The Last Deployment

Lemer, Bronson

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We call them hajjis. Most of us don’t even know what the word means. We heard it one day outside the wire, and now we can’t stop calling them that. There are hajji men—dressed in dirty slacks and T-shirts, standing on the street corners or peering from behind steering wheels. There are hajji women—covered in black as they walk down back alleys and slink down in back seats. There are hundreds of hajji children; we see them the most as they throw out their hands every time we pass by. Hajji dogs. Hajji buildings. Hajji behavior and, even, when we’re particularly pissed, hajji weather. *I’m so sick of seeing hajjis everywhere* becomes a common refrain on days like that.

For a while Roach tried calling the Iraqi people LBMs—Little Brown Men—but that didn’t catch on, so he dropped it. Now, to us, every Iraqi person is a hajji.

On May 18, I wake at 5 a.m. and make my way to the motor pool for my first mission into the city. A few days earlier other members of the platoon came back from a mission into Baghdad, and while I listened to their stories, I wondered when I’d get my chance to go “out there.” I’d heard the news reports about how violent Baghdad can be. Soldiers killed along the streets. Trucks ambushed. Roadside bombs found by Hummer tires and American feet. Even though I’ve felt that thus far we’ve only made ourselves comfortable in Iraq, part of me doesn’t want to go into Baghdad. Part of me wants to stay at BIAP, a stone’s throw away from the heart of the city. If this war was a beast, I was comfortable with the occasional brush against it, but I had no desire to slice open the chest of the animal and gaze at its still-beating heart.
The commander stands in the motor pool, spewing forth details about our mission. We are engineers, so we’ll be helping the Iraqi people by repairing the city and making life a little easier for them. We line up our vehicles—three five-ton dump trucks, a couple of Hummers for the officers, a covered two-and-a-half-ton truck to haul the troops, and a flatbed trailer with a couple of tractor loaders. Inside the back of the two-and-a-half-ton truck, I glance around and wonder if anyone else feels nervous energy jolting through their body.

The truck is quiet as we leave BIAP’s north gate. Once we get out past the airport boulevard and onto a city street, I am overcome with anxiety. Already, I feel the pull of the city, its people grabbing hold of me with their eyes as we ride down the road. At the intersections, I expect the children to rush our vehicles and latch onto our boots, their thin fingers clinging to our bootlaces. Beyond the people, I hear the city rise up and welcome us—jarring car horns blaring out as we cross the city streets, quick Arabic slurs, a baby’s muffled wail. It isn’t even 8 a.m. and I am already mesmerized by this city, and its sights and sounds.

We pull into a gravel lot. I climb out of the truck and look around. I rub my eyes, stretch, grab my weapon with both hands, and feel the magazine of ammunition I have slapped into the chamber. I half expect people to rush our vehicles, for there to be bullets whizzing past our heads. It may be that I have this Hollywood war movie image in my head, where the troops rush out of their vehicles and are picked off by enemy snipers. Instead, I listen to the silent morning and cough at the smell of gasoline and garbage that wafts over this neighborhood.

We’ve made a horseshoe with our trucks around the lot, and at the edge of the horseshoe, just beyond our trucks, is a giant pile of trash. I look around and notice smaller piles—fruit peels, plastic bottles, empty cartons. We have pulled into the middle of a neighborhood dump.

Slowly, I start to feel the city come back to life around me. Members of a military police unit rope off the horseshoe to create a sort of safe haven, a place where we aren’t exposed to people and garbage. As Newman explains the mission, I look past our trucks and notice the tan stucco houses that surround the lot. From doorways, I see dark eyes peer out at us. Slowly, people appear, popping out from their houses to watch us work. Most of the platoon are headed to a nearby school where they’ll be helping to repair classrooms, while some of the troops from Horizontal Platoon cart away the garbage in the lot. I want to take it all in, to see the people and experience this place. Therefore, I volunteer to escort a specialist with Headquarters
Company, two military intelligence officers, and an interpreter into the streets surrounding the lot.

Bouret is a communications specialist with HSC. She has come along to take pictures of the mission, to show the people back in North Dakota what good work we’re doing over here. As we near the edge of our trucks, ready to step out into the streets of Baghdad, she looks over at me and asks, “Ready?”

The streets of Baghdad, particularly this neighborhood, aren’t any different from those of other run-down countries. There are crumbling walls lining the streets, each a barrier between the dark houses and the road. Women stand in the gateways, one foot in their front-yard gardens and one foot out into the street. Men have gathered on the corner, some smoking cigarettes while they quietly talk. Nobody seems to notice the sewage that has backed up and is spilling out into the road. We step over a puddle as we cross the street, careful not to let our feet sink down into the slush and grime. Children rush to our side, sliding right through the sewage to shake our hands.

I expected the children to be grabbing at my uniform, reaching inside my pockets, and running away with whatever they found. I expected rocks to be thrown, slurs to be used. I expected to see needy faces and big eyes of wonder. Instead, I look over a dozen smiling faces.

“Mee-sta, Mee-sta,” a little boy says as he runs up in front of us. I shake his tiny hand, nod to the other neighborhood children around him. They are all dark hair and smiles, giving us the thumbs up as if they approve of us being here. From afar they seem joyful and full of energy. Bouret takes out her camera and takes a few pictures. They smile back, give peace signs. But then they start asking for food. One child points down his open mouth with one hand and holds his other hand out to us, palm up. Another boy holds out his hand and imitates cutting off his wrist. We look over at the interpreter, who tells us that that gesture means money. They have suddenly turned into little men.

They look like children back home, but when I look into their eyes, expecting to see a happy glow, instead I see a hardness that children shouldn’t have. They shouldn’t have to worry about begging for food and money. I shake a few hands like I’m a senator on the campaign trail, and make my way through the crowd and across the street. A Hummer from the military intelligence unit slowly trundles its way down the street, a speaker atop the vehicle broadcasting an Arabic message.

