The longer we’re in Iraq the more I think about luck and superstition. I had read stories about GI superstitions and seen them depicted in movies, but I never really realized how widespread superstitions were until I found myself in the middle of a war. When you’re at war you have a hard time not thinking about luck. During every mission you think about how lucky you are to be alive, how any minute you could be taken out by a sniper or blown to bits by a roadside bomb if it weren’t for some lucky rabbit’s foot or horseshoe you’ve been dragging along.

Superstition exists in all of us in the platoon. Rogers has a lucky pendant. He pulls it out during missions and kisses it, crosses himself, and places it back against his chest. In his helmet, Rainman has a picture of his wife, much like Lieutenant Cross carrying photographs of Martha in *The Things They Carried*. Trangsrud is full of superstition. He doesn’t like the numbers 1, 4, and 2, or any combination of the three. He also does a number of odd chants and gestures for good luck. Most of the time we think he’s making them up.

I carry a broken copper ring in my rucksack. I used to wear the ring, a good luck charm I’d worn since high school, on my left middle finger. The ring showed a snake wrapping itself around my finger and curling halfway up my first knuckle toward my nail. It was given to me by an ex-girlfriend in high school, before I realized I was gay. In the middle of January 2003 the ring snapped in half, partly because of old age, partly because of the cold winter. Two weeks later, I received the call deploying me to Iraq, and I can’t help but think that the ring breaking caused the deployment.

I am superstitious because of my father. When I was in high school he nonchalantly told me about a curse on Lemer children who are named
after their fathers. Any Lemer father who names his son after himself
damns the child to die a painful death. Every time he tells the story he uses
the same examples: a great-uncle who fell from a hay loft, and another
Lemer son who was dragged by a horse. But the best example is my father’s
own brother.

My uncle J.R. isn’t dead. When he was in his early twenties, he was
involved in a car accident that left him paralyzed. My father never went
into details. All he said was that J.R. was lucky the curse didn’t kill him and
then he would point to the place on Highway 52 south of Minot, North
Dakota, where my uncle’s car went off the road. When it came time to
name me, my mother argued for naming me Nick Junior, but my father
wildly protested. He brought up the curse and said he couldn’t do that to his
son. Instead, he named me after his favorite movie star, Charles Bronson.
That is why, in the Lemer family, there are only daughters named after
fathers—Toni Marie named after my uncle Tony, and my sister Nikki,
named after my father.

Now, in Iraq, I carry Charles Bronson inside of me. He’s my guardian
angel, my watchdog, my memory of home. He’s my good-luck charm, and
he’s never going to break.

On June 19, Lake leads a line of soldiers to the motor pool for our first
fight. A boxing ring is marked off with green tape—a square laid out across
the rocks. Four fuel cans serve as corner posts, and behind the cans are two
chairs for the competitors. One of the sergeants in the company is already
at the ring when we arrive. He has volunteered to referee and is noisily
pacing inside the ring, rocks clinking together under his shoes.

Thursday Night Fights began as a necessity. We needed some way to
burn off steam, to help relieve stress, and to take our minds off being away
from home. During a FOO, Lake purchased boxing gloves and pads from
a sporting goods store in Baghdad. He came back to BIAP with a bag full
of gear—two sets of red and white boxing gloves, two slightly beat-up
headgear, and mouth guards that we were afraid to use for fear of catching
some desert disease. He came up with a plan for Thursday nights—boxing—
and he started signing up names.

Lake has paired off everyone according to height and weight. It starts
with the little guys—Fredricks and Rogers—and moves all the way up to
the heavyweights—Lake and a soldier from Headquarters Company.
Somehow I’ve gotten roped into boxing Tuna. I’m not much of a fighter.
Unlike my brother Brandon, who, my father claims, received his temper
from my mother's side of the family, I don't have the temperament for fighting. I am far too laid back for swinging and punching. I let everything just roll right off my back. But when provoked, when poked and prodded, I'll fight.

