CATHERINE TALBOT’S TWO DAYS IN IRAQ

A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
© Sylvia Bowersox
Spring 2016
CATHERINE TALBOT’S TWO DAYS IN IRAQ

A Project

by

Sylvia Bowersox

Spring 2016

APPROVED BY THE INTERIM DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

___________________________
Sharon A. Barrios, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

___________________________
Paul Eggers, Ph.D., Chair

___________________________
John Traver, Ph.D.
PUBLICATION RIGHTS

No portion of this project may be reprinted or reproduced in any manner unacceptable to the usual copyright restrictions without the written permission of the author.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my husband, Jon, my darling son, Holden, and my wonderful service dog Timothy. It is only through their love, patience and support that I have been able to successfully complete this project. I also dedicate it to my therapists Dr. Anna Lempke and Dr. Aldrich Patterson.

There will always be a special place in my heart for the men and women with whom I served in Iraq, both military and civilian. I have been so blessed to have these fantastic people in my life. They continue to inspire me and give me strength. This process has not been easy, for any of us, but with their help and God’s grace, I got it done, and will always be grateful for their love and support.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would have been beyond my reach without the love, instruction, and encouragement of many people. Always and forever my heart belongs to my dear husband, Jon. He has always been my biggest fan and chief supporter. He stood by me when no one else would, and he held my hand during my long years of my recovery. Most importantly, he loved me and agreed that I was a writer. Because of his solid faith in my work and me, I was able to find a way to keep moving forward no matter how difficult it was or how much it hurt. My son Holden will always be my darling little boy, and he is the reason I write. He was seven when I got back from my third tour of Iraq, and he asked me “where have you been Mommy?” At the time, I was not certain and I am still not certain, but I am working on finding the answer for him. He is my precious son who nearly lost his mommy. My friend and commander, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Epright pulled me aside one day while we were still in Baghdad and told me that I had talent, and that I must write about our time in Iraq. He continues to be my friend and inspiration. Sergeant Major Yolanda Mayo, U.S.M.C., is the best assignments editor I ever had the pleasure to work for and get yelled at by. She drilled into my head that our work at American Forces Network mattered, and that it had better be good. My father, Harold Ankenman, a retired Army officer who died of cancer during my second tour of Iraq, instilled in me a strong love of my country, the sense of duty and the courage to never give up. I miss you Daddy.

I must also thank my professors at California State University, Chico who have been so important to me on my journey back into the world. Dr. Robert Davidson greeted me into the department and mentored me for two years. I greatly benefited from our long
conversations on literary theory, process and art. I will always to grateful to him for understanding that problematic drafts are all part of the discovery process. Dr. Paul Eggers taught me the finer points of style and theory. He was always available when I needed to discuss a plot detail, and the first person to congratulate me on my accomplishments. And finally, I thank Sarah Pape, M.A., whose calming voice and willingness to listen was always most welcome.

I must give a very special acknowledgement to Anna Lembke, M.D. She saved me and guided me back into the world, making all this possible.

Thank you all.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Rights</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### I. Critical Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth as a Writer</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literary Influences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defamiliarization</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War and Personal Responsibility</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Talbot and Campbell’s Hero’s Journey</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II. Catherine Talbot’s Two Days in Iraq

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Hollywood Royale</th>
<th>25</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are You Scared Yet?</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scattered Crumbs</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad Morgue</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Works Cited 106
ABSTRACT

CATHARINE TALBOT’S TWO DAYS IN IRAQ

by

© Sylvia Bowersox

Master of Arts in English

California State University, Chico

Spring 2016

*Catherine Talbot’s Two Days in Iraq* is a novel-in-stories that takes the reader along with Catherine and her Army unit on their deployment to wartime Iraq. The stories explore the poignant changes and trauma that occur in a soldier's life when they are living on a daily dose of destruction. The narrative follows a young woman and her groups of misfits, bosses, and enablers as they bring freedom to the Iraqi people. We watch Catherine develop from a neglected child to absentee mother; from an orphan warrior to an overwhelmed, suffering woman.

This project is divided into four parts: an introduction, entering the war zone, Catherine at work in the combat zone, and the descent into the hell of the Baghdad morgue. Catherine’s story invites the reader to experience the personal world of the men and women, who face confusion, heartache, and occasional exhilaration while serving in a far off land that few understand, least of all Catherine and her compatriots.
CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

People on the outside think there’s something magical about writing; that you go up in the attic at midnight and cast the bones and come down in the morning with a story, but it isn’t like that. You sit in back of the typewriter and you work, and that’s all there is to it.

– Harlan Ellison

Growth as a Writer

When I first walked into the English Department at California State University, Chico (CSU, Chico), it was as a former Army broadcast journalist and public affairs officer, out of work for the preceding several years while recovering from war-related trauma. My writing experience had been limited to producing military television news stories, drafting press releases, and developing fact sheets to help market the Army’s mission. These skills that I learned as soldier-student at the Defense Information School (DINFOS), Fort Meade, Maryland complimented my education as a B.A. in English Literature. Even though I was a disabled veteran who had served multiple tours in Iraq, and was severely out of practice, I still considered myself a professional writer who merely needed instruction on how to write in a civilian manner. In my mind, civilians wrote for themselves without taking into account the impact of their words, and they never had a military commander or the pressure of a war weighing on their creative minds. I believed that civilian writing equaled creative freedom, and
to a significant degree, a lack of external controls. I never wanted to answer to anyone again, and I was confident that I would be writing publishable literary masterpieces in no time.

However, the section of my brain dedicated to writing had been completely taken over by my military journalist’s adherence to facts, particularly those that were deemed essential by the command, and by the ever important mission. Despite years spent working in public affairs, I had never written a single word that I did not believe was true (i.e., word for word, as it happened), and necessary for the task. My words existed solely to communicate the message deemed important by the higher ups. Doing any more or less was not a possibility. Manipulating story elements to tell a story of my choosing was to me practically a sacrilege. So the fact was that for me to creatively tell the true story of my life in my way, I needed more knowledge, the kind available in graduate school. The faculty at CSU, Chico invited me into the department and took up the challenge.

While my professors all encouraged my ambitions and goals, they did not seem to share my certainty that this process was going to be fast or easy. They began recommending texts that would help improve my writing and prepare me for the difficulties that were sure to lie ahead in my newly chosen field. They assigned readings including essays in Charles Baxter’s *Burning Down the House*, John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction*, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Blood of Others*. They also encouraged me to revisit the classical texts of Plato and Aristotle. I also found the time to re-read the works of my favorite authors, Maria Rainer Rilke, Hunter S. Thompson, Lewis Carroll and Kurt Vonnegut.

In my first semester as a graduate student at CSU, Chico, I enrolled in a workshop class. I learned a lot about writing, read a lot about the craft of writing, and worked on my writing skills. My struggle with my assignments in that class made me realize that I indeed had
a lot to learn about writing outside of my comfort zone. I suddenly had the freedom to write what I wanted to write, in the manner I wanted to write. With freedom comes responsibility, and in my case, it also came with stage fright.

I quickly learned that my primary challenge in becoming a civilian writer, writing with a civilian's freedom, was learning what to do with that freedom and how to apply it. My only experience with writing had been in the “just the facts” realm. In the military, an individual or group did a specific something on a specific mission, at a specific time and place, and this is what I wrote about. I worried less about context and set up because my audience why I was talking, and what I was talking about. Plus, I never had to worry about form, because the military structure had been drilled into my head at military broadcaster school and reinforced by my assignment editors.

At CSU, Chico, I found that I no longer had the safety of knowing what my editors and the consumers of my writing wanted from me, nor exactly how to give it to them. I now had to decide what I wanted from me, and that requirement meant that I went through a period of making a mess with my prose. Because I now had the freedom to include whatever I wanted, I included everything, whether it belonged or not. At first, I wrote non-fiction essays and stories, including every detail, episode, and face that I could remember, whether or not the additions added anything to my story or pushed the narrative along.

I wanted to write about my war experiences, but by the beginning of my second year I had found little success using the genres of creative nonfiction or poetry. My personal war story was just too intimate and painful for me to be able to keep it first person and nonfiction. I needed to achieve some emotional distance to write the story. Besides, in the nonfiction realm, I found myself wanting to write in a journalistic style. Then I started to focus on writing literary fiction. For me, learning to write literary fiction was an exercise in learning
which elements to leave out, and how to mold my narrative to tell the story I wanted to tell. I also learned that I did not always have to write my copy in the first person. I had a pallet of narrative perspectives from which to choose, and began experimenting with which view worked the best for a given piece.

When I switched to literary fiction, I gained the powers of a literary creator with almost goddess-like powers. The details of my story stopped being “events that actually happened.” Instead, those events became the ingredients of my artistic endeavor. Through the act of literary creation, I could bring new human beings into the world. These were fictional human beings that existed on my computer screen and in my mind's eye. As they grew from infant to adult, they demanded their independence. They had to be listened to and respected, or risk becoming less than whole and dying on my page, without ever being allowed to live. I had been searching for a way to tell my story, and fiction gave me the most options.

I remember the first time I wrote something that didn’t happen, that was not bound to facts. It was in Professor Davidson’s workshop class, where once a week the class did in-class writing exercises. After writing was over, the professor called on a few brave souls to share their efforts. I prefaced my reading with a comic “this never happened.” I remember feeling powerful, and I was instantly hooked. The liberation of arranging your narrative the way you want to organize it was exciting. There was a catch though. Outside of a strong background in the nuts and bolts of getting thoughts on paper, I did not possess a single clue about the craft of writing fiction. I had a lot to learn if I was going to write my Iraq war novel and tell the truth, if not necessarily stick to the exact facts. I had to find some role models, and I had to find them fast.
Literary Influences

The first how-to book I cracked open just happened to be Elmore Leonard’s *10 Rules of Writing*. I found this to be an excellent little book that reads like the author was sitting next to me. His rules made perfect sense to me. My favorite was “If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it” (29). This little piece of advice meant that I could write my stories with my natural, conversational style that the military had never given me the opportunity to master. My own voice and talent would be my method of conveying the reality of the stories that I planned to use for my novel about Iraq. Henry James, in his essay “The Art of Fiction,” explains:

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say (145).

As a creative writer, I have the freedom to include what I saw, what I felt, and what it cost my fellow soldiers and me. I realized in Professor Eggers’ workshop class that I was leaning toward literary realism. I learned that literary realism was not only a 19th-Century literary period, but also a literary method, and a generalized attitude about the world that was in reaction to the dreamy excesses of romanticism. However, realists such as Mark Twain and Henry James went further into the “transcription” of life than I would like to go. I want my novel-in-stories to be my creations. I have a reason for telling my stories and I want to mold real life into the truth of the situation. As I learned through my studies at CSU, Chico, real existence provides the raw materials for fiction; however, it requires a lot of skill to mold those materials into literature. The play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello is a delightful example of the difficulty of translating “reality” or “what actually happened” to the truth of art. In the play, six characters show up at a rehearsal and proceed to convince the director to turn their story into a play. We watch the differences between the reality of a
situation and the fictional depiction of the same event as the characters object to the literary
versions of their reality.

In a 1985 New York Times article, “Writing: Can it Be Taught,” novelist and
professor John Barth provides a very useful definition, especially for my argument.
"Literature," say Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (after Aristotle), “is the artful
rendition of human experience into words.” In my estimation, this is exactly what happens
every time a writer attempts to render this type of fiction. I must go to the dictionary for the
definition of rendition. Rendition is a “translation from one language to another; a performance
or interpretation of something” (Oxford English Dictionary, n. 3.d.). So what a fiction writer
does is translate or interpret the “human experience” through individual talent and ability to
come up with writing that tells a story, but also says something about the life and perspective of
the particular writer. Rendering human experience is a skill that must be learned, and that is
one of the skills that I have been learning at CSU, Chico. But, as I’ve learned, you don’t have
to be heavy handed or obvious about the process. My favorite word on the subject comes from
Ernest Hemingway, as quoted by Arnold Samuelson in his book With Hemingway, “It’s none
of their business that you have to learn to write. Let them think you were born that way.” I
agree. But pulling that off requires even more skill. Enter teacher, technique, and a lot of
choices to be made. Reality is tricky.

According to John Barth, in his essay “Very Like an Elephant,” “Out there—and
also, importantly, in our heads—is what we’re accustomed to thinking of as Reality” (139).
And to get at the reality in our heads, Barth maintains that literary realists use either the
“Windex approach” or the “stained-glass approach” (141) when writing fiction. Barth attempts
to elucidate this point in the Forward to a combined edition of his first two novels, The
Floating Opera and The End of the Road, where he writes "Ought you to make art for its own
sake or engage it in the service of some lofty cause? Are you more interested in the thing said than in its saying (the Windex approach to language) or vice-versa (the stained-glass approach)?” (Schaub 164).

I believe that I mainly use the “Windex approach.” I have a purpose to my writing and a predetermined point that I want to get across to the reader; however, I want my prose to seem perfectly natural, conversational, and “invisible.” I may want to instruct, but I would never want anything I wrote to seem overtly didactic. I want my reader to read my words and hear my characters talking to them. I want my readers to imagine that I didn’t make up my words, but that I transcribed them, which means I do a lot of rewrites to reach that level of naturalness.

John Gardner’s prose adds another layer to my work. In his book *On Moral Fiction*, he explains, “The medium of literary art is not language, but language plus the writer’s experience and imagination and, above all, the whole of the literary tradition he knows” (124). This is a very efficient and useful equation. Which tell me that after gathering Rilke’s “sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime,” coming to CSU, Chico to learn literary tradition and the framework in which to paint my (civilian) literary masterpieces was the next logical step in my literary development. It also means that as a writer, it is my duty to spend a lot of time with the literary tradition, i.e., the writing of other people. And I do. I read a lot, especially authors who have somehow been in the military, or at least close to it.

I discovered that two of my favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut and Hunter S. Thompson, are both veterans, and that we have something in common—military experience and the emotional necessity of making sense of it all. Vonnegut, an Army veteran who spent part of World War II in a German prisoner of war camp, had difficulty with writing about his wartime experiences. Nevertheless, he was able to complete *Slaughterhouse Five*, which
became a widely acclaimed novel about World War II. In the book, multiple subplots are taking place at the same time, and the timeline itself is fluid. I very much understand this technique because in war, everything really does feel like it’s all happening at the same time. In Iraq, time felt like it went forward and backward, and sometimes upside down, and somewhere your friends were still enduring their own deaths. But just because Vonnegut completed fourteen novels that included several masterpieces, it doesn’t mean that the process was easy for him. He was quoted in the London Times as saying, "When I write, I feel like an armless, legless man with a crayon in his mouth." That is not quite my experience, but it is close. I feel like I am writing in the dark about a scary dream I once had, and I’m never certain how to tell you about it.

Air Force veteran Hunter S. Thompson, in his book The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time, confesses, “I've always considered writing the most hateful kind of work. I suspect it is a bit like f*cking—which is fun only for amateurs” (Thompson 78). I suspect that the “hateful” monsters Thompson depicted in his work are reflections of his military experiences. Through my multiple readings of his work, especially his Fear and Loathing series, I learned to be true to my gut emotions. The visceral truths in a story contain the magic. Without realizing it, you suddenly find that you are learning what he is trying to teach you—seeing the picture that he is working so hard to plant inside your brain. Thompson gave me the confidence I needed to look the reader in the eye and tell my truth with intensity.

Thompson’s writing is dangerous, immediate, and necessary. The first line of Fear And Loathing in Las Vegas is the greatest first line that I have ever read. "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold” (Thompson 3). You might not understand who is talking, why they are talking, or what that person is doing, but you know in your soul that you want to find out. That imperative, that necessity to read or
listen further is one of the reasons I work so hard on my writing.

Intensity is not the only reason that Thompson wrote. In a 1958 letter found with other early writings after his death, Thompson explains to a friend, “I find that by putting things in writing I can understand them and see them a little more objectively . . . for words are merely tools and if you use the right ones you can actually put your life in order” (Thompson 46). I just might be able to do the same thing. By writing, I just might be able to figure it all out and save myself, and regain some of my humanity that I lost to the Iraq war. As John Gardner tells us, “Art rediscover[s], generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness” (5). Maybe my art will allow me to rejoin the world; perhaps it will lead the way.

Lewis Carroll is another writer whose work is very helpful in the discovery process of my journey. The Annotated Alice presents the emotional truth of Carroll’s characters. Alice, his main creation, is a little girl caught up in a world she does not understand, much as my main character is caught in a war that she does not understand, and just like I was caught up in a war I did not understand. Alter Carroll’s characters ever so slightly by adding explosions and death, and you’ve got the U.S. Army at war. Wonderland is too big to take on all at once, and the Iraq war is too big for me to take on all at once. It seems that Carroll clearly wanted Alice to mature and find her way in the world. This desire is most evident when she asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here," and the Cat responds with "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to" (65).

The question—where should I go from here—is the question from someone unaccustomed to making her own decisions or taking responsibility for her own actions. Before I started my quest for truth through fiction, I wrote what I was told to write, in the manner in which I was told to write it. In my version of this scene, the Cheshire Cat is the amalgam of my many professors and literary mentors, while Alice is me as a propaganda-writing soldier.
walked into the English department and asked Professor Davidson which way I ought to go from here, and he told me to join his class and figure it out for myself—with his help, of course. So, with lots of help, here I am three years later where I want to be. I’m a writer with enough technical skills to allow me to continue learning and working out where I “want to get to.”

So, why do I do it? Why do I write? Listening to my favorite poet Maria Rainer Rilke, I would have to admit that I write because I must write. Something or someone touched me on the shoulder and said, “I appoint you to be the note-taker, the writer, the one who attempts to make sense of it all.” But, I must ask the question, what is the purpose of being a writer? What do people like me actually do? Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay “What is Writing?” provides me the only answer I have ever been able to live with. Writers write so that people will know about things, and won’t be able to claim they don’t.

The function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about. And since he has once committed himself in the universe of language, he can never again pretend that he cannot speak. (Sartre 38)

What a great definition for a former broadcast journalist — you write so people will know things, and can’t claim they don’t. Living through World War II in Occupied France, Sartre had every reason to be considering accountability—and so do I. I lived through the Iraq war, and survived the personal tragedy of its aftermath. I want people to know the story of war from my female perspective.

The female military perspective of war seems to be missing from our literary tradition, fiction or otherwise. What we have are war novels, movies, television programs, and testimonials that tend to be stories of battle-hardened, “Band of Brothers” male soldiers as they face the enemy and certain death. Currently, the war novels that continue to be lauded by a
curious public include *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*, by Tim O’Brien; *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr; *The Yellow Birds*, by Kevin Powers; and *Here, Bullet*, by Brian Turner. These works have been recommended and gifted to me many times. These male writers all carry a gender and “combat arms” soldier bias. Even though Michael Herr was a correspondent and not a soldier, based upon his book *Dispatches*, he did everything but carry a weapon. The primary difference between my perspective and theirs, outside of the obvious gender differences, is their connection to the battlefield, during wars in which there actually was a battlefield (in contrast to Iraq and Afghanistan, where the battlefield was wherever you happened to be that day).

