9. This Is Our Comfortable Hell

Published by

Lemer, Bronson.
The Last Deployment: How a Gay, Hammer-Swinging Twentysomething Survived a Year in Iraq.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/2465.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/2465
As the soldiers push the refrigerator toward the tent, the wind whips the sand into a fury. Particles rise up like flames around the appliance, devouring the box like termites. They walk the box forward, teetering the giant appliance back and forth like a mother escorting a child toward a grandparent. The men maneuver the large rectangle through the curtain doors and onto the wooden floor of the tent. They slide the appliance across the wood, the metal rubbing against grainy sand, and as they move it to the corner, the sound of grinding fills the tent. They don’t mind the noise. They stand with their arms akimbo; white salt stains make circles on their T-shirts like patches of ringworm—blurry on the edge, damp in the middle. They brush away the sweat from their heads with their forearms and saunter out of the tent toward the next icebox.

From inside a Conex box (a large metal box for transferring equipment and supplies across land and sea) at the edge of our tents, I breathe a sigh of relief.

The temperature on Fredricks’s thermometer reads 108 degrees. We’ve been sweating and swearing all morning. We sweat because of the sun, swear because we’re forced to endure the heat all day inside a steel Conex box that bakes our bodies like Easter hams. We’ve stripped down to brown army T-shirts, the sun too hot for our long-sleeve camouflage uniforms, as we move boxes around the Conex, examining and inventorying the contents of each box. Trangsrud smokes Camel cigarettes near the edge of the box, his boot tapping against the steel floor. We all look at him in agitation. Newman is knee-deep in the mess, surrounded by ladders and wooden carpenter boxes. He opens one and looks over at me.
“Two hammers, four tape measures, two long-tooth saws, three auger bits, two levels, seven tool belts.” He pauses to wipe away the sweat. I scratch the details down on the clipboard, lean against the side of the box, and wait for Newman to say the words: Let’s take a break.

Because of the heat, we work only for about ten minutes before we are forced to surrender to the sun, forced to sit in the shade and drink lukewarm water from olive-colored canteens, and wonder what we are doing here.

I stare down the line of tents that have popped up almost overnight and think about the nomadic lifestyle we’ve been living. We’re gypsies in the Middle East, nomads pushed forward by the beating sun. We pulled into Anaconda Army Airbase almost a week ago. It took us more than two months to get here—first taking a three-day bus ride from North Dakota to Colorado, then a fourteen-hour flight to Kuwait, and finally a 480-mile bumpy convoy into Iraq. Now we can finally unpack our gear, roll out our flags, push wooden stakes into the sand, and thank God we have a place to lay down our heads.

Our camp is centered around an old stucco Iraqi army building with a metal awning jutting off the back corner. We’ve built picnic tables and placed them under the awning—this has become our new chow hall. To the south of the building, Headquarters Company has raised a colony of tents. Alpha and Bravo’s tents extend in three rows to the west of the building like insect legs protruding from the body. At the end of these rows is a single row of Conex boxes, where we’ve been sweating all day.

When we return to our tents at the end of the day, the refrigerator is waiting for us in the corner. It is the most beautiful thing we’ve ever seen.

“About damn time,” King says. He throws his gear onto his cot and a puff of sand rises from his sleeping bag like a cloud of gas.

We walk up to the appliance mesmerized, running our hands down the white metal siding, over the handle on the door. It is a completely average-looking refrigerator. No stainless steel casing. No automatic ice maker. No side-by-side fridge/freezer doors. It is white and has a freezer on top, cooling coils in the back, and a temperature gauge inside. It is designed to cool water; that’s the only thing that matters.

King opens the freezer door and places his hand inside, palm down.

“Nothing,” he says as he turns back to us. He slams the door shut and walks over to his cot. “It’s just teasing us.”