In junior high, my classmates egged me for weeks until I finally agreed to fight Nick Shear in the boys' locker room. I don't really remember why they wanted me to fight him, just that everybody else was telling me to do it, so I did. I put up my fists and punched him square in the nose. One punch and it was over. I remember lots of yelling and blood.

Lake steps into the middle of the ring and calls out the first pair. Around the ring, most of Bravo Company is camped out to see the fight. Some people stand near the ring. Others sit on the hoods of five-ton trucks, hooting and hollering. A couple of the women have cameras to document the experience. Fredricks and Rogers go off to their corners, escorted by a couple of soldiers. They lace up their gloves and squeeze their heads into the padded helmets.

The fights consist of three one-minute rounds, with a one-minute break in between rounds. Three judges decide a winner if there hasn't been a knockout or forfeit. Into the evening, we cheer on our fellow soldiers as they jump around the rocks, throwing punches and grunting. We get into watching each other fight. Smith, the tallest man in the company, takes a couple of punches to knock out one of the truck drivers. He uses his long arms to keep his opponent away, clocking him over and over until the truck driver falls to the rocks during the first round. Fly defeats King with a few good punches and general scrappiness, something that surprises most of the platoon.

When I get into the ring my heart is racing from the adrenaline of watching others box. They made it look so easy, but as Lake laces up my gloves and places the helmet over my head, I realize that I have no idea what I am doing. Others in the platoon had told me what to do—*Keep your arms up. Protect your face. Jab with your strong arm.*

The thing I like about Tuna is how laid back he is. In a lot of respects we are similar. We're both easygoing. We both like to act goofy, but we know when to shut our mouths. We're approximately the same height and weight. It makes for the perfect matchup. Yet watching him hop around the ring as he warms up for our fight, I see a different man. He's transformed into something else—something more fierce and angry than I've ever seen him. He has this really intense look on his face, and when the referee blows his whistle, he comes out swinging.
Part of me didn’t want to fight back, but when someone is swinging for your head you swing back. You keep your left arm over your face and swing with your right. You dart around the ring, jumping and moving so your opponent can’t pin you down to one place. You think about his next move, how you’ll counter it with your own. You imagine everything you’ve ever been angry about and let it build up inside you until it must be released, until the power surges through your chest and down your arms. You curl your fingers forward, digging into your gloves, and let that anger come out through a left jab to the face, a good sucker punch in the throat. You fight.

I don’t mean to fight dirty, but I do. In the last ten seconds of the match, I start swinging randomly. In the end, I throw one too many punches to the back of Tuna’s head, costing me a point and the match. When you have that much adrenaline pulsing through your veins, you just fight and worry about the consequences later. That seems to be my motto for the entire deployment: fight now, worry later.

Before the match, I told Tuna that I was going to give him a nice uppercut that would send him on his ass. After the match, while we are talking about how exhausting it was, how hard it was to fight on rocks, Tuna says, “I was waiting for your uppercut, but it never happened.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I was saving it for the third round, but I got too tired.”

Walking back to the terminal to take a shower, I am still buzzing from the fight. I’m not an athletic guy. In my family, I leave the athletics to my three brothers. They’re the ones who are always rolling around the floor wrestling or trying to start a game of touch football at family gatherings. But something about that fight got me going. Something has been awakened inside of me—an animal I never knew existed. It stands furiously growling, drenched in sweat but ready for a fight.

There is something extremely sexy about women in dresses,” Rogers says. He has a pair of binoculars and is looking out at the women who pass by the military checkpoint. We are on another Task Force Neighborhood mission, this time to a school next to one of the army’s checkpoints throughout Baghdad. Rogers and I have been watching people all morning.

“I don’t know what it is, but man, they look good walking around in those black dresses,” Rogers says. “Don’t you think?”