My novel’s heroine, Sergeant Catherine Talbot, has been molded by the military and war, as well as the consequences of war. When Catherine’s parents, who were both in the military, couldn’t manage to be parents and veterans at the same time, Catherine finds a substitute family. Jumping ahead, her new family dies in the attacks on 9/11. Catherine, who has since grown up, joined the Army, and had a child, finds herself in Iraq as a broadcast journalist in uniform. Along with her video camera and notebook, she carries an M16 and records stories after deaths have occurred, as I did. I heard the bombs. I recorded my reactions. I mourned the friends who were killed, and those who disappeared in the mystical place beyond the wire.

Catherine is clearly not male, and she does not have a direct role in precipitating violence. She is the archivist. She experiences the goblins of the war embodied in the rockets coming at her from across the Tigris River, in super-charged car bombs, and in the anonymous deaths of friends and Iraqi translators. In a story near the end of my novel-in-stories, Catherine comes face-to-face with the results of that violence during her mission to the morgue, and she is unable to cope. Her story comes not from a place of anti-war sentiment because she is part of
the all volunteer Army, and truly believes in her mission. Rather, it comes from the daily grind of a long and hopeless campaign that neither she nor the members of her unit are equipped to handle. As she wryly observes of her unit on their first day in Baghdad:

They were a wonderful, dysfunctional family with firepower, video cameras, and a presidential mandate. Not the battalion of battle-hardened Marines that Catherine had dreamed about joining, but a weekend flag football team suddenly finding itself at the Super Bowl” (Bowersox 43).

Catherine plays the role of mascot and color commentator for that team, and it wears her down. She is not a traditional female character, yet she is not masculinized either. She finds herself on both sides of the line, and this is from where a lot of her frustration emanates. She is told over and over again that she is a woman, and not a real soldier. She does not fit into the traditional mold of hypermasculinity in war narratives. She is neither overly strong nor correctly feminine. She does her version of her job, and works as hard as she can. In The Things They Carried, as in the more recent novel The Yellow Birds, women serve as plot devices. O'Brien’s women seem symbolize unobtainable lost love that is somehow separate from the masculine world of war. In his Vietnam novel The Things They Carried, he touches upon all of the types of women that men dream about—the childhood love who died (Linda), the love that fell in love with war and stopped being a woman (Mary), the idealized love (Martha), the married former girlfriend (Sally), and the bored daughter (Kathleen). While the women of The Things They Carried were cherished ideals, the nurse and mother figures in Kevin Powers’ novel The Yellow Birds are the elements that invade the masculine realm of war and cause trouble. Brian Turner’s Here Bullet presents the war in terse lines without a touch of poetics in his poetry. Turner’s women are victims or caregiver nurses. They are the other, the extras, and the figures that care or needs caring for—they do not belong, or fight and they cause problems for those who do. In my story, it is the war itself that causes the mischief, and I
defamiliarize war by presenting it through Catherine’s eyes. She is Christopher Isherwood's camera. She is an American soldier with her own perspective.

Defamiliarization

_Catherine Talbot’s Two Days in Iraq_ is a fictional, but “true” war story based on my observations and experiences during my three tours in wartime Iraq. My primary inspiration has been understanding my personal journey from a traumatized American woman in the wake of the September 2001 attacks to a traumatized female veteran attempting to adapt to the new normal as an American – not at war, yet still fighting a war.

Catherine, who began as my alter ego, my representative, and my explanation for what happened, has grown into a person in her own right. She must go on a horrible journey, one made all the more horrible because we can see from the beginning that she probably will not succeed, or if she does, that success will come at a great cost. I needed to get at the truth of what it means to be dropped in the middle of the modern war on terror. Lucky for me I had a path to follow and a formula to use in writing my true war story.

In O’Brien’s novel _The Things They Carried_, the author sneaks in a war story instruction manual called “How to Tell a True War Story.” In it he explains the elements of a war story. As far as I am concerned, his most important point involves the emotional response of the reader. He tells us, "You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you" (O'Brien 175). I assure you that there are elements of Catherine’s story that certainly embarrass me. These shaming elements are present at the beginning of the story and never stop materializing. The reader finds Catherine in the position of having to raise herself because her parents with their military experiences have no emotional strength left with which to parent her. She finds a replacement family with Pamela and Jack, both military veterans. Pamela tells us that though
she might have been injured in Vietnam, it was the VA’s mismanagement of her injuries that made her permanently disabled. Catherine is an unwed mother. She finds herself pregnant from a liaison that occurred while she was away at military training. These elements are embarrassing because this is an American we are talking about, and she should have been treated better. Her parents should have taken better care of her, and the government shouldn’t have lied to her.

No matter how proud I may be of my service in Iraq, and how much I endowed Catherine with that pride, all the facts seem to have resulted in the conclusion that Iraq and Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks, something not apparent to those serving in Iraq at the time. On top of that, there is the toll that deployments take upon military families, especially the children. And then there is the deployment itself. Catherine experiences first hand the results of the invasion and bungled attempts to rebuild the country. The needlessness of the military presence in Iraq is symbolized by her major press trip to Basra where both she and reporter Trevor Smith “talk to many people who have nothing to say.” If I have done my job, by the end of these stories the reader will marvel at Catherine’s strength, courage, and resilience, while being hopelessly embarrassed and mortified that she and others like her were sent on such a fool's errand.

The human beings that populate these stories are Americans who possess a sliding scale of patriotism and skills, and are doing their best to perform under duress and pressure. The constant stress of the war takes a toll on these characters. We watch Catherine gradually buckling. After her mission to the Baghdad morgue, she is left traumatized and silent. Sasha, who is her lover and a member of her security detail, also suffers from the load. The signs of his destruction are subtler, and are signified by his increasing smoking and his inability to help Catherine. Ryan, who is Sasha’s best friend, is becoming more and more abusive to everyone
he works with and is sexually harassing Catherine on a regular basis. Joe, who is Sasha’s second best friend, and Catherine’s confidant and friend, also suffers. Despite his grounding and consistency, Joe also shows signs of exhaustion and confusion. His descent is signified by him sitting on the steps of Catherine's trailer, rendered completely ineffectual at the end of the “Baghdad Morgue” chapter. The minor characters also do their best, and succeed or fail not necessarily due to their shortcomings, but due to the impossibility of their task. I relate Catherine's journey into the belly of the beast of war to invite the reader to experience the unrelenting violence, futility, and tragedy of her mission.

I present a new version of war through Catherine’s story. Her female perspective is not the norm in war tales. The usual war story comes through the male infantry soldier’s perspective. Catherine’s story is giving the reader a new way of perceiving war, and its effects upon those involved. This process is called defamiliarization. It is an artistic technique wherein a writer takes familiar objects or situations and presents them from a different perspective so that the audience may experience them in a new, unfamiliar way.

Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique” explains the term defamiliarization:

If we . . . examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic . . . Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war . . . art exists that one may recover the sensation of life . . . The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar” (Shklovsky 778).

I attempt to further defamiliarize war by obfuscating the timeline and rationality of the narrative. We who served in Iraq had a saying, and I use it as a metaphor and organizing principle for Catherine’s story: “There are only two days in Iraq; the day you arrive and the day you leave. The rest is a confusing blur.” This phrase was our attempt to come to terms with and accept the confusion and disastrous organization of our war. I do not believe that war is ever or
ever was straightforward and linear. However, this one was ours and it was a mess. There is a literary precedent in this kind of manipulation. Kurt Vonnegut’s war novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where everything, including alien abduction, occurs at the same time, is the ultimate in war-zone timeline organization. I attempted to make my war story take another step into this kind of storytelling, creating a novel-in-stories where the events are entirely plausible, albeit confusing. I do this in order to mirror the daily alterations in this war. It is the Global War on Terror, where the entire world is a battlefield and nobody knows what to do about it.

I feel that it is vital for readers to be able to recognize and follow the thread of Catherine’s story, while being engulfed in the story’s high intensity and bewildering reality. For my vision of this “true war story” to be successful, I needed the pacing, placement of elements, and jump cuts to be a huge part of both the message and the reader’s experience of the narrative events that more or less go together and make sense. Moreover, this does not necessarily include a linear plot line or daily “we did this” list. Sometimes in the story, days pass, weeks or months go by in a complete blur, and then something happens to bring everything into crisp clarity.

The characters accept this reality as the only version of normal they will ever know again. The paintings falling off the wall of Catherine’s trailer as the result of rocket attacks demonstrate this new normal. Catherine does not react to the fact that the blast was close enough to knock pictures off her wall.

Charles Baxter, in *Burning Down the House*, explains Catherine’s connection to her paintings and other items in her overstuffed trailer. He states "People in a traumatized state tend to love their furniture. They become ferociously attached to knickknacks…how a person sees the things that surround him usually tells us more than an explicit description of his mood" (73). An event that would horrify the average American back home comes with a ready phrase
that Catherine utters without hesitation. “Wow, a four-picture boom. We’ve been getting more and more of those super-strength booms” (88). With every picture, there goes another layer of her protection and resolve. It is no accident that by the end of the story “Baghdad Morgue” all of Catherine’s paintings have been blown off the wall by a nearby explosion.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn presented the vital truths of an abnormal situation in the language of daily life. In his novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, the character Ivan Denisovich takes each moment of his life in a Stalin-era work camp as a normal occurrence. I know from experience that people in extreme circumstances come to an emotional and spiritual place where they cease viewing those circumstances as out of the ordinary. Once you have been in Iraq for a while, nothing surprises you anymore, and very few things scare you. The effort can wear you out and stupefy you, and the brutality can take your soul; however, nothing but the most extreme events can amaze you.

Baxter makes this point beautifully. "Beyond stating the bare facts, trauma cannot speak of itself. If it could, it wouldn't be trauma . . . any narrative inflation of pain, any demonstration of it, is exploitative, and a betrayal" (Baxter 75). Which is why I cannot comment upon the horror of Catherine's war. She can’t know she is traumatized, she just is. I wanted my characters to allow the reader to discover the horror of a scene without telling them how to interpret the elements of the scene. I did not want to moralize or proselytize or sway my reader in any way. I want to allow them to make up their minds.

Ivan Denisovich takes us through his day, relating events in an unblinking, unsentimental manner. The horrors of labor-camp life are accepted, even celebrated, as the most normal of situations. His commentary on his day of unimaginable privations, freezing weather, and terror comes across as if you or I were reflecting upon our day at school. In the final paragraph of the novel Solzhenitsyn illustrates this technique to perfection:
Shukhov felt pleased with life as he went to sleep. A lot of good things had happened that day. He hadn't been thrown in the hole. The gang hadn't been dragged off to Sotsgorodok. He's swiped the extra gruel at dinnertime. The foreman had got a good rate for the job. He'd enjoyed working on the wall. He hadn't been caught with the blade at the search point. He'd earned a bit from Tsezar that evening. He'd bought his tobacco. And he hadn't taken sick, had got over it. The end of an unclouded day. Almost a happy one (181-182).

The “all and all it was a pretty good day” tone of this novel illustrates my aims perfectly. The reader cannot help but be appalled at the conditions of Shukhov’s life in the camp. But Shukhov is not appalled. He has adapted his personality and nervous system so he can experience this horror of a life as a normal situation complete with normal frustrations and joys.

War and Personal Responsibility

I strove to write Catherine as a strong survivor who does her duty without complaint. She is similar to the majority of soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. The question of why they were going to war came down to two elements: first, the events of 9/11; second, being told that they were going to war—end of discussion. Once an order has been given, soldiers obey that order or go to prison. In a soldier’s life, the ideological and political overtones are not even to be considered. But for Catherine to be a heroic figure, she must take responsibility for her decisions, actions and mistakes. Baxter agrees: “Isn’t there something deeply interesting and moving and sometimes even beautiful when a character acknowledges an error? And isn’t this narrative mode becoming something of a rarity” (10). One way that I accomplish this feat is to make clear that her choices were made before she went to war. She joined the military to help protect the country, create a personal identity (as a soldier), and do what she was told. Catherine’s unraveling comes not from doing her duty, but from realizing that on some level she was happy to be punching back after the trauma of the 9/11 attacks.

As Baxter puts it, the public doesn’t want characters to act with purpose. “I think
the whole concept of definitive action is meeting up with considerable cultural resistance these
days” (12). He blames Richard Nixon for this disavowal of responsibility and willingness to act. However, for the purpose of my Iraq war story, I would like to add a few more names to that list: George W. Bush, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and Ricardo Sanchez. Colin Powell, a retired Army general, was particularly disappointing. We in the military believed him, yet he misled the country in the days leading up to the invasion of Iraq, and never took responsibility for his deceit. But then again, in the realm of disavowal, Army Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the first commander of military forces in Iraq, created the conditions that led to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, and has never once acknowledged his failures. Into the realm of passing the buck until the public forgets about it, I send honest, patriotic Sergeant Catherine Talbot. She has found a way to cope with the untenable aspects of her life—she changes them.

Catherine is the agent of the action in her life. She sees a problem and does something about it. She isn’t comfortable or accepted at home so she finds another home. Her grandfather, the Vietnam vet, leaves home and disappears so she finds a way to locate him. She needs a purpose in life so she joins the military. Her country is attacked so she goes to war. She is an active participant in her life. She’s lonely so she finds a lover in Sasha. This doesn’t always mean that she makes the right decisions. It means that she does not sit idly by and allow the world to act upon her. She takes a stand, and makes her move. “Right or wrong, but never in doubt” is an often-repeated military phrase that applies directly to her.

She would never passively say “mistakes were made,” like President Richard Nixon did until his dying day. If she felt that she had messed up, she would have the courage to look you in the eye and give you a good dose of Baxter’s “I fucked up.” The problem with the war that she has found herself involved in is that there is no way for her to know if she has made
mistakes and what to do if she had. Thus, her story follows O’Brien’s model, "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior" (174). This story will open a window to daily events that happened in the Iraq war, but if I am successful, it will never tell the reader how to feel about the situation described. I will let Mary Gaitskill speak to my readers. She conveys my message the best, as quoted in Baxter’s essay:

Ladies and gentlemen, please. Stop asking ‘What am I supposed to feel?’ Why would an adult look to me or to any other writer to tell him or her what to feel? You're not supposed to feel anything. You feel what you feel (14).

Catherine Talbot and Campbell’s Hero’s Journey

The characters who inhabit my story, both military and civilian, are not direct combatants. They are not the helicopter crew in Blackhawk Down, or the strangely independent sergeant of The Hurt Locker. These people are not heroes in the traditional John Wayne sense. None of them have killed anybody or are necessarily prepared to kill anybody. Catherine’s unit of Army Reservists are soldiers in what is known as a combat service support unit. The civilians are State Department employees, or young, inexperienced political appointees. They are the people engaged in a war that forgot to include the convenient distinction of front lines and safety zones. In this war no one is safe, and everyone feels the pressure, and no one knows what to do. So they stick to their mission and never consider how it fits into the larger world. The mission is everything, and Catherine is on what Joseph Campbell calls the hero’s journey. "The usual hero’s journey begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society” (Campbell 151).

Catherine’s sense of safety and family identity died on 9/11. For the purposes of her
story, she is a hero. As Campbell puts it, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself” (151). The journey begins with Catherine living in the world of her hometown. My Iraq war novel starts on a deceptively gentle note. It is the story of a little girl growing up in Anytown, USA. On the weekends, she goes to the movies: “On Saturday afternoons, when Catherine was in the fifth grade, her mother would take her to spend the day at the only movie theater in town, the Hollywood Royale” (Bowersox 24). In this town, there are shops and stores, and a movie theater. Bored kids cruise on Main Street and the old folks complain. Nothing much is new about those activities. They probably occur in some form in every small town in America. On the outside, everything seems all right with this town. “The Hollywood Royale was owned by Pamela and her husband, Jack. It was three blocks down from Sears, and across the street from Baskin Robbins and the Texaco station” (Bowersox 24).

I attempt to present these details in a non-threatening, matter-of-fact way. To lull the reader into a sense of normalcy, I choose to bring my reader into the daily life of my character Catherine Talbot. Her entire life she has been searching for a way to feel loved and safe, and that desire leads her to a new brand of war that never ends.

Little Catherine does many of the same things that other girls her age do. She goes to the movies, has friends, and doesn’t do her homework. But unlike anyone in her group, she has been befriended by an older couple, Pamela and Jack. They are friendlier versions of her dysfunctional parents. Both couples served in the military, and both argue. Both have problems. However, Pamela and Jack are kind to Catherine, and they become her “replacement parents,” giving her the home and acceptance that she is missing. Fast forward to the horrible events of 9/11 that take Catherine away from her friends and call her to war, which is the start of her hero’s journey. She accepts the call of duty, and in the second chapter finds herself trapped in the purgatory of the transport plane that brought her unit to Baghdad. The edge of
her known world becomes the welcome tent at the Baghdad airport, and is the location of her frightening first night. She meets people who have already experienced the war, and who have become creatures of the war. The next morning, she and her unit face the first of the trials of her journey.

Anonymous forces attack her convoy as they descend into the reality of war, and the American guards at the entrance to the Green Zone assist her. Her other helpers in this journey are her grandfather the Vietnam veteran, her friend Private Kelly Sloan, the unit administrator known as Mom, and her Embassy gang that includes her lover Sasha, his best friend Ryan, and his second best friend Joe, as well as Rachel, her favorite State Department press officer.

In “Baghdad Morgue” the final chapter of my creative project, Catherine descends into Campbell’s “underworld” and is faced with the brutality of the Iraqi civil war that the occupation force she is a part of has unleashed. The uncertain morality of her position is symbolized by the “poisonous smell” that her team encounters while running through the headless bodies covered in ice at the morgue, and climaxes when she momentarily believes that she will have to go back to the morgue and do it all over again. The experience forces her to acknowledge that her quest isn’t working, and the traumatic scenes in the morgue render her mute. Like all soldiers in her position, she is an instrument of a horrible game with international consequences. But, then again, she has always been involved in that game as symbolized by the issues that come up for her during the day’s mission. Those issues include the neglect she suffered as a child, her feelings of abandonment, the death of her family, and her inability to meaningfully connect with Sasha or any other human being. By the end of the day, she has hit the wall and stands in her trailer, a soul in shock. To complete her hero’s journey, she must find a way to regain her humanity and continue her deployment. She must gather her strength and symbolically die to be reborn to reach her goals and achieve Joseph
Campbell’s “ultimate boon.” This boon, according to Campbell, is a prize. Catherine must secure the new home and safety she came to Iraq to find. This prize or boon can be a physical or emotional, but the final test is sharing that prize with her community. She then must decide whether to return home with her prize and share it with her world.

The theme that runs through this work is Catherine’s search for a new home and new family. She is Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, trying to get home. But it’s not there anymore. As Tim O’Brien tells us, "War is hell, but that is not the half of it because war is also mystery and terror and journey and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love” (179). Catherine experiences everything that the war has to offer. She goes to Iraq with the hope of making her world safe again. However, the longer she is in Iraq, the more separated from herself she becomes, and the chances of achieving her goals become more and more remote.