Newman explains that the electricians are hooking the fridge up to the generators and should have the appliance up and running before nightfall. We wait. King and Rogers stack boxes of bottled water next to the fridge.
This Is Our Comfortable Hell

in preparation for being chilled. Cole peeks out the tent door every few minutes to gauge the electricians’ progress. Lake opens and closes the freezer door, waiting for a wisp of cool air to come wafting out. We’ve all been waiting for a little bit of comfort, a little relief for the toll the sun has taken on our bodies and our minds.

When the fridge is connected and humming, we race to load it with bottles of water. Over the next couple of days, we anticipate cold water. We start to think of that fridge like a loved one—a wife perhaps—waiting at home for us with cold, cold water. Marching across the sand back to our tent, we picture her in our heads—her silver handle smiling at us as we pass through that door, sweat dripping from our brows as her fan sucks in air, and when we pull back that door, inside is the sweetest thing we’ve ever seen—water, stacked like cheerleaders in a pyramid, so cold it clouds the bottles.

When we were in Kuwait, Jones and I waited outside Camp New York’s PX trailer for three hours, listening to a soldier discuss Dante’s Inferno.

“If Dante were here,” the soldier said, leaning against the yellow steel siding of the PX trailer, a cigarette dangling between his chapped lips, “he’d call Kuwait the fourth circle and Iraq the sixth.”

Jones and I just stared at this man, amazed at his knowledge of Dante’s poem. You don’t see many soldiers waxing eloquent on the circles of hell. Yet soldiers can be a collection of contradictions, and as he went on about the climates of hell that differentiated Kuwait from Iraq, we listened in awe of his descriptions and his knowledge on a writer rarely referred to on military bases.

Kuwait didn’t feel like Dante’s fourth circle—a place for those obsessed with material possessions. But as I looked down the line of soldiers waiting to get into the PX at Camp New York and fill their pockets with Coke, Gatorade, Playboy, tobacco, and chocolate, it clicked. The sun was bearing down on us day after day. We’d been through at least two sandstorms, and the climate, combined with the war that was waging to the north, helped me realize how right this soldier was. Kuwait was hell, and our punishment was hours of waiting in lines.

Two weeks later, when I was convinced it couldn’t get any worse, we arrived in Iraq.

During our first three days, late morning temperatures were never below 100 degrees. In the early morning we could see the heat coming. We’d rise from our cots, shake off the layer of sand that had accumulated over our sleeping bodies during the night, and walk to the tent door with
toothbrushes and canteens in hand. Most mornings we practically ran from those tents right when the sun came up, for fear that we’d be roasted alive. We’d stand between our tent and the next, splashing water on our faces, trying to wake up from the nightmare that is Iraq.

Now, on May 5, I walk three paces from our back door and squeeze toothpaste onto my brush. I hold my canteen between my right elbow and ribs and unscrew the cap with my left hand before pouring water over the paste. I lift the brush to my mouth, my eyes to the horizon, where I see the heat rise up, light bouncing off the tents scattered near the runway beyond our camp. It starts here, in the morning, when the heat is still bearable and kind. It eventually builds to a sweltering triple-digit degree, showing no mercy to struggling soldiers just trying to make it through the day.

When I return to the tent, Newman is there, telling me to grab my gear because I’ll be riding shotgun for Ivy on a post mission. Ivy motions for the tent door. We walk across the sand to a five-ton dump truck. From the passenger seat, I watch Ivy lift his heavy form into the truck. He is swearing because of the heat. He shifts the truck into gear and steers the vehicle out of the parking lot and onto one of the paved base roads. We pass a stucco building just outside the motor pool. The building is in dire need of a face-lift; it practically begs us to tear it down. I wonder if that will be part of our job in Iraq—to renovate this run-down base into a living, breathing, fully functioning military post. I look over at Ivy, who’s concentrating on finding the right building. His forehead is wet from sweat, and he occasionally lifts his sleeve to wipe away the droplets.

“How hot do you think it’ll get today?” I ask.

