The Last Deployment

Lemer, Bronson

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On May 14, we move to Baghdad, where, once we’re settled, we’ll begin work on repair missions in the violent city. As we pull out of the south gate of Anaconda, I notice a lone child standing in a field of weeds. From the back of a truck, I squint to see him. He stands near the road, knee-deep in twisted weeds, wearing a gray burlap sack. His eyes are wide as our vehicles pass. I catch his eye and hold his gaze, feeling his loneliness right down to my boots. There is sadness in the way he watches our trucks pass. He doesn’t smile or wave. He doesn’t chase after our truck or yell “Mee-sta, Mee-sta!” like the other kids do, demanding food or water. He stands still, silently wounding us with his stare.

I don’t see anyone around and wonder if the child is lost or, even worse, homeless. There are no other people in the field, and his silhouette looks out of place, like a sunflower in a field of dandelions. He holds a clump of weeds in one hand and grips the side of his thigh with the other. There is something about his demeanor that sticks with me long after we’ve passed the child and followed the gravel road to the highway. It is the way he watches us, how he appears so helpless in that field and looks like no other child I’ve seen—in this country or back home—that makes me want to help the Iraqi people.

I shake away the image of the boy as we near the highway. Jones and I set up our positions in the back of the truck. We’re standing near the cab, aiming our weapons out ahead of the vehicle. It is early evening, and we’ve managed to catch the citizens of Iraq as they settle in for the night. The streets of the tiny villages along the highway are clogged with men in white cloaks and women in black burkas. Young men in dirty T-shirts and jeans gather outside a greasy garage, smoking and laughing, as a multicolored
Icarus in Iraq

car—orange trunk lid, white side doors—pokes out from a dark stall. They motion to us as we pass, whisper quiet remarks to each other, and tap ash off their cigarettes before taking in long drags. A group of young women crouch in a doorway, thighs touching calves, hands picking at the pebbles around their feet. They wave as we pass, and we wave back. Jones and I take turns yelling at the children playing soccer in the gray fields as if we were their mothers. “Hey,” Jones yells. “You there,” I scream to the goalie. We demand their attention. Then, when they look up at us as if they’re in trouble, Jones and I wave back and laugh to ourselves because we have so much control over these kids. The kids shake their heads and yell Hey right back.

On the highway, an old man honks his horn at us and does a little dance in the cab of his truck, a crooked, half-toothed smile across his face. Another man holds his daughter in his lap as he drives down the highway; the toddler’s small hands grip the metal steering wheel. The father points at me. He whispers something to his daughter as his dark, bushy eyebrows tickle the skin above her ear. She looks at me and waves. I take my finger off the trigger, wave back, and adjust the M16 rifle I had tucked into my shoulder. It is all very surreal and paradelfike; it almost feels like a homecoming. We are the heroes driving down the center of this country, swooping in to save the day. We wave and smile and rest in the back of our trucks as we zip across a country of people who are pretending they want us here. The odd thing is that seeing these people wave and the children laugh, I actually feel good about being here. I am getting excited about doing some good, about the role we’re about to play in these people’s lives. This is why we are here, I think.

Yet part of me knows better. I know there are people who don’t want us here. I see them along the road as we near Baghdad. They are the people who don’t wave, don’t even look up. They ignore us. Some stand around in groups, pointing and growling at us or relaxing in plastic chairs outside their houses, stone-cold looks on their faces. They don’t have to say anything; I see the disgust in their faces.

When we turn off the highway and onto the boulevard leading to the airport, we are met with scrawling words of hate and disdain. On a concrete wall along the road, a graffiti message says, “YES SADDAM YES SADDAM” in red block letters. Farther down the road, on the other side of the street, we come upon a blunt message on the wall near the airport: “LEAVE OUR COUNTRY.” We aren’t leaving. Instead, we’re moving to another base, spreading out across this land.
Icarus in Iraq

The early evening sun makes a shadow of the winged man, casting dark lines across the road. In the back of the truck I chew my lower lip and wait for the guards to let us into Saddam International Airport. I squint into the sun to see the man, a stone statue poised on a two-story, star-shaped platform. He is stepping forward, one leg bent, his torso slanted away from the sun as if at any minute the figure will burst forth from the pedestal and lift into the Baghdad sky. I imagine the man laughing as his wings stretch and flap, wind carrying the creature higher and higher, until he circles the sky above our truck and darts off toward the sun.