No. They look like the ghosts from Ms. Pacman, I want to say. I used to be pretty good at talking about women with straight men. I often returned volley during drill weekends, when the guys commented about one of the
female soldiers or talked about sex with their girlfriends. But I no longer feel the need to discuss women with them. I’m tired of lying. Instead, I simply nod at Rogers and look away.

Rogers shifts his weight to his right foot, adjusts his weapon. He’s one of the smaller guys in the platoon—five feet four and stocky. This is the first time I’ve been on a mission with him, so I’m quickly learning his proclivity for watching women.

“You know why they wear black, don’t you?” he asks.

“I think so.”

I had no idea. I’d seen these women walking around the streets of Baghdad, shrouded from head to toe in black cloth. The cloth covers everything except their hands and faces. The garments go all the way to the dusty ground, making them appear to have no feet, like wandering souls. On windy days the black shroud billows behind them in the wind.

“They are called abayas,” Rogers says. “I asked an interpreter why they wore them, and he said that married women will wear them to show their devotion to their husbands.”

Rogers lowers the binoculars and wipes a bead of sweat from his forehead. It’s the end of June, the temperature easily in the triple digits.

“Some kid tried to tell me it was because they were mourning Saddam,” he continues. “That kid was full of shit.”

I watch Rogers follow three younger women with his binoculars. We are standing before a field full of garbage and debris, between the school, where the rest of the platoon is working, and an army checkpoint. The women are walking on a trail about fifty yards away. They don’t even notice Rogers watching them. When the women disappear behind a house, Rogers takes to watching cars.

“It’s funny. Once they see me watching they speed up and get out of the area.”

He laughs and turns slightly to catch another car off at the edge of the field.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m watching you.”

Many of the Task Force Neighborhood missions begin this way. I watch the people around me, taking in my environment and the people who populate it. I spend hours soaking up the locale. I make note of what everything looks like, who is peering in at the edges of the scene, where I can take cover, and the quickest way out of the neighborhood in case we need to make a rapid exit. I do this partly out of training; this is my job and the military has trained me to be this observant. But I also do this because I
don’t want to be caught off guard. I’m still waiting for that third strike—the curse—to take me out, so I’m always on guard, always on my toes.

In the afternoon, after eating MREs in the courtyard of the school, Rogers and I move over to the other edge of the perimeter, near a neighborhood street. The street is relatively quiet, but slowly people appear. We get the usual kids running and shaking our hands, asking for food and money. Across the street, a couple of women stand in their doorways and watch Rogers and me, much in the same way we watched them this morning. An hour into the afternoon shift, an Iraqi man in his early twenties—the same age as we are—walks over to where we are standing. He starts to speak to Rogers in English. Rogers looks over at me in amazement. We’ve been doing Task Force Neighborhood missions for several months now, and this man has the best English of anyone we’ve met. He introduces himself and tells us that he is a student at Baghdad University.

“What are you studying?” I ask.

“Poetry, drama, novel, composition,” he says, listing the subjects off on his fingers.

I tell him that I study English back home, and we get into a conversation about literature and writing. We discuss Shakespeare (he tells me about his fondness for Shakespeare, but that he really likes Christopher Marlow). I tell him about the British and American authors I’d read during survey classes in college. He mentions Jane Austen. He takes a few minutes as he tries to remember the title of one of her books. I ask if it’s *Sense and Sensibility*, and he gets excited at hearing the title, knowing that he’s made a connection with an American soldier about something other than war, Iraq, or Saddam.

And for once, I actually forget I’m talking to someone from Iraq. I relish the fact that I can finally talk with someone about literature. The more I talk with him the more I start to believe that we are the same person—he and I. We both enjoy literature and writing. We both talk passionately about poetry and drama. But as we talk, I wonder what else this man thinks about. He’s a young man stuck in a struggling country torn apart by warfare. Does he think about fighting for his country, about protecting his family and his way of life? He has to think about more than just Christopher Marlow and Jane Austen. I wonder if he ever thinks about fighting, like I do. I wonder if he fears being killed walking home from college and if that fear motivates him to take up arms. I wonder if, like me,
he thinks about luck and fate and destiny, and how he will survive another day in Iraq.