Ivy doesn’t answer. He grunts and steers the truck into a crackling paved lot between two beige warehouses. The buildings are facing each other, each lined with six garage doors. As Ivy and I climb down from our truck, another soldier walks up to one of the garage doors and surveys the mess. The doors are open, and papers, pamphlets, and folders spill out the opening onto the pavement between the warehouses. The place has been looted, documents thrown about like confetti. I stand and watch for a minute. The two soldiers walk through the building, paging through a few documents and pulling open cabinet drawers. Slowly, I walk up to one of the doors and reach for a sheet of paper. The document is covered in Arabic letters, dark scratches across the pale paper. Instantly I feel guilty, like I’m looking at something I shouldn’t. These aren’t my things. These documents—laid out and discarded—are not mine. I have no place
among this disaster. But I still want to look. I’m still curious what it was like to live on this post.

I carefully step over a pile of folders into the warehouse. The stalls are lined with silver filing cabinets. Some of the cabinets have fallen forward like tipped outhouses, sealed shut by their own weight. Other cabinets have hardly been touched, a few off-white sheets of paper peeking out the top drawer like stray chest hair climbing out of a T-shirt. Ivy walks over to me, explains that our job is to clean up the garbage, spare truck parts, and other metal outside the warehouses. We need to cart these things away to the dump. I watch as a Bobcat loader lifts the metal into the bed of our truck. Load after load, the Bobcat clears the debris from outside these buildings, and every time the loader dumps the trash into our truck, I think about the letters and documents I am standing on. What do the documents say? Why do we have to destroy these documents?

And most importantly, to whom do these things belong?

The more I think about the discarded warehouses the more I am reminded of my childhood home in central North Dakota. I grew up in a two-story farmhouse on a small hill overlooking a branch of the Sheyenne River. When farming became rough, my father took a job managing an ice-cream warehouse in town, and we eventually abandoned the farm in favor of a red ranch house in town, complete with a finished basement and attached garage. But we kept the house and farmland it stood on for the four years I was in high school. We kept the animals there—several head of sheep, two dogs, and a few horses—and every day someone from the family drove five miles from town to the farm to feed the animals and play with the dogs.

Shortly after we moved, my father asked me to drive out to the farm. While I can’t say that I lived a nomadic childhood (unlike some children, particularly military brats who move from post to post, my family only moved once—from a farm into town), I’ve always had an Odysseus-like obsession with returning home. As I drove the gravel roads to the farm, I was reminded of my childhood memories in that house, the only place that felt like home.

I pulled my Ford Escort into the driveway, the bumper pushed up against the steel gate that spread across the road like double doors. I stepped from the vehicle and looked up at the house. The house held no joy. It looked cold and dark. No light shown through the windows. No smoke billowed from the chimney. No laughter came from the house. I
knew, before even seeing the house again, that it would look like this, abandoned and left to die on the North Dakota prairie.

The gate’s lock felt cold in my hand as I pushed the key into the slot and snapped the lock open. Pushing the gates forward, I felt a great wind at my back, like I was pushing open a door to my past. Instead of getting back in the car, I walked the long driveway.

As I walked, I glanced over at the piece of land on the other side of the dry creek. When I was ten, my father told Brandon and me that he had put the land in our names, our own piece of acreage. We never fully understood why our father did this, but did it matter? What ten-year-old can brag about owning his own land? We used to dream about building houses on the land—on the hill across the creek from our parents—where we’d help out with the farm, raise our own families, watch our parents grow old, and live happily on the North Dakota prairie. We would stand on the hill and take in the view—our view, our land, our futures—before jumping onto our sleds and racing down the snowy hill, our red plastic sleds stopping just before the frozen creek. But as I neared the house and saw the peeling paint, I realized how impossible that dream had become.

My father had boarded up the picture window that faced the barn and creek—two large sheets of plywood nailed haphazardly across the front of the building, a mouth wired shut. I passed the boarded-up window and shivered as I stepped up the two stone stairs and pushed open the heavy wooden door at the back of the house.

