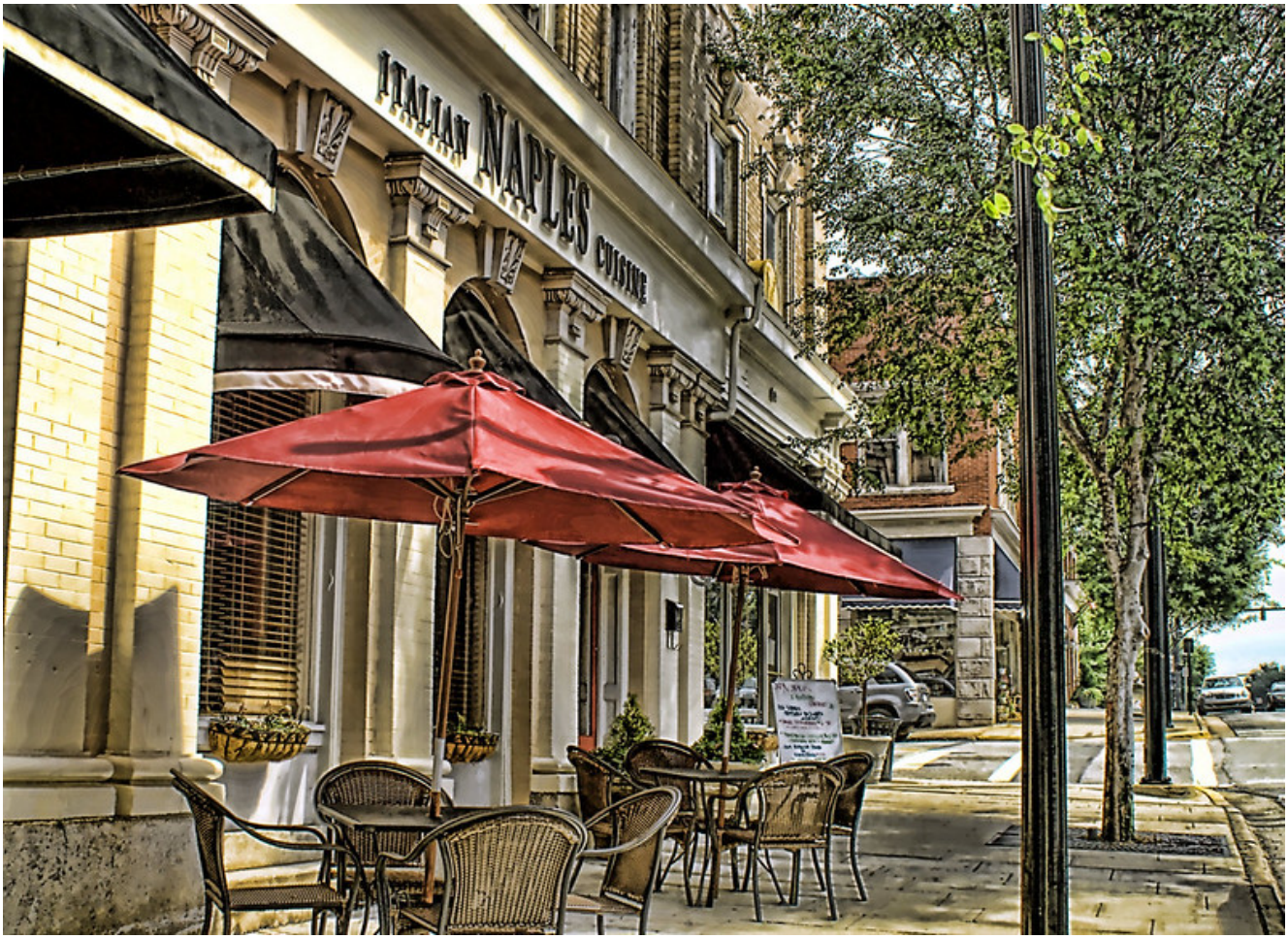
New Fiction by Jesse Nee-Vogelman: Improv