Eventually, the man says goodbye and walks off down the street. I am standing along the edge of the school, watching the children wander away toward home and wondering what it would be like to grow up in this country. That’s when I hear the gunfire. It is close; I hear it echoing off the buildings. I stand frozen beside the school. Rogers and a few other soldiers are also still, waiting to hear more, wondering if it is enemy or friendly fire. We stand like that for a moment, until a Hummer with three military police goes barreling off across the field, in the direction of the gunfire. We watch the Hummer vanish between two houses, and we wait in anticipation of more gunfire, but nothing follows.

Hearing that gunfire, there was something inside of me that wanted to run toward the sound. I wanted to take off in the direction I’d heard the shots, my rifle in both hands, yelling at the top of my lungs, until I found the finger that pulled that trigger, until I found the person who fired those shots. It is the same warrior who’d been awakened by the boxing. He wants out. He wants to fight, but I won’t let him.

Instead, I ask Rogers for his binoculars, raise them to my eyes, and look off in the direction from which I’d heard the gunfire, hoping that maybe seeing a few Iraqi gunmen will quench my desire to fight.

When we were in Kuwait we tried to catch scorpions.

The plan we came up with was nothing more than a half-dozen soldiers running across the desert chasing after what looked like moving sand. King, Cole, and Lake spent whole afternoons out scouting for scorpions and other sand creatures. In the mornings, Cole would tip his boot upside down and say, “Come out scorpions that have crawled up into my boot during the night. Come out.” During the hot afternoons, while the rest of the platoon watched from the shade, the three guys sneaked around the motor pool like spies, peering around Conex boxes and under trailers, anywhere cool and dry, hoping scorpions would come scurrying out.

In the end all they caught were two desert lizards.

They built a cage from scrap pieces of wood and played with the lizards for days. The lizards had huge stomachs that stuck out like disks from their abdomens. They both had razor-edged tails that they’d swing at us when we peered into their cage. We’d stand around and watch King and Lake provoke the lizards, poking at them, moving them to opposite corners in
an attempt to get them to fight. The lizards looked back angrily at the men, as if they were confused at why they were being encouraged to fight.

We wanted a good fight. It was ironic really, given that we were a week away from heading into our own fight with the Iraqi people. But it was all the anxiety we’d been building up, waiting in the desert. After a couple of weeks we couldn’t wait any longer, and when Lake saw that the lizards weren’t going to fight, he released the creatures back into the desert and began to think of another plan.

One of Charlie Company’s soldiers had caught a tiny scorpion, and, after some persuading, Lake convinced the soldier to stage a death match between the scorpion and a mouse. We placed the two animals inside the empty lizard cage and stood around waiting for a fight. At first the animals did nothing; they were too petrified by a few dozen soldiers peering down at them. But eventually, as if it realized that we needed a fight, the scorpion made the first move.

The scorpion swung its tail up over its body, piercing the mouse in the neck. The mouse hardly seemed fazed by the move. The scorpion backed away and waited for the mouse to approach. When the mouse came near, the scorpion attacked again, but this time the mouse bit into the scorpion’s tail, snapping it clean off. We all gasped in amazement.

In the end, the mouse left the scorpion tailless and legless. It had managed to outdo the scorpion on its home turf. It was something we admired as we waited in the Kuwaiti desert, ready to advance north, into an unknown country full of scorpions. There was something about that mouse exceeding our expectations that stuck with us as we made our way into Iraq.