We’ve traveled forty-five miles south to the capital city, eventually connecting to the boulevard that takes travelers away from the heart of Baghdad and into the maze of concrete barriers and concertina wire that is the city’s main airport. I watch two soldiers step aside as we steer our trucks through the gate and onto the airport grounds. I turn back to look at the statue and notice a tall billboard on the opposite side of the road. There is Saddam’s broad face, his slick black hair, and his large hand held palm-out to wave goodbye to people leaving the airport. The billboard attempts to make Saddam seem kind of like a proud parent waving at his children—the father of Iraq. But I’m not buying it. The billboard is eerie, the image of a stalker watching people come and go. I turn away, but I can’t help but feel his eyes on me, like he’s watching us enter this airport named after him.

The trucks speed past the tall grass and weeds in the dry ditches. I look out over the field, past the grass, and see the main terminal at the far end of a long road, beige wings shooting out from the main body of the building. Deep blue letters are printed across the building in both English and Arabic: Saddam International Airport. The airport was built in 1982 at a cost of more than 900 million dollars. It has three terminals, each named after an ancient empire: Babylon, Samara, and Nineveh. Originally the airport was designed to accommodate 7.5 million passengers a year. Now, I imagine, few people enter or leave this place by air.

As we get deeper into the heart of the airport, I see other signs of the airport’s former life. A ten-story building creeps into the sky as if it’s not sure whether it should be there. The building is gray and peeling paint. On the front of the building, about five stories up, is a billboard showing Saddam saluting passersby. I cringe at seeing Saddam again—it’s as if we can’t get away from him. Stop signs in Arabic and English dangle from posts like broken limbs. A piece of a plane lies in the grassy ditch. Abandoned trucks line the fence near a former fueling station. I don’t see any complete planes, but as we move up the road I see signs of military life. Vehicles are
I watch the dusty dual-language signs pass by, arrows pointing off in all directions. Just then we see another image of Saddam as he beams from a stone monument near the road. The monument is on a strip of sand between the two roads leading to the main terminal. In the picture he sits on a gold throne and watches the passing trucks, an Iraqi flag waving in the background. He smiles at us—a proud Saddam greeting airport visitors—and as we zip by him, I notice his hand, held out as if gesturing for peace.

We’ve been at the airport for fifteen minutes, and we’ve already seen three Saddams. There is something unsettling about this, especially now that we’ve run him off by invading his country. This place has an air of mystery, a ghostlike feel of something deserted and reclaimed; only now, an odd lurking presence remains. It is a drastic change from the streets of Baghdad that bustled with activity as we passed on our way here.

In a narrow lot, we pull the trucks into a line, park, and settle in for the night. Captain Roar tells us that we’ll be sleeping in the motor pool this evening, and in the morning we’ll move into our new home. I jump down from the truck, shake the sand off my uniform, and remove my goggles. We’re all exhausted from the trip. I glance over at the airport terminal, where the sun is setting behind its beige walls, and watch as troops stand around smoking and joking, hands on hips as we take in the new environment.

When the sun sets, we set up camp for the night. I grab my cot and climb onto the headache rack of our truck. I unfold the cot, roll out my sleeping bag, and settle in. I am tired, hot, and stupefied at what I’ve seen. I stare at the nearby airport terminal and think about the people again—the children with their frantic waves that cut right through me; the women in shabby dresses smiling at us like we’re suitors or saints; the old men who hardly look at us, hardly acknowledge our presence. They are all there along the road to Baghdad—spread out as if on display for the passing troops. Then the image of the boy in the field returns. He isn’t like other children in this country. He doesn’t wave or laugh or do what children should be doing, and I wonder why. I conclude that the child is missing something—a parent, a mentor, a teacher, anyone to guide him. He is homeless in a country that is essentially fatherless. We’ve run off this country’s leader, and now, instead of looking to Saddam for help, they look to us.
I realize that what we’ve gone through today is not a parade. It is more akin to an adoption meeting where we meet, for the first time, our new responsibility.