The house was small. Each room led into the next—the kitchen bled into the dining room, the dining room into the living room, the living room to the enclosed stairwell. The bathroom was just off the back door, added onto the square house as an afterthought. I gazed into the bathroom and saw a broken toilet bowl, cracked in half. Half of the ceramic bowl had fallen off and leaned against what was left of the toilet. I stepped beyond the bathroom and through the kitchen. Since moving, my father decided to store the horse tackle in the abandoned house. Sitting where our table used to be were a couple of saddles, the tackle box we took to the county fair every summer, and an assortment of bridles and ropes.

The living room was dark from the boarded-up picture window, but a rogue beam of light shown through the tiny window above the front door, which we rarely ever used, even when we lived there. The door to the stairs was open, and as I stepped onto the bottom landing of the staircase a rush of childhood memories came at me. These stairs held so many memories. Here I raced my brothers up and down, sent toy cars crashing over the
steps, and pouted on the top step whenever I didn’t get my way. I looked up and saw those memories laid out—almost literally—as I gazed upon an avalanche of children’s clothes spread down the wooden steps.

This is what was left behind—my childhood in the form of Sesame Street T-shirts and cotton pajamas. I stepped on the clothes as I climbed the stairs, my feet slipping on the items as they slid below my shoes. I was afraid to look down, afraid that rats would rise up from the abandoned clothing and scurry across my shoes. At the middle of the staircase, I thought about stopping, turning back now that I’d seen the discarded items. I rested against the outside wall, part of me wishing that the wall behind my back would disappear, sending me out of this house and onto the grass where I could hold on to the rosy picture of this place.

I stopped on the top landing and collapsed onto the step, much like I did when I was a child. That house would always hold the memories of my childhood: how my brother and I rummaged through the high school yearbooks my mother stored under the bed he and I shared; how my siblings and I took newborn baby lambs into the house and sat with them next to the floorboard heating vents, warming our extremities from the cold midwestern winters; or the summers when we sat below the dining room window and played with our Tonka trucks as the music from *Days of Our Lives* drifted out into the warm, sticky air. Those memories remained. But after seeing the house I had this new memory—an old wooden box, white paint peeling on the outside, and relics of the past weighing down the inside, until the structure finally becomes too hard on the eyes and is ripped from the landscape by a wrecking ball, tornado, fire, or general decay. Then it is gone.

When Ivy calls my name, I am standing squarely on a pile of Arabic documents, misty-eyed and lonely. I’m still holding the sheet of paper, my fist clenching it like it was my favorite childhood T-shirt.

“Lemer, let’s go,” Ivy bellows.

We take the first truckload of trash to the dump down the road. As Ivy and I dump the papers into a pile with other trash from around the base, I am reminded of items that must hold some importance to somebody. *They are only documents*, I try to tell myself with each load. Old utility bills or instruction manuals. They are not love letters or childhood scribblings. *Nobody would ever want these things. They have all run off.*

At the end of the day, we return to our tents. We are welcomed by the news that the shower tents are finally operational, and the lieutenant is taking a truckload of soldiers to the facility. We haven’t showered in almost
a week, since we left Kuwait. Our sweat has caked our bodies in salt, so much so that white rings form around the necklines of our uniforms. At least we hardly notice how bad we smell because nobody around here smells clean.

On the ride to the shower tent, I notice mini-camps of tents along the route. The base looks like a concentration camp. Each battalion has staked out a plot of land, and as we drive I notice a team of soldiers stirring gasoline fires from the latrines, people wandering from one tent to the next, watching their boots kick around the sand. Nobody looks happy. When we arrive at the shower tents, we quickly get in line. The soldiers stand around, all dressed in PTs, waiting to get into the tent. We don’t talk. We just wait. Darkness is setting in around us. Instead of looking inviting—a luxury after so many hot days—the tents look dark and gloomy. At the front of the line, just before the attendant pulls back the curtain to reveal the dark showers inside, Fredricks looks back at me and says, “It feels like I’m going into a gas chamber.”