Soldiers are stuffing a building full of explosives. The building, the only one left inside the southern corner of Abu Ghraib prison, is scheduled to be demolished. It needs to be removed to make way for a tent city for Iraqi prisons. It is hot, the middle of July, and I am trying not to think about Iraq. But my mind keeps drifting back to the prison we’re currently working at. The prison itself is huge—the size of a small city. Before we invaded Iraq, the facility was Saddam Hussein’s most notorious jail. I had read about it in the magazines sent from home, how it was dreaded for its torture chambers and mass executions. But after we invaded Iraq, the prison was abandoned by the Iraqi government. We arrived to a deserted facility, full of trash and garbage, and were asked to turn it back into a jail.

We’re on the outermost ring of Abu Ghraib, right inside the wall that runs around the entire prison. Captain Roar is standing against his
Hummer, talking with Paul Bremer, director of reconstruction and humanitarian assistance for postwar Iraq. Captain Roar is explaining the plans for the site, how Bravo Company will first clear the site of all debris, then demolish buildings, and finally build containment sites for the new Iraqi prisoners. From the way Captain Roar explains the project and the way Bremer leans toward Captain Roar to hear, I can tell the U.S. military has big plans for this place.

After Bremer leaves, I walk back to the Hummer where the LT, Lake, and Rogers have been waiting. They are talking about death.

“Do you guys know what Saddam’s favorite method of torture was?” the LT asks, looking around the Hummer.

I slide into the empty seat and unhook the chin strap of my Kevlar helmet.

“He liked to bury someone in the sand up to their head and leave them there to die,” the LT says as he stares out the front windshield of the Hummer.

A few days earlier, on my first trip out to Abu Ghraib, I followed Newman and Elijah to one of Saddam’s torture chambers. We took our cameras and shot pictures of the insides of a cement room that looked like a locker room shower. I stood along the wall and imagined all the people who could have been tortured in the room, and I actually felt something standing in that torture cell. I felt bad for all the people who suffered at the hands of Saddam: the ones who were tortured and killed, the family members who never saw brothers or uncles again, the children who grew up fatherless. I felt something because I was actually a part of this event; I wasn’t at home watching the whole thing unfold on television. I felt proud being a part of the military force that ended Saddam’s reign of terror.

“That would be a horrible way to die,” Lake says. “Slow and painful. Almost like getting burned at the stake. I think if I had the choice I’d want to drown to death. Quick and painless.”

“I want to die peacefully in my sleep,” the LT says.

“I think we all hope for that,” I say, laughing.

We all chuckle and laugh at how naïve the LT can be. The man has no edges; he’s like a grown Ken doll in GI camouflage.

“Not I,” Rogers says. “I want to be eighty-five and I want to go skydiving without a parachute. As I’m floating to my death, I’m going to have this huge smile on my face as I see the earth for the last time.”

Something about Rogers’s death scenario sounds comforting. Maybe it’s the image of an old man floating to his death. Maybe it’s the idea of
going out of this world with a bang. I like the thought of leaving this world knowing I’ve accomplished something.

Around five o’clock, Lake, Rogers, and I take the Hummer and drive around Abu Ghraib. We don’t get very far. Next to the area we’ve been working in is a large grassy field full of debris and trash. As we’re driving across the field we notice a pack of five rough-looking dogs running around the debris. Lake stops the vehicle. We stand before the Hummer, watching the dogs. The dogs are scrounging around for scraps, digging their noses into the car parts and tires littering the field. A black dog looks up in our direction. I see its dark eyes look right at me before it darts off between the shell of a vehicle and a pile of rubbish, leading the other dogs across the field.

I turn away. Lake is standing off to the left with his weapon raised. He is aiming at the dogs.

“Let’s take them out,” he says softly, a quiet intensity in his voice as he follows the animals with his rifle.

You give a young man a rifle, and he’s going to want to fire it. You spend months teaching the young man how to disassemble and reassemble the rifle. You teach him how to fire at pop-up targets, how to aim through the weapon’s sights, how to clean the dirt away from the firing piston. You give him ammunition, tell him to always carry the weapon, but demand that he fire that weapon only when instructed or threatened. You send that man into Baghdad, make him watch people swarm his convoy, and force him to hear the gunfire ricocheting around the city. The young man always wants to fire his weapon. His desire is the power the weapon brings, how one shot from the instrument can instantly justify his presence in war.