I first learned of the myth of Deadalus and Icarus through music. I played alto saxophone in junior high school concert band. We attempted a portion of Igor Markevitch’s *L’Envol d’Icare* one year. The music portrays the entire rise and fall of Icarus—from the labyrinth where he and Deadalus were trapped to the crystal-clear water the boy’s body splashed into. I remember the way the music builds up, the warbling flutes and beating bass signifying the flapping of Icarus’s wings; the way the horns and saxophones wail on the ascent; how my classmate’s wrists snap the mallet against the timpani as Icarus nears the sun. The whole score promises a train-wreck ending, climaxing at the point where the wax of Icarus’s wings melts and he plummets into the ocean, swallowed whole by the great, angry sea.

It was a disaster for any junior high band to attempt, but we tried it anyway. Every time we got to the climax, I blasted my saxophone as loud as it would go, squawking out note after dramatic note in order to get the full effect of the tragedy. I imagined an audience listening to the tragedy unfold with our music. The women would weep; the men would get lumps in their throats; and everyone—man, woman, and child—would stand and applaud as we brought the story to a close.

What I took away from the song was the profound love Deadalus had for Icarus. Deadalus constructed wings from feathers and wax for his son, warned the boy about the dangers of the sun and the ocean, before pushing him off into the sky. He was the first of the Brady Bunch fathers—always looking to protect their sons with profound spoonfuls of knowledge and tidbits of common thought. It was a relationship that broke my heart because I felt that I’d never had a genuine moment like that with my own father.

While my brothers found common bonds with him—hunting, fishing, wrestling—I struggled to find anything to connect myself with my dad. During holidays, when my brothers put each other in headlocks, and my sister and mother argued over dirty dishes and leftovers, I was left with my silent father. He twiddled his thumbs, rubbed his hands together, and stared at the ceiling. I cracked my knuckles, cleared my throat, and wondered what it was that made us so different. We were different to the point of discomfort. We both twitched around in our seats, not looking at
Icarus in Iraq

each other, until he rose from his chair, walked to his favorite cabinet, and returned with a Western novel.

I always thought at least we could bond over literature and words, but I know nothing about Louis l’Amour. Maybe I should.

I remember how rough his hands got in the summer from pounding fence posts, pulling at horse bridles, and carrying buckets of water to the sheep. He sat in the living room and lathered his hands in Cornhusker’s lotion. The thick syrupy smell mixed with the humid air, and at night I smelled the lotion on my pajamas as we played in front of the television.

It was later—when I’d grown old enough to lend a hand—that he enlisted my help with farm chores: feeding the animals, gathering the square bales, helping a ewe through labor. After all, he’d say, what are kids good for if not manual labor? That is why he had six children.

He taught us how to ride bikes, tractors, and horses. Once, while teaching me how to drive a stick shift with his Ford pickup, I stalled the vehicle at a stop sign in town and couldn’t figure out how to correctly let my foot off the clutch. We sat at that intersection for fifteen minutes as I tried to get it right. Each time I lifted my foot, the truck died. We then sat in silence, father and son, as one of the city cops watched from the armory across the street.

I never mastered that clutch.

But I learned more from my father than he’ll ever know. He taught me determination—that if there is something I want, I should work hard to get it. He did everything he could to prepare me for the world. Yet there is only so much fathers can do before they let go and trust that their advice will stick. They must give their children the right tools to survive—man-made wings or common sense—before patting them on the back and sending them out into the wide world. It is then up to the children to decide how to use their newly acquired knowledge.

Icarus, however, was a stupid, stupid boy.

Is that piss?” King asks, pointing at a plastic water bottle sitting half full in the corner.

“I think so,” Roach says as we all look on from the doorway.

We’re standing in our new home—one of the second-rate side terminals down the runway from the main airport terminal—staring at a bottle of urine. I look out over the upper level of the two-story building. The place is a mess. A line of floor-to-ceiling windows peers out at a runway full of military helicopters, poised like grasshoppers on the hot concrete. Beyond
the helicopters, an old plane lies on its side at the edge of the runway, its wing snapped off like a limbless dragonfly.

I step from the doorway up to the windows and make a handprint on the pane, white fingers surrounded by dust—a stamp of disapproval. About half of the windows are busted out, and a pile of garbage and broken glass lies beneath each empty hole. The windows that remain are caked in a layer of dirt—both inside and out. The sand has been whipped up against the glass by the helicopters and never wiped clean.