The terrorist sat down at the cafe at a quarter to one. She had always been punctual. Beneath her clothing was a bomb improvised from ammonium nitrate. The bomb was uncomfortable. She kept thinking things that didn't matter, like: ripping off the tape will be painful, or, it's going to leave red marks on my skin. She raised her hand and ordered a cappuccino and a chocolate croissant. Why not a little pleasure? Someone had left a newspaper at the table. She didn't feel the need to read it. She knew all about what was happening now, here and all over. She looked around the cafe at the other people eating and drinking. She didn't feel much of anything. It was difficult to imagine, really, that anything would be different in just a few minutes. She'd been in a hundred cafes just like

this. A thousand! Nothing strange had ever happened before.

She looked down at the newspaper on the table. The sports section. How about that? She'd thought it was the news, but it was just sports. She didn't know anything about sports. Everything going on in the world and there was just sports happening and that's what people chose to read about. She looked around the cafe. All these people care about sports! she thought. She picked up the section and flipped through the games, reading the box scores carefully. This is what people care about, she said to herself, as if trying to understand something. She flipped to a page that printed the scores of local high school games. She hadn't known newspapers printed high school games. She found her high school and read through the names of the varsity basketball players and how many points they had scored. She recognized a last name: Ramakrishnan. She had known a Ramakrishnan in high school. It wasn't a very common last name. His son, maybe. She checked and saw that he had scored twenty-eight points, the most in the game. A surge of pride went through her, so strong and sudden it made her anxious. What did he have to do with her? Nothing.

Her food came. She paid and left a very big tip. Why not? The waitress smiled at her. A lesbian maybe. Go ahead, what did she care? That wasn't the type of thing that mattered to her. She took a bite of the croissant and sipped the cappuccino. Ah. Very good. She would miss this. What a funny thought. She wouldn't be able to miss anything. She laughed to herself. What a funny time to be funny! Her heart was beating very fast. She felt calm, but her heart was beating very fast. As if it were someone else's heart. Wouldn't that be something. The bomb goes off and this old man across the world dies because she'd actually had *his* heart all along. That's who I would apologize to, she thought. I had no idea, she would tell his widow. It wasn't supposed to be him.

She checked the time. There was a clock above the cash

register and another by the door. Everyone had their phones out, and their phones were also clocks. There were clocks everywhere. She thought the world had done away with clocks, but she was wrong. There were clocks on the coffee machines. Timers beside the ovens she could see through a glass window into the bakery. Clocks that everyone thought would go on forever, but really they would stop. A clock strapped to her chest. Oh no officer, she thought. I'm sorry for the confusion. As you can see, that's just a clock.

Just a few minutes now. Not one o'clock, actually, but twelve-fifty-nine. A little joke to herself. They would all expect it at one on the dot. But no, it was twelve-fifty-nine. As good a time as any! she wanted to scream. She pictured a hero from a movie, running computer programs in some dark basement, cracking the code. At twelve-fifty-five the program would blink—they've got her. At a cafe just down the street. The hero checks the clock (there's always a clock nearby). We've got five minutes! he yells and rushes out the door, and as he's running as fast as he can, he knows he has just enough time to stop her. Five minutes, the exact right amount, and he throws open the cafe door, just over a minute to spare, just what he needs, and then, boom. Twelve-fifty-nine. Ha!

The clock above the door crowed. She looked up wildly, heart pounding. Was it time? But the clock was five minutes fast. She let out a breath. She hadn't been scared before, but now she was. Stupid clock. It should be illegal to have the wrong time on a clock. There should be someone whose job it is to go around to all the clocks and arrest the people putting the wrong time on them. She looked at the clock again, and this time she was surprised to find the clock was not just a clock, but was actually the belly of a wooden rooster. Cock clock, she thought, which calmed her. Then she looked around and saw all sorts of other things she hadn't noticed: paintings of cardinals and shakers shaped like crows and napkin holders that looked like hummingbirds. It was a bird cafe! Ten minutes

she'd been here, and she hadn't even realized it was bird themed. Some old lady must really love birds, she thought, and for some reason this made her feel very sad. All those goddamn bird decorations that would be broken. That woman's whole life collecting bird decorations and one day she starts this cafe and thinks, these goddamn bird decorations are just too darn special to sit cooped up in my dusty old house. The public needs to see all these freaking birds. So she puts them in the cafe. Bird mugs and bird napkins. Close up photos of beaks in tulips. Signs with bird sayings like, Toucan Do It!, and Flock Off!