“To tell the people what you’re doing today,” the interpreter explains.
Walking into someone else’s neighborhood with everyone watching, I feel on display. I feel their eyes watching me, their dark fingers pointing as I walk down the street. I feel uneasy walking between Bouret and the interpreter, so unnatural being the center of so many people’s attention.

At the corner, where a dozen men are watching us approach, the two military intelligence officers and the interpreter are talking to a young man. I look around at their faces, worn and creased by the conflict in this city. I nod at the women, shake hands with the children. I laugh at a boy juggling rocks along the side of the road. A teenage boy steps in front of me and points his long, thin finger at my chest.

“You,” he says and then points at Bouret.

He places his two index fingers side by side, like bony bride and groom figures you’d see on a wedding cake. He looks into my eyes. I look down at his fingers and realize that he’s asking if Bouret is my girlfriend or wife.

“No,” I say, shaking my head and looking back at Bouret.

She is standing near the military intelligence officers and listening as the interpreter translates what a group of Iraqi men are saying. She notices me looking at her and steps over to where I’m standing.

“He just asked me if we were a couple,” I tell her. We laugh and both shake our heads again.

I look at the boy and realize that even in Iraq, stereotypes exist. I’m sure they see us all the same—straight American soldiers, eager for power, money, and women. They see us all dressed alike and think we all must have the same desires, the same needs, the same wants. In a way, they are right. Most of us want similar things—an end to the conflict over here, a cool breeze, a chance to see our loved ones, the day when we can go home. But I also want to tell the boy how wrong he is. I want to point at one of the male American police officers across the street, then point at myself, and then place my two index fingers together. But I don’t. I’m not sure he’ll understand.

The boy says something in Arabic, and when Bouret and I stare back at him speechless, he shakes his head and walks away. It is hard to understand what the Iraqi people want. Sometimes—like when the children point down their mouths or use their fingers to make universal gestures—I pick up on what they’re saying, but most of the time I shake my head, shrug my shoulders, and throw up my hands, or just ignore their comments altogether. In doing this I realize that we view them the same way they view us. To us, every Iraqi child we meet on the street—with his mouth open and palms outstretched—is the same kid, recycled over and over again. And to them, I look just like the other soldiers they’ve seen marching around the city.
As we watch the boy walk down the street, an older man grabs my arm and pulls me over to an open gateway near the road. A short woman, shrouded in black, stands in the entrance to a house, looking meek. She is hesitant to talk, but when the man gestures at her, prods her with his Arabic words, she talks angrily. Her eyebrows form into sharp arches, and she gestures with her arms, first up at the sky, then over at the soldiers in the lot.

“I don’t understand,” I say to her, shaking my head.

Bouret has stepped over next to me. I ask her if she understands, and we both look back at the woman and shake our heads. I see beyond the gate into the small garden lined with vegetables. I notice the man walk down the path, through the garden, and into the house. He returns to the doorway holding a propane tank.

“Oh, propane,” Bouret says. “To cook food.”

Minutes later the interpreter comes over and explains that since we’ve entered the country and run off Saddam, the people haven’t been able to get propane. The woman stands quietly behind the interpreter, her hands folded in front of her. She doesn’t look angry anymore, just disappointed and upset at the Americans’ inability to provide for her family.

We leave the woman and the people gathering on the corner, and walk to the school a block away. The afternoon continues in much the same fashion. Children swarm around us, begging for food and money. At the school, a half-dozen older children are helping soldiers clean up trash. Bouret and I are sitting on the front steps of the school, watching the kids push the trash into piles with the shovels we’ve given them. Rainman stands on the playground, children swarming around him like flies. He is handing out candy. He places a few pieces in dirty hands, then turns to leave, but is met with more hands. He has fed the wolves but now can’t get away.

“Mee-sta,” one of the boys with shovels says loudly.

I turn to look at the boy.

“Disco?” the boy says as his hips gyrate back and forth, his two index fingers pointing at the sky as he twirls around. He has a huge smile on his face.

Bouret and I laugh and clap our hands. Another boy notices the attention we’re giving out, so he drops his shovel and steps up next to the first boy.

“Michael Jackson?” the second boy asks. He joins the other boy in disco dancing. How is it that children in Iraq know about Michael Jackson? From American music videos? From siblings? From relatives in the States? I look at the boys and laugh at the universal appeal the pop singer has gained.

The boys don’t care; they still dance to the song running through their heads. I imagine the song is “Thriller.”

“You,” the first boy says, pointing at me. “You.”

They want me to dance. I walk over near the boys, my weapon now moved from out in front of me to being slung behind my back, and I dance with the children. The boys laugh and giggle. We’ve made a connection, and we all smile.

As Bouret and I walk back to the trucks, young women pour out of a courtyard across the alley. It is an all-women’s school getting out for the day. They see Bouret and instantly surround her, asking questions. I imagine that they don’t see too many female American soldiers. Other children, begging and wanting to shake our hands, flood the alley. I move through the crowd quickly, gently pushing the children as I step down the road. I manage to make it back to the parking lot, but when I look back down the alley, I notice Bouret surrounded by eager hands and open mouths. They have engulfed her on all sides like wolves ready for the kill. These children prey on the slow, and they’ve caught Bouret right in their trap. She tries to push forward, but she’s met by dozens of hands reaching up to touch her, several mouths asking her Arabic questions.

The alley has filled with children, and Bouret pushes her way forward. I don’t think to panic, to call for help. They’re just children. But watching Bouret inch forward, I realize how these people have managed to swallow us whole. They’ve managed to stick in our minds in ways we’ll have a hard time shaking.