I look over at Lake and can tell he’s eager to kill the dogs. I see it in his eyes every time we leave post; I see it in all our eyes. It’s the Charles Bronson inside us all. We all want to shoot at something in Iraq, just to get the satisfaction of killing another living thing. I’ve been waiting for that moment to release my inner Charles Bronson; watching Lake aim at the dogs, I think that maybe this will be as good as it gets. But Lake lowers his weapon and walks back toward the Hummer.

“It’s just not worth it,” he says.

An hour later, as we’re getting ready to leave the prison, I hear gunshots coming from that field. I turn around to see three soldiers running after the dogs, their weapons aimed, firing shots. The dogs blend right into the sand and grass as they zip across the field. I imagine the soldiers are bored with waiting around the base. Maybe they’re tired of waiting for the animals
If Charles Bronson Were Here

to kill themselves by running in front of our vehicles or slowly starving to death. Maybe, like Charles Bronson’s character in Death Wish, they’re simply tired of nobody doing anything about the dirty animals, so they decide to take matters into their own hands.

I watch the dogs scatter and feel a little sympathy for the animals. They have nowhere else to go. They were born, and will die, in this shitty country. They can’t help the circumstances they are in. But another part of me knows what it’s like to be stuck in the middle of a war with nothing to do. I know what’s it’s like to want to fight.

It is this part of me that scares me the most.

The men are in a jovial mood. They are standing on the runway outside our barracks at BIAP, sweating in the heat, the temperature threatening to rise to 130 degrees Fahrenheit. They’ve stripped off their camouflaged tops and are walking around in mud-brown T-shirts, their biceps stretching against the fabric as they hammer nails into wooden walls. They are building guard towers for the prison, and they are singing.

It starts with REM’s “Losing My Religion.” They struggle with the first verse, but when the chorus hits, every man is singing along. They fumble over a few lines and laugh when they forget the words, but when they return to the chorus, everyone chimes in. There is no talking—only the sound of hammering accompanied by the off-key bellowing of an REM song on an airport runway in Iraq.

Later, the men move on to Starship’s “We Built This City,” except instead of city they insert the word prison. I step back and watch the men hammer and sing. They don’t know any of the words besides the ones in the title; therefore they’re stuck repeating the same line over and over. They sound like a broken record looping the same tired line.

We’ve spent the better part of July working on the prison. In the corner of Abu Ghraib, we managed to set up eight containment pads, each with a five-stall shower unit. We’ve spent weeks building the shower units at BIAP, and another week installing the structures at the prison. Now we’ve moved on to the guard towers. At the end of the month, the days slow to a crawl. Each day seems stretched out by the heat. When the heat is bearable we continue to build projects for the prison. When the heat is just too much for us to work in, we sit around the terminal making ourselves miserable by thinking about home and annoying one another. We watch pirated movies we picked up in Baghdad. We read the books that have been floating around the company. Leaf, Cole, and King take their frustration out in the
homemade gym at the bottom of the stairs. On Thursday nights we head to the motor pool for another night of boxing, and this helps with the stress, but we slowly grow tired of beating up on one another. Eventually, our favorite pastime becomes gossiping. We like sitting around spreading rumors about when we think we’ll go home. The military has yet to issue us re-deployment papers or tell us we’re in Iraq for the long haul. Once a week Captain Roar gathers the company together and squelches any rumors and dispenses new information on when we’ll be going home. One week it’s: **Worst case scenario—we’ll be home for Thanksgiving.** The next week: **I’ll have you home for Christmas.**

On July 23, when the first North Dakotan is killed in Iraq, nobody seems surprised. Newman tells us during a squad meeting. A member of 957 Multi-Role Bridge Company, another North Dakota National Guard unit in Iraq, was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade near Ar Ramadi. We don’t mean any disrespect, but we’ve gotten used to hearing about soldiers being killed across the country.