Flock off! she wanted to yell, but didn't. All of you, just flock the flock off!

She touched the lump under her shirt. There was no button. Just time. The clock would reach a certain time, and then it would happen. This made it easier. She didn't have to press anything or do anything. It was almost like it was happening to her. She just showed up at this place and it happened. If you zoomed out far enough, she thought, there was no difference between her and any of them. She had been a normal woman and then, at some point, the circumstances of her life had led her to this particular cafe at this particular time and the bomb had exploded and she had died. Just another victim.

Would anything change? She didn't know. She wasn't really concerned with that part. She was concerned with doing something. She was concerned with being heard. They would hear her, alright, this time. What they did after, well, that was up to them. There was danger, always, in telling people what to do or how to feel. That's how people end up in situations like hers. People always telling them what to do and how to feel until one day they turn around and say, No! This is what I am doing and this is how I feel!

She had always known there were bad things in the world. It

seemed to her that all the people who tried the hardest to fix them only made it worse. There was a book she liked that said, All our worst crimes are committed out of enthusiasm. Yes! she had thought. That's exactly it. All these bad things in the world because people think they know the answer and want to get there. She had lived her life with this in mind. Skeptical. Questioning everything. Always knowing everything that was wrong but never knowing anything that was right. Then, years later, she had reread the book and noticed another line: skepticism is the rapture of impasse. And she thought, Yes, that's exactly it. All these years of questioning, she had done nothing. She had been skeptical, so she had done nothing. Then all the things she had been skeptical of just happened. Better, then, to commit a crime with enthusiasm!

So she had made the bomb. Improvised explosive device. That's what they called it in the news. Not that anyone would know that, only reading the sports section. It was an evocative name. It made it sound desperate and spontaneous. It demonstrated creativity. That's not a very good bomb, a professional bomb maker might say. Well, I had to improvise!

She had taken an improv class in college. She had hated it. She had hated it because the people were awful. The people were awful and they stared at her when she didn't know what to say and they were always saying things like, The first rule of improv is always say, Yes! No one seemed to know any other rules. They just repeated that rule over and over. Once, when it was her turn in class, she got on stage and her partner said, Wow, what a crazy day at the zoo! What a stupid thing to say, she thought. Even if it had been a crazy day at the zoo, she would never have said that. She didn't know how to respond to something so stupid. So she just said, Yes. I can't believe what the chimpanzee did to that tiger! Yes, she said. The zookeeper is going to have some trouble cleaning up! Yes, she said. She said, Yes, over and over until the teacher had said, Alright, that's enough, and she was allowed to sit

down again.

She looked around at the cafe and suddenly it felt to her as if she were stuck again in a terrible improv scene. That everyone around her was trying poorly, desperately, to seem natural. Off-the-cuff. She took another bite of croissant and closed her eyes, imagining herself on stage. There's a bomb in the cafe! Yes, she said. Everyone is going to die! Yes, she said. Yes, yes. She squeezed her eyes. Yes, yes, yes. She squeezed as hard as she could. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Even the word eyes was made of yes. Yesses everywhere. Yes, yes, yes. Eyes closed yes. If her eyes were closed when it happened, it was like she wasn't there. If her eyes were closed when it happened, it was like she wasn't there. If she closed her eyes when it happened.

Yes.

But she couldn't make it. She peeked. She had always been a peeker. At Christmas, tearing the corners off wrapping paper to see what was hidden inside. That's how she felt then, in her final seconds, squinting through one eye at the people around her. Sticking her eye to the dark hole she had ripped in the paper and hoping it would let her see some new world that had not yet come to pass. But it was just the same. Just people. Yes. And she realized with a start that each of these people had their own lives, and that those lives were about to end. But that, of course, was the point.