Back at BIAP, I sit down on my cot and pull off my right boot. I tip the boot upside down and watch the sand and dirt fall to the floor at the end of my cot. I look around and notice other soldiers doing the same—dumping Baghdad from their boots. We’ve taken the city with us, and brought it back here, along with the old woman begging for propane and the boys asking me to dance like Michael Jackson. I don’t quite know why yet, but I know that days—maybe even years—from now I’ll have a hard time forgetting these things.

By the time we arrived in Iraq, we were used to having a shower only every third day. But after starting Task Force Neighborhood missions, we needed a shower to wash away the city. We needed to get the smell of gasoline and
garbage out of our hair, to feel clean again after all those dirty hands grabbing our limbs and the harsh sun making us sweat.

The airport terminal doesn’t come with fully functional toilets, let alone showers. But being the resourceful carpenters and plumbers we are, we build our own showers out in front of our terminal—six phone booth–sized wooden stalls complete with soap holders and towel racks. On top of each stall is a barrel that we fill from our company’s water tanker. Inside each booth, a hose hangs down from the barrel with a half-liter bottle punctured with holes serving as a shower head. It isn’t the Marriott, but it will have to do.

There is one stall that isn’t like the others, one stall a little bit closer to Marriott standards than the rest. We call this stall The Golden Shower.

“It has an actual shower head with a valve instead of a water bottle,” Roach says. He is one of the plumbers who helped build the showers. “Trust me, you can feel the difference.”

I am standing in line for the showers, half-listening to Roach describe The Golden Shower. People are settling in for another night in Iraq. The sun is casting an orange haze behind the main airport terminal. I hear helicopters flying overhead and the gentle hum of oscillating fans from inside the terminal. A line of ants moves perpendicular to the shower line as they march back to their hill. It has been a week since our first mission into Baghdad, and the people are still on my mind. Yesterday, while sitting on the picnic tables behind our terminal, I imagined I saw the old woman carrying her propane tank across the strip of runway outside our terminal. She drifted between the helicopters, waving one hand and dragging the tank with the other. She was trying to get someone to notice her, trying to get us to do something about her situation, but we ignored her, turned our heads away. I knew it was the heat that made my mind run wild, but I also knew that the Iraqi people still had a hold on me days after that mission.

A couple of days ago, Newman sent Jones and me to the finance office to get $450 in one-dollar bills. We needed the money to pay the two hundred hajjis we are hiring on our next mission. As Jones was talking to the teller behind the window, I could see the confused look on the man’s face, as if to say, What do you need that many ones for? Jones cradled five bundles of ones in his hands all the way back to our terminal.

“I just want to hold it and love it all the way back,” he said. “I wanted to say to the teller, ‘I want to take my entire platoon out to the strip club.’”
Jones isn’t the kind of guy you’d expect to see in the strip club. He’s quiet and withdrawn, but as we walked down the street carrying all that money, we felt like kings, men with power. It was the power of all those one-dollar bills. It was also the power we’d recently gained from going into the city. After that first mission, I felt important and powerful, like I was invincible.

Roach is still talking about The Golden Shower as the line inches forward. People come and go. Roach says something about getting The Golden Shower, but only one in six people get to use it, so his chances aren’t very good.

“I just thought someone had peed in the shower and then written ‘Golden Shower’ on the wall,” Tuna says, laughing.


I’m not very disappointed when I don’t get The Golden Shower. I’m too tired to care. After my shower, I return to my cot to find the terminal dark and nearly quiet. I notice the rise and fall of chests in the dark, hear Rainman and Elijah softly snoring. I take off my shirt and lie down on my cot, sweat already forming on my chest. I stare at the ceiling and wonder how I ended up here. In high school, when I signed those papers to join the National Guard, I never imagined I’d be seeing Iraq. But here I am, sweating through May in a country I had no interest in ever setting foot in, surrounded by men, women, and children I had no interest in ever helping. I turn onto my side, look out the terminal window. I don’t really know what I’m doing in Iraq, but if I start to understand the Iraqi people’s lives, I may start to understand why I’m here. It seems simple. I mean, how hard can it be to put yourself in someone else’s shoes?

They call us fags. On college campuses and in neighborhood bars, they call us fags for not being like them. They call us fags in restaurants and truck stops and car garages, parking lots, grocery aisles, and Wal-Mart. They call us fags when we have our parades and drag shows and talks about tolerance and acceptance because it is written someplace in a great book that being a fag is wrong and sinful. They call us fags when they don’t think we are listening, in the privacy of their own homes, where they hope and pray their children don’t turn out like us. Most of the time they do nothing more than throw around a few hurtful words—words they don’t want to understand. They write it in colored chalk all over campus sidewalks. FAGS! in thin, childish letters, curled right around the sign for Coming Out Week, which we’d drawn onto the cement footpaths.
And they call us fags on the weekend, when they dress up in uniforms and meet other part-time soldiers to talk about their nagging wives and girlfriends and complain about “fags taking over their neighborhood.” They call us fags because they think they are so radically different from us. They don’t think about the men sitting next to them. They assume everyone wearing the army green is just like them.

Watch out for the fetus,” King says as I step across the loose gravel. 

King is convinced there’s a fetus among the rubble on the road. He jokes about stepping on one, telling each person who walks the path between the hospital and the empty lot to watch out for dead babies. I find a dirty syringe lying in the sand behind the hospital. I look farther up the path and notice that the ground is littered with used hospital items—bloody bandages, dark tongue depressors, used needles. I shiver as I try to think about what else lies out in this field.