There is a hole in the wall at the end of the windows. Three soldiers stand near the hole, looking down at the rubble that lies on the concrete below. Pieces hang from the opening like stuffing from a coat. It’s almost as if a missile has pierced the terminal and left a fleshy scar. There are no plastic seats for waiting passengers to watch the planes taxi. No check-in airline counter. No snippy airline employees. No coffee stands pushing caffeine on weary travelers. The bay is open, filled with dirt and garbage. We find the urine bottle in one of the two rooms at the end of the bay and speculate that the soldiers downstairs on the first floor used these rooms to relieve themselves and get rid of their trash.

“No way, man,” someone yells. “You do it.”

A handful of soldiers argue over who has to remove the bottle of urine. I walk from the window to the half-balcony wall and look out at the soldiers below. The first floor is about three times the size of the second and lined with cots and sleeping soldiers. They’re packed in like stranded tourists. At the far left is a makeshift gym. Several second-hand weight plates are scattered about; a homemade wooden bench press sits in the center of the area as if it’s an elegant couch. The area is devoid of any weight-lifting troops. Morning light shines through the green siding along the front of the building, casting a lime-colored beam over several sleeping soldiers. An oscillating fan does overtime as it sweeps across a group of men sleeping near one of the two giant staircases leading to the second floor. The fan clicks as it reaches the limits of its span, as if to express its disgust at constantly being used.

Above it all—the cots, the fans, the water, the weight-lifting equipment—a flight-information display system hangs from the ceiling like a watchful eye. The board is black with rusty edges and displays no arrivals and no departures. When we first entered the building, I half hoped the device would announce our arrival: Bravo Company, 142nd Engineers, arriving at gate 4. I could almost see the ancient letters flip forward as they spelled out

*Icarus in Iraq*
our arrival. But they didn’t. The board remained silent, no clickity-click of letters breezing past as it tried to spell out another destination.

The empty display board adds to the mystery of this place. I imagine a time when letters appeared on that board and travelers hurried through this terminal, not having to worry about waking sleeping soldiers or being trapped in a dead-end corridor blocked off by a line of military cots. I try to think of this place as it was before we got here, when helicopters didn’t dot the runway, and planes still lifted people into the sky.

I turn back to see six soldiers standing in a circle playing rock-paper-scissors. Paper covers rock followed by a collective groan as one of the soldiers in first platoon loses the game. I watch the soldier slip on a pair of gloves and approach the bottle.

“Lemer,” Newman says as he walks up to me. “The LT says the PX is open. Why don’t you go try and see if they have any cleaning supplies?”

I can’t say how I found the PX—I have no idea where anything is on this base—but I attribute it to animal instinct—how animals just know where the food is. The whole base is a strange, new world, different yet familiar. I see the familiar—the bottled water shipped in, the Hummers and helicopters scattered about the base—but this is nothing like airports back home. There are no car rental companies where you can rent a Ford Taurus and zip off into the city. There are no duty-free shops, souvenir boutiques, or magazine racks. We’re living like primitive survivors, building whatever we don’t have.

The PX is housed in a large warehouse with white siding and a huge, green garage door that is spilling out a line of soldiers in camouflage. I walk to the end of the line and wait. The wait doesn’t even faze me: after five years in the military, where you stand in line for everything, waiting two hours to get inside a general supply store doesn’t seem the least bit unusual. I could wait here all afternoon and still feel it was worth it for a taste of Coca-Cola and junk food. After two hours, I set foot inside the building, grab a plastic basket, and get back in line. The line heads north down one wall, turns right at the corner, and runs along the back wall before turning south again and running along the opposite wall until it reaches the checkout lines near the door. It is a giant U made entirely out of moving, sweating soldiers.

I rip a flap off one of the large cargo boxes lining the inside of the building and fan myself. The box is full of sunflower seeds—bags and bags of Spitz. The line follows the boxes around the building. Soldiers get in
line, place their basket on the sandy cement floor in front of their feet, and wait to inch forward to the next box. Each box offers a different luxury. I come to a box filled with Oreos and another with Pop Tarts. As we move, we push our baskets forward with our feet, the plastic rubbing against the sand. The noise dominoes down the line each time one of the three cashiers yells Next, making it impossible to even talk with your neighbor.

At the back of the warehouse, I find a box full of towels and another with greeting cards. Soldiers reach into the boxes and fill their baskets with junk food and toiletries. I find very few cleaning supplies. As I near the checkout lane, after waiting for nearly four hours, I come upon three boxes full of underwear in plastic packages. I then realize how ridiculous the whole situation seems. Who back home would stand in line for four hours just to buy cookies and underwear?