“The other soldier in the truck was a twenty-year-old from Bismarck,” Newman says. “He lost his arm below the elbow.”

I hold my right forearm with my left hand and look down at my boots. I don’t like hearing about anyone losing any part of himself. While waiting in Kuwait, I read John Irving’s “The Fourth Hand,” a story about a television reporter who loses his left hand to a lion in India. The actual scene of the lion taking the hand made me cringe. But more than anything, I was struck by the emotional impact of losing a part of yourself in a country where you didn’t belong. It makes me uneasy stepping across Iraq. I’m always afraid I’ll step on something—a buried bomb, some homemade device—and lose my leg to the sand. I’d hate to leave anything behind here.

Inside me, I feel Charles Bronson coming to a boil. If he were in Iraq, he’d take revenge for the North Dakota soldier’s death. He’d be a Marine and storm Baghdad homes and knock down doors. He’d question civilians, take down names, ransack back rooms. He wouldn’t take shit from anybody, especially not in Iraq. And every time another soldier is killed in Iraq, he wouldn’t think that he might be next, like I do.

“The kid will probably return to North Dakota a war hero,” Newman continues.

War hero. It’s a difficult title to swallow. Does being in the wrong place at the wrong time make you a war hero? I feel for the injured soldier, but as I look around at the other men in my squad, I wonder if any of us could be called heroes.
A month earlier, on our last Task Force Neighborhood mission, the curse almost got me.

Fly, Jones, Newman, and I got lost in Baghdad. We needed to go back to the school where the rest of the company was waiting. Instead of driving a couple of blocks and finding the school, we found ourselves alone in Baghdad, lost, in the worst possible scenario. In my head, I could see insurgents rushing our vehicle. I could see them using women and children to lure us into a false sense of comfort before they’d launch a round of missiles our way. Fly would become agitated and afraid and steer the vehicle off the road. They’d rush our truck and drag us from the Hummer, much like we’d seen the Somalis do to helicopter pilots in Black Hawk Down. It was the kind of thing we’d read about in magazine articles about the war; it was the kind of thing that happened to Jessica Lynch.

As we drove down the road, every Iraqi standing in the street seemed to be watching us. They saw every worry line on Newman’s face. They saw every single one of our heads darting around the truck, trying to figure out where we were going. They knew we were lost. We were sitting ducks inside an army Hummer. Our luck had finally run out.

Jones had his M16 pointed out the window, his face a blank slate of stone. Fly was full of nervous energy. He kept asking Newman which direction to turn, where to go. I closed my eyes and listened to Newman trying to contact our company over the radio, and I waited for it all to be over, for everything to fade to white. But nothing happened, and that was when it hit me.

I knew I had failed my platoon as a carpenter. I was no good at that profession, and I’d long ago become bitter with my decision to join the military. But I was good at something, and back home my friends had always been amazed by my sense of direction. Whenever we left BIAP and traveled into the city, I peered outside the truck and tried to make note of my surroundings. There was a mosque. Over there—a picture of Saddam. Across that field—a school, a ministry building, an open market, a group of children playing with a furry dog. I was good at directions, and when we got lost I knew I had to step in.

“Turn left here,” I said. “I remember this block when we were coming in. The school is the other way.”