It is May 28 and we’re on another mission in Baghdad. We’re repairing the walls of a hospital. The building is a huge block structure at the corner of two city streets. Across the street is a line of shops, and behind the building, where we’ve lined up our trucks, is a dirty alleyway that separates the hospital from a sandy lot filled with craters and trash.

I help my platoon unload bags of concrete and lime from our truck and lay them against the hospital wall. We unload our wheelbarrow, grab a handful of masonry trowels, and form a line to relay the cinder blocks from the back of the truck to the area where we’ll be building our wall. Yesterday I rode along on a FOO (Field Ordering Operation) into Baghdad to buy these blocks. We went from shop to shop until we found a merchant who would sell to us. Then, as our truck was backed into the driveway of the merchant’s shop, I noticed a middle-aged woman rushing across the street carrying a young boy. The boy was awake and even smiling, but we noticed his deformed arm right away. The interpreter told us that the woman wanted us to take the boy with us, back to our base, where we could fix his arm. The woman looked defeated when the interpreter told her that we couldn’t take the child, that we had no way of helping her.

As I hand each block down the line, I am reminded how determined that woman was, how hopeful she seemed that we could help her son, only to find out that we couldn’t do what she asked us to. After failing to procure propane for the Iraqi woman during our first mission, this was strike two for us. We haven’t done anything the Iraqi people have asked us to do. We can’t take children with us, even if it was our guns that did the damage. I
feel that we might not be able to do any of the things the Iraqi people would like us to.

King fills two buckets with water. He puffs on a cigarette as the water fills. I watch as he tiptoes around a mound of rubble, the cigarette stuck to one side of his mouth. His boots barely miss a stack of bloody bandages.

“This is just sick,” King says through his teeth. “I had to cover up some bloody bandages earlier because I was so grossed out.”

We awoke at 3 a.m. this morning. As we loaded our trucks with equipment, water, and MREs, I looked east and saw the moonlight illuminating the city, making it look calm and romantic. It’s hard to imagine the city that way, silent and still asleep, but I like to think that there was once a time when Baghdad was a desirable place.

On the trip into the city, I noticed that someone had spray painted the words DIRTY BUSH on a wall. The letters were large and dark red, blood-stained. We’ve come across a mix of supportive and hateful messages throughout Baghdad, and I’ve gotten used to them. It isn’t the supportive messages that worry me; they are everywhere. It is the threats that give me concern. They stick with you like a failing report card or bad news.

I look off into the field behind the hospital. There are mounds of dirt scattered over the field and garbage littering the short grass and weeds. I’m afraid to walk out into the field for fear of stumbling upon empty glass medicine bottles and blood-soaked gauze or, worse yet, a body. The city and children seem calmer today, less eager to grab hold of our wrists and beg for our attention. It could be that for once we aren’t near a school and children are few and far between. But around lunchtime, while pulling security near the road, I see a few children walk by. I follow them with my eyes, hoping that they’ve grown tired of begging. But every now and then, I am surprised by one or two children who come running up from behind.

“Mee-sta,” one boy says as he waves at me. He has a toothless grin and strappy sandals.

“Bad Saddam. Good Bush,” the boy says, giving me the peace sign.

I can tell that the boy wants me to acknowledge his attempt at English, to give him a thumbs up or nod my head in agreement. But I just look at the child, wondering why he’d say that. For the rest of the day, children run up to me and make similar statements. It doesn’t seem like the kind of thing children learn in school, and from what I understand about the average Iraqi citizen, most adults don’t know much English, so the children aren’t hearing it at home. I wonder if it’s a phrase someone told them to tell the U.S. soldiers, a reaffirming line of comfort for the troops.
They are eager to defy their runaway former ruler and eager to give praise to the man who sent me to this country. I wonder how I could ever trust the Iraqis, a people who turn on someone so quickly. I want to believe what they are saying. I want to know that this country is about to change and that I am a part of that change. But I have a hard time believing these children. Some simply say, “Good Bush,” possibly too scared to defame Saddam. Others put emphasis on the Saddam part. Either way, I know the children don’t fully understand what they’re saying. I know they don’t fully believe the words that spill out of their mouths. They are just phrases picked up on school playgrounds, dirty street corners, or behind thin doors. Our interpreter tells us that there are people who want us here, people who are glad to see our sand-colored camouflage in their streets, but I don’t believe him. He, just like the children, is filling our minds with compliments while we hear reports that insurgents in Baghdad are killing more American soldiers.

When we get back to BIAP, we again go through what has become a ritual—tipping the sand from our boots. I empty my boots and think about the last couple of missions, how I’ve started to resent the very people I thought I’d be helping. I started these missions hopeful that I could do some good. But the heat, combined with the stress of being in the violent city, has made me cynical. I’ve started to question why I’m even here. We’re taking so much sand from this city, but what are we giving back?

I like to imagine what the pile of sand at the end of my cot would look like if I didn’t clean it up. I imagine a whole city rising from the sand I’ve collected—my own private Baghdad. In this Baghdad, the people don’t seem so innocent. There are no wide-eyed children, no begging mothers holding children. There are no men silently smoking cigarettes on street corners, or children dancing like Michael Jackson. Instead, I imagine a city that is loud and dusty and full of whispers. I imagine people clawing at the soldiers who’ve taken over their city, running their nails against their uniforms, ripping into their pant-legs, scratching a line into their cheeks. I imagine the soldiers turning around to see not children and women begging for help but wolves, red-eyed and vicious, waiting and ready to pounce.

This is what I believe Baghdad to be—a place where knowledge is illusive, the situation is complex, and the people are never how they appear.