On her arrival in Iraq, as she sits on the tarmac with her restless unit and their gear, she fantasizes that it’s all been a joke. She wonders if they have not been traveling to Iraq, but have doubled back and have returned to their starting point. If that is indeed what has happened then maybe 9/11 didn’t happen at all, her replacement family did not actually die, and she can go on about her life. This sentiment mirrors the country’s wish, as President Bush encourages the country to go on vacation and even to Disneyland. However, the reality is harsh and impossible, and Catherine chokes on her first breath of it.

Catherine’s story is a personal tragedy with global consequences. No matter how hard she tries, she cannot put everything back together again. She is us, and we are her and she cannot regain her security, safety, or friends any more than we can. We are all in this together and we all are lost.
Dearest Reader, I provided you the characters, the first-hand vision, and experience curated by the technique taught to me by life and the professors at CSU, Chico. Thank you Chico State for giving me the opportunity to gain the skills necessary to bring Catherine’s story to life. I leave it up to you, the most worthy reader, to decide if I learned enough to make this effort worth the trouble.
CHAPTER II

CATHERINE TALBOT’S TWO DAYS IN IRAQ

There are only two days in Iraq; the day you arrive and the day you leave, everything else is a confusing blur.

The Hollywood Royale

On Saturday afternoons, when Catherine was in the fifth grade, her mother would take her to spend the day at the only movie theater in town, the Hollywood Royale. The Hollywood Royale was owned by Pamela and her husband, Jack. It was three blocks down from Sears, and across the street from Baskin Robbins and the Texaco station. Their little town had about sixty-three thousand people—who according to Catherine’s mother didn’t care about anything except beer, fucking, and clogging up Main Street on Friday nights.

Catherine’s mother was younger than Pamela and jealous of her. Because Pamela had been a Marine in Vietnam, and people liked her. Pamela was beautiful, too; she was lithe and dignified, like a dancer, and she kept her still mostly black hair in a short, regulation cut. Jack, was younger and had long curly red hair with a bald spot in the back. He wore his dog tags on a chain around his neck, and never took them off. Nobody liked him as much as they like Pamela, but he was okay. He had joined the Army in the ’70s to go to Vietnam, but the war ended before he could get there, and he was still pissed.

Pamela had a Semper Fi tattoo on her arm in red and black ink, and Catherine dreamed about getting the same tattoo, right after she joined the Marines, right after she got all grown up. Pamela the Marine liked Catherine better than any other adult liked her, and she would prove it by talking to her and being with her and sometimes even helping her with her
Catherine behaved like she was convinced that she deserved abuse and bullying from her mother, from the other kids, from strangers, from Jack; and the little girl felt helpless to defend herself or speak up in any way. Anytime anybody had a go at her, she would stare at the ground and count the discarded items at her feet. Pamela wouldn’t stand for her allowing herself to be such a reliable target. She immediately stopped the catcalling and the rock throwing from the other kids. Pamela also let it be known that any kid caught calling Catherine, “stinky catty” would be forever band from the movie theater. Jack was hard on all the kids especially Catherine, and anytime he said anything mean to her there would be hell to pay. Pamela would make him stop by yelling at him in a loud, forceful voice full of emotion and concern. Nothing like the way Catherine’s mother would scream at her dad, a member of the California National Guard, as he escaped their house on drill weekends.

Through Pamela’s tutoring, Catherine learned how to at least acknowledge that the people who hurt her were wrong and should stop. But Pamela was broken. For all her strength, she was weak and limped real bad, dragging her left leg behind her as she walked. She had several spider-web scars peeking out from under the brown tee-shirts she always wore—just above the neck and a couple on her right arm. Throughout the day, she would take sips from a silver container that she pulled out of her back pocket. Catherine once asked her why she didn’t drink from a cup like everybody else.

“Because the VA messed up my leg, honey, and I’ve gots’ta live. Now, go watch your movie before you find yourself scraping gum off them seats.”

Catherine was convinced that she knew what had happened to her. It must have happened when Marine Pamela was in Vietnam. The little girl figured it out after her grandfather, the Vietnam vet, had taken her to see the movie Full Metal Jacket. People in
Vietnam shot guns at each other a lot and Pamela must have shot a gun at people too.

Catherine just knew it. The Marine that her friend must have been was always the hero of the little girl’s fantasies. In her favorite fantasy, Pamela stopped the bad guys from hurting kids, from hurting her. She always saved the kids and left the adults to fend for themselves. Catherine felt safe with her around. Her friend would always protect her and would never leave her.

The Hollywood Royale was painted light blue and had two screens, one with twenty-seven seats and the other one with thirty-two seats. Catherine had counted them herself one rainy afternoon. Those screens played very different kinds of movies. Jack’s screen was on the right, behind a red door with a *Citizen Kane* poster plastered on it. At the time, she thought he played stupid movies. As it turns out his movies were for grown ups and she watched them now—*The Thin Man, The 39 Steps, Touch of Evil, The Birds*—all classics.

The door leading to Pamela’s screen was covered with drawings and papers and report cards from all of the kids that watched movies on her side of the theater. She would hang up the A papers and F papers. At the end of the year, she would give prizes for the best report card and the worst. Catherine never got a prize; she was an up-and-down student who never flunked, but never got an A either. She liked the movies on Pamela’s side the best. They were what her mother would call “bad movies, really bad movies, full of nasty people and explosions.” Catherine loved those movies. Those movies were so bad they were good—movies like *Sinbad the Sailor, Plan 9 from Outer Space, Buckaroo Banzai, and Frankenstein Island*. From those movies she learned how strong people dealt with the strange creatures that threatened them.

Catherine told new kids coming to the Hollywood Royale for the first time that Pamela’s movies were the best because “you don’t have to be quiet. You can yell and throw
popcorn, and nobody slaps your hand or tells you to pipe down, or takes you out to the parking lot to yell at you.”

They sold popcorn and purple jawbreakers and Mountain Dew at the theater, but if someone couldn’t pay, Pamela would let them take out the garbage, or clean the bathroom, or do some other chore in exchange. Sometimes Sharon and Kelly, Catherine’s only friends from school, would tag along and the three of them would spend the day together in the dark watching movies. Catherine’s favorite was *Sinbad the Sailor*, with the green monsters and the heroes with a hundred arms. When she wasn’t busy, Pamela would sit with them and they would watch *Sinbad* two or even three times in a row, and between shows they’d throw popcorn at each other and at the people they didn’t like—like Jack.

Jack would yell at them, and then Pamela would yell at him, and then everything would get really loud. Pamela would follow Jack into the little room with the green door behind the concession counter. Then the kids would hear something heavy smash against the wall and they would cheer and Pamela would open the door and hobble out to them.

She was Catherine’s real mom.

The movies playing at the theater didn’t matter. All that mattered was that for three dollars and eighty-seven cents plus another five dollars for food and phone calls, Catherine’s “actual mother”—the one who didn’t like her, the one who used to be a supply sergeant in the Air Force, the one that had kept casualty lists on a clipboard in her office and cried over a particular name, a name of somebody who was not Catherine’s father—could get rid of the little girl for an entire afternoon. And Catherine was happy to not be at home, happy to be with Pamela. She was even happy to be with Jack.

At six o’clock, her actual mother would pull up in front of the theater, and Catherine would jump into the car without saying anything. Her actual mother never wanted to
know anything about the movies or her day, and Catherine wouldn’t have known what to say anyway. The sticky darkness of the movie theater suited her. She didn’t want to play outside. She didn’t want to do her homework. She didn’t know what she wanted to do. She just knew that she wanted to be in a place where people liked her and where magic lived, and magic didn’t live at her house.

Then one day the movie theater closed, and it stayed closed.

Pamela and Jack had gone to Boston to visit their grandchildren. On September 11th, they were on their way home when their plane went into the North Tower at 8:46 A.M.

###

Catherine was not living in her hometown on 9/11. She had moved away years before the event—escaping her actual mother’s screams, the Baskin Robbins, the Texaco station, and Main Street on Friday nights.

In 1997, when she turned twenty, Catherine tried to join the Marines. But she couldn’t do a pull-up. No matter how hard she tried, how much she grunted, bit her lip, or loudly told herself “you can do this,” she couldn’t lift her one hundred and thirty-three pound frame toward the bar, in fact she didn’t get anywhere close—her body wouldn’t move. The Marine recruiter invited her to either start an exercise routine to gain the strength to do a pull-up or talk to the Army recruiter. For expediency, she went Army. Luckily, she could do a push-up, and she scored pretty well on her Army entrance exam. She became a broadcast journalist—a kind of reporter. When she moved to Hollywood to live with her newly sober grandfather, to become a rock star, and to study Communications at UCLA, she joined an Army reserve unit in Los Angeles.

On 9/11, she sat with her grandfather and two-year-old daughter while CNN guided the world through the events of that horrible day. That night, under the anomalously silent
airways of our terrorized nation, with four thousand grounded flights and more than three thousand suddenly dead civilians, her grandfather hugged her and said, “Get ready honey, you’re going to war.”

Two years later, she was in Baghdad.

The Hollywood Royale is now a bowling alley.
Are You Scared Yet?

“Sergeant Talbot, as soon as we get off this plane, we’re in Iraq,” said Private Sloan in her best cheerleader voice, from the other side of her Army-issue Panasonic video camera. “Are you scared yet?”

Catherine stared into the camera lens and froze. What does one say to these things anyway? “Kelly, what are you doing?” she snarled. It had been a long flight from Fort Lewis, even with the two-hour layover in Frankfurt, and she was in no mood to facilitate Private Kelly Sloan’s idea of a last-minute training session.

Twenty-six-year-old Sergeant Catherine Talbot was only in the mood for the butt end of this plane to open, so that the five cargo pallets full of their stuff—duffel bags, the two generators that never worked, the sixteen boxes of mystery equipment, and the three dark green non-up-armored Humvees—could be removed from this plane. But mostly she wanted herself to be removed from this plane.

The atmosphere on board was distressing and suffocating and lonely. There had been too many ins and outs during the flight, too many uncomfortable snores, too many huge gulping sighs, too many screaming conversations, too many yes sirs, no sirs, too many stifled sobs. Too many, too many, too many, and now they had finally arrived in the sandbox and were ready for business, but the plane wouldn’t release them. Catherine wondered if their command had been kidding all along and they weren’t going to war after all and hadn’t, in fact, landed in Iraq, but were back at Fort Lewis, Washington. If that were the case the Army would have gathered all of their family and friends for a “Not This Time” party and a “Just Kidding” parade. She wouldn’t mind, because if that were to happen, there might be a chance, just a slight chance, that 9/11 hadn’t happened, that it had been faked somehow, and Pamela and Jack
and everybody else who died on that day weren’t dead but were guests of the government, off having fun somewhere. Then everything would be okay, and she would be able to play the next gig with her band and go on about the business of living and raising her daughter with a clear conscience and friends who weren’t dead and a country that wasn’t wounded.

But 9/11 had happened, no matter how much Catherine wished that it had not. It would always be a fixed event in time, and Pamela and Jack would have always exploded into a million pieces as the plane they had trusted to bring them home went into the North Tower instead. Iraq needed her unit, the United States needed her unit, everyone needed her unit and thousands of other units, each offering personnel up to the war in different guises, all prepared to hurt and bleed and die the same.

Their commander, Major Bloom, and every other officer and politician up the chain of command leading to the White House and the United Nations Security Council had said so. Even God had said so. At her unit’s going-away ceremony, the brigade chaplain had held them all captive for more than an hour explaining God’s message. The audience listened in tearful silence, except the uncomprehending children, who laughed and cried and chased each other around the banquet hall, unable to fathom the seismic shift their little lives would experience beginning moments after their soldier parents hugged them and climbed onto the Iraq bus. The understanding adults included her unit, the local press, members of the reserve center’s military detachment staying behind, and the long-suffering family members who would keep the home fires burning or, at least, attempt to. In a voice full of the Holy Spirit, the military man of God ended his sermon with a couple of promises from his God.

“Be not afraid, the Lord, our God, has sanctioned the actions of these brave men and women in uniform, and will surely travel with them, guide them, comfort them, and ultimately return them safely to us with his loving arms—in Jesus’ name we pray—Amen.”
This particular group of men and women in uniform were the “mighty 327th” Broadcast Operations Detachment out of Mendel, California. At thirty-two members strong, they were a small unit by any definition, nothing but a detachment. In war-zone Iraq they would be attached to a larger military organization that would take over the important command and control decisions, leaving the unit’s day-to-day operations to their little group of officers and NCOs to fight over. They might be small, but they made lots of noise doing their job creating the news, personality features, entertainment, and command information commercials for the television and radio stations of the American Forces Network, better known as AFN. They were the Army’s version of artists, and they filled their roles to perfection. They were highly-strung, emotional, and argumentative. Sometimes they even behaved like they were more or less, kind of, sort of members of the United States Army Reserves. Catherine considered their infrequent military posturing silly, but went along with them, and even polished her boots and kept her hair within regulation colors—except that time she dyed her hair burgundy for a gig and forgot to wash it out in time for drill.

She got a counseling statement from the commander for that one.

She wanted to do her job, but pretending to follow rules sometimes got in the way. It would have been so much easier to be fully militarily squared away all of the time, but since nobody else in her unit put in the effort, she didn’t either—which is why it was always a treat when she went to military schools where she could go overboard with her version of G.I. Jane military bearing and nobody made fun of her efforts.

The golden members of the 327th spent time on the ground in Frankfurt standing in line for the phones and the computers, buying junk food, and exercising their strained nerves upon each other.

Sergeant Carney did push-ups and sit-ups in the lobby by herself. Private Bronson
and Sergeant Brown drank the tiny bottles of gin that Private Bronson’s mother, a flight attendant, had procured for him. Sergeant White glared at Catherine as she watched the poor girl crying into the phone, then Sergeant White said something to Private Melissa Stark that made her cry. Private Johnny Williams saw the exchange and said something to Sergeant White that caused her to volley a “fuck you” back to Private Williams and the argument got Lieutenant Graham involved, which was bad for everybody. Sergeant Lee tried to punch Sergeant Webb in the face while Captain Patrick Johnson spent about fifteen minutes trying to be friendly before noticing that no one was talking back to him, so he gave up and went to sit in a seat by the window and stare at the planes. Catherine’s team interviewer and only friend, Private Kelly Sloan, again told Sergeant Fleetwood that she only liked him as a friend, no matter how many times they had hooked up. Sergeant Fleetwood then stormed off and spent the rest of the time sitting on the ground near Captain Johnson, reorganizing his sand-colored backpack.

They were a wonderful, dysfunctional family with firepower, video cameras, and a presidential mandate. Not the battalion of battle-hardened Marines that Catherine had dreamed about joining, but a weekend flag football team suddenly finding itself at the Super Bowl.

Catherine had no idea how the members of the little unit ended up in their various imbroglios, but she knew if they didn’t knock it off soon somebody would get hurt or in trouble or both, and that somebody would probably be her. So she sent Kelly to collect her ample want-to-be-lover Sergeant Fleetwood and a couple of the others to help her convince everybody to behave, or at least be quiet. When the commander and the acting first sergeant finally showed up ready to knock heads together and regain order, Catherine stopped them and explained the situation.

“Sir, everyone is so tired and stressed out that it’s practically making everybody
sick, and that’s why we seem so loud and out of control. But everything is just fine now. However, we do have to be careful, sir, or everyone will truly break down under the strain, and that won’t serve the mission.”

Major Bloom stared at her for a moment; Catherine couldn’t tell if his features conveyed incredulity, concern, or anger. She was relieved when the man turned away and took the acting first sergeant with him. Once the two of them were safely back in the cluster of what must have been, at one time, a gift shop, everyone burst into exhausted giggles.

She didn’t get it. Their country had been attacked, Saddam had weapons of mass destruction poised to mass destroy the world, and they were going to war.

What was so funny?

But then again, she couldn’t be bothered to figure it out. The experience was exhausting—the omnidirectional fear, the continual drama, the petty spats, the pain that her military comrades were inflicting upon each other that just might, at any moment, explode into a version of the war they were entering, was wearing her down—not to mention the most distressing aspect of the day’s travel, her airsickness.

“We didn’t get it. Their country had been attacked, Saddam had weapons of mass destruction poised to mass destroy the world, and they were going to war.

What was so funny?

But then again, she couldn’t be bothered to figure it out. The experience was exhausting—the omnidirectional fear, the continual drama, the petty spats, the pain that her military comrades were inflicting upon each other that just might, at any moment, explode into a version of the war they were entering, was wearing her down—not to mention the most distressing aspect of the day’s travel, her airsickness.

“Pappaw, I barfed twice,” she confessed to her grandfather, when it was her turn at the phones.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he said, “you should have seen me on the way to Saigon. I was green the entire trip.”

So now they had made it to Iraq and she was desperate to get off of the plane and experience this war-zone for herself. She liked Private Kelly Sloan more than she disliked everyone else. But come on now. They were Army Broadcast journalists, not talk show guests.

“Kelly, why are you pointing that camera at me?” Catherine demanded.

“Major Bloom told the acting first sergeant to get some footage,” she answered.
Private Sloan was the prettiest female soldier in the unit. She was on everybody’s to-do list, but as far as Catherine knew, Sergeant Fleetwood was the only one she had actually slept with.

However, Catherine did share an hour with Kelly on the Humvee.

Halfway through the flight, personnel had moved their drowsy selves to the roofs and hoods of the unit’s non-up-armored Humvees and pallets of duffel bags. Catherine and Kelly slept, back to back, on the roof of the same Humvee for about an hour, until it sagged so much they almost rolled off during minor turbulence.

Acting First Sergeant Mikel Claypool sprang into action after he fell off the hood he had been dozing on, causing him to regain his dignity by screaming at everybody and ordering them to get back to their seats, “before all y’all hurt your damned selves.” Not that anybody could call the nylon-webbed torture device that hung down either side of the airplane a seat. Those things must have been designed by the CIA to cripple anyone who dared sit in them for more than a minute. The exertion sent needles flaming from Catherine’s lower back into her toes. An added benefit was smelly Private Blackwell sleeping on her shoulder. He was too heavy to push off, and she didn’t want him to inflict his ponderous, leaden cranium onto her unsuspecting shoulder ever again.

So she sat on the floor at the rear of the plane, and with her back against a generator, listening to “Heroes,” her favorite Bowie song, on her new Discman over and over again until the batteries died.

Nobody noticed.

Now, looking at Kelly, Catherine realized how lucky she had been. The flight had given her a terminal headache and strained her back, but it had decimated her friend. The girl had black fuzzy-hair spiders escaping her mandated military bun and crawling around her
forehead and the nape of her neck. Her dark eye make-up had melted down her face, transforming her from a hard-ass beauty to a tired Army raccoon. The excursion hadn’t hurt Catherine’s looks at all. In her uniform, with her short golden-brown hair plastered close to her scalp, without make-up, she resembled an adolescent boy. But then again, she had always resembled an adolescent boy.