The Charles Bronson inside of me wanted to do more than just give directions. He wanted the bad guys to attack our truck. He wished for the opportunity to fend them off with his machine gun and anger. He wanted to be the hero and save the other men. He wanted to wander the streets of
Baghdad and gun down anyone who threatened our presence in this country. He wanted to wear the long trench coat, carry the pistol, shoot men in their guts, and shrug it off as his God-given right. He wanted to shoot all the stray dogs in the city. He wanted action, blood-spewing, high-adrenaline, bullet-pumping situations where he could get mean and dirty, times when he could feel justified for having to carry, but never being able to fire, a rifle in Iraq. And he wanted to roar and howl about the injustices within the American forces, things like incompetent lieutenants, sexual harassment, and policies like “don’t ask, don’t tell” that weaken the armed forces. He wanted to cause a lot of trouble, but I wouldn’t let him because there were other things to worry about now—keeping cool, doing our jobs, staying alive.

Instead, I gave directions to Fly, instructing him to turn at the corner by the mosque, to follow the highway to the statue, and turn left down the road to the school. I’d been waiting for my true war experience, the time when I’d have to prove myself in Iraq, and getting lost in Baghdad was the closest I came. I knew the curse was waiting out there, and I wasn’t going to let it take me down.

The prison mission is complete and prisoners have finally arrived. On August 1, we pull into Abu Ghraib and notice a handful of men wandering around one of the containment pads near the road. Each pad is surrounded by concertina wire. Inside, men in dirty robes crouch in the sand. There’s a tent and a shower unit, and above them a guard tower. A few soldiers stand in each guard tower, watching the dirty prisoners.

Rogers parks the Hummer at the edge of the compound. I get out of the vehicle and walk over to one of the pads. I’d never really seen prisoners before. Even though the men before me are the least dangerous criminals in Iraq, I want to see what we are up against in this country.

The prison guards have let an Iraqi child onto the compound to sell Coke. He stands near the edge of the compound, watching us watching the prisoners. I walk up to the boy and buy a Coke. I look out over the compound. There are three guards near the front gate. In each tower are more guards. Across the field, the LT is talking with Captain Roar. They boastfully peer out at the completed compound. They look so proud standing before the prisoners; watching them, I realize how much power we hold in this country. We’ve been stepping across this country for three months now, forcing our way into homes, rounding up Iraqis who are up to no good. We’re doing what Charles Bronson’s character did in Death
If Charles Bronson Were Here

*Wish* except we're not killing these people. Instead, we're keeping them alive so they can watch us turn this country around.

I stand before the prisoners, almost teasing them by sipping from my Coke. Some of the men are looking at me. The gentle breeze makes their robes billow out a bit. All summer I'd wanted a fight—we all did. We wanted a real part of this war, where each and every one of us let our inner Charles Bronsons out to roam. I think every man who goes to war wants to feel justified that his time there isn't wasted. Most of the time that justification came in the form of fighting, of firing your weapon, and fending off the enemy. What I've realized is that I don't need to see that kind of fighting in Iraq. I don't need to fire my weapon to feel like I've done some good over here. I know I've made a difference—completing projects during Task Force Neighborhood missions, seeing the people who waved and shook our hands, watching these prisoners wander around the containment pads I helped create, and giving direction to my lost squad members. And even though I wouldn’t let the Charles Bronson inside of me speak out about the unfair and unjust “don't ask, don't tell” policy, I tell myself that when I return I will let him out to roam and howl, and I’ll do my part to eliminate that policy. That will be my contribution to improving the military, and being part of this war makes me realize that I must do something.

I don’t need to kill something to feel like a real soldier.

On September 1, I’m standing in battalion headquarters at Anaconda Army Airbase, watching CNN, when I hear that Charles Bronson has died. I see his name scroll across the bottom of the screen and gasp. I’d spent a long, hot summer in Baghdad, repairing schools, adding onto hospitals, and improving the neighborhoods of the city. Now we had traveled back to Anaconda Army Airbase, where most of us expected that we’d remain for the rest of our deployment, away from the suicide bombers and Iraqi snipers who roamed Iraq. We’d probably see the Iraqi people only when we did guard duty in the perimeter towers or wave at them on our way home. But still I didn’t feel safe at Anaconda, and now I no longer had my lucky charm, my personal Charles Bronson, to protect me in Iraq.