I spend most of the days in between missions napping in a pool of my own sweat. I am awakened by the sound of another helicopter setting down on the landing strip outside our terminal. I open my eyes and see the
spaghetti-strap ceiling we’ve created with electrical wire. We’ve run the wire through the ceiling tiles in an effort to provide the entire bay with the electricity needed to power a dozen blowing fans. The wires look like jungle vines. I hear the whipping sound of chopper blades nearby, and as I sit up I watch a cloud of dust lift into the air and float down the runway, pebbles shooting out from below the chopper as it lands.

We sometimes have three or four days off between missions, where we sit around the terminal playing cards, watching movies, or lifting weights. I hear Lake and Cole in the homemade gym at the bottom of the stairs. The metal plates clank against each other as they’re put on and taken off the bars. Grayson and Newman are sitting on their cots and talking, while down at the end of the bay a group of soldiers crowds around a television playing a pirated copy of *Matrix: Reloaded*. After a month of missions I cherish days like this, days away from the city. I don’t have to worry about swarms of children and watchful stares.

I walk to the two Deepfreezes along the back wall. We picked these up on a FOO and instantly packed them full of bottled water. I lift the lid, feel the cool puff of air hit my face, and grab a cold bottle of water. As I walk back to my cot I catch the temperature on the thermometer: 116 degrees.

Elijah is sitting alone on his cot, his head in his hands. His wife is expecting their first child soon, and he’s been waiting three days for the orders sending him home for the birth. As I pass by his cot, I see the anticipation in his face, the way his eyes have a hard time focusing on anything without his mind drifting back to his wife and his absence from the birth.

“How’s it going?” I ask, stopping next to his cot.

He looks up at me with his sweaty face. His glasses lie in his lap. At his feet are his bags, packed and ready to go—he just needs the word and he’s gone. But looking at his face, I can tell that his mind is already somewhere else. He looks away from me and out the window at the helicopters.

“You know your priorities are messed up when all you want is a cold bottle of water and you’re happy,” he says.

I can tell that the anticipation and heat have gotten to him. When he turns back to look at me, I hand him my bottle of water, pat him on the shoulder, and, with a smile, walk away.

Jones is quietly reading on his cot as I approach and sit down across from him.

“Listen to this,” he says without looking up. “Iraq holds the world’s second largest oil reserves, many of which have been undeveloped and are waiting to be tapped.”
Jones is normally very withdrawn and quiet. He is quiet to the point of almost seeming meek. But lately his wife has been sending him conspiracy theory articles on why we’re really in Iraq. He gets animated and excited when reading them and goes off for ten minutes about the latest theory or how much he hates the war.

“It’s all about the fucking oil,” he says. “It’s about money and power and oil. We are here because Bush wants to take control of all this untapped oil. It has nothing to do with the people.”

I let him go on about the conspiracy theories circulating in the media. We’ve been told that we’re in this country to help the people. When the war began we were led to believe that we were doing some good over here. And I’ve believed that we were indeed helping the people. I wanted to believe that I was in this country for more than just the oil. While I have yet to fully understand what I am doing in this country, I think about what Jones is saying. I have yet to see the direct result of our missions. I have yet to get any kind of reaffirming gesture that what I am doing is appreciated or welcomed. My heart tells me that I am doing something important, but my brain reminds me of the woman with the propane tank and the one with the deformed child, and the looks on their faces when we told them we couldn’t help.

That night, as I watch the jungle wires gently sway in the fan’s breeze, I realize that I’ve been fooling myself thinking that my job in this country is important. I’ve been holding onto a lie, a statement I chose to accept because I needed some reason to justify why I had to leave my life in America to help other lives in Iraq. We’ve all had our lives interrupted in order to secure more oil. Lives will be changed by this war. Wives will leave husbands. Children will grow up. Elijah won’t get to see his first child born. We’ve all had to put our lives on hold for money and power, and it makes me cringe as I feel the lie I’ve been led to believe slipping away.

It’s not about the oil, I try to tell myself. I have a hard time believing what Jones is selling, but deep down I feel like there is some small kernel of truth in what he is saying.
relationship, I would choose this one, because in that photo I look happier than I’ve ever been. I’d just been through my first relationship with another man, and even though we were breaking up and going our separate ways, I felt like I’d achieved something, like I was finally living the life I wanted to live.

But people move on and sometimes there is nothing we can do to stop them from leaving. You made up your mind all by yourself, and I was fine with that. If you would have stayed for another two years, the roles would have been reversed, and you would have been the one watching me go—shipped off to a war I have a possibility of not returning from.

I don’t think I ever told you what our friend Kelly said after she and I helped move you to Minnesota. We were driving back to Fargo, and as my car climbed the hill outside New Ulm, she turned to me and said that she wasn’t sad to see you go. She was happy, actually, because she knew—absolutely, deep-down-in-the-bottom-of-her-gut knew—you and I would get back together. She knew you and I would find each other again. There was a long silence in the car after that. I didn’t agree or disagree with her. There was a possible truth in what she said, a small sliver of possibility. I remember that conversation and that photograph now, and on the nights when I’m lying awake listening to the helicopters land and lift off, when the voices of the Iraqi children echo through my head and images of Iraqi women holding propane tanks replay over and over in my mind, I can’t help but wonder if she was right.

The thermometer reads 120 degrees Fahrenheit. It is June 2 and I am sweating salt rings around my collar as I drive through the streets of Baghdad. My shirt is soaked in sweat, double rings forming around my arm pits because I don’t like driving big trucks through crowded cities. But I don’t show that fear; instead, as I turn these city corners, I feel the power of this vehicle under me, the strength I have at my fingertips as I plow my
way into this city. I feel the eyes of a million hajjis upon me, and I feel uneasy because everyone is watching.

A motorcycle zips past our truck and darts across the street.

“Get the hell outta the way,” I yell.