Catherine wasn’t on the “to-do list” of anybody in her unit.

“But Kelly, we’re AFN, not combat camera,” Catherine said, irritated that nobody ever seemed to know the difference.

“I know, but the old man wants this, and since you’re the most expressive and dramatic, you’re my first victim,” she said with a pointed seriousness quickly dissolving into exasperation.

Before 9/11 and Pamela and Jack’s death, and the country’s descent into another Gulf War, Catherine’s personality had been on the effervescent side. In fact, at one point she could have been described as giddy and excited, with a larger-than-life personality. However, now she spent too much time being worried, panicked over far too many issues that were completely out of her control for her to ever to be excited about much except her daughter. It was true that at one point she had been so happy to be a soldier and a part of the group that she had been the most excited about the unit’s activities, and it was the memory of her annoying enthusiasm that was causing her troubles now. In fact, the unit’s unofficial gossip council had recently handed down their verdict on her. As a soldier, she was a team player who accomplished whatever task was put to her. This made her a fairly squared-away soldier. As a broadcaster, she might be strong-willed and troublesome, but she worked hard, helping everyone produce a fairly decent product. What saved her was that she was not any better or worse than anybody else in that department—so nobody felt the need to hate her.
“Kelly, you do know that we’re in Iraq already,” she said, hoping that the girl would pick on someone else.

“No shit, Catherine, just say something,” she said, bugging her eyes for emphasis and motioning to a point just beyond her camera lens.

“Okay, fine,” she huffed, turning to the lens, and in her best Hey Mom look what I’m doing voice, recited, “Hello everybody, I’m Army Sergeant Catherine Talbot on day one of our Iraq mission. We’re going to do great things. I know it. Send goodies. Hi Mom.” She finished with the cheesiest grin she could manage and her version of a spokesperson’s wave.

Kelly scowled at her and said, “Thanks, Catherine. Don’t quit your day job,” then took her brand new camera to find someone else to bother.

The recently acquired lightweight civilian cameras, with nowhere to plug in a microphone and absolutely no professional parts, were high on Catherine’s list of annoyances. The commander had presented them to the unit as their war cameras.

Their “war cameras” would have been perfect for filming graduations, backyard barbecues, and a baby’s first steps. In Iraq, they would be dead in a month. However, considering everything, the cameras were the least of their worries. They didn’t have any protective gear, armor for their Humvees, or anywhere to live now that the Green Zone’s Al Rasheed Hotel had been attacked by twenty rockets and was off limits to them. Plus, she was positive that the commander didn’t fully grasp that they were going into a war zone located in a place with sand and populated by people who weren’t Americans and didn’t necessarily speak English. The man went to bed early, got up late and was forever writing lists on legal-sized yellow notepads that he kept in the black plastic footlocker the acting first sergeant had purchased for him at the PX. Even more worrisome, the commander didn’t protest when his unit was trained for combat in a desert country by slogging about in the rainy forests
surrounding Fort Lewis, Washington.

It had been raining when they arrived at Fort Lewis after their long flight from Los Angeles, and the cloudbursts continued, with only occasional breaks for an overwhelmed and dimmed sun to peek through, until the day they left to board their flight to Iraq. They ran in the rain. They went on patrol exercises in the rain. They qualified at the shooting range in the rain, and they lined up for their anthrax vaccines in the rain.

If Iraq turned out to be covered in thick verdant grass and imposing redwood trees that were continually deluged with rain for weeks on end, and the enemy didn’t move or make any noise, and everyone called it a day as the daylight dimmed at 1630, they were ready. They would capture Saddam, rebuild the country, and make the world safe for democracy in a couple of weeks.

Welcome to the sandbox, everybody.

Are you scared yet?

###

Outside the huge Boeing C-17 transport plane it was twilight in Baghdad war-zone land. The unit was to wait for morning as guests of Victory Base Complex. They had landed on the military side of what had been, until just after the April invasion, the Saddam International Airport. Now it was called Baghdad International Airport, or just BIAP.

Catherine first heard about the airport when she was at the dental clinic at Fort Lewis waiting for her deployment cleaning. CNN was blaring loudly on the waiting room television. The acting first sergeant had just sat down next to her in one of the chairs covered in green fabric when the Coalition spokesperson declared the name change to the world in proud Army tones.

Catherine laughed and, looking over to the acting first sergeant, quipped, “How
cool. When you invade a country you get to change the name of its airport.”

“Sergeant, watch your mouth and don’t bother with what’s not your business,” he ordered, “and listen up for your name. We’re not bringing you back here because you weren’t paying attention.”

“Yes, First Sergeant,” mumbled Catherine, staring at her boots.

Well, it was cool, and if she controlled a country, she’d make the acting first sergeant be nicer to her. And then she’d make him scrub toilets with a toothbrush.

###

When Catherine finally escaped the plane, her first breath of Iraqi air practically killed her. The air was all smoke, chemicals, and burning shit. The sky was low and cloudy. The military lights, powered by loud, irritating generators, reflected off the low-hanging clouds, making the place seem like a group hallucination. If it wasn’t real, she hoped that she had stumbled onto the *Wizard of Oz* soundstage at the MGM Studio in Culver City, which was now called the Sony Studio lot. Because when Sony had taken over they changed the name; that’s what invading armies always did. Somewhere there would be a door that led to catering, with her favorite wine, home, friends, and safety.

She never did find that door.

What she did find was the welcome tent. And it wasn’t welcoming. It was a stuffy, steaming, smelly bedlam. She had no idea that military tents could be this huge. She also had no idea that a tent this huge could be so stuffed with people.

It was an expansive, rectangular structure with many sections. One section was a library and religious reading room with books stacked in blue milk crates, and card tables surrounded by soldiers with weapons at their feet. Another section had four 7-Eleven-type refrigerators filled with one liter bottles of water. A handwritten sign taped to the glass read,
“If you take one out put one in.” She spent the next couple of minutes imagining the identity of the “one” that could be taken out and put back in. She decided that the answer was “lovers” and it made her momentarily pleased to think of her last lover shivering in the fridge.

She then took one of the bottles out, and didn’t put one back in. *Fuck them,* she thought. The water was imported from Saudi Arabia.

*9/11 water. Great!*

Kelly’s question, “Are you scared yet?” kept sounding in her ears above the din of the crowded tent. Was she scared yet? She didn’t think so. She was disoriented, harassed, uncomfortable, and a bit numb. But scared? No, she wasn’t scared. She wanted to be in Iraq, involved in the fight. She just didn’t want to die.

She had a child to protect, a country to help defend, college and the beginnings of a music career to get back to. Being alive allowed you do all of that.

Next to the refrigerator were crates of water bottles and boxes of tan meals-ready-to-eat packages stacked neatly and holding up a rickety bookcase stuffed with devotional books and boxes of Army postcards. Catherine hated MREs— they were disgusting. She swore that she would starve to death before she would eat anything from meals-ready-to-eat packages. Except, perhaps the crackers, and maybe, under extreme circumstances, the dehydrated peaches. As to the postcards: what does one write on a postcard in a war zone?

*Just landed in Baghdad wishing you were here*

*Listening to mortar fire and thinking of you*

Sure, why not?

Another section of this huge tent was for sleeping. Young men and women leaning on backpacks, books, rucksacks, helmets, and each other were dead asleep. One guy was crying, and an Army sergeant with bloodstained trousers was on his back, dry-humping the air.
The largest section of the tent had a big-screen television with about fifty gray metal folding chairs pointed at the screen and filled with soldiers of all ranks, genders, shapes, and sizes. Figures projected on the television were doing stuff, making noise, and moving their mouths like they were talking to each other, but something was wrong with the distorted sound. Stuff changed positions, characters moved their mouths, and then the sound came.

It was just like the sound at the concert a group from Catherine’s unit had attended before the start of their Iraq adventure. The band “The Righteous Few” was playing at the LA Coliseum across the street from USC, the commander’s alma mater. He procured tickets for everybody—cheap tickets, really, really cheap tickets.

The band’s video image was projected onto huge video screens placed on either side of the stage. But Catherine’s little group was so removed from that stage that the singer’s mouth moved, the guitar player strummed, the bass player thumped … and then after a few beats the sound reached them. Her little group made the best of the situation though. They danced, made fun of the singer, yelled at the band, and partied with the Hell’s Angels sitting in front of them. Before long Catherine had smoked too much, drank too much, and danced too much to care what was happening on the stage or how her actions sounded, or looked.

Meanwhile, back at the war, Big Bird suddenly filled the television screen. “Okay,” she thought, “this Baghdad thing might be interesting.”

Are you scared yet?

Maybe.

But then again, why be scared? She had it on good authority from two of God’s Operation Iraqi Freedom disciples—Dave and Sam—that the guy upstairs was really with them. He had deployed with them to this war zone, and his angels were betting on their side, helping them where they could.
Earlier in the evening, Catherine had watched those two young soldiers reading a Bible together, with their M16s and assorted hardware surrounding them. They both noticed Catherine staring and introduced themselves, asking if she wanted to pray with them. They were from Utah and had joined the Army together, ending up in Kentucky with the 101st. They had entered the war with the invasion and were now on their way back to Mosul.

Sam was nineteen and Dave was twenty-one, and they were both infantry. Sam told Catherine that God wanted to talk to her. He had the maturity and force of a preacher with years of experience in the bringing-people-to-God and saving-souls business.

“Sam . . . Private, God’s not interested in talking to me,” Catherine told him.

“Sure he is . . . Sergeant Talbot. Why else are you here?” he asked, reading the name and rank off of her uniform.

“We’re all here for the same reason,” she retorted, “doing our duty, protecting our families. I’m here for my little girl.” What she didn’t mention was that she wanted make the bad guys pay for killing Pamela and ruining everything.

“Then be not afraid Sergeant,” said Dave.

She was about to protest that she wasn’t afraid, when something stopped her. Did that mean that she was afraid? No, she was too mad to be afraid. She was mad patriotic—those fuckers had attacked her country on 9/11, killed her friends, and scared everybody, making of mess of things. Now her side had some attacking to do, and she was going to help tell their story.

Sam continued his sermon. “Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will work for you today.”

“Sergeant Talbot, know that the Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be
silent,” Dave added.

“You mean that with God on my side, I don’t have to do anything?” she asked.

“You do what He tells you to do,” they said, practically in unison.

“And how does he do that?” she asked. “Tell me what to do?”

“You talk to him,” said Dave.

“We’re talking to our heavenly Father together right now,” Sam said. “Won’t you join us?”

She considered her options as the two heavenly-hosted Army lambs waited. What had her Grandfather, said to her just before she left? “Honey, in a war zone you should never pass up any opportunity to connect with another human being. They could die, or you could die; at any rate you might not get another chance.”

She noticed that Sam was really young and he had green eyes. Just like her daughter had green eyes. And he was looking at her with those green eyes, like the fate of the entire world rested on her decision.

She gave in. “All right, you two, a little reading and talking never hurt anybody.”

###

After they had been reading from the Bible for about an hour—asking “our heavenly Father” for lots of stuff, including good sense, healing of the sick, and a swift end to the current hostilities—God’s privates were called away.

“Be it your will, heavenly Father, that our sister Catherine find you and listen to your wisdom—in Jesus’s name, amen.”

“Sergeant Talbot are you scared yet?”

Well, are you?

“God . . . Deity . . . Dude, leave me alone.”
Catherine was on her third lap around the tent when she ran into the unit factotum, Sergeant Phil Momicia. He was an affable conscientious guy and he took care of everybody. He was a sergeant first class with about seventeen years in the military, and his official title was unit administrator. Everybody called him “Mom,” and they loved him. He was the sweetest and most sincere person Catherine had ever met. One long afternoon, when she had first joined the unit, Mom told her bits of his life story. He had grown up in Los Angeles, surviving what he called a “war zone-like home life.” This situation continued to deteriorate and he was on his way to becoming an outlaw and completely ruining his life when his grandmother sent him to live with his aunt in Butte, Montana. “She cleaned me up, made me go to school, and brought me to God. God and my aunt saved my life, Sergeant Talbot. They gave me a mission, a reason.” He told her that taking care of soldiers was his way of praising God.

This wasn’t difficult for Catherine to believe, because, Mom the unit administrator really did seem to care about everybody and always had time for everybody. No matter how busy he might be or how long it might take.

Catherine never wanted to help anybody. Unless of course they annoyed her, and then she could always can find the time to bitch them out, or at least be unpleasant to them. The administrator had told her on numerous occasions that God want his people to be kind to each other. Catherine didn’t understand God.

But she liked Mom, and she trusted him, and that was enough.

“Sergeant Talbot, I’ve been looking for you,” he said with a smile.

She had no doubt that he actually had been looking for her. Had anybody else who didn’t outrank her uttered that phrase, she would have ignored them completely.
“This is quite a place,” she told him with an offhanded smile, but realized that she yearned for her daughter and needed to cry.

“Sergeant Talbot, you seem lost,” he said, watching her reaction with a slight tilt of his head. She was the only person in the room for him at that moment.

“How frightening,” Catherine said with an attempted smile.

Okay, so she was lost.

But Sergeant Talbot, are you scared yet?

No. Not yet.

“I’m fine,” she said, regaining her composure. “What can I do for you, Mom? I mean, Sergeant?”

His face flowered into a wide smile, “you have to sign your new SGLI.”

“What?”

“It’s your life insurance Sergeant,” he reminded her. “You wanted everything to go to your daughter, remember. And nothing—how did you put it—to her sperm donor.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I have a daughter and my daughter has a father, and that father is not one of the people I’m here to protect.”

Private Sloan called him her baby-daddy.

Catherine called him her mistake.

Her grandfather called him a son-of-a-bitch, but thanked him for helping him get a granddaughter.

Jillian, the four-year-old granddaughter called him Dadda.

Catherine and Dadda had been at military school the same time. They were both learning how to become Army journalists at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Maryland. She was the broadcaster and he was the newspaper guy. She thought he was
gorgeous—as it turns out, he wasn’t—and he thought she was crazy. As it turns out, she kind of was. When they all went into Annapolis for their first liberty weekend, everyone paired up and got hotel rooms. She got him. Their arrangement continued every free weekend and whenever they could sneak away. When they graduated, her formal class ‘A’ uniform was a little snugger than she remembered.

He went back to his National Guard unit in Maine and promised to call. He didn’t. She went back to her Army Reserve unit in California and, after three months of expansion, weight gain, and silence, she had her grandfather, the retired Army lieutenant colonel, contact Dadda’s commanding officer. Now the two parents more or less shared custody, and the child had two mommies.

Dadda recently got married, and not to her.

“I’m in Iraq with my unit, and he’s at home with his new wife, playing with our daughter. It’s not fair,” she cried to Mom.

Mom shook his head in agreement. “No, Sergeant Talbot, life isn’t always fair.”

Are you scared yet?

###

At zero dark—she didn’t know what time it was—Catherine had had enough of trolling the war from the inside of a tent and took her place in the sleeping section, away from the air-humping private and the television with Big Bird. With her cold-war era flak vest that wouldn’t stop shit supporting her head, and her arm resting on her helmet, she slid down the rabbit hole of sleep.

On her way down to the Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter, and the Red Queen, she grabbed her daughter Jillian off the shelf that the little thing had been sharing with the hookah-smoking Caterpillar. The child’s sperm-donor father, Humpty Dumpty, was on the next shelf
wearing a suicide bomber vest. He grabbed the girl, handed her to the Duchess, and punched Catherine in chest, pulling out her heart. With a loud, “You knew this would happen,” they all exploded.

And just like every bad movie Catherine had ever seen, her nightmare dissolved into morning and somebody she knew; in this case it was Sergeant First Class Grace Carney trying to wake her up by kicking the soles of her boots and screeching something about the trucks being here to take them into the Green Zone.

Catherine was still shaken by the thought of her daughter dying. Since the day she had brought the girl into the world, she had been certain that something horrible would happen to her. She knew that bad things could and did happen in the world. But after Pamela and Jack died on 9/11, she knew that those bad things could happen to her, and her paranoia mushroomed.

Captain Patrick Johnson brought her a bottle of water. “Thank you, sir,” she told him. Why was he being nice? A nice officer is a weird freak of nature.

Private Kelly Sloan, who was not a freak of nature but not so nice either, told her with a whistle, “Catherine, you look like shit.”

“Yeah Kelly, I know,” she replied. “You’re kind of fucked up too.”

Catherine was in an I-hate-everything mood, and had a headache. Her arms were still heavily asleep and all prickly needles and shooting pain.

Sergeant Carney, who should have been the unit first sergeant but wasn’t, always attempted to assume the role when the acting one didn’t act fast enough to suit her.

“Fall in, everyone,” she ordered. “If you miss this transport, who knows when we’ll be able to get you.”

Catherine couldn’t decide whether she cared if she was gotten or not. She was
dehydrated and hung over, with too many world-changing events happening all at once for her brain to keep them straight and still work properly. Her hair stuck to her head in itchy patches of sweat, and her mouth was sickly dry.

“Can we fix the world now and just go home?” she asked Kelly, who rolled her eyes and touched her shoulder in an effort to seem concerned and comforting.

“Don’t worry, Kelly, I’m all right and not scared yet.”

The tent, sans its nighttime magic, was dirty and depressing and smelled of dust and sweat. The television was still on but the sound was off. The party had been over for hours, but folks were sluggish about leaving. Though some appeared to be still asleep, Catherine wondered if any of them might be dead.

Last night, she hadn’t noticed that there were people behind the long plywood counter at the far end of the tent. The flags on the canvas wall behind them claimed this tent in the name of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Iraq. Did the other forty-six members of the Coalition also have welcome tents?

That would make for a lot of welcome tents.

She walked to the door and pushed it open. The intense white sun overexposed the world and blinded her for a moment. It couldn’t have been later than 0800, yet the air was already hair-dryer hot.

So this was Iraq.

In Iraq, everything was oatmeal yellow and bright, and covered by lots of dark-red sand.

“Great, we’ve landed on Mars.”

###

The ground outside the tent was sand covered by gravel and planks. The road was
packed sand. Some of the sand was in sandbags. Some of it was in small dunes. Some of it was being kicked up into mini tornadoes by the efficient tires of the constantly passing military vehicles. Most of it, however, was floating in the air and finding its way into lungs, choking everybody.

Catherine wanted a cigarette.

Six tan porta-potties were lined up just outside the welcome tent door. One of the plastic structures had fallen over and created a toxic stream flowing toward the tent. Three American soldiers were intoning at each other in guttural sentences while watching over the brown skinned workers who were attending to the mess.

People were everywhere, all crabby and regaining consciousness. The vision of a whole lot of people in uniform seemingly in a hurry, yet somehow still lumbering and stumbling and tripping over themselves, was creepy.

Catherine didn’t want to go into the Green Zone; she wanted to find a way to wake these lost people up and give them some coordination.