One day Lake returns from one of the bunkers near our camp with an Iraqi soldier’s helmet and an old, tattered uniform. I watch as he rolls the helmet around in his hands and shakes the dirt from the uniform. I can’t help but wonder why someone left these things behind.

I have become obsessed with this notion of things left behind. There is a sort of mystery in examining these things—documents, old uniforms, even writing on walls. They all say something of people who’ve been here before us. I almost majored in sociology in college, and now I’m obsessed with figuring out how societies form, how they function, why they exist, and why they sometimes disappear.

It all started with outhouse graffiti. There is something exciting about deciphering outhouse graffiti. It says so much about the kind of soldier who passed through a place. Most of the messages are typical notes from bored soldiers: SO AND SO WAS HERE or SO AND SO IS GAY or something about SO AND SO’s mother. There are battle cries—ALPHA COMPANY LEADS THE WAY—and simple statements from homesick soldiers—THREE DAYS AND A WAKE UP AND I’LL BE GOING HOME. In Kuwait I saw a limerick etched into the plastic siding of an outhouse. The limerick said:

I’ve fucked in London.
I’ve fucked in Spain.
This Is Our Comfortable Hell

I’ve even fucked on the coast of Maine.
But I’ll never be happy,
I’ll never be free,
Until I’ve fucked the army
the way it fucked me.

I repeated the limerick to Jones and Lake because it seemed entirely fitting to our situation.

But there is also something disturbing about outhouse graffiti. When I was in Kosovo, I first started to notice graffiti invitations for sex, from one male soldier to another, and I began to wonder about the seedy underbelly created by the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Straight soldiers could simply be themselves; there were all kinds of rumors about male soldiers having sex with female soldiers while deployed. Gay soldiers, however, had to resort to graffiti invitation for sex. There were physical descriptions etched into the outhouse walls, and next to the descriptions were times and dates for meeting up. I was both creeped out and intrigued by these invitations. While I had no intention of answering these invitations, I was glad that there were other soldiers like me—gay men hiding behind the military uniform. The outhouse graffiti was my only proof that I wasn’t alone.

We are all damned.

It’s called karma—plain and simple karma. What goes around comes around. Iraq is our hell, our personal punishment for some wrong we’ve committed, and we’re doomed to spend the rest of eternity wandering the desert under the sweltering sun.

I can’t understand what it is I’ve done wrong. What have I done to deserve this? I rack my brain for why I belong in this hell. Could this be my punishment for punching a classmate in the junior high locker room and gloating about it? Could this be the result of my unholy life, laughing at Father Vern’s accent after his sermons, or disbelieving the existence of God? Or, as I’ve been told by the “religious Right,” is it because of the homosexual lifestyle I’ve been leading?

The refrigerator has been connected for three days, but it has yet to cool any water. The bottles are stuffed into the main compartment so tightly that when we grab the cap of a bottle and pull, we have to hold the rest of the bottles back to prevent the entire puzzle from tumbling out.

Ivy stands near the fridge yelling himself hoarse.
“Who the fuck tried to put Coke in the freezer?” he yells at Tuna and King, who are lying on their dusty cots. “Why isn’t there any damn cold water? The fucking Cokes are taking up all the room.”

We ignore Ivy because that is usually the best option. He then blames us for not restocking the fridge, pointing fingers at whomever’s near.

“You cocksuckers aren’t stocking the fridge,” he yelps. “I am the only one doing it!”

The temperature climbs to 102 today. When the sun sets and the desert finally cools down, the chiggers come out to eat our tan flesh. Newman sits outside the tent scratching himself; red dime-sized bumps dot both his arms and legs. Rogers and Elijah are comparing bites while discussing how hot it got today. Viv shoots across the tent in his underwear, screaming about losing his PTs and smiling ear to ear.