I really don’t know what we’re doing here. Some members of our platoon are the only people to have gone into Baghdad. But for the most part it seems like we’re spending more time on post than doing missions in the city. Mostly we just sit around, building picnic tables, and helping ourselves.

I watch Roach kick a pile of two-by-fours. We’ve been tasked with building two wooden picnic tables from the pile. I laugh as Roach—a plumber—scratches his head and steps back from the stacked wood. He’s in charge of our group—a ragged band of misfits made up of two carpenters, two electricians, a plumber, and four rock crushers. The thing I like best about being engineers is that if we don’t have something, we build it. We’re engineers and we’re resourceful, so building a couple of picnic tables seems simple.

But I’m a terrible carpenter, and I’m comfortable with this realization. As Roach tries to draw the plans for the picnic tables in his tiny pocket notebook, I think back to Camp Bondsteel, the 955-acre military post near Ferizaj, Kosovo, where I spent seven months in 2000. The base was truly man-made. It was built on the rolling hills and farmland at the foot of a mountain and was made up of nearly 250 wooden SEA huts. From the scraps, I built a wobbly nightstand with two slanted shelves. I took a picture of it, like a proud mother would a child, and sent the photo to my friends. They commented on the nails sticking out the side (I told them I used them to hang my dog tags) and how everything on the second shelf slanted slightly to the left. But I felt no shame.

Now Roach turns to me for advice. We talk about the plans, instructing the four rock crushers to start laying out the wood and handing tape
measurers to the two electricians. I watch the electricians extend their tape measures and make their lines as Roach and I figure out each measurement. The other carpenter is at the saw we’ve set up nearby. Once the boards are measured, the rock crushers feed the boards into the saw, the other carpenter chopping the pile of wood into pieces.

Then comes the tricky part. We have a hard time putting the tables together. The angles are all wrong; the legs refuse to extend from the table top the way we wanted them to. The spaces between the boards are uneven. Both tables wobble. When we have the tables assembled, I sit down on one bench, my weight making the opposite bench lift into the air. I remove my boonie hat and wipe the sweat from my forehead. The wind carries a handful of sawdust off the sand and over the tables, making the tiny particles stick to my forehead. I take a drink from my canteen and splash some water on my forehead. The sawdust scent triggers memories of childhood woodworking projects—birdhouses, tool boxes, footstools. I used to take such pride in these projects, knowing that this birdhouse was the fruit of my labor, that the hard work I put into this stepstool or tool box would result in something concrete and permanent. The projects were examples of a job well done. But as Roach sits on the opposite side of the table and the bench rises beneath me, I feel my father’s shame deep down in my gut. If he could see me—sitting on these shitty, crooked tables—he would look at me with shame and shake his head. He wouldn’t say it, but I know he’d be disappointed.

I am mostly disappointed in my own abilities and lack of interest in carpentry. I take no pride in it, and these picnic tables show that. But it doesn’t really sink in until I’m sitting on these rickety tables, wobbling back and forth, that I may be no good to the people of Iraq; I may have nothing to offer. After all, how can I help others when I can’t even help myself and my platoon by completing simple carpentry projects?

Roach looks over at me and points up toward the road running by the motor pool. “Want to go check out Saddam?”

I follow his finger and see the Saddam monument we noticed on our arrival here. We all walk toward the monument, climbing up the steep ditch and across the road to reach it.

As we near, I notice that the picture of Saddam is made of tiles—five-by-five-inch squares depicting the proud former leader. The picture has been defaced—graffiti sprawled across Saddam’s face, his hand, and the throne he sits on. The poster has become a sort of guest book for U.S. troops visiting the airport. Most troops have written their names, units,
I notice that someone has already placed 142nd ENG—NORTH DAKOTA on the running tally of units here.

We read the messages and run our hands over the tiles. On Saddam’s hand someone has written in block letters: “I Pissed Here. Love, Your Friend Smith.” Nearby, another soldier has signed the monument “Sgt. King, Spring Break 2003.” A few of the notes are phrased as letters, like a note I found near Saddam’s knee: “Dear Sara, Well We’re Here. We’ve Taken Care Of Saddam So Our Children Will Never Have To Come Over Here. Love, Dan.” Roach laughs. He points at a message near Saddam’s head that reads “I Jerked Off On This Poster You Shithead.”