Rainman laughs. I’ve gotten cocky and cynical lately; we all have. These missions have helped us perfect ignoring the citizens of Baghdad. We like the attention the people are giving us. It feels good to be celebrities, where people praise our every move and run up to us asking for us to look at them, to recognize their existence. But like Hollywood celebrities, the fame has gone to our heads. We don’t even look down at the children anymore. We complain when we see them coming, trying to duck behind a truck or building and hoping they won’t notice us. Sitting in our vehicles, we know that after we’re done with this mission we’ll return to our base, where Burger King is about to open and hot showers are waiting to cool our sweaty bodies. We’ll return to mail from loved ones and the security of knowing we will eventually be able to leave Iraq.

An old man on a bicycle takes his time crossing the street. To our left is an open market where Iraqi farmers are selling vegetables from wooden street carts. The market is alive and buzzing with people, and I detect the spicy scent of cooked lamb wafting into our open windows. I look over and see a pile of purple eggplants, long rows of dark cucumbers, baskets full of nuts, and ripe cherry tomatoes spilling out of a cart. As we slowly roll past the market, the people turn and look our way, eying us suspiciously. I look back, and we all acknowledge the nervous tension that hangs in the air.

I feel that at any moment a kid will dart out in front of the truck and I’ll catch his head with the truck’s bumper, sending his small body under the vehicle. With every sudden move, I slam on the brakes and hear a half-dozen yelps from the rest of the squad in the back of the truck.

We’re looking for a school where we’ll repair classrooms, build desks, and rewire light fixtures, but we’re lost. We drive down a narrow alleyway, and from the truck’s cab I look over the ornate gates and into the backyards of the houses. It feels so much like spying, as if I am privy to what people prefer to keep behind locked gates. Tidy gardens with neat rows of vegetables are fenced off from a small patio area. In the doorway of one house, three little girls watch us pass. They lift their tiny arms and wave; I lift my hand from the steering wheel and wave back.

We eventually find the school, just in time to see the students let out for the day. I sit in the truck while Newman and Grayson do recon on the site.
It is a girl’s school, and I watch as dozens of female students fill the street, darting off in all directions. They all wear matching blue uniforms, some carrying backpacks, some simply holding their books. They walk in twos and threes down the street and away from the school. I wait to see if they’ll come running our way; I expect the littlest girls to start begging, to at least wave at us. But they don’t. The girls walk away from the school, ignoring the three, huge, steel truck bodies parked in front of the building.

We are so used to being praised that we almost expect it. But for some reason the girls don’t even flinch or look twice at our weapons, our sunglasses, our helmets. This could be a scene from any high school, even back in America. But then I notice a few of the girls stop and watch us as we wait alongside the road. Finally, some recognition, I think. Jones and Roach, standing by the road, are waving at the girls. The girls don’t wave back. Some point at us, some stop to watch us before whispering to their friends. Most ignore us, and for the first time I feel shunned by the Iraqi people, the way they point at us and giggle. How they talk among themselves and ignore us doesn’t sit right with me.

I can’t help but feel a little guilty about our position in this country as I watch the girls point and whisper. It seems wrong to get this much pleasure from driving through these city streets. We used to be taken aback by the enormity of this city, swallowed whole by its ancient streets, its angry eyes, and its swollen defiance. We used to sit in our trucks, our weapons aimed out the windows, and stare at the children standing on the side of the highways, wide-eyed boys holding gas cans and rubber hoses, looking both lost and mischievous. We used to smack our lips over street-vendor food—shaved lamb, roasted vegetables, and pancake-thin flat bread—and ask for more. But now we stare at the silent women, yell at the hardened men, and ignore the needy children. We wander from neighborhood to neighborhood like we own this city, our eyes never staying too long on dirty children playing in street sewage or the misfits that walk the streets begging for handouts. We think we know what these people want and how to help them, but we also know that if we stay too long they’ll tear us apart.

Back at BIAP at the end of the day, I find myself thinking about my own private Baghdad, the one I’ve imagined at the end of my cot. I want nothing more than to stomp out this city. I want to step on the schoolgirls who laughed at us, to squash the children who play in the street. I want them all to disappear—the needy children, the propane woman, all Iraqi women with wounded children. I want nothing to do with them.
Do they have Burger Kings in France, French Kid?” Bobby says to me. Bobby has taken to calling me French Kid, or, when he’s feeling rather brave, French Slut. After eating MREs for lunch for three weeks straight, he turned to me and asked, “Do they have MREs in the French army, French Slut?” I actually enjoy the nicknames; they lighten up the mood and make the fact that we’re walking around an Iraqi airport less absurd. He could be calling me something a whole lot worse.

On June 10 I find myself standing in line at the first Burger King Restaurant in Iraq. The restaurant, however, is at BIAP and only for the troops. We’ve managed to build up a “home away from home” here in Iraq. We now have a PX with daily shipments of Gatorade, cookies, cigarettes, and Coca-Cola; a gift shop with Arabic items such as prayer rugs and hookahs; and a barber shop where we get “high-and-tights.” It almost feels like home.

Bobby and I are sick of eating MREs, so we’ve decided to stand in line for as long as it takes on the opening day of the restaurant. The restaurant is a restaurant only in name; it is actually more like a county fair concession stand—a steel shed across from the PX. Flaps are opened at the front of the tiny steel building to reveal a line of cash registers and several employees dressed in blue and yellow polo shirts and matching baseball caps. The lines form behind the cash registers, two beige boots stepping forward each time an order is completed.

Bobby looks impatient. I give him the Do you want to go back to eating MREs? and What else do we have to do today? looks as he hops around in line. I smell the charbroiled burgers covered in melted cheese and topped with lettuce, tomato, and onion. I look around and can tell that other soldiers are thinking the same thing. We stand in line, salivating over greasy burgers and golden “freedom fries,” and for a moment it seems like we aren’t even in Iraq. This isn’t war, I tell myself. How bad can it be when we have burgers and fries?