New Poetry by Joshua Folmar:

“Sudoku”

New Poem by Joshua Folmar: Sudoku

New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”

New Poetry from DA Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”

New Essay by Joshua P.F.: Bombs in the Trash

It was a relatively clear and cool night in the spring of 2008 on our fortified U.S. compound, Camp David, which was co-located on the property of the Najaf Technical University at the southern end of Najaf, Iraq. I was smoking hookah and watching Arabic TV with our local Iraqi guards, something I did nightly, when my Captain, a West Point grad, sheepishly poked his head in the door and asked if we could talk. Of course, I said, then passed the hookah's hose to the Iraqi next to me, ensuring the tip was pointed back toward me so not to give offense (passing the phallic hose's tip facing outward is considered vulgar). I rose, then walked to the door.

My Captain, a tall, thin, dirty blond in his late 20s, was in uniform: combat boots, ACU bottoms, and a military-issue fleece top; I, on the other hand, was wearing my usual ensemble: Vibram-soled Merrell hiking boots, Dickies work pants (a California staple of '90s skate culture), plaid snap-button shirt, and a navy-blue nylon windbreaker.

"What's up, Sir?" I asked.

He scanned the room pensively. There were no other Americans around, just the two of us, and our non-English-speaking guards inquisitively throwing casual glances away from the TV toward our conversation.

“Soooo….” he began to say. “I’ve heard you take little trips outside the wire in civilian clothes…”

I looked at him, trying to keep my expression neutral. The accusation, though true, was quite salacious. U.S. Military personnel in Iraq, even Special Forces like he and I, were strictly confined to the guarded installations, Military Camps and FOBs, and only left under direct orders to conduct a mission or move to another installation. When leaving “the wire,” soldiers travelled in convoys of heavily armored military vehicles with guns big and small, medical supplies, commo gear, and anything else needed for a prolonged fight. No soldier would want to venture out alone as a vulnerable civilian—logically it didn’t make sense.

“…if you happen to be out tonight, do you mind checking to make sure the MSR is clear?”

Clear, I thought to myself. What does he mean by clear? I asked. The Captain explained his concern that there might be something hidden in the roadside trash (sporadic piles of trash line every major road in Iraq) on the MSR (Main Supply Route) in front of our compound. Apparently, he’d read some intelligence cable claiming terrorists were threatening to disrupt U.S. Army convoys in the region with IEDs, and he was apprehensive about his resupply run the following day. This didn’t surprise me. I’d seen Special Forces officers refuse to get out of armor-plated trucks during a mission, fearing stray bullets. I’d known Special Forces commanders who reject orders of battle that position them at the head of a convoy, fearing roadside bombs that often target the first truck.

I reiterated his request in more direct language: “So you want

me to go outside the wire in civilian clothes and dig through trash piles looking for bombs?”

His response: “Basically, yes, if you’re out already.”

I asked again. Maybe he was tired and didn’t understand the ramifications of his request. He wasn’t suggesting an official military mission with bomb detection technology and protection gear; he was proposing that I go out, unsanctioned and unprotected, into what was technically a war zone, risking my personal safety to ensure his. What if something happened, like if I was kidnapped or blown up? Surely this would get him in trouble, maybe even court martialed. He was such a straight arrow, a by-the-book kind of guy. Why would he risk this?

Was he really that scared?

Was he a coward endangering someone else for his own protection?

But in my Captain’s defense this wasn’t an order, like how they say in movies “that’s an order!” It was more like a suggestion, and I felt free to decline his request (although consent becomes fuzzy when there’s an asymmetry of power: he a captain and I a sergeant). Actually, I think he was asking me for a favor, that’s probably the best way to describe it. And that surprised me more than anything.

He and I’d had a rocky relationship up to that point. To be honest, I’ve had a rocky relationship with authority my entire life. This came up in my psychological evaluation during Special Forces selection, and I was almost kicked out over it. Fortunately, they let me pass with the excuse that I was young and would therefore age out of my rebellion, which I don’t think ever happened. So I don’t think my Captain knew what to do with me. I, and a few others on the team, often did things without asking his official permission and ended up begging for his forgiveness after. I never hesitated to do what I thought was right. He hated that, but he needed me. I was one

of the more senior members of the team, and I ran all of the HUMINT (human intelligence) operations.