We have no cold water, the sand fleas are eating us alive, and, as if that weren’t enough, the gods are mocking us, as somewhere off in the distance someone’s boom box is playing The Cure’s “Just Like Heaven.” Add in the stress of being away from our families and stuck in the middle of a war, and we have our own private hell.

The motor pool is covered in ash. It’s actually sand, so finely ground that when you set foot into the lot the particles rise up and surround your boots like morning fog. The sand is the color of Pacific beaches, light tan particles found in childhood sandboxes and Kuwait landscapes. But the texture of this sand is different. It is a fine powder spread evenly across the lot. As troops trounce across the motor pool, to and from trucks and Hummers, wispy brown puffs climb into the sky and explode like bombs over tiny sand cities.

“It’s like walking through dry ash,” Bobby says.

Bobby has taken to collecting the sand/ash in miniature bottles of Tabasco sauce found in MREs. He shows me four bottles cradled in his palm. The tiny vessels rest inside his hand, red caps keeping the sand sealed inside the glass. I pick up one of the bottles between my forefinger and thumb, gently tipping the bottle back and forth. The bottles of sand are just one piece in the collection of artifacts we are taking from this country. I imagine Bobby keeping the bottles for years after the deployment next to an Iraqi Republican Guard helmet, a scorpion pressed under glass, and an Islamic prayer blanket inside a chest. I see him picking up the bottles with his wrinkled fingers and showing the sand to his children and
This Is Our Comfortable Hell

grandchildren. His grandchildren will shake the bottles, wonder whose ashes their grandfather is keeping, but never understand.

Six boots kick a wild cloud of sand across the motor-pool lot. It is May 7, and I have motor-pool guard with two other members of Bravo Company. We walk toward one of Horizontal Platoon’s dozers parked along the concertina wire fence that surrounds the lot. We climb up the dozer, coming to a rest atop the steel square that shades the driver from the sun. McGoff and Adams lay their weapons on top of the cab and pull a cribbage board from their bags. I sit in one corner and look out over the motor pool.

Under a million tiny stars, I stare at the sand and think of Babylon—where civilization began. I think about this ancient place, only miles from where I am now. I read about Babylon in an issue of the Stars and Stripes, how shortly after the invasion U.S. troops took control of the ruins. Archaeologists criticized the troops for causing harm to the ruins, making even more of a mess than when Saddam tried to rebuild Babylon in the mid-1980s.

These ruins—the three vast mounds on the east bank of the Euphrates, the Ishtar Gate—are what remain of Babylon, but they are not what the troops will remember. Soldiers wouldn’t remember the mounds, the names of which they can hardly pronounce. What they will remember is the sand. The sand is what ancient civilizations left behind—to cover us while we sleep, to become lodged in the nooks and crannies of our bodies, to stick to our sweaty limbs, to keep us entertained, to give us souvenirs. I think about the number of people who’ve lived and died on this sand, fine like ash, each tiny particle representing a life lived here. Between the stars and the sand—both in the millions—we trounce around this country, kicking the ash of people as we go.

This sand—like the cabinets of Arabic papers, the avalanche of children’s clothes, and the outhouse graffiti—is what remains of people who’ve long since moved on.

I sit up and look across our patch of tents, thinking about where we’ll move to next. I don’t think Dante had a place for the gypsies, the nomads, the wanderers. But then again nobody did. They didn’t belong anywhere, which is why I feel so completely and absolutely powerless here, as we’re shoved from country to country, pushed into another land in conflict, forced to wear a uniform that makes us all look the same—nameless soldiers blending into the sand. I could die here, be buried in the sand—my limbs
tangled with another soldier’s under this grainy ash—and nobody would ever know. I’d blend right in.

A Hummer leaves the lot, kicking up another cloud of dust that floats into our tents and coats the sleeping soldiers. This ash is burying us alive, and all we can do is play cribbage and endure.

