New Fiction from David Blome: “Bodies”

On a bright December morning, the lieutenant told me the news. An insurgent group in Latifiyah had executed about twenty Iraqi Shiites. Their unburied bodies were still rotting in the desert. We had to do something. We had to help. That’s what he said.

“What kind of fucked up bullshit do you have us doing now?” I said.

The lieutenant crossed his arms. “We’re helpin’ out, Doc. That’s why we’re here.”

“Sir, you can’t be serious. After six months, after everything we’ve been through, we’re gonna go risk our lives to clean up a bunch of dead Iraqis?”

“That’s right, we’re gonna go do our job.”

“Pfft.”

“Hey, Doc, you just do what you’re told.” The lieutenant loved that line.

“Roger that.” I turned and headed toward the tent looking for Logan. On my way I passed Talal, our Iraqi interpreter.

“Good morning, sir,” Talal said.

“Where’s Logan?”

“Inside, sir.” Talal pointed to the tent. “He is sleeping.”

I nodded, entered the tent, and walked straight to Logan’s cot. He was lying facedown underneath a poncho liner. I sat by his feet.

“Guess you heard,” he said, rolling over. I shook my head. Logan put his arms behind his head and grinned. “You don’t look excited. At least it’s something new.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t give a shit anymore.”

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Three hours later we loaded up the Humvees, did radio checks, and headed toward the gate. As usual Logan and I sat in the back of the trail vehicle. He was smoking. I was staring at the casings lodged between the benches. Some of them were only a few days old. We stopped outside the medical facility on our way off the FOB where a young corpsman was waiting with a stack of body bags. He handed them to Logan then tossed me a box of latex gloves.

From there we drove at full speed toward our destination: a bombed-out munitions facility near Latifiyah. Right as the town came into view we veered off the asphalt and turned onto a dirt road. I kept my head down until Logan nudged my shoulder. “You gotta see this,” he said. I stood up and followed his gaze. He pointed to a gnarled mass of rebar and concrete the size of an SUV. It looked like a gigantic insect.

“Must’ve been a bunker,” I said, pointing to a few more in the distance. We passed piles of rubble, the wreckage of various structures, a palm tree, and two burned-out vehicles. Tire tracks cut across expanses of dirt and brush. Not a soul in sight. “Hey,” Logan said, “this would be a great place to dump some bodies, wouldn’t it?” I nodded and sat back down. Then the lieutenant’s voice came over the radio.

“The road’s about to fork. Gunny, take your element south. I’m gonna head north.” Without slowing the lieutenant’s element

bore right. We made a left and patrolled for another fifteen minutes until Gunny stopped the trucks. “I think we got something,” he said over the radio.

Logan, still standing, pressed his push-to-talk. “What do you see?”

“Don’t see anything, can smell it.”

I leaned forward to look through the windshield. Gunny stepped out of the lead vehicle, walked a few steps off the road, and stood still for a moment. He looked around then walked back to the truck. We started moving again. I stood up and took a deep breath. A sour stench filled my mouth and lungs. I shuttered. Logan wiped his nose.

“Can’t be too far away,” he said.

They weren’t.

“All right, stop the vehicles,” Gunny said. “About fifty

meters to the right. Doc, Logan, go see what we got."

Movement gave them away. Two mangy dogs circling a dark heap. We climbed out of the truck and they trotted off.

"I'm gonna shoot those dirty fuckers if this is what I think it is," Logan said.

"Bro, I think we both know what this is." I was breathing through my mouth to avoid the stench, a trick my mother taught me.

"Check it out," Logan said, pointing with his boot.

An ulna or radius bone. Casings. I looked at Logan. Then at the heap of clothes, shoes, and decomposing flesh. I could see hair, blackened hands, and a few heads. The faces had rotted away.

"I guess we got our bodies," I said, swallowing hard.

Logan shook his head and spit. "Seriously, man, how do we get stuck doing this shit?" He raised his M-4 and shot one of the dogs. The other ran off.