The soldiers who had come to escort them into the Green Zone appeared accustomed to the place. They acted like they knew their way around and smelled like they had done important things, and didn’t seem to find anything wrong with the cast members of *The Night of the Living Dead* playing the parts of American soldiers in Baghdad.

The mortal in charge, according to his uniform and name tape, was Sergeant First Class Pryne. He was dark and about Kelly Slone’s height, which meant that she was tall and he was short. He looked like he worked out a lot, took vitamins, and was a completely squared-away military machine. Yet the more Catherine watched him directing his soldiers and yelling at her unit, the more she caught a vision of him smacking his girlfriend in the face and charging too much on his Visa card. In her vision she saw him sitting in a dark corner somewhere with a
bottle of something alcoholic, crying.

She remembered her father, after he got back from Desert Storm, smacking her mother in the face, drinking a lot of alcohol, crying, and finally leaving the house one night at the end of an extremely long fight.

Fights and man-tears are scary.

# # #

Sergeant Pryne organized the unit into a formation and marched them to a very large wooden cargo box.

“This container is filled with personal hygiene products sent to you by the good citizens of the United States in recognition of your service,” Sergeant Pryne told them, using his drill sergeant voice.

Really?

Catherine found herself standing next to Sergeant Fleetwood. They had never liked each other. In fact, when the deployment roster was made public Sergeant Fleetwood had pulled her aside and said, “Sergeant Talbot, I would like you to allow my father to aide you in avoiding this deployment.” His father was an LA lawyer, well connected and rich.

“Sergeant Fleetwood, why would you do that?” Catherine had asked.

“I don’t like you Sergeant Talbot and desire not to be bothered by you on this particular deployment. You may attach yourself to the next one if you wish,” he answered with the air of having made a valid point with enough money and influence to see his and every dream to fruition.

Catherine found him pathetic and so naive that everything about him made her cringe. She decided not to be nice by being condescendingly nice and agreeable, despite having to stifle the urge to smack him in the face with her black military purse. She smiled a deep
motherly, understanding smile. “But Sergeant Fleetwood, I like you very much. I adore you even, and I’m not bothered by you at all. You’re a really great soldier and a fantastic guy. I don’t care what anybody says.” She volleyed back softly and possessed enough control to wait until he wandered away to change her expression and shoot him a daggered baleful look. If anyone from her unit had to die in Iraq—she nominated him.

The rumor was that Sergeant Fleetwood had followed Private Kelly Sloan into the Army. He was obsessed with her hair and thought he could force her to love him. Kelly had fucked him a couple of times, but wasn’t impressed.

“He’s a passable lover, I guess,” she had told a group over lunch in the chow hall.

“Then why do you put up with him? If he’s just passable?” Catherine had asked.

“The gifts are amazing. It’s all in the gifts,” she answered with a smug smile, showing off her new watch from Tiffany’s.

No one was impressed.

Well, maybe Catherine was a little impressed.

In general, people put up with Sergeant Fleetwood because of the gifts and the money and the people he spent his money on. Catherine found him sadder than sad—pathetic even. But he didn’t care. He had enough money not to care. His family had been rich and powerful for a long time. They purchased who and what they wanted. His father had once told a group of soldiers at a unit Christmas function that “anyone can be bought. You simply have to negotiate the right price.”

Well, Catherine couldn’t be bought, and neither could Kelly. Though both could, for the right price, be rented.

Catherine never socialized with or even approached Sergeant Adam Fleetwood. When he entered a room, she exited. She rarely spoke to him either, unless she had an official
reason. She preferred to ignore him and all of his money and arrogance. However, when the opportunity presented itself, Catherine always took that opportunity to engage him, perchance to annoy him.

“So, Sergeant Fleetwood, what do you think about this? We left our home and our families to go to Mars on behalf of the good citizens of our home planet, and they sent us shampoo?” Catherine talked to him as if they were best friends.

He didn’t return the favor.

“So Sergeant Talbot, it is all they could afford, but I already have everything that I need,” he answered flatly, looking through her to Private Sloan, who was standing close to the acting first sergeant. The warm sunshine of jealously brightened his face.

_Oh goody, there’s going to be kerfuffle._

Sergeant Fleetwood marched away.

_Bummer._

After gathering their personal hygiene treats, Sergeant Pryne marched the unit to pick up their weapons and board the chariots that would transport them into the magical Green Zone. The chariots were two grayish-tan “deuce-and-a-half” trucks, and two Humvees for the officers. The enlisted worker bees were to ride in the back of the trucks. The truck bed was about seven feet up, so the guys jumped into the back with little effort and began lending helpful hands to the females. Since Catherine never did think of herself as a female who needed a helping hand, she attempted to jump in just like the guys.

She fell backward onto the sandy ground.

Sergeant Thomas, her squad leader and evil arch-nemesis, laughed—loudly. Nobody else noticed until Sergeant Thomas laughed and made it a thing. Then they all laughed.
“I hate you all,” she yelled at the crowd who weren’t listening.

###

“What the hell is that?” screamed Sergeant Lee into Catherine’s ear, not five minutes into the chariot ride. He had clearly not suffered any vocal harm from his night in the unwelcoming welcome tent, and was motioning toward a huge pointy sandcastle-looking structure mounted high in the air on a thick wooden stake. It had multiple mouse holes and perches in uniform patterns all over the surface.

It looked like a beehive, or maybe an anthill condo.

“It’s where you put your dick,” said Private Williams.

“It’s where Saddam hid his weapons of mass destruction,” said Private Stark.

“It’s your new girlfriend,” suggested Sergeant Brown.

“Would you people shut it?” Catherine said. Turning to Sergeant Pryne, she asked, “Sergeant Pryne, do you know what it is?”

Sergeant Pryne was sitting at the cab in the front of the truck bed. He looked at her and his body seemed to expand. He was one of those people who felt the need to jump-start his thoughts.

Catherine rolled her eyes. She knew lots of those types.

“Well, three-twenty-seventh, I’ll tell you what that there structure is,” he said, positioning himself like he expected his answer to make everyone very happy. “That there is one of Saddam’s bat houses. There’s a lot of bats in this here location and people say that old Saddam would eat them raw for dinner,” he announced in a manner that didn’t invite follow-up questions and appeared to allow him to feel like he had done his duty for the day.

Catherine wasn’t satisfied.

But before she had the chance to get herself into trouble by asking another question,
the truck hit a bump on the uneven road and she felt herself go a bit airborne. When the truck was back on the road again they passed a checkpoint manned by a soldier sticking out of a tank.

There was a whole squad of soldiers on the ground, so loaded down with gear that they looked like they belonged with Alice, in Wonderland, not here on Mars.

Humpty Dumpty indeed.

An anonymous soldier that Catherine dubbed Sergeant Thing One waved them through the last BIAP checkpoint, and they attacked Route Irish with what felt like a lot of speed. In reality they were really crawling, at fifty-five miles per hour, which is the top speed of most military vehicles.

The Arabic graffiti on the first overpass they went under probably wasn’t from the local Chamber of Commerce welcoming them to Baghdad.

As they all watched the airport complex speed away, Catherine’s throat became prickly painful and her face heated up. She was suddenly seeing the afternoon sky moments before the summer rain on her grandmother’s ranch in Colorado.

She was going to cry.

Catherine hated it when she cried. But sometimes she needed to cry because it hurt. It hurt so much. It felt like the day she learned that Pamela and Jack were dead. It hurt like when she realized that she would never feel safe again. It hurt like she had been ripped away from something—a section of her body wasn’t there anymore, was staying at BIAP, and another part had died with Pamela and Jack and her father’s pain and her mother’s anger. She knew if she looked she’d find the wound and the blood, the scab and the scar.

Yesterday, she was still posturing and positioning herself. Yesterday, the war was still an idea, still a concept, a movie playing at the Cineplex in her head. Yesterday, she didn’t
know how to mean it and be a soldier at war.

Today, right this minute, speeding down Route Irish—the road soldiers called IED Alley and the Iraqis called Death Street—they were crossing the divide between getting ready to go to war, arriving at the place of war, and being at war—being in the middle of the war. And this place, this middle of the war, was a place on the other side the world, where everything looked just familiar enough for your brain believe that you knew what you were doing in the middle of this war and how being in the middle of this war should make sense.

But it didn’t and it never would.

So, Sergeant Talbot, are you scared yet? asked Private Sloan’s words still dancing in Catherine’s head.

Close.

# # #

Catherine looked into the lane next to their vehicle and saw a rusty car that could have been a Pontiac Phoenix. She could tell that it had started out as a blue automobile, but now the rust had eaten away at everything and the engine was visible through the hood.

Through the intact glass she saw a family.

Dad was driving and a teenage boy was sitting next to Dad. Mom, or aunt, or older sister in a headscarf was sitting in the back seat with three kids. The adults stared straight ahead, but the children smiled and waved at them. They weren’t wearing seat belts. Catherine waved back with one hand while holding her weapon with the other. She felt herself making faces at the children and enjoying the funny faces they made back.

Then their vehicle swerved into the old, rusty car with the family inside and pushed them off the road. She was about to complain about hurting the natives when from somewhere in the bleached white concrete living spaces of sixth-century Mesopotamia on the other side of
the freeway flew a lone bullet, and then another, and then another and another.

Their vehicle swerved hard to the left and everybody on the left was suddenly on the right—unwelcome guests.

Welcome to the sandbox, everybody.

Surprise, this shit’s for real.

Are you scared yet?

*My God.*

“Three-twenty-seventh, you’ve got your weapons with you,” cried Sergeant Pryne.

“Protect your convoy. Pick a sector.”

“We don’t have any ammunition,” protested Sergeant Grace Carney.

“Do it anyway. Your presence is enough to intimidate them,” said Sergeant Pryne.

“You heard the man,” said Sergeant Carney.

With their helmets falling over their eyes, and without ammunition, they positioned their weapons and eyes over the slats of the transportation vehicle into the unknown of *Shit, that one could have taken me out.*

Catherine’s daughter took center stage in her head. *Dear God, I’m doing this, so she will never have to do this. I’m doing this, so she will never have to do this. She will never have to do this. She will never have to do this. I hope she will never have to do this,* Catherine prayed.

Something somewhere close exploded and the vehicle swerved again, this time to the right. The pictures in her brain disappeared and all she could think was *Fuck, fuck, fuck, I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.*

*Dear God.*

*Dear God, don’t let me die. I’m not meant to die here on the other side of the world.*
I’m only twenty-six. I’ve got a kid. I’ve got things to do. God, Don’t let me die.

Route Irish was only seven miles long. This couldn’t last forever.

Oh, but it could.

###

And then the souls in the truck collectively exhaled and believed they were safe, just in time for something else to explode behind them. The explosion was enormous and disheartening, and it was war. They would find out later that a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, better know as VBIED or simply a fucking car bomb, rammed into a tanker truck, vaporizing a dozen American soldiers, a group of contractors, and some Iraqis. The deep reds, yellows, and coal blacks of the explosion could be seen, and felt, and heard for miles—Catherine felt it in her chest. She thought her heart had exploded too.

They crossed the finish line at the Jersey barrier partitions and blast walls, Abrams tanks, and American soldiers of Checkpoint Twelve—entering the Green Zone to the orchestra playing the Iraq war version of the song, “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor.”

Next stop was Saddam Hussein’s Presidential Palace, now home to the Coalition Provisional Authority and military representatives from the free world. Catherine and her unit were to check in with their chain of command, and then do something else; Catherine didn’t care what it was. She hadn’t died, and that was good.

It was almost the end of August and the war had been going on for more than five months, which was three months after the President had declared “Mission Accomplished” on the festive deck of that aircraft carrier. It was hot, but the temperature would be cooling off someday soon they hoped, and they would be doing their duties in relative comfort.

As it turned out, Mom, the unit administrator, had been the weapon-without-ammunition pointer, sector protector, stationed next to Catherine the entire time.
“Sergeant Talbot, are you scared yet,” cried out private Sloan’s voice from a place in Catherine’s memory. “Well, are you?”

    Yes.

    “Mom, I’m scared,” she said.

    “Yes, Sergeant Talbot, I know,” he said and placed his hand over hers. “Stay scared, Sergeant. It will be good for you.”
The media came to Baghdad to collect our scattered crumbs . . . without us, they couldn’t do anything.

—Overheard at Embassy Baghdad

“So where can I find your stories, sweetheart?” asked civilian journalist Trevor Smith, sitting next to Catherine in the back seat of the white armored SUV. Her head was pounding and his voice only made it worse. She could tell that he was at least trying to be nice. It wasn’t working. Adding “sweetheart” to the end of his request only made him more of a sarcastic shithead.

She gave him credit for trying.

Catherine’s first inclination was to tell this civilian reporter, this Trevor Smith, that this wasn’t a bar and she wasn’t his sweetheart, but this was their first date so to speak, and she needed to make sure that she didn’t say anything that would trigger the ferocious beast in him and get her into trouble. Last week, Catherine had stood by in shock while he tore into Rachel, her favorite press person from the public affairs office at the palace. Rachel, who weighed in at one hundred and thirty-eight pounds and five foot eleven and three-quarters, could have been a model, but she wanted to help the Western media change the world instead. She only thought she was tough, but Trevor Smith really was really tough. He was tougher, louder, and more vicious than anybody, especially her. His caustic baritone and precisely placed words cut the supporting cables of Rachel’s self esteem. He wasn’t messing around. If he didn’t get what he wanted, God would know and send an insurgent team to destroy Rachel, and that was all there was to that.
Rachel was young, blond and brilliant. She had just graduated from Yale, and this was her first job. Fighting back wasn’t in her portfolio yet. Later that day, she told everyone who would listen that she wasn’t cut out to deal with the liberal press. “What do they know anyway?” she huffed and then got on the phone to her dad the congressman.

What this reporter guy knew was a mystery to Catherine, who he knew was a different story. She knew all about the people that made up the “who” of “who he knew.” They were well connected and supported by the DC officials controlling the Iraq mission —and the mission included the military, and the military included her. According to the guys in charge, this guy sitting next to her was the single most important reporter in the world. His publication had lots of readers — in the President’s office, in Congress, in the red states—everybody everywhere.

She would lose if she tried to brawl with everybody everywhere.

So she scanned this important guy’s figure, searching for a way to deal with him. He wasn’t bad looking – white, but clearly not from only Nordic stock, maybe some Russian, maybe Spanish. He could even have a little Iraqi, or even Kurdish in him. The problem in deciding his pedigree was his dark red hair. Where did that red hair come from?

He was compelling and engaged, but not engaging. There was a whole lot of there in his eyes, but not a bit of here. He looked at her, the red sand, their security people sitting in the front seat, even at his notebook, but his eyes and his demeanor told her and anyone who bothered to look that he was thinking about something else. However, none of those details mattered, because this man had that something extra that made him special and a fascinating guy. It made him appealing to that soft spot in Catherine’s heart reserved for the men who made things difficult for her.

Damn it.
However, she did possess a method for keeping him somewhat off guard. She could irritate him. Throughout the day she had noted with glee that even though his name was Trevor Smith, he winced every time anyone called him Mister Smith, which of course made it the only name she would ever use for him. Mister Smith was older than most of the press corps members, and was probably older than Catherine by a lot of years. However, he was still youngish and virile looking, with loads of curly red hair that refused to be contained under his helmet, or that Coalition Provisional Authority baseball cap that Bremer had presented to him after the famous palace interview. All in all, he was a compelling guy with an abundance of curious contradictions. His exposed wrists and hands were filthy, but his nails were trimmed and tidy. He was clean-shaven even though it was nearing five-o’clock-shadow time. He affected an Arnold Schwarzenegger swagger, yet became a real pussy when his bureau chief, the short Persian guy from Santa Monica, was around. Mister Smith talked at Catherine rather than to her, which excited her even while it pissed her off. His lack of interest made her want to get his attention, which meant that she needed to hate him and make his life miserable, but probably wouldn’t. The worst of it was that he acted like he knew stuff, or at least acted like he believed he knew stuff. Which made her remember that she normally liked people who knew stuff, had close relations with people who knew stuff. But she didn’t like him and didn’t want to have any kind of relations with him, no matter what he thought he knew—yet there was something in his brown eyes that said, “Pay attention to me, listen to me, look at me, I’m important.” Which of course, both challenged and exasperated her.

He’s not Sasha, her lover, or even Ryan, her lover’s friend, and he’s definitely not Joe, her lover’s second-best friend and the one person that everyone could always count on to be a nice guy, no matter what. Mister Smith was this guy. And this guy was the reporter she had spent the day with in Basra—protected by six, life-sized Dyncorp G.I. Joe types from the
Coalition’s central casting office. According to their actions, civilian journalist Trevor Smith was their principal concern and the one they were put on this planet to protect, while she was the replaceable soldier who could be left behind and forgotten.

On that day, she and Mister Smith covered a couple of forgettable locations in Basra and talked to people who didn’t have anything to say. However, the day wasn’t a complete waste of time; she had been able to prove an important scientific fact. It was vital that during wartime, practitioners took on the responsibility of determining as many scientific facts as possible. These opportunities might not come again, so they couldn’t be wasted. The scientific fact that Catherine had been able to prove on that day was that it takes longer for an Army broadcast journalist with a video camera, a ditty bag, and an M16 over her shoulder to collect information for a story than it does for a seventy-three-inch, arrogant scribe with a mechanical pencil from the Metropolitan Times to do the same thing. She was able to gather this valuable information while she was on the far end of the enclosure interviewing an Iraqi teenager who worked on the site and wanted one day to join the Army. Before she had finished, her translator told her that “Meestah Smith had done all” and everyone was “awaying.” It seemed that Mister Smith and their entire party, security detail included, had forgotten about her.

She found that in order for her not to be left at this desolate location, captured by insurgents and beheaded on camera after having been raped for many days by multiple bad guys, she had to run to catch up with her group.

She hated running.

She also had to scream.

“Don’t leave me. Wait. Wait, goddamn it, wait!”

She hated screaming.
During her run, Catherine stumbled over her tripod and landed hard on her knees. That night over dinner, she told her friends from the palace public affairs office, including Rachel, all about it.

“I looked up from the sand to see that he was smirking at me,” she told everyone.

“Oh, I hate him so much.”

“I would have smashed that smirk off his face with the tripod,” said Rachel, still smarting over Mister Smith’s attack on her.

“That would have been fun,” Catherine said. “But I couldn’t have done anything like that and gotten away with it, could I?” Everyone at the table started laughing with a couple of snorts, “Cath, you’re so…” and “It woulda made a great release.”

Catherine was the press office’s pet—harmless and unusual, and she played her role perfectly. It got her stuff, but she paid in self-respect. “Okay, okay, I don’t really want to hurt him, and I don’t really hate him. He’s just annoying. The problem is, I probably did look pretty funny—all sandy and mad.”

More laughter.

But dinner was hours away, and Catherine had a decision to make. Would she take the bait and believe that the civilian reporter Mister Trevor Smith was interested in her work?

“So how about it sweetheart? You going to tell me where your story air?” asked Mister Smith.