So maybe this favor was a proverbial olive branch, a way for me to get back into his good graces. Or maybe it was the other way around, maybe he felt like a disrespected outsider and wanted to be included in our *extracurricular* activities. Maybe he wanted my respect? It was no secret that I thought of him as weak and ineffectual. That's how we were taught to think of officers; and most I'd encountered (but not all) lived up to those expectations.

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To add to the confusion that night, I think I'd been drinking with our Iraqi guards. Technically, U.S. soldiers in Iraq weren't allowed to drink alcohol, but I and a few others on my team were released from General Order No. 1 so we could drink during meetings with intelligence sources. Of course we abused the privilege. I'll confess that once or twice my team (minus the Captain) got drunk and then went out looking for a fight.

Anyway, I gave my Captain one last chance to retract his request.

But like a good officer, he stayed the course: "Let me know if you find anything!"

Dumbfounded, I went to get Jim, our Senior Weapons Sergeant and my partner in crime. Jim is an interesting guy, physically imposing, sort of a redneck, and up for anything; he definitely fit the stereotype of an SF dude. And he's one of the most kind and loyal people I've ever known, though we did have some heated arguments.

"What the fuck?" Jim asked. "Is he serious?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"This is fucking ridiculous."

“What isn’t?”

“He’s such a fucking pussy…”

Jim and I continued to discuss the bizarre tasking. We couldn’t deny his accusation: in the past few months, Jim and I, along with an interpreter, had on several occasions dressed up like locals and quietly snuck off our compound. Sometimes it was to meet an intelligence source, or attempt to recruit a new source, and sometimes it was just for fun, like to go to a restaurant or sightsee. There weren’t many places in Iraq where U.S. soldiers could get away with this sort of thing in 2008, especially in southern Iraq, but Najaf was a relatively peaceful city because of all the Shia holy sites that brought over a million tourists every year, mostly from Iran. As long as we kept our mouths shut and dressed like locals, people would hopefully assume we were light-skinned Iranians on holiday.

So it was far from unreasonable for Jim and I to accept our Captain’s secret mission. We were frankly bored in Iraq, and we’d do almost anything, no matter how dangerous, to get the wartime experiences our egos craved—that’s why we joined Special Forces. Despite the military’s emphases on rules, structure, and hierarchy, many soldiers (especially in Special Forces) flagrantly break those rules with the excuse of “making mission,” as we called it, with little to no thought of the repercussions. This, at least in our minds, seemed heroic. So how could we refuse our commanding officer’s tacit permission to break the rules, knowing there was a chance we’d uncover IEDs and potentially save American lives?

“At the very least,” I told Jim, “this will make for a funny story later.”

“Yeah, if nothing fucking happens.”

“Right…” I said looking at Jim. I could tell he didn’t particularly want to go, but we’d spent so much time talking

shit about others on our team, like the Captain, how they were weak, how they were pussies, that I think we both felt saying “no” would have made us hypocrites, and potentially cowards. My pride couldn’t handle that.

Jim looked at me. He wasn’t going to back down if I was in.

“Let’s just do it,” I said.

“Fine.”

Jim and I decided not to bring an interpreter on our trash-digging escapade since we weren’t expecting to meet anyone that night. But we did bring one of our local Iraqi dogs, Willy. Willy had an athletic, medium build, droopy sad eyes, and a burnt orange and white coat. We thought he’d happily dig through trash piles looking for uneaten food and expose any explosive devices. We loved that dog and we’d hate to see anything happen to him, but if someone was going to get blown up that night, better him than us.