At the end of our shift, we pack up the game and climb down. From the top of the dozer, I watch Adams climb onto the hood of the vehicle before jumping down into the sand; his boots make a cloud of dust so thick he disappears.

It takes us almost a week to figure out why the fridge isn’t cooling water properly: we’ve stuffed the compartment so full that the appliance is having a hard time cooling all the bottles. We take a few out, leave a little wiggle room, and watch as the icebox finally does its job, delivering cold water to hot, tired soldiers.

I grab a bottle from the fridge and my rifle from my cot, and walk out the tent door.

“Ready?” Roach says.

“Let’s go,” I say as the curtain closes behind me.

Bobby, Roach, and I have the keys to one of the Hummers and have decided to drive around to the other side of the base. As we walk down the line of tents, I notice a group of soldiers around a bonfire. The group is playing cards on a makeshift table as a boom box plays rock music nearby. Men are lounging in canvas folding chairs and drinking water like it’s beer on poker night. The mood is jovial, and as I pass, I think about camping back home, living in a tent, and not worrying about work or war.

As I pass the first bonfire, I notice another, a few tents down this time. I see yet another fire at the back of our little colony of tents. For the first time since we’ve been here, the camp is filled with a sense of excitement, people happy with their surroundings. We’ve finally settled in, I think as we step into the motor pool and over to the Hummer. This is our comfortable hell.

Roach steers the Hummer out of the lot, a wild cloud of dust flies into the air, and Bobby laughs like a lunatic in the back seat. I smile as I look back at him and the fog of the gray dust we’ve kicked up.

We take the perimeter road, keeping an eye out for the runway in the middle of the post. We pass the north entrance to the camp, where soldiers stand near the gate looking out onto a dark, desert road. The sun is setting, and in the guard towers, troops lean against the front railing, gazing out over a field. As we drive along the north side of the base, the setting sun
creates long shadows of the guards in the towers, pushing their dark forms over the perimeter fence and out onto the grass beyond base. *The sun isn’t on our side,* I think as the shadows are pushed beyond the post, into the dangers beyond.

As we near the runway, we notice whole chunks of destroyed Iraqi plane parts littering the airfield. We drive past what looks like part of a cockpit pushed up against the perimeter fence in between two of the guard towers. It’s like a piece of trash, a wind-whipped plastic bag pinned against the fence. We find the rest of the plane farther up the road, scattered around the runway as if it has crashed here and nobody bothered to clear the debris. That is when it occurs to me—we’re survivors of some plane crash, abandoned and shipwrecked on some shitty island called Iraq.

I want to tell Roach and Bobby my theory, but just then Bobby points at a small block building near the far end of the runway. Roach steers the Hummer into a paved driveway next to the building.

Leaning against the building is a wooden billboard painted with the face of a man. The face has been mostly punched out; scraps of wood lie on the sand behind the billboard. The poster looks out of place, as if someone placed it there for a purpose, perhaps to display a message. We get out of the vehicle and stand with our hands over our eyes to shield them from the damn sun. Roach snaps a couple of pictures. We are all standing there in silence, looking at the plane parts on the runway behind the building and the punched-out portrait, when Roach says, “Look at the eye.”

One of the eyes is still intact, hanging alone as if in a Picasso painting. It doesn’t take us long to recognize that eye; it has been plastered all over the media back home and on billboards throughout this country. It is Saddam’s eye, the only recognizable thing left.

When we get back to camp, Charlie Company has arrived and is camped out in the motor pool. They lie around on cots like we used to, dirty and tired from the trip into Iraq. As I walk from the Hummer back to our tent, I step on a tan sheet of notebook paper, folded in quarters and half covered in sandy ash. I reach down, shake the sand from the paper, and as I unfold the document I watch the Arabic letters appear, still bright and crisp, as if they still mean something to someone.