Would the promise of his attention make her cease being a proud Army professional? Would she hand him the ability to laugh at her again?

Yes, she would.

Looking back from the future, Catherine would tell this story with greatly exaggerated details, but in her heart she would always know her reaction had been a mistake.
“You want to see my stories,” Catherine said, giddy that anyone like him, a civilian, could be interested in anything she did. Despite everything, and practically against her will—she looked up to him, the superstar, for affirmation, guidance, and maybe even a job after she got out of the Army.

*Gads.*

He stared at her with glazed eyes. Catherine noticed that he seemed to be thinking about something else again. But she didn’t mind. He must be thinking about my stories and she allowed her mouth answer the question without first consulting her brain.

“My stories play on the American Forces Network and the Pentagon channel,” she gushed. “I can’t believe you want to see my stuff.”

“I don’t,” the civilian superstar answered. “I want to steal your stuff, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” she said quickly, and made a face.

He then gave her a gotcha smile.

“Shithead.”

Her face burned from the horror of allowing herself to be messed with like that. Who was this guy anyway? Sergeant White said that he had a triple Ph.D. from Oxford and a commendation medal from God and a Pulitzer Prize for his story on urban decay. Sergeant Carney told her yesterday that everybody hated this guy, but they really loved him because he was such a good reporter, and a really nice guy, underneath it all.

Nobody gets a commendation medal from God and lives, and what a waste of time getting three Ph.Ds., only to end up here. And the jury was still out on the nice guy shit. But if he was such a good reporter, people should hate him. Maybe, she should hate him. Maybe, she should read his stuff. “Then I could steal from you, Mister Smith,” Catherine said out loud, though no one was listening.
This guy, this Trevor Smith, this journalist, was released into the atmosphere by the Middle East desk at the *Metropolitan Times*. She had heard Mister Smith tell Mark Brooks, the public affairs officer from the State Department, that he was “just a farm boy from Oklahoma.” Catherine didn’t believe for one moment that Mister Smith was a farm boy or from Oklahoma. He sounded like his parents owned land on Martha’s Vineyard, and he behaved like he knew what to do with all the silverware spread out on tables at fancy restaurants. Attached to all that knowledge came the arrogance that his specialized ability in forks, knives, and spoons meant something important that no one could possibly understand—especially not an Army broadcast journalist from California.

Catherine was desperate to hate this guy.

“But I don’t hate him. Goddamn it. I don’t hate him at all,” she would tell anyone who asked.

The next morning, before the first meeting of the day, Catherine exposed Mister Trevor Smith’s true personality to the members of her electronic newsgathering team.

“Everyone says that he’s hot shit right now. But his editors forgot to domesticate him and teach him how to make nice with the little people on his paper route—like me.”

The general consensus was that she should have made him pay for his disrespect. Should have done something nasty but untraceable. Nothing that would have hurt him, but if it had, he would have gotten a vacation out of it—so no harm, no foul. Sergeant White, fresh from two weeks with her boyfriend and three full days at her father’s day spa, told Catherine and the group, “I would have promised him a blow job if he behaved, then I would have…oops! Teeth.” Catherine shuddered at the thought of “oops…teeth” and wondered why this guy was so concentrated on what was going on inside his head that he neglected to gain any value from her experience. “I could have explained a lot to him,” she said indignantly.
“He’s just an asshole, that’s all. The fucker.” From the dark corner of their section, the acting First Sergeant, sitting with the commander, told her to watch her mouth. But then he told her that a lot.

###

Mister Smith took the window seat when they boarded the Blackhawk for the one hundred seventeen-minute flight over the high desert that separated Basra from Baghdad and the rest of the country. Even though it was late afternoon, the bird was sweaty and sleepy hot. Everyone except him had to fight hard to stay conscious. Only he was weirdly awake, staring out into the vast sandy tan-and-blue atmosphere high above the ground and transposing messages from God onto his reporter’s notebook in large looping black-ink markings. Even while the door gunners were both shooting at something that turned out to be a herd of camels, he looped on.

Catherine thought that his reporter’s notebook was quaint. It was thin and long and old-time tan. It read REPORTER’S NOTEBOOK in dark brown letters on the cover. His navy blue interceptor vest with white block lettering that designated him as PRESS was brand new under the day’s dust. Catherine wondered if today’s mission was Mister Smith’s first out-of-town gig. He was Green Zone famous, having made headlines with high-profile interviews at the palace. Not that she paid that much attention, but he did show signs of a first timer. No matter how much she wanted to, she couldn’t give him too much shit, however, because the Metropolitan Times bureau lived beyond the wire in the Red Zone. Their villa was somewhere on the city side of the Tigris River. It was dangerous country.

“He might be who he is, but I’m someone too,” she told Rachel.

“Cath, you’ve got some sparkling logic going on there,” Rachel retorted.

Catherine promised herself to have fun with this one. That is, if she ever saw him
“My next story is in Fallujah. Steal that, Mister Smith.”

# # #

Three days later, Catherine was back in Baghdad at her office in the Convention Center, standing at attention in front of the AFN commander, Air Force Colonel Jeffrey Blithe, and her assignments editor (but really an attack dog), Marine Gunnery Sergeant Powers.

Catherine felt that she must be in trouble as usual. But this time, no matter how much she searched her mental data bank, she couldn’t figure out what she had done.

Everyone knew about her lover, Sasha. Catherine had brought him to the Sunday office spaghetti feed, not long after they had met. She hadn’t had the wits to hide her feelings, so everybody knew. The worst or the best part was that he was obviously crazy about her too. That and his accent and willingness to sing Russian songs made him and them a hit. Since she hadn’t gotten into trouble over him yet, she decided that she had nothing to worry about there. Besides, she wasn’t married, and he wasn’t either so they couldn’t charge her with adultery. They could harass her about fraternization; but then they would have to harass everyone else, including certain officers, and since that would happen only if higher-ups wanted it to happen, she couldn’t worry about it. Nobody had mentioned the souk incident in a long time and Colonel Blithe had liked the Saddam watch she had gotten him, and had laughed at the amount of spunk that it had taken Catherine to jump out of her Humvee and purchase gifts for everybody before anybody noticed she had escaped the convoy. The stunt hadn’t gotten anybody hurt and she promised to never do it again. It wasn’t so unusual that she and her squad leader hated each other. Her squad leader hated everybody, or almost everybody or really just her, but still—it wasn’t her fault that he hated her. Consequently, Catherine felt reasonably safe from censure and resigned herself to handle whatever this turned out to be.
Then she noticed that the Colonel was giving her his my-dear-girl glance and clearing his throat. Which wasn’t a good sign. With a sinking heart she realized that he was going to give her bad news.

“Sergeant, we have decided to send Sergeant Grant to cover your story in Fallujah,” said Colonel Blithe in measured tones, no longer looking at her.

She felt her face getting hot. She had been working that story for a month, and had told everybody about it. She would look like a fool if they didn’t let her go.

She knew that in situations like this, she had to keep her mouth shut and later launch a complaint through the chain of command that would eventually get back to the Colonel; he would provide an explanation in writing, or not. But as always, the sergeant couldn’t help speaking up, and a protest sentence escaped her lips despite her best efforts to control herself.

Lucky for her, Gunnery Sergeant Powers stopped her before the sentence got much longer than a sputtering exhalation of sounds with an emphatic “why?” at the end.

“You’re at attention Sergeant. You’re not going because the Colonel says you’re not going,” he interjected, using his angry drill-sergeant voice.

“That’s all right, Sergeant Powers, let’s allow her to stand at ease, shall we?”

The Colonel, still not looking at Catherine, decided to issue his explanation in real time.

“Sergeant Talbot, we’ve decided that Sergeant Grant is the better broadcaster, and, at any rate, it would be better to send a male,” said Colonel Blithe, still looking away, but he wasn’t finished. “Actually, Sergeant, we were worried that your situational awareness wasn’t sufficient for a spot of such tight engagement,” he said, concluding the subject and thereby shutting off any angle for future complaint.
Back at her trailer that night, after a bout of tears and a dinnertime of pushing her food around her plate without eating any of it, she blurted at Sasha, “It’s just a story on the Seabees. They deserve their moments on TV, right?”

Through the smoke of multiple cigarettes Sasha responded in an I’m-making-fun-of-you singsong voice, “You wanted to do a story on Seabees? The Seabees in Fallujah? And since Fallujah is just another town, and there’s nothing special about Fallujah, you don’t understand why they are doing this to you.” He lit another cigarette and smiled at her with mocking yet kind eyes, shaking his head. He knew her and the Army too well to let her play the victim.

They stared at each other with wide eyes, each daring the other to blink. Then he tackled her onto the single bed. She forgot about being pissed.

“All right, all right, it’s in Fallujah, and Fallujah is going to go up soon, and I wanted to be the reporter that covered it when it does.”

“You are a girl, so they are not going to let you. Move on,” he told her with a kiss and a shrug.

The next day she explained to Rachel, her press office pal, that the only broadcasters in Baghdad who were better than she was were the enlisted active-duty Air Force members that showed up for their three-month rotation, complained for two months, three weeks, and a couple of days, did fantastic stories, and then left. Making room for the next shipment of Air Force broadcasters.

“We call them the shampoo, rinse, and repeat brigade,” Catherine said.

Rachel giggled.
“They complain, while everyone else is here for twelve-to-fifteen-month rotations and they’re here for three,” Catherine explained, “and Sergeant Lee is not a better broadcaster than me, Rach, but he does have a dick and that makes him better equipped for war zone reporting. Doesn’t it?”

Rachel, thought for a moment and said, “I thought that when you guys put on your Army uniforms you lost your gender and became another piece of general-issue equipment.”

“Nope, that’s not how it works, at least not in my unit. And Rachel, Colonel Blithe said that it’s my fault they took my story,” Catherine said, affecting a trying-hard-not-to-cry pout.

“Cath, it’s not your fault.”

“Of course it is. I’m focused while female, which isn’t a good combination in the Army.” This line of emotional reasoning was designed to soften up Rachel and get her to say yes to the request Catherine had decided to make when she realized the Fallujah story was gone.

“Rach, is there any room on Rummy’s bus?”

“Cath, my boss really wants this visit to go smoothly.”

“I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Don’t fucking say that you hope to die.”

Catherine had heard that Rumsfeld was coming to town and she wanted a seat on the bus to travel with the Defense Secretary on his tour of that Saddam-era prison, which the Coalition really should have bulldozed but didn’t, and now it was full of Iraqi detainees guarded by an Appalachian National Guard unit.

Somebody had told her the place was called Abu Ghraib.

# # #
“Young lady, young lady,” cried Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld from his position at the podium in front of about three hundred soldiers. Traveling with him all day, Catherine had picked up another piece of valuable, scientific information—girl Army sergeants were young ladies, whereas boy Army sergeants were Sarges.

They were at Abu Ghraib. This was the assignment she had begged for after her command had stripped her of the Fallujah prize, and now she was being humiliated. A middle-aged Army staff sergeant explained the situation. “Sergeant,” he said, “you’re in the way; nobody can see Rumsfeld because of you. Move now.” Of course she was in the way, she thought. The animals on her side of the aisle had pushed her until she was no longer behind the line.

“Shit.”

Even the NBC guy was laughing at her, and he was the one who had fallen on his face in front of everybody getting off the Blackhawk at the Ruins of Hatra. Even Petraeus had laughed at the sight.

And now everyone was laughing at her.

# # #

“I could feel everyone laughing at me,” Catherine told George, her poolside guru, later that night. “I lost the coin toss, and the Sarge on my team got to shoot video of the Secretary while I, the young lady, got the cut-away position on the other side of the room.”

“Catherine, look at me,” George, the career diplomat, ordered her, as he often did when she was crying or getting a little too frantic for his taste. “Look at me.” He stared into her eyes until she couldn’t stand it and broke out in a broad smile.

“Okay, okay, maybe it wasn’t that bad. I was part of the camera-lugging monster-pool. Which meant that I wanted to find somebody doing something embarrassing, or ultra-
patriotic, like crying or something. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“That’s better,” George intoned like the father figure he was though his actual children were a million miles away in Maryland. “I imagine you were the smallest member of the group, the easiest to push around.”

“Yup, jungle rules applied—I got shoved out of the way,” she admitted with a shy grin, eyes pointed skyward.

“Well, you know what to do the next time,” George said.

“Shoot ’em?” Catherine answered.

“Damn straight.”

# # #

She continued shooting video of the soldiers watching Rummy and stayed in her place. Afterwards, Mister Smith of Basra showed up to annoy her.

Of course he did.

“You’re not having a good day, sweetheart … I mean young lady,” he said with a smirk.

*Smirking must be his go-to expression.*

“Oh, I’m doing just fine, Mister Smith. How you doing?” she shot back at him. Over his shoulder she noticed that the NBC guy was shooting video of her. Mister Smith followed her glance and broke out laughing.

“Andy’s going to run a story of the young lady who tried to hide the Defense Secretary from the American people,” he said, smirking again.

Mister Smith’s comment gave her the opportunity to use techniques from her one-day of spokesperson training. Huff. Smile. Breathe. Speak.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, choosing to ignore both his comments and
Andy, the NBC guy.

“Have you ever been to the cages in this place?” Mister Smith asked, suddenly serious.

“Cages? Ah, the prison cells. No, I haven’t,” she told him. Instead of lunch, she had tried to get into the cells to shoot some video, but somehow, nobody knew where they were. So she spent over an hour with the crowds outside at the prison gate. The women covered in black were the best. When they noticed she had a camera, they increased their screaming and crying and raised tear-stained eyes to heaven. It would have been an impressive sight, except that she’d seen it before. Every time she had a camera around crowds of Iraqis, the women did the same thing—loud screaming and crying with arms to heaven. Catherine was certain that somebody had given them instruction on proper spokesperson techniques.

“What do you want with the cells?” she asked, certain he was going to do something unpleasant, but smelling the potential for a good story. She was willing to do almost anything for a good story, even if it meant taking a favor from this guy. She knew that nobody at AFN would care. But she wanted to do a good story, nonetheless.

“You share your footage with me,” Mister Smith said conspiratorially, “and I’ll get you in there.”

She found that she couldn’t speak—the idea of her footage being seen outside of military sites made her almost dizzy.

“Answer me, sweetheart. We have to go now,” he pressed.

She still couldn’t talk.

“Look, I could get anybody. I see a couple of Air Force shooters over there.”

She could see them too. They were the combat camera team. Those teams got good footage for archive, but it was always shaky stuff. Forcing a story with their shaky footage was
a challenge she hated. She picked up her bag and managed to say, “Let’s go, then.”

“I knew you’d agree,” he said with something that approached admiration.

*Does this guy respect me?* she wondered. *No shit?*

The world was a strange place.

# # #

No, the world wasn’t a strange place, it was a fucked-up place. And now she had a sound drilled into her head that told her what a fucked-up place it was. It was the sound of death from the gallows that had hung Saddam’s Abu Ghraib victims. Their guide said that the people executed on these gallows were luckier than the ones Saddam had arrested, brought to this place, and shot into mass graves on the other side of the prison gates. These people at least had some kind of trial with their conviction and execution.

She took the tour with Mister Smith and an Air Force sergeant. Somehow they didn’t make it to the cells but found themselves self-consciously marching down the reverberating hallway that led to those gallows. The room overflowed with agony and last moments. The execution device towered above their heads and looked like it was stolen from a high school theater production of *The Crucible*.

She wanted to run away.

“If these walls could talk, they would scream,” said the Air Force sergeant to himself. He then turned to Catherine and said, “That’s going to be my lead.”

“Not if she gets it first,” said Mister Smith. “Come on, sweetheart, let’s get footage of this thing.”

She didn’t want anything to do with it. She felt that if she got too close, somehow she would magically find herself on the end of its rope, with video of her kid and everything she hadn’t done playing in her head. She didn’t want to die like that. But real-life be damned.
She was on a story.

“Okay,” she said and followed the enlisted soldier leading the tour.

“Do you want me to pull the lever for you?” he asked. “It makes a great sound, all hollow and shit.”

Catherine was standing next to their tour guide. He smelled of urine, cigarettes, and foul, closed-in spaces, and since he didn’t seem to know when to shut up, he continued his monologue. “That little square flooring drops away. It’s so cool. The guy on the rope chokes.”

The enlisted soldier then demonstrated with a choking sound of his own.

There was nothing great or cool about any of this. Catherine wanted him to disappear. But she let them set up the shot for her and motioned for the “choking is cool” soldier to pull the lever. She did her job, and now she got to remember the sound.

This is the reality of being a broadcaster in a war zone.

And it’s fucked up.

# # #

Catherine was now in her editing cell above the AFN office at the Convention Center. Her lover, Sasha, was away doing something secret, and Joe was busy writing letters to his buddies recovering in Germany after being at the Green Zone cafe when the bomb went off. Sasha’s first-best friend, Ryan, was particularly problematic tonight because he wanted her to give him a blowjob, and even after she told him to fuck off, he continued to beg. He even promised that Sasha wouldn’t mind. She had to count to ten to keep from stabbing him with her Gurkha knife. Thankfully, he finally went away. Everyone else she could tolerate was probably drunk and useless, swimming at the pool behind the palace.

She didn’t swim unless she had to, and tonight, getting drunk would be stupid. She had an early day tomorrow—covering the opening of a water treatment plant in East
Baghdad—or was she covering the opening of a sewage treatment plant in West Baghdad? It didn’t really matter; their new assignments editor would send them to a door opening if he could get away with it.

The last one did get away with it. He sent her on a story that turned out to be a door opening with that documentary filmmaker, Laura, Laura something, Poitras, ah … Laura Poitras. They went to this hospital with blood on the floor and fluids dripping from the ceiling. Catherine was supposed to cover the transfer of fertility equipment to a fertility clinic. The equipment turned out to be a box of something, and the clinic turned out to be a room in an office.

Two civil affairs soldiers held a ribbon across the door.

It was exciting.

Anyway, she wanted to be alone tonight. She had work to do. She had to make something out of the gallows footage. She didn’t know if Mister Smith had actually done anything with her footage, but she had gotten the tapes back this afternoon, along with a note that guaranteed an expensive glass of something once we “blow this popsicle stand.”

His note made her want a Popsicle—a purple one.

They don’t make popsicles in Baghdad. She hated Mister Smith.

“I hate you, Mister Smith,” she repeated out loud to a confused Sergeant White, who had handed her the tapes and the note.

And now the footage was making her cry, and she didn’t like it. She didn’t cry when that weirdo major from the Transitional Justice office showed her pictures of severed body parts from the “Saddam is a Psycho Bastard” collection. The pictures of hundreds of lonely penises were actually fascinating. You couldn’t figure out what they were, and then you did. Even after you figured it out, they still didn’t look like anything human. They looked like
the discolored turkey necks that your mother would boil with the giblets for gravy at Thanksgiving.

The before-and-after pictures of Saddam’s torture victims were hard to look at, but they didn’t look real, and it’s not easy to feel something for pictures that don’t look real. If there’s no common ground, no this could be you or someone you love, the images, no matter how horrible, can’t get in and do anything to you.