I reached for my push-to-talk. "Lieutenant, this is Doc, over."

"Send it, Doc."

"We have about five to ten bodies here in an advanced stage of decay."

"Roger, you said advanced stage of decay?"

"Yeah, advanced."

"Mark the location and keep looking."

Logan and I exchanged looks. "Keep looking, sir? We found bodies."

“Doc, we’re looking for a group killed in the last few weeks. Shouldn’t be seeing that much decay.”

Logan laughed. “Apparently the lieutenant’s a fucking coroner now.”

“You should tell him that,” I said. Then I pressed my push-to-talk. “Roger, sir, we’ll keep looking. What about the bodies we found?”

“Just mark the location.”

“I got the location,” Gunny said, cutting in. “You guys head back to the trucks.”

Logan turned and left. I grabbed a handful of dirt and tossed it over the bodies. When I returned to the trail vehicle, Logan was lighting a cigarette. I sat down, still breathing through my mouth, feeling a little sick. The lieutenant’s voice came over the radio again.

“Gunny, need you to move to us, I think we got ‘em.”

I located the box of latex gloves. As we bounced down the road I shoved a handful into my drop pouch. About ten minutes later the other element came into view. They had stopped next to a circular brick building. Its roof had collapsed, the entrance lacked a door, and parts of the walls were crumbling.

The lieutenant was standing at the entrance, waving. Our truck stopped, and without a word, Logan and I made our way to the entrance. “They in there?” I said to the lieutenant. He nodded and we stepped inside.

Loose rubble covered the floor. A cloudless sky had replaced the roof. Against the bare walls leaned eighteen bodies, shoulder to shoulder. All men. Each shot in the head, some more than once. Powder burns speckled their swollen and disfigured faces. The casings said AK-47. All wore button-up shirts tucked neatly into dress pants. Their hands were

unbound. One had a note lying near his feet.

We just stared until Logan said, “What do you think, sir, been dead a few weeks?”

“Yeah, Logan, I’d say so. Doc, would you agree?”

I leaned down and picked up the note.

“Doc, would you agree?”

“With what?”

“That they’ve been dead two weeks.”

“Sir, I’m a combat medic. I have no idea.” I held out the note. “Should we give this to Talal?”

“Why don’t *you* give it to him?”

“Be happy to.” I pressed my push-to-talk and walked toward the entrance. “Somebody send Talal into the building.” Talal came running. I handed him the note. He took it with both hands and started reading. “What’s it say?” I said.

Talal started nodding. “It say who did this.”

“Go show the lieutenant.”

“Ok, sir.”

I stepped out of the entrance, let Talal pass, and walked toward Gunny’s truck. He opened the door as I approached.

“We don’t have enough body bags,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that. We’re not cleaning this up.”

“You gonna tell the lieutenant that?”

Gunny stared at me for a moment. “Yeah, I’m gonna tell him that.”

I felt relieved. Then Logan and the lieutenant started shouting. We turned to see them sprint out of the building. They slowed to a trot, stopped, and looked back. Both eyed the building as they made their way to us.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Gunny said.

“Something started beeping,” Logan said between breaths. He pointed toward the building. Talal was leaning out of the entrance, motioning for us to join him. Logan shook his head. Talal motioned again.

I looked at Logan. “The place gonna blow?”

Logan smiled. “Maybe,” he said. “C’mon.”

We walked toward the building. Talal stepped out of the entrance, picking at his moustache. I faked a smile. “What happened, Talal?”

“Telephone, sir.”

“What?”

“Telephone.” Talal held a fist to his ear.

We stepped into the building. Talal took my arm and guided me to one of the bodies.

“Sir, this one. Here.” Talal pointed.

I leaned forward to look. Talal backed away. Sure enough, I saw a rectangular bulge in the dead man’s front pocket. I reached into my drop pouch and took out a pair of latex gloves.

“What are you doing?” Logan said from the entrance.

“What’s it look like?” I donned the first glove.

“Dude, seriously.”