I walk back to get a picture of the entire poster. I stand, framing the shot, and imagine the other soldiers who have already taken their pictures in front of it. I imagine them standing in front of Saddam, unaware that their proud smiles match that of the leader depicted behind them. It has been so easy taking over this airport—defacing what we don’t like, building what we don’t have—that I wonder if we even realize what we’re doing here. The messages proudly sprawled across the poster depict people almost too comfortable with their situation, soldiers too cocky and foolish to realize the importance of their presence here.

I take the picture. Before leaving, I notice a message written near the bottom of the monument, from a soldier staying at one of Saddam’s former mansions near the airport. The message, again in block letters, is a letter written to Saddam himself: “Dear Saddam, We’re Staying In Your Palace. Thanks For Your Hospitality. Love, Sgt. Rick And 2nd Platoon. P.S. We Took A Shit In The Living Room. Bill Us Later.”

Walking back to our terminal, I notice a rectangular, stone monument just outside the door of the building. For some reason, I haven’t noticed the plaque before. Beige blocks surround a white marble plaque with letters, both English and Arabic, etched into the stone. The English is written on the right side of the block, the Arabic on the left. I squat down to read the message:

Constructed in the era of the
Leader president
SADDAM HUSSEIN
Secretary General of the regional
leadership of the Arab Baath Socialist Party
President of the republic.

Below the message, in black, even letters, a soldier has written in marker: TERMINATED o8APR03 BY GEORGE W. BUSH!!!
Icarus in Iraq

Over the next few weeks we see further demonstrations of this termination. We change all the names of things: Saddam International Airport is renamed Baghdad International Airport, or BIAP (pronounced Buy-op by the soldiers). Someone spray-paints HOTEL CALIFORNIA on the sign along the road. Even the terminals, which once held history in their names, are simplified and stripped down to terminals A, B, and C.

The tiled monument of Saddam disappears; the image is painted over by coalition troops. The billboard showing a waving Saddam as visitors exit the airport also vanishes. Saddam is being erased from this country. Wiped clean. He no longer smiles or waves. He ceases to exist here.

On May 16 I volunteer to travel back to Anaconda for a day, to get supplies and mail. When we leave BIAP’s east gate, the winged man is still there, unchanged. He looks the same, still threatening to lift off from his cement platform and dart toward the sun. He has the same stern look of determination—a look that shows both hope and sadness. He reminds me that there are people beyond this post and that thus far in Iraq, we’ve only managed to help ourselves. He reminds me that more must be done in this country. We act like children in an amusement park: fighting over cleaning up piss, getting giddy over American cookies, and defacing posters of Saddam. But we are not the children here.

We need to show Icarus how to fly.

Abbas Ibn Firnas always knew he wanted to fly.

The Spanish-Arab humanitarian, technologist, chemist, and poet watched a daredevil named Armen Firman fly off a tower in Córdoba in 852 CE. I believe he was instantly impressed at how the man glided through the air using a huge winglike cloak, how the wind lifted the daredevil’s hair, and how all the people pointed and stared in amazement. The feat was one of the first of its kind, a challenge to astronomers and engineers working on ways to make humans fly like birds.

Ironically, it was a man called Blackbird who first recognized the talents of Ibn Firnas. Blackbird was a patron of the sciences and saw potential in Ibn Firnas. He noticed the way the young man was fascinated by chemistry, physics, and astronomy. He watched Ibn Firnas design a water clock and devise means of manufacturing glass from the millions of particles of sand in the Middle East.

Then, in 875, Abbas Ibn Firnas attempted to fly. He built his own glider, invited his friends and neighbors, and launched himself from a tower. Ibn Firnas was finally in flight, soaring over a crowd of spectators—now a
spectacle himself. He laughed and flapped his wings, noticed the crowded streets below, and felt like a bird. In the faces of the people, he instantly recognized his fame as one of the first people to fly.

Ibn Firnas is the Islamic equivalent of the Wright Brothers. Westerners teach their children about the Wright Brothers, a pair of American pilots credited with making the first, controlled, powered flight in 1903. But the Islamic people tell their children about Ibn Firnas, who flew under his own steam a thousand years before the Wrights. They remember him in Libya through a postage stamp honoring his flight. A crater on the moon is also named in his honor. And in Baghdad, Iraqis honor him with a statue of a winged man, who stands proudly outside the recently captured international airport.