At the front of the line, I fumble over my order and the six other orders I’ve told my platoon I’d bring back for them. I look down at the list and read off a dozen Whoppers and six cartons of fries before looking the Asian employee in the eyes. He doesn’t even blink. He’s probably been getting this all day.

I hold the greasy sacks in my hand and realize that I can get almost anything I want here. Bobby and I step over to the Iraqi gift shop nearby, where we find a pack of the fifty-five Iraq’s Most Wanted List playing cards. I take the cards out of the box and flip through the stack.
“They should have made Saddam the joker,” I say to Bobby, showing him the ace of spades card with Saddam’s face on it. I flip through the other cards, laughing at the mustaches on the faces of the men. Of the pictured men, only four are mustache free. The only woman pictured is Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash, a “weapons of mass destruction” scientist and Baath Party regional command member. As I flip past her card—the five of hearts—she salutes me with the tips of her fragile fingers.

Bobby finds a stash of Iraqi dollar bills in plastic sleeves along the back wall. On one side of the bill, it reads “Central Bank of Iraq—Twenty Five Dinars” in English and shows pictures of Babylon. On the opposite side, Saddam appears, surrounded by Arabic letters. In the center is a group of hajjis riding horses into some unseen battle. They hold spears above their heads and wave flags as they move across the paper money.

As we walk back to the terminal with burgers for the platoon, Bobby and I feel like kings. We have food, the greasy patties we’re used to back home. We have treasures from a country we never thought we’d ever see. Our walk is a kind of pompous swagger. It feels great to get what you want. We enter the terminal, and soldiers rush to our sides for their orders. Seeing their smiling faces and watching everyone feast on the burgers and fries we’ve delivered, we couldn’t feel more praised.

They call us all kinds of things, mostly behind our backs. They call us scum, American devils, murderers. They sneer and laugh and point at us. In newspapers, we read about troops being killed by roadside bombs and army captains who hold the charred helmets of dead American soldiers and proclaim, This is what they think of us. In a video being passed around, an Arabic-speaking journalist asks Iraqis in Baghdad what they think of the American soldiers. One child holds up a snake, shakes it at the journalist, and replies, They’re vipers.

I watch a bearded man cradle a large bundle of bananas—bananas that look so ripe and fresh he could have only recently ripped them from a tree. He zips across the street, weaving and darting in and out of traffic. I am standing between two five-ton trucks on a thin strip of median that separates the two lanes of this boulevard, pulling security as Newman and Grayson use an interpreter to barter for steel plumbing fixtures. We’re on a FOO in Baghdad. There have been a half-dozen days like this where I stand watching the people of Iraq. With each one I’ve gotten more and more irritated at this city, at its people, and at the reason I’m over here.
After wandering this city for a month, I can't seem to shake the place. I feel Baghdad on my entire body. I smell the scent of this city on my uniform—a mixture of garbage, grease, and cooked lamb. At night, I hear the way the children say mee-sta like the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun looping through my dreams. I feel the salt and sand that has risen up and settled into the deep crevices of my body. I find the city behind my ears, at the nape of my neck, and inside the bend of my arm, tucked neatly between two folds of skin. Plus there is the sand I’ve poured from my boots, a whole dune being hauled out of this city every day by soldiers. I used to admire how much of the city stuck with me, but now I shiver at the thought of this city never leaving me.

I shift my weight to my right foot, push away a pebble in my boot with my toe. The man with the bananas is waving at traffic. He lifts the bananas out in front of him and waves his tan arm above his head. He yelps at the passing vehicles, his dark fingers catching nobody's attention, his soft yell finding no open ears. It is still warm, and I see the sweat form on the man’s forehead. He is slightly hunched over, and I watch as the sweat falls onto the hot concrete street. He isn’t forceful with his yelling, and people pass him by, nobody stopping to purchase his fruit. The women won’t even look at the man. They cast their eyes forward, watch the litter blow across the sidewalk, and move on.

I feel bad for the man. I want to call him over, buy one of his bananas—maybe ten—and talk with him about the difficulty of selling fruit in Baghdad, maybe even give him tips on how to sell more. But I’m hesitant to talk to any Iraqis. I’m too tired and sweaty to play any role but that of a tourist, silently watching from the sidelines and occasionally oohing and aahing at the broken scenery. Plus, I know better than to get involved.

The streets are full of cars and trucks; it is bumper-to-bumper traffic today. Lake, wearing a pair of sunglasses, sits atop the truck. I glance up and notice the traffic reflected through the lenses as he stares down the street. Most of the cars are patched together from other vehicles—dark brown doors on a white Mustang. The vehicles move slowly down the street, past our vehicles. I gaze inside the windows and see white-knuckled men gripping steering wheels with both hands while women in head scarves hold small children in the backseats, their eyes peering out the windows at our uniforms, our trucks, and our guns. A couple of motorcyclists glide by—young men with no helmets. They slide between parked and moving cars. I watch as a dump truck lumbers by, coughing up smog into the city street, where it mixes in with the scent of gasoline and sweat.
I take it all in like I’m watching a live theater performance, occasionally wincing when a motorcycle nearly gets creamed. A street vendor has set up shop across from our vehicles. Roach stands behind one of the trucks, a small gathering of children begging at his feet. He gives one of the children a dollar and points at the cart. The child runs across the street to the vendor. He doesn’t hesitate or race off with Roach’s money. Instead, he returns with four cold cans of Coke. Roach thanks the boy and passes the dripping wet cans around—one for Lake, one for Roach, one for me, and one for the boy.