The Major had been useful, though. He helped her with a story about the million or so people that Saddam supposedly “disappeared” by having them executed before anyone knew what was happening. It was a great story. It contained the whole package: screaming women, waving kids, and a basement overflowing with thousands upon thousands of Saddam-issued execution orders. She had been overwhelmed, but not emotional. It was such a great story. She wouldn’t have admitted it to anyone, but she had been excited by the icky hugeness of it.

It took the sound of the world falling out from under feet to unnerve her and bring tears. It was real to her. It had gotten in and was doing something.

And she didn’t like it.

She was just at the point where she had to decide whether to leave in the bit where the guide at the prison had said the gallows were “cool and shit,” when the air conditioner went on. She didn’t give it any thought until a tiny voice in her head said, “Hey, wait a minute, we don’t have air conditioning here.”

What was it then?

She escaped using the tiny spiral staircase that connected the editing suites with the big office downstairs, hit her head on the top of the stair (like she always did), got some of the shit droppings in her hair from the clogged and overflowing toilets that flooded the bathroom,
and made her way to her desk downstairs.

The office was empty, and the air conditioner was really rockets. They were under attack.

“Jesus Christ, they forgot me. My colleagues forgot me,” she screamed out loud, though there wasn’t anybody around to hear her. “And fucking Christ! Someone stole my helmet and interceptor vest,” she screamed considerably louder. She had “Fred,” her M16, with her at all times, but the extra cartridges she kept in the bottom drawer of her desk had disappeared.

“Fucking thieves.”

She knew that she had to get to the bomb shelter. But she didn’t know where the shelter was located. Nobody had taken the time to show her, and she had never asked. *There it goes again,* she thought, *another exploding something. Sometimes, it was hard not to feel that somebody out there knew your name and was personally trying to kill you,* running to the window she saw that the Al Rasheed Hotel was on fire again. Not again, didn’t they already do that last October? This was going to mess everything up. She had been trying to convince the acting first sergeant to let her live at the hotel, so she could be closer to the action and farther away from them.

Then an angry, authoritative voice filled the room.

“Sergeant Talbot, what the hell are you doing in here?”

It was Colonel Blithe, and she was in trouble. She explained herself, and then the Colonel said something about how she was supposed to check in when she was working late.

Collecting herself and using her I’m-an-Army-professional voice she said, “Sir, what’s going on?”

“I came up to check with CNN,” he said, turning on the television above his desk.
The explosions she had watched at the window just moments before were now on the screen in front of them, and the Colonel was taking notes. The CNN voice-over said the rockets were coming from an SUV parked north of the hotel.

“Sir, how do they know this?” she asked the Colonel, who was now on the phone reading his notes into the receiver.

“They have people,” he said.

“Don’t we have people?”

“Yeah, but we don’t have those people,” he said, hanging up the phone. “Come on, Catherine, let’s go protect ourselves.”

“Yes, sir, but wouldn’t it be more American to watch the attack?” she asked. “Sir, maybe we could even help somehow?” The Colonel suddenly looked tired, and frustrated, and a bit like her grandfather, the Vietnam vet.

“Yes, Sergeant, he said it would be more American if we stayed. But our orders are to protect ourselves, so we’ve got to go.”

# # #

They made it to the all clear with no one from her group getting hurt, but Catherine didn’t retire to her trailer behind the palace. Instead, she went back to work in her editing cell. Despite Colonel Blithe’s orders to “make it quick,” she stayed at her desk until the morning crew came on at 0500. When she heard the elephants arriving downstairs, she spread out on the floor under her desk and slept for about ten minutes while they were settling in, then she joined them for breakfast. After breakfast she walked back to the palace, past the remains of the bombed-out Green Zone Cafe and the bombed-out Hajji Mart. She waved at some Marines wearing bandages and smoking outside the hospital.

It wasn’t too hot yet.
She liked to walk through the streets of the fortified Green Zone, and since the Colonel’s words last night in the shelter included “Catherine, we have enough stories about water treatments plants,” she didn’t have a story today and could be late to work.

She used to take the shuttle or ride her bike to work with Joe and Sasha; sometimes she would even take a taxi. But things were different now. Those idiots blew up the Green Zone Cafe and the Hajji Mart, and everybody had panicked.

The attack took the rest of Joe’s squad away from them, spooked Sasha, and caused everybody else to suddenly remember that they were in a war zone. The Military Police confiscated every bicycle in the Green Zone, and the acting first sergeant forbade Catherine to take an Iraqi taxi ever again. And of course the shuttles were off limits, due to the risk of a suicide bomber boarding at one of their many stops.

So she was stuck. She had to walk.

From then on, things got kind of weird. Major Bloom’s way of handling the increased pressure was to pretend that he was General Patton or George Washington or somebody other than who he was, the commander of a little reserve unit of broadcasters who behaved like they were only incidentally in the Army. He started acting movie military-like, with daily unit formations in the parking lot, and troop movements in their soft-sided Humvees taking the morning shift to work at their Convention Center offices.

He was Rommel reincarnated in the desert.

The formations out in the open ended when Colonel Blithe ordered the major to “knock it off.” But his officious Army actions continued, including the troop movements. Catherine had never liked the commander but those convoys taught her to hate him.

Every time she heard him holler, “Move ’em all out,” with his tiny, trying-so-hard-to-be-authoritative voice, she thought of new uses for rockets.
By nine a.m. she’d had about two hours to get back to the office before anyone noticed she wasn’t there. But first things first. She needed a cup of bad coffee, and the chance to check on her favorite Pakistani server, who swore his name was Ben-ja-mean.

# # #

Catherine ran into Doctor Daniel Gonzalez, the Embassy Health Attaché, in the coffee line. He was with his battle buddy Marie Bense, who worked in the palace and did something. Marie was a very interesting person. No one could ever understand a word she said or what exactly she did for the mission. She was a German national, being paid by Gerhard Schröder, and she lived in a trailer behind the palace and worked in the Health Attaché’s office, though she didn’t work for the Health Attaché. Rachel told Catherine that those two were fucking.

“Really,” Catherine said, unimpressed, “what does that prove? Around here everybody is either fucking somebody or wants to be fucking somebody or is getting over having fucked somebody or having been fucked over by somebody.”

According to the Health Attaché, Marie didn’t like Catherine.

*Oh ouch.*

Marie’s English was so bad that Catherine had given up trying to communicate with her months ago. This morning the two women ignored each other and instead spoke to Doctor Daniel Gonzalez, who just happened to also be an Air Force colonel.

“Hi Doctor, do you know why Mister Smith is in my coffee line?” she asked him without expecting an answer. *Haven’t my last twenty-four hours on this planet been annoying enough?*

“Who’s that woman he’s with?” the Health Attaché asked.

“That woman is Karen Schwartzbaum,” Catherine reported. “She’s from the
company that’s taking over from that other company that does that thing in the Public Affairs
Office. I hear she sleeps with everything. And she’s wearing a pink designer suit and
extremely high-heeled shiny black pumps.”

“Cute woman,” Marie interjected.

“Her hair used to be a blondish red. Now it’s a burgundy shade of red,” Catherine
said.

“She Botoxes. I can tell,” Marie added shaking her head in delighted disapproval.

“Sergeant Talbot, I need you to take footage at the Baghdad Morgue on Thursday,”
the Doctor announced. “How do I secure your services?”

“Is the footage for you, or can I do an AFN story?” she asked, suddenly an Army
professional.

“Sergeant Talbot, this footage is just for my office. It can’t be seen by anybody,”
the Health Attaché warned her.

“Then call Colonel Blithe, or ask the head public affairs officer in the Green Room
to call the Colonel,” Catherine suggested. Then she noticed that Mister Smith was looking in
her direction. She closed her eyes and whispered to God, Don’t let him notice me, please don’t
him notice me, come on now, God, please.

“Hey sweetheart,” Mister Smith greeted Catherine. He then greeted the Doctor with
a masculine handshake and Marie with a kiss on the cheek that she initiated.

Thanks, God. “Good morning, Mister Smith,” Catherine threw back in his face with
an emphasis that he neglected to register.

“You’re on Freedom Radio, right?” he asked, like he really needed the answer but
wasn’t bothering to listen.

“Ah … not really, maybe, sure. Why?” Catherine answered, suddenly
discombobulated and tired. Her rotation on the radio was coming up and she was really hoping to get out of it somehow. Radio was boring and she sucked at it.

He hadn’t heard her, because both women were flirting with him.

Catherine hated it when people flirted in front of her. Thank God Sasha was coming back soon. She needed him.

“Sweetheart, what is the most requested song in Iraq?” he asked before the women caught his attention again.

She decided that answering the question and running away was the best plan. “The most requested song in Iraq is ‘I Will Survive,’ by Gloria Gaynor,” she announced to the group, turning to leave without explanation or her bad coffee.

“Thanks, sweetheart, you’re the best,” Mister Smith yelled after her.

She was about to make her getaway when Mister Smith called her back with, “Did you get the tapes? Hader says thanks.”

“Hader used my footage?”

“Yeah, and he says thanks.”

Hader worked for the Iraqi Media Network, Al Sadr’s American funded organization.

“So nobody in the West will see my footage,” she screeched back at Mister Smith just a tad too loudly.

Suddenly, her head hurt and her eyes were burning. She needed some sleep. No, she needed to run away.

“Probably not, sweetheart,” Mister Smith hollered back equally loudly. “But, Hader is getting me in to see the Prime Minister because of your footage. So, thanks.”

In order to save the American people the time, trouble and cost of her trial for the
murder of one Mister Trevor Smith from the Metropolitan Times Baghdad Bureau, Sergeant Catherine Talbot, twenty-six years of age in the year of our Lord Two Thousand and Four turned sharply on her heels and marched away. It didn’t matter how much she wanted to slip a cartridge into Fred her M16, point the muzzle at Mister Smith’s smirking face and pull the trigger—she couldn’t allow herself to do such a thing. She would probably miss the first time anyway and would have to reload or something. M16s weren’t meant for close quarters combat or revenge killings.
Baghdad Morgue

Catherine was certain that this morning it had been Thursday and so it must still be Thursday. She had forgotten to put on her watch this morning, so she had no idea what time it was at this time on the day that was still Thursday.

She told herself not to cry. Everyone expected females to cry, so she couldn’t let herself do it. She knew what she had to do at that minute. She had to escape the vehicle or she would die, and that was the only other fact that she knew. Why wasn’t anybody opening the door for her? The frightened animal inside her head was screaming and crying and begging. She could see her friends standing under the green marble falcon at the south entrance of the palace. Sasha, the Ukrainian refugee turned American Army sergeant, was chain-smoking and leaning over the shoulder of his second-best friend, Joe from Minnesota. Joe loved his wife and showed pictures of his kids and new baby to whoever happened to be in his proximity and still breathing. She remembered that fact as well. She also remembered that on this day Sasha’s first-best friend, Ryan, was somewhere in Anbar Province, possibly bleeding and dying with the Marines—helping them, helping the war. But nobody was helping her. She knew that no one would ever open the door for her and she would die trapped in the back seat of the white SUV. She would die alone.

Catherine didn’t want to die.

She considered using her M16 to enable her escape by moving the selector to fully automatic fire and holding down the trigger until she was free. But since these windows consisted of ballistic glass with a shield of polycarbonate, she reasoned that her chances of success were minimal. The makers of these armored SUVs must not have designed the doors to be opened from the inside—especially by a small female Army sergeant from California.
They were, by necessity, too heavy. She would have to wait. But she couldn’t wait long; the sand from the outside was getting in through the air vents and was quickly replacing the air in her section of this vehicle. She was suffocating and would die soon if someone didn’t open the door.

The dead people from the morgue were still in her nose. She could still smell them, and the space under her nose was raw where she had glopped the Vicks VapoRub in a vain attempt to cover the smell of decaying flesh. It hurt and it made her want to sneeze. But she couldn’t. Looking down at her tan desert boots glazed with layers of red sand, she moved her toes and realized that her socks were still wet. Her socks were still wet and her toes felt like waterlogged prunes. They felt all shriveled up like she had spent too long in the bathtub, covered in bubbles like she used to on Tuesday nights when her grandfather would babysit her daughter. But there weren’t any bathtubs or bubbles in Baghdad. She hadn’t seen a bathtub in months, and she might never see a bathtub or bubbles, or her grandfather again.

During her mission at the morgue, Catherine had followed the group into the main room where the dead people were randomly spread out on the ground. Some had been covered with ice. The ice was melting, creating deep puddles. Those bodies in the puddles used to be people, she reasoned. And people have blood in them, right? Dead bodies are people who used to be alive. They had been alive and now they weren’t. And those bodies that used to be people but weren’t anymore, they were beaten up and broken. They were wax figures—melted and misshapen, permanent shock frozen onto what was left of their features. Some of the wax figures were missing their arms or pieces of their faces; some of them had burn marks all over their bloated bodies, and some had angry blood-purple spaces in between their legs instead of genitals. A wave of nausea brought bile into her parched throat, melting the soft folds of her esophagus, giving her voice a deep growl and making everything hurt. She swallowed hard
and felt the bile acids unwillingly returning to her stomach. She needed to vomit.

Trapped in the back of the SUV and picturing the events of the day, her mind wouldn’t allow her to believe, even for a second, that she’d stood in pools of blood. Her socks weren’t soaked in blood. Her toes weren’t all prune because of blood. She had been in danger during the mission on this day. There’d been blood, but not hers, and now she was almost safe. Like she had been safe that morning in her trailer with Sasha.

###

“You are taking the pictures in the Baghdad morgue today?” Sasha had asked the ceiling that morning through the smoke of the day’s first cigarette—Parliament Full Flavor. He considered the smoke above his head for a moment and then said, “You will be good at this.” He then moved the Buddha-shaped ashtray he had purchased at the Baghdad souk from his stomach to the mattress and rolled over to watch her dress.

“Why not?” Catherine said. “My mission is to follow the Health Attaché around, and I take footage, not pictures.” She almost told him how scared she was about seeing dead people, but she gave him a kiss on his forehead instead. She then borrowed his cigarette, took a drag, and returned it to his waiting fingers.

“What’s your mission today?” she asked, while searching for her boonie hat, Embassy badge, and dog tags, which she could have sworn he threw behind the tiny fridge full of cans of Arabic-brand Diet Cokes and smelly, half eaten salami. “Where’s my stuff?” she asked the nonplussed Sasha. He puckered his full lips and pointed lasciviously toward the other single bed.

It had been a fun night.

Catherine wasn’t quite ready for work yet; she had to spend a few minutes with her lover. The mornings after Sasha stayed over, she liked to sit with him and see if he had
anything to say to her. They never seemed to say anything to each other, and Catherine couldn’t figure out why she was always silent around him. They made love, and made each other laugh, smoked together, sat by the pool together, looked out for each other, but rarely said anything. At parties, he told stories and whispered Russian songs into her ears, but that wasn’t communication.

It was quiet in the trailer, but Catherine could hear the trucks arriving with the day’s load of sandbag sand. It was business as usual for the Iraqi day laborers. She thought that the trucks sounded like they could use a tune up, and a few of them probably needed new carburetors. But that could be said about every Iraqi vehicle she had ever seen. Then, many Arabic sentences, melodic and jerky, filled the air with the intelligibility of wild dogs arguing.

She had to get going.

Catherine held her lover’s glance for a moment, then he broke contact and looked around her body to the bedside table for his cigarettes. She moved her jumbo container of baby wipes back to its proper place under the bed. There had been a lot to clean up from the night before.

The moment was over.

She stood up, gave him a kiss on the forehead and was on her way out the door. Sasha lit another cigarette, and it looked like he might say something, when an explosion coming from the Karada checkpoint on the other side of the 14th of July Bridge—the city side of the bridge—knocked four of her six paintings off the wall, causing Sasha to drop his cigarette.

“Fuck, goddamn,” he hollered, putting out the smoldering embers with his fist. The cherry from the cigarette had burned his chest. “ Fucking hajjis.”

Catherine thought the percussion from the blast was stronger than usual, and it hurt
her chest. She instinctively jumped back into bed.

“Wow, a four-picture boom. We’ve been getting more and more of those super-strength booms,” she said, trying to sound unconcerned.

Sasha sat up. “This is a war zone,” he said. “What do you expect? You should live in Pripyat.”

He ran his fingers along her collarbone and up her throat, stopping just under her chin. “Do you still have to go? Have you not a couple more minutes for me?”

She was silent for a moment as she calculated the lie she would tell the Health Attaché, her friend, and boss for the day. She made a decision. “You got until Big Voice gives the all clear,” she said.

###

Catherine’s feeling of well being from the “thank God the rocket didn’t hit us” coupling with her lover dissolved as the convoy to the Baghdad Morgue drove into a frightening invisible wall of stench. The atmosphere instantly reeked of decaying foliage, curdled milk and blood and bitterness and disintegration and it hit Catherine in the face and filled her mouth with the metallic flavor of death. Their convoy of four SUV’s was bouncing through the streets like they were in a video game when that fetid odor invaded her soul with its decaying scourge. Catherine found it foreign but not unfamiliar, and it didn’t play fair. It triggered the memory center in her brain, transporting her back to her eleventh year when her mother ruled the world.

Catherine’s mother fed her animals horsemeat from China. It came stuffed in many plastic bags with pictures of horses and funny writing. That day, the meat was rotting and it smelled alive and interesting. The little girl had pulled the electrical plug of the double-wide freezer out of the wall two days before, and every time she opened one of the doors to check
on the meat it smelled more and more like blood, hot plastic, and sitting in her mother’s car on summer days. She wanted to unfreeze the horses, so she could get to know them. She also wanted to hurt something that her mother loved. Her mother didn’t act angry when she found out what little Catherine had done. She simply stuffed the child into the warm freezer full of the rotting meat and held the door shut.

The scent also took her back to the day her grandmother died. Catherine was nine. She liked her grandmother. She had been kind, and had protected her when her mother got too violent. She had died in a quiet room with the smells of bleach, Lysol bathroom cleaner, piss, farts, and something boiling and smelling like chemistry class around her. The family had laid her grandmother out flat on the bed. Catherine looked at her and saw that death covered every piece of her like a blanket. Death looked empty and it smelled intimate and confusing, and pretty like powder, and her babysitter when her father was gone and her grandmother and her mother weren’t looking.

###

Catherine was about to ask the man sitting next to her, Doctor Daniel Gonzalez, the Embassy Health Attaché, why the air smelled so horrible. She considered mentioning the memories it brought up for her when the vehicle stopped with a sudden force, causing her to bang her head on the back of the seat and knocking the air out of her lungs. It was probably a traffic jam, she thought, until she saw that their convoy was trapped by an assortment of Iraqi cars and trucks that really shouldn’t have been drivable but somehow were. Stranded like this, the Americans were now targets. She realized this could be serious. She looked through the bulletproof, double-paned glass to gauge how the individuals outside her atmospherically controlled, armored SUV were dealing with that smell.