We’ve traveled back to Anaconda to retrieve our mail and to get supplies for upcoming missions in Baghdad. As Newman and Grayson gather supplies, the rest of us sit in the shade. While sorting through our company’s mail, I come across an envelope full of letters from my aunt’s fourth grade class.

Most of the notes are stereotypical letters to the troops. The children talk about themselves mostly, explain how old they are, what their parents do, or if they have any pets. A majority of them offer up interesting theories about where Saddam is hiding. I flip to a letter written in pink, cursive handwriting and read through the half-page paragraph: “Dear Bronson, I might know where the leader of Iraq hide out is at. It is under the sand someware. I think there is a door under the sand. But be careful, he has a bomb with him. Good luck. Be careful! Your friend, Carly Jo.” Another student, Logan, holds a similar theory. He’s even drawn a picture to give me a visual image of Saddam’s hiding place.

I come across one letter that makes my day—my entire year actually—with just this first line: “Dear Bronson, You are the coolest man ever.” In the middle of the letter, as if to make it stand out as the most important question ever, he has written: “WHO IS YOUR GIRLFRIEND” followed by five exclamation marks. I laugh and flip to the next letter.

Reading through them makes me smile and wish I could go back to grade school, where I could practice my cursive handwriting and do math problems all day. Most of the boys have drawn some kind of tank or gun. Some are even witty. One kid has written on the back of his card: “CDs: $14. Sunglasses: $3. Dog: $50. Keeping the nation safe: priceless.”

But I most identify with a letter I find at the bottom of the pile. The child’s name is Seth. He has written in gray, cursive pencil: “I hate it when
we have wars. Lots of people die from it. I like to draw stars.” He then
draws a giant red, blue, and orange five-point star, and signs his name.
Even with the constant war coverage and newspaper headlines tallying the
dead soldiers in Iraq, Seth has managed to look beyond the destruction. As
he draws stars in North Dakota, I envy his naïveté and his youth. Being on
this deployment, having to do a job I don’t entirely enjoy, makes me envy
Seth. I wish I could forget about this place sometimes, this odd thing called
war. I wish I could be back home, doing what I love, instead of driving
back and forth across the desert, pretending to be a carpenter and acting
like I’m doing some good over here.

Newman and Grayson pull up into the shade with the Hummer. I stuff
the letters in my pocket and climb into the back seat. On the ride back to
BIAP, I watch the children play soccer in the fields and the young girls wave
and giggle at us. On the road, I see a man riding a scooter. The man looks
like an old friend I used to work with back home. He has the same facial
features, same thinning hair, and same slender figure. I stare at the man
until he zips past our Hummer. As we are entering Baghdad, the Hummer
gets a flat tire. The entire convoy of five vehicles pulls to the shoulder of
the road, and we get out and look at the shredded tire. We’re stopped at the
top of a huge bypass on the edge of the city.
As three of the soldiers from Maintenance Platoon look at the tire, the rest of us walk to the guard rail and look out over an open field below. Soon, a group of about twenty kids comes running over and stands at the bottom of the ditch, looking up at us as we line the rail. They range in age from three to twelve and are wearing multicolored cloaks. They are asking for food, patting their stomachs, and sticking their fingers inside their mouths. Lake walks back to the Hummer and retrieves a handful of items—MREs, bottles of water, granola bars—and throws the food to the children like he’s feeding dogs. I watch the children fight and claw at each other. The boys push aside a little girl with sad eyes as they dart forward to grab the MRE packages. Nearby, I notice three adults watching the kids push and shove for food: two men are smoking, and a woman sits bowlegged on a stool while washing clothes in a steel bucket.

When all items have been claimed, an older boy with dark red hair raises his index and middle fingers to his lips. He sucks in and moves his fingers away from his mouth and repeats the gesture.

“Is he imitating smoking?” Lake asks.

“I think so,” I say.

“I’m not giving him cigarettes,” Lake says, laughing.

Lake gets out his Arabic Command and Control Card. The card has English to Arabic translations of various commands like “lower your hands” and “drop your weapons.” The card also translates numbers—so you can explain that there are ten thousand of us coming into this country—and helpful words and phrases to use such as “Nah-nuu Am-ree-kee-uun,” which means: “We are Americans.” Lake turns the card over in his hands. He finds the right question and looks over the crowd of children at the bottom of the ditch.

“Man hu-wa al-mas-’uul?” Lake asks.