In between sips, I look around for the banana man. I don’t see the man and think that maybe he has given up, headed home to his wife and six hungry children. Instead, I notice another walking merchant—a one-armed man with two dozen hand-sewn purses looped around his good arm. The purses dangle from his arm like raindrops. They are straw-colored and shaped like diamonds, each with an odd loop of fabric at the bottom. The man walks stiffly, shaking his arm at the men and women who pass. He is much louder than the banana man; his sales approach is more forceful, more direct. He sticks his arm out as if he’s ready to knock someone down with the purses, demanding that people look at him, his deformity, and his merchandise. A young man stops to admire a purse, touches it, fingers the loop at the bottom, and releases the bag back to the man’s arm, the purse gently swinging like a pendulum. I watch the man drift down the street. I try not to stare, but I want to know where this man is headed and if he sells any purses.

Walking merchants are a common occurrence on FOOs, and every time we’re out in Baghdad I’m tempted to purchase genuine Iraqi items from these merchants. I want to help them out, thinking that maybe the one thing I can give back to these people is a few American dollars that they can use to feed either their families or addictions—nicotine and alcohol. But I’m hesitant to approach the one-armed man, the banana man, or anyone else. Instead, I think, I’ll buy my Iraqi souvenirs from the base PX.

I look over at Roach to see if he’s noticed the one-armed merchant, but he’s too busy entertaining a group of children. Roach is a father, and I’m not surprised at how easy it is for him to interact with the children. When I turn back, the man is gone. I look up and down the street, but he is nowhere to be seen. He must have found an interested customer or a busier street, I think, knowing that it is more likely he has given up and collapsed next to a street vendor or in someone’s garden.
Two minutes later, I’m watching people come and go from the shop across the street when I hear someone say, “Mee-sta!” behind me. The word is loud and sharp, and I jump. I turn around to see the one-armed man dangling his line of purses out in front of his body like a cape.

“Jesus,” I say, holding my right hand over my Kevlar-protected heart. “You scared me.”

The man looks back at me with wide eyes, as if he doesn’t know what it’s like to be scared. But I know that for someone living in Iraq, lack of such an emotion is nearly impossible.

He waves the purses in front of me and repeats his phrase.

“No,” I say, shooing the man along. “Now go. Go!”

I point down the street. The man doesn’t seem shaken by my comments; he probably gets this all the time. He turns and slowly shuffles down the street, his body sticking to our trucks like a man on the edge of a cliff as he slides down the median. I watch the man slowly step out into the street and dart out between traffic. He ducks into a shop and is gone.

Roach is making origami swans out of scrap pieces of paper the children are bringing him. Lake has taken off his sunglasses and is leaning hard into his weapon as he stares down the street. I turn back to find that the banana man has returned. He is zipping across the street again, trying to make another go at selling his fruit. I admire his determination, his will-power to continue on here. Looking around, I feel like I’ve been in Iraq for years, like these are everyday situations that no longer seem all that unusual to me. Roach has always been this playful with Iraqi children; Lake always looks this angry.

I watch four Iraqi boys dart by with origami swans. Roach is watching the children run down the street. Roach is happy here, content among the children, and I admire his ability to find them amusing, even after a month of grabby hands and sharp *mee-sta, mee-stas*.

The street is still busy when Grayson and Newman come back from the shop. As Roach helps them load up the supplies, a family standing across the street watches us. The man is tall and angular, a dark beard around his chin. His wife stands next to him, a young girl in her arms, and a shy young boy—maybe two or three years old—peeks out from between her legs. The man notices me. He grabs the boy from behind the woman, wraps his strong forearm around the child, and carries his son across the street. He stops right in front of me and holds up his son so the child is dangling in front of my face.

“Osami,” the man says, smiling. I assume that is the child’s name.
I don’t know what to say; I’m not used to people just walking up to me. I want to tell the man what I already know, what I have come to realize about why I’m in this country. I want to explain to him the full circle of emotions I’ve gone through since entering this city: questioning why I am here, starting to believe the conspiracy theories, hearing the schoolgirls’ giggling, which made me realize that these missions are not only about the oil. In the Baghdad I want to build, we are helping children like Osami. I hate to think in such clichéd terms, but the truth is that we’re here to help these people learn how to help themselves, to teach them how to create their own futures, for their children and for their people. It seems to me, in a roundabout way, that the man dangling his son in front of me is trying to say, Look—this is our future.

The man holds the boy out stiff, the child’s feet swinging in the wind. The child is inches from my face. I notice the boy smiling, his tiny teeth shining against his tan face, dark forehead, and black hair. His smile instantly brightens his face. His legs swing back and forth, and he reaches forward to touch my helmet.

“Hi,” I say.

The child giggles. Without another word, the father hoists the boy up on his shoulders, turns, and crosses the street again, back to where his wife and daughter are waiting.

Roach and I finish loading our supplies. I climb in the back of the truck, and as we pull out into the street I notice an old man in a long, dirty robe walking down the sidewalk as children dart in all directions around him. The man is waving a stick, blindly stepping across the pavement straight toward a stone wall. I try not to stare, but as the blind man nears the wall I briefly think about asking Newman to stop the truck. I want to hop down and steer the old man away from the building. I want to show him that there doesn’t need to be this separation between us and them. But then I see a younger Iraqi come up from behind the blind man, place money in the old man’s hand, and turn him in the right direction.

As we drive away, I realize I’ve been waiting for a sign that what I am doing in this country is paying off, and I’ve just received two. Watching the young man guide the blind Iraqi down the sidewalk, I am finally content with being in Iraq. It is a step in the right direction, a future that doesn’t include us. Our presence in Iraq is about oil and helping these people. While I don’t deny that we didn’t enter this country thinking about oil, I am determined to leave this place thinking about the people, knowing we’ve helped them survive.