I donned the other glove, stepped between the dead man's legs, and tried to angle my hand into his pocket.

"Goddamnit," I said.

"What's the matter?"

I looked back at Logan. His face was wrinkled with disgust. "It's not gonna work," I said, "not with him sitting up." I stood and surveyed the bodies. "Logan, you think these guys are boobytrapped?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. You need a pressure-release fuze to do that. Would've blown by now."

"Okay."

"Why?"

I leaned over, grabbed the dead man by his ankles, and pulled the body away from the wall. My efforts left a trail of gore and wormlike creatures writhing on the floor. Talal gasped. I held my breath and went right to work. Using my thumb and index finger, I wiggled my hand into the guy's pocket, pulled out the phone, then turned away and exhaled.

I pressed zero on the pink Nokia and the screen lit up. The Arabic meant nothing to me but the battery icon was about a quarter full. I tried to hand Talal the phone but he backed away with his hands up, shaking his head.

"What's the matter?" I said. "You want gloves?"

Talal looked at his hands. "Yes, gloves."

"Let's go then." We walked back to the truck. The lieutenant, still holding the note, was talking to Gunny but stopped when

he saw the phone in my hand. “Where did you get that?”

“Out of a dead guy’s pocket.”

“You’re serious?”

“What do you think was beeping?”

The lieutenant just stared at the phone. Gunny shifted in his seat and said, “You took it out of his pocket?”

I nodded and dug another pair of gloves out of my drop pouch. “Talal, here, put these on.” Talal didn’t move. “Hurry up,” I said. “Put ‘em on.” Talal took the gloves but started fumbling with them.

“I said hurry up!”

That got him moving. He donned the gloves, cupped his hands, and I handed him the phone.

“Hey, Doc,” the lieutenant said, looking at my face, “you okay?”

I tore the gloves off my hands and dropped them in the dirt.

The lieutenant took a step back and said, “Why don’t you go to the truck? We got it.”

“You wanna hear my suggestion first?” I said.

The lieutenant looked at the building. About five seconds passed. “Sure, what’s your suggestion?”

“Let Talal return that call. He can tell whoever it was where to find the bodies. We’ll leave the body bags and gloves. They can bury their own.”

“You know, Doc, before we left, you were ready to let these guys rot in the desert. I’m glad to see you still care.”

“I’m not sayin’ I care, I just wanna be done with this. Let

Talal call that guy.”

“Let me handle this.”

I locked eyes with the lieutenant.

“You wanna handle it?”

“Yeah, let me handle it.”

My fists clenched. “All right, I’ll let you handle it.” I turned and almost walked away. Almost.

“You know what, sir?” I faced the lieutenant. “I’ll do better than that. I’ll let *you* take the body bags out of my truck and *you* do what you want with ’em.” I took a breath, ready to continue, but Gunny lunged between me and the lieutenant and gripped my arm. Hard. “Let’s go,” he said in a low voice.

We started walking. “I could kill him,” I said.

“You could, but what you’re gonna do is go sit down until we leave.”

Logan walked with me to the truck and we climbed into the back together. I sat down, leaned back, and shut my eyes. That stench filled my mouth and lungs.

“Logan?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Who do you think called that guy?”

Logan chuckled. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

I sat up and opened my eyes. “Who do you think it was?”

“No idea,” Logan said, shaking his head, “but somebody’s still looking for him. Kinda sad when you think about it.”

“I know, I’m trying not to.” I leaned back again. “Can I ask you something else?”

“What?”

“How many more you think are out here?”

Logan sat down next to me. “Bodies?” He took out his cigarettes. “Honestly, bro, nothing would surprise me. Could be hundreds. Thousands.” He looked at me and smiled. “Tell you one thing though. Long as mine ain’t one of ‘em, I’m not gonna worry about it too much.”

He had a point. “What do we got,” I said, “two weeks left over here?”

“Sixteen days.”

I nodded and shut my eyes. “I just hope Talal calls that guy.”