They didn’t seem to notice.
She saw workaday people – children in blue school uniforms, older men in traditional dress, younger men in brown polyester pants, women covered in black cloth with babies, and teenagers in tee shirts with fists. They all seemed to have places to go and were stepping over, around, and through the rubble to get there. They seemed irritated but not overly concerned. The members of her little convoy were noticed but not focused on. Only the children waved.

Whatever the smell was, it wasn’t new and the people seemed to be used to it and were able to live their lives around it. They were acting like normal people, walking in groups, in pairs, and alone. They were staring, pointing, talking with fists in faces, hands on hands, hands holding bags, purses, boxes, a dead chicken.

###

A local Iraqi policeman with a bulging gut, sunglasses, and sweat on his forehead under his worn blue cap was attempting to direct traffic. Three of their Blackwater security guys approached him. The one doing the talking held his weapon at the ready, the barrel pointing slightly toward the cop. The other two Blackwater guys were watching for threats. Even with his girth the Iraqi traffic cop seemed small and powerless. He pointed to a tree of dark traffic lights. Of course, there was no electricity. The water was probably off too. Marginally chilled air blasting from vents all over the cabin had quickly turned warm and was threatening to go hot. Catherine couldn’t breathe.

The Blackwater guys sitting in the front seat turned to present their solutions for the current situation to the Health Attaché. Doctor Gonzalez shook his head “no” to all of them. “Let’s wait it out and see what they do,” he said. The security guys didn’t relax, but turned and concentrated forward.

As a female sergeant, Catherine always appreciated how easily some people gave
orders. She always had to yell or at least threaten some kind of violence to get anything done. She knew other females sergeants who flirted or acted cute, and they had it easier.

“No sense upsetting the natives,” Dr. Gonzalez said with an uncomfortable but professional smile thrown in Catherine’s general direction.

Sitting next to the Health Attaché, watching the Blackwater security guys negotiate the Baghdad street, Catherine wanted to know what that poison smell was and why nobody else seemed to be noticing it. “Sir, what is it? What’s up with that smell?” she said slowly, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Don’t you know?” Dr. Gonzalez asked, using his upbeat morning voice. It was the same voice he had used when they first met. It had sounded so fake that Catherine was certain he was making fun of her, but she had since learned that no matter how it sounded, he was always deadly serious. She learned from his stories that as the son of immigrants, he hadn’t found the American dream an easy goal.

So his fake upbeat voice was his version of flirting and acting cute, Catherine decided. Unfortunately, that voice had welded itself permanently onto his personality. She imagined that anybody who didn’t know him would think he was terribly fake and condescending. But something had gotten him where he wanted to be. So why not that voice backed up with a lot of hard work?

He was a doctor, he was an Air Force colonel, and he was in charge. He had done something right.

But Catherine had questions.

“No sir, I don’t know what the smell is,” she insisted, unconsciously rubbing her nose.

“Well, Catherine, it’s the smell of freedom,” he said. “You do know that
democracy is messy and, in this case, smelly, too,” he added, smiling with hard eyes.

She found herself almost angry at his response. She had listened to Dan Senor, the Spokesman for the Coalition utter that phrase—the “democracy is messy” phrase—at multiple press conferences. It was a bullshit talking point and she never expected to hear it coming from her friend Dr. Gonzalez. But, before she could respond, a thud of metal smashing into metal made its muffled way into the compartment. Matt, the driver, was talking excitedly on his cell phone. Terry, sitting shotgun, announced, “We are going—now.”

“All right, Mr. Jenkins, do what you have to do. Get us out of here,” said Dr. Gonzalez, whom everyone except Catherine called Danny.

“It’s the civil war, Catherine,” Dr. Gonzalez said over his shoulder, monitoring the activities of their Blackwater security detail through the window. Their convoy was plowing through the traffic circle; somehow the Iraqi cars and trucks weren’t in the way anymore.

Doctor Gonzalez continued, still not looking at her, “Every night, American Army patrols and Iraqi Army and police patrols gather about two hundred bodies from the Baghdad streets.”

Catherine had heard about the civil war. It had turned Baghdad into a place where everybody was openly killing everybody—even children. She felt her face go numb. The smell was making her itch all over.

“The miasma assaulting our senses at this moment, Catherine … ah, Sergeant Talbot,” the doctor said in a gentle, professorial voice, “is the combination of messy freedom and the dead decaying in the morgue and on the street.”

She wanted to argue. She wanted to yell at the top of her voice that she used to work next door to the morgue in Los Angeles and she had never smelled anything like this. And then she remembered that the electricity was always on in LA. This was Baghdad, and meat left out in Baghdad rots.
Once they made it out of the traffic circle, Catherine took out the point-and-shoot camera her grandfather, had given her, and proceeded to document the trip—*woosh, woosh, snap, snap*. A man on a bicycle—*woosh, woosh, snap, snap*. Fields of garbage with goats—*woosh, woosh, snap, snap*. A cart and donkey—*woosh, woosh, snap, snap*. Shop windows, coffee cups, a swing set, a big shiny blue dome—*snap, snap, snap, snap, woosh*.

Stop.

Their convoy made it through the gate of the Baghdad morgue, after the dark blur of sandy city streets and sequences of what passed for Iraqi wartime normalcy.

Even though the air conditioner had once again sent them relatively cool air, Catherine was sweating and moist all over, and her head ached. The dead had taken over her senses, becoming like that overwhelming, steady sound that is at first so annoying but quickly becomes the new normal.

The convoy parked in a horseshoe formation around the front door. Matt and Terry from Catherine’s vehicle escorted Doctor Gonzalez, while she not so patiently waited for her escorts.

A tall, thin woman in khaki pants and a Blackwater monogrammed polo shirt opened Catherine’s door, giving her not quite enough room to easily get out of the vehicle. Catherine had to squeeze through. Weapons hung all over the Blackwater woman’s body and her lips were covered with bright red lipstick.

Even a Blackwater woman had her shortcuts. Red lipstick. *Goddamn*, Catherine thought.

The Blackwater woman’s partner was shorter and meaty looking.

“I’m Kim, this is Barry,” the Blackwater woman growled. “Don’t give us any shit
and we’ll get you home just fine.”

They then heard one of the Blackwater security guys posted at the gate yell, “Stay back one hundred meters or we’ll shoot!” The Arabic translation followed like one of those obnoxious jingles on television selling insurance or hamburgers. Then they heard a couple of thuds, a few cracks, and some righteous, high-pitched man-screams.

“Ah, fuck,” Kim said. “They just had to throw those goddamn bottles.”

A few weeks ago, Colonel Blithe had explained Blackwater’s new frozen water bottle initiative to the entire CPIC Office during one of their extra-long morning meetings. He said it was Blackwater’s new non-lethal approach for crowd control. “Throw a bottle and save a life,” he had said. Catherine thought it might be better than shooting somebody, especially if it saved a life, especially if it saved her life. How much could it hurt being hit by a frozen water bottle? And then she remembered the time she had played catch with a couple of the Blackwater guys. It could hurt. It could hurt a lot.

She had to concentrate; they were going into the morgue.

Catherine heard herself whisper, “Keep going, you’ve got this.”

The Iraqi guard at the front door was wearing a tan uniform and had an AK-47 hanging from his body. When he saw Catherine’s party coming toward him he sprang into action, and though he didn’t dare touch his weapon with the Blackwater security around, he went into full masculine posturing mode just the same and acted like her grandfather’s elderly Doberman, who would growl and bark when anybody was watching. The dog showed what all that noise was worth when he let robbers take the stereo and all of Catherine’s cameras. The Doberman then growled at the police when they came to investigate. A couple of days later she explained to her grandfather that she had no idea what had happened to the dog after the police had left. He must have run away.
The guard handed Catherine a jar of what smelled like Arabic Vicks VapoRub. He sent some instructions in melodic Arabic in her direction and mimed scooping the stuff and smearing it under his nose.

“I got it. It’s to cover the smell. I got it,” Catherine said, even though she was certain he didn’t understand, and their translator was with the Health Attaché’s group. Catherine motioned him away. “La, la, la,” she said, using the Arabic word for “No.” She really wanted to yell some variation of *Leave me the fuck alone. What the hell is wrong with you people, killing each other like that? Civil War my ass, don’t you have enough problems?* But that wouldn’t have been a good idea, and she didn’t know how to say any of those words in proper Arabic anyway. So Catherine managed a squeaky “I don’t need it, thanks. I’m fine,” and tried to continue walking through the door.

Kim, her Blackwater security person, wasn’t having any of it. “Take the shit,” she ordered. “I really don’t want to have to carry you back to the vehicles after you faint.”

The woman must have been a Marine at some point, Catherine thought. “Fine,” she said, grabbing the jar from the guard. So now the world smells like Vicks VapoRub-scented dead people. Just great.

*Please God don’t let me fuck up.*

###

The female pathologist was the guide. She wanted many things from Dr. Gonzalez. Catherine kept hearing slices of their conversation. The pathologist repeated over and over the phrases “we need,” and “cooling devices,” and “you could get us,” and “we need much money.” Catherine heard Dr. Gonzalez’s replies: “Perhaps,” and “Certainly,” and “I’ll try my best.”

The pathologist wore brown-rimmed glasses held together with tape and was a
small, youngish Iraqi woman wearing a cheap-looking dark blue business suit, numerous strands of gold chains around her neck, a black rubber apron, and blue gloves. She spoke just enough English to be funny.

“Don’t picture my face,” she told Catherine multiple times blocking her camera lens with her tiny hands.

“Okay, I won’t take your picture,” she told her.

At one point, the pathologist pulled Catherine aside and escorted her to a little room with a huge television and about a dozen white plastic chairs, where three women covered in black cloth sat watching the screen with a group of kids sitting on the floor at their feet. She led Catherine as if they were at a day spa and the pathologist was taking her to the massage room, where she expected Catherine would give her a big tip after the experience. The television screen in the little room with the white plastic chairs was showing a PowerPoint presentation of disembodied heads.

Head after head, after head, after head, after head went by with bureaucratic precision and Catherine found them fascinating. She noticed the differences of each head, the personality of each used-to-be person, and she couldn’t stop staring, couldn’t stop noticing. The women sitting in the white plastic chairs, covered in black cloth, who had been crying the whole time, suddenly were crying a whole lot louder, and it occurred to Catherine that all those heads used to be attached to bodies, and those bodies used to be able to cry too.

# # #

Home at the palace, Catherine was still waiting for Sasha or Joe or somebody to open the door of the SUV and let her out. She was attempting to sustain life by gulping what remained of the air. She wasn’t quite crying, but tears were coming. *Somebody, please open the door. Please. I’m going to die.* Her breath sounded like the man she had once watched
expire at the Green Zone hospital. The man was hooked up to the machines in the open bay with the other dying men. They all died but didn’t want to and fought hard with strange and metallic sounds. Her breath resonated like the drill in her father’s shop, making space for the screw, and the shelf, and everything hidden away from her mother. Her breath sounded like the desperation of a hungry belly and a drowning animal going down for the last time. She knew she was dying; but it didn’t matter if she died and was laid out on a wet cement floor without blood and the female pathologist took care of her empty shell, because she was a soldier at war. And during a war there were dead soldiers and dead people. There were lots and lots and lots of dead soldiers and dead people. Dead soldiers and dead people were the main product of every war, and wars create a lot of them—lots, and lots, and lots of them.

All of the pictures and the conversations and the sounds and the death were loud inside Catherine’s head. But her face was empty and placid, familiar and inviting, with only the hint of tears, and Dr. Gonzalez—never one to notice what was going on in another’s heart or look below a surface that he was not interested in or cutting into—failed to see the pounding vein on Catherine’s forehead or the firmness of the fist her hand had been frozen into since they left the morgue. He hadn’t wanted to notice, and so he didn’t notice. He turned and looked at her with that misplaced intimacy that some military officers seem to need to impose on those in their power.

“Sergeant Talbot, Catherine, today you executed your mission with impressive professionalism under harsh, wartime conditions,” said Dr. Gonzalez, in his best Embassy Health Attaché voice. “I’m going to put you in for an award.”

She looked at the doctor who was also a Colonel and wanted to tell him everything in her head, and yell and cry and slap the stupid compliment off of his face, but there were a thousand miles between them, filled with dead people without heads or hands or hearts, and all
she could manage was a small “Yes” and a thank-you-for-noticing nod.

Then the door opened.

It was Sasha.

###

“Sergeant Talbot,” Dr. Gonzalez yelled toward Catherine, who was retreating with her lover and his friend. “Where are the tapes? You don’t want to have to go back there, do you?” Catherine was certain that the man was joking, but the joke pushed the panic button in the center of her head and the alarm was loud in her ears.

She didn’t want to go back there.

Dr. Gonzalez stood by the SUV, and with a laugh in his voice continued, “We could go back tomorrow, Catherine. You could help the pathologist with her puzzle.”

Catherine didn’t want to help the pathologist with her puzzle. Her puzzle was matching the heads with the bodies of people murdered in horrible nightmarish ways. She didn’t ever want to see those bodies again—never, never, never. The question of matching heads with bodies was how the pathologist, that doomed young woman, filled her days. Catherine knew that eventually the pathologist would go down in a storm of bullets. She’d seen it happen. That’s what happened to nice Iraqis who talked to Americans, who worked with Americans, who helped Americans—who trusted Americans.

When Catherine had asked the pathologist about the possibility of her being killed by insurgents wanting to punish her and send a message to her besieged community, the little Iraqi had held her index and middle finger straight together with her thumb as the trigger.

“Pow,” she said.

Catherine jumped and the pathologist laughed and shrugged. “You’ve got to get out before that happens,” Catherine told her.
The pathologist laughed, shrugged again, and said, “Inshallah,” with her eyes turned to heaven.

Until the day of her early death the pathologist would stand in the middle of that low-ceilinged, dank room without any fear. Every day from eight a.m. to two p.m., she stood between the incomplete bodies stacked neatly on one side of the room and the heads piled up like coconuts on the other side—working. Always working—she was certain that someone would eventually bring her the tools and equipment she needed. But until then, she would do her job. The poor thing would do her job. She was lost, and there was nothing Catherine could do about it.

“How will I ever match those many heads with those many bodies?” the pathologist asked with frustrating pathos.

Catherine didn’t want to know. She just ran the camera. She calculated that she had about two hours of footage from that room—that room with the heads, with the blood and the melted ice. Help the pathologist with those bodies, those heads, with that job? No, she did not want to go back there. She had to find those tapes. “Oh God, oh God, oh God, where are they?” Catherine whispered to herself. Oh God, if they’re gone, I’ll have to go back there again, oh God, oh God. Her heart was beating so fast she could feel it in her throat. Oh God, they’re gone, oh God, they’re gone. No, they’re can’t be gone.

“I’ve got to find those tapes,” she told Sasha and Joe. She started patting down her legs at the cargo pockets. She felt like she was searching for her lighter and not finding it. And she really needed her lighter; she really, really needed her lighter. Where in the fuck was her lighter?

Panic spread through Catherine’s body and then she felt a fuse blow in the nightmare center of her brain and it hurt for a moment. Sasha gently placed her camera bag on
the ground and kneeled down to help search its pockets. “They are here,” he told her.

And so they were. She stood up and handed all six miniDV tapes to the doctor.

She was calm.

She then floated into the palace.

# # #

Joe and Sasha found her at the entrance to the access point at the south end exit. They had to wait until the little sally port was full of people before closing the door to the palace and opening the door to the enclosed backyard and the space that held the dining facility, the pool, the smoking tree, her trailer, and the other trailers where everybody else lived.

The dead filled up the little transitional room. Nobody looked at Catherine and nobody said anything. Sasha was holding a fresh pack of cigarettes, and when the door opened, he whistled for his friends to join him at the smoking section at the picnic table under the dying tree.

“You’ll want one of these,” he told Catherine.

# # #

Catherine, sitting crossed legged on the sunbaked picnic table, with her discarded boots and green woolen socks resting at Joe’s feet, was on her fourth cigarette when Bill, the fireman from Kansas City, joined them under the tree. He motioned to Sasha for a cigarette, and then noticed something.

“My Gawd,” he said, “who died?”

Joe answered with a quick, don’t-upset-the-crazy-person tone, “Cath took video footage at the Baghdad morgue today.”

“Oh, I guess it’s pretty awful out there right now,” Bill said, “what with the civil
war and all. Is that why she’s the way she is?” he loudly stage-whispered to Joe.

“Yes,” Catherine answered, hugging herself and rocking back and forth with her eyes half open, “I didn’t step in blood. Look,” she instructed, lifting her leg in a war zone version of a yoga move, pulling up her trouser leg, uncovering a swollen yet shapely calf.

“I know, sweetheart,” Bill said, examining her leg for a moment and then stepping away. When he returned, he brought the thick firehouse hose with him. He came over to Catherine’s side of the table and said, “You might not have stepped in blood, sweetheart, but everybody deserves a shower from the fire hose every so often.”

The water soaking Catherine’s feet and legs reminded her of that summer when she was eight and her gang of kids that would gather every morning to explore the neighborhood together, and would take advantage of every unsupervised hose and water source to escape the heat. There weren’t any parents until lunch, but no one was worried; the kids were safe. The kids had no idea that there was a world outside, a world that their daddies and mommies were doing their best to keep out of their consciousness; a world where they were doing their best to maintain the fragile illusion of safety. How could the kids know that there was a place called Iraq and in Iraq there were places where kids got slaughtered and their tiny bodies joined bigger bodies in small rooms with melting ice?

Those bodies, both big and small, were stacked up like the logs daddies would stack along the fence for the fireplace. Higher and higher, and those logs and those bodies were piled and they were missing things; they were missing the things that showed up on the television in that little room with the white plastic chairs and the crying women wearing lots of black cloth.

###

She should have felt something about being back in her trailer. Being back in the
Baghdad home she sometimes shared with her lover. But Catherine didn’t feel anything. She vaguely registered that she was alive and that Sasha was with her and Joe was sitting on the steps outside, not smoking the cigarettes she had forced him to take.

“My Katyusha, my little warrior,” Sasha said and kissed her eyelids through the layers and layers of dead people.

She allowed him to finish the kiss, then removed the rest of her clothing—her bra and panties—and in two steps threw them out of the door and onto Joe’s unsuspecting head. Joe didn’t say anything; at his feet were the rest of Catherine’s uniform, her boots, her socks, and her interceptor vest, her M16. He had fished them out of the garbage receptacles where Catherine had dropped them on her way back to her trailer.

He wasn’t certain what to do now.

While inside the trailer, Catherine got down on her knees and reached under the bed to retrieve the white jumbo container of baby wipes sent from the States, sent by an anonymous somebody who wanted to help but not get involved. Naked, Catherine stood up with the container in her hands, as an explosion from somewhere in the distance knocked the two remaining paintings off her wall. She didn’t move. Her lover attempted to take the container from her and engulf her quivering body in his arms. She pulled away and hugged the container to her bare breast and didn’t say anything. They stood in silence facing each other, breathing.
WORKS CITED
WORKS CITED