The children laugh. They look at one another and talk quietly in Arabic. Slowly, the redhead raises his right hand into the sky and steps forward.

“Are you in charge?” Lake asks, pointing at the redhead.

The boy nods his head timidly. Lake reaches into his pocket and tosses a dozen loose cigarettes down to the redhead. The children race to grab the cigarettes, some of which snap in half as they’re tugged between tiny hands. They fight for them like they did for food. I notice Lake smile, and I shake my head. I can’t tell if he enjoys seeing them fight or if he finds some pleasure in corrupting Iraqi youth. As we walk back to our trucks, Lake jokes with a couple of the other soldiers about being a bad influence.
As we drive away, I shake my head at the picture we’ve just painted of ourselves. We should be role models here. We should give this country everything it doesn’t already have: leadership, guidance, hope. Instead, we make fun of the hajjis along the roads, share disgust at the lack of beautiful women in Iraq, and toss cigarettes to three-year-old children in highway ditches. We aren’t the leaders we should be over here. Instead we’re just like the children that gawk and beg and act foolish. We’re no different.

If American children saw us over here—building picnic tables or complaining over the price of PX cigarettes—I wonder how their image of a hero would change.

In Jack Kerouac’s novel *Dharma Bums*, Japhy and Ray are hiking outside San Francisco when Ray turns to Japhy and states that there is nothing in the world he wants more than a Hershey bar. Sitting on our rickety picnic bench behind the terminal, I couldn’t agree more. We’ve become so accustomed to getting what we want that I have a hard time coping with not having a chocolate bar now. However, the sun doesn’t allow chocolate bars to last long in Iraq.

The picnic table groans under my weight. I watch a half-dozen birds coast over the terminal and out toward the gate, and I think about Abbas Ibn Firnas. His flight was mostly successful, yet what parents fail to tell their children is that doctors attributed his death—twelve years after his flight—to what happened when he tried to land.

The landing was, by all accounts, rough. Ibn Firnas felt comfortable being in the air. If he could have stayed up in the air, circling round and round until his body tired of the activity, he could have survived. But then again, everything that goes up must come down. So when Ibn Firnas tried to land, he injured his back. Critics say he hadn’t taken proper account of the way birds pull up into a stall and land on their tails. Ibn Firnas had no tail to land on.

I look out over the line of helicopters dotting the pavement. The helicopters sit on the runway like they’ve always belonged there. Nearby, soldiers walk to and from the PX with plastic bags as if it’s a shopping mall. We’ve managed to build a labyrinth we have no desire of ever leaving. While we’ve managed to travel into the city on a few missions, we’ve spent a great deal more time here at BIAP, making this place feel like home when it is anything but.

I watch nine black guys try to steal a ball from the one white soldier on the basketball court near the picnic tables. The backboard behind the
hoop reads in spray-painted letters: BRAVO COMPANY LEADS THE WAY! Nearby, six Bravo Company soldiers sit inside a wooden man-made tub filled with cold water. A handful of the truck drivers in the company built the tub the same day we built the picnic tables. They lined the tub with a plastic tarp and filled it with water. Now, I watch the group soak in the cold water, their bare shoulders poking out of the water as their heads tilt back in comfort.

We’ll move on and leave this terminal for good. Our names will appear on the empty flight display screen: Bravo Company, 142nd Engineers, departing for HOME at gate 1. But before we do, I want to know I’m doing some good over here. I want us to act like leaders, role models or parents; we should be Deadalus and the Iraqi people our Icarus. I want to feel as if my time isn’t being wasted. It sounds a little selfish, but I need this to help me get by. I’m here to help people like the boy in the field, and I need something—anything—to be proud of. The more I think about it, the more I realize I have very little to be proud of in my life. I no longer play the saxophone. I rarely run anymore (except in my mind). I don’t have a significant other or children or even a college degree. I’m a horrible carpenter who can’t even build a couple of picnic tables. Sometimes I even think I’m a horrible soldier because I don’t get excited and giddy every time another monument of Saddam is knocked down or we capture another former Iraqi leader. And because I can’t speak out about being gay while in the military, I can’t take pride in my sexuality, like so many other people do. I have nothing to be proud of, so I need to make a difference over here.

We complain about the price of cigarettes, bitch about the heat, and pamper ourselves because nobody is there to stop us. Looking at the men playing basketball and soaking in their homemade tub, I know we’re already too comfortable here.

We’re already too close to the sun.