Jim and I chose to drive our newly acquired covert POV (Privately Owned Vehicle), a white Toyota 4-Runner with ballistic glass, steel-reinforced doors, and armored seats. Wearing civilian clothes, we grabbed our body armor, Glocks, M4s, bugout bags, and the dog, then jumped into the SUV. We exited our compound through the main gate onto a side road. It was after midnight and the Iraqi gate guards gave us funny looks; I can't imagine what they thought (there were all sorts of rumors swirling around about our activities in Iraq, like that we were putting sharks in the aqueducts to eat children). We drove a few hundred meters down the main road, and then we stopped at our first large pile of trash. The houses on that MSR were set back pretty far back from the road, so there was plenty of room for us to park in the dirt. And lots of trash.

At the first pile, we opened the car door and shooed Willy out. Of course, the scaredy-cat looked at us, then looked at the open door, then whimpered. We tried to pull him out, then we tried to push him out, but Willy absolutely refused to exit the vehicle. I think he was afraid we'd leave him out there, outside of our cozy compound. Iraqi dogs have a harsh life in the unforgiving desert, but live in near luxury on U.S. military camps (I bet the Iraqi dogs think we invaded the country just for them. And who knows, maybe we did).

So, Jim and I had to search the trash ourselves. Our first instinct was to take turns; one would stay inside the protective vehicle while the other checked a trash pile, and then we'd switch. But neither of us could stomach the thought of watching the other get blown up while cowering in the truck, survivor's guilt and all. So we got out together. Willy still stayed in the truck though. I think he was the only one that night thinking clearly.

We carefully approached our first pile of trash. Jim extended the muzzle-end of his rifle into the pile and carefully turned over several pieces of trash. I followed suit. Willy watched suspiciously. Nothing, thank *Allah*.

We searched through a few more piles, fortunately still nothing. Then we moved farther down the road, still nothing. Just as we were about to give up for the night, Jim and I looked up to see lights flashing in the distance. We were on a main road next to a suburban area a couple miles south of downtown Najaf, and not surprisingly, we attracted the attention of local residents who probably assumed we were actually planting IEDs, not looking for them, and called the police. So just when we thought this night couldn't get any weirder, Jim and I looked at each other.

"We're about to get arrested, in Iraq."

As we watched the lights approach, I tried to imagine what the police would think, rolling up on two bearded, heavily armed white guys in western garb rummaging through piles of trash after midnight.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" Jim asked.

"Uh, I don't know… but we may know these guys."

The cops arrived, a pickup truck loaded with Iraqi police officers brandishing AK-47s. We lifted our hands to present a non-threatening posture, and I offered the traditional greeting, "*salaam a'layk.*" Then I quickly told them we were American soldiers stationed in Najaf: "*Ihna Amreekan, saakin gareeb minna.*" Then I asked, in more broken Arabic, what police station they were from. Their response: the station about a mile southeast of the city limit. This confirmed my suspicions. We did know these guys, unfortunately.

*

A few weeks prior, our SF team in armor-plated, turret-mounted-.50-Cal Humvees descended upon the Iraqi police station at the southern end of Najaf, about a mile east of Camp David, in a "show of force" unsanctioned by our Captain.

We were pissed.

It was common practice for police in Iraq to arrest someone on fictitious charges and extort money from his family for release; the Iraqi police were considered quite corrupt by the general population. But unfortunately for this particular cohort of extorting police officers, their hostage was one of our coalition partners, a soldier from the Iraq Army unit located on the northern end of Najaf. This unit came to Camp David several days a week for training, and we conducted joint combat operations together. So we were pretty close with these guys.

The kidnapped soldier lived in the neighborhood next to Camp David, and after he was arrested, his wife and a few fellow Iraqi soldiers quickly rushed to our compound to inform us. At this point in the deployment, we were sick and tired of watching our collaborators get exploited and sometimes slaughtered while we stood idly by, usually waiting for bureaucrats to sanction intervention. So this time, before any military officers could debate the appropriate course of action, or more likely just schedule a meeting to discuss who'd be in charge (who'd get to take credit), we decided to grab our guns, pile into our military vehicles, and rush to the Iraqi police station to conduct an impromptu rescue operation.

Our Captain wasn't consulted.

We pulled up to the police station aggressively, jumping the curb and nearly ramming one of the buildings. We trained our .50 Cals on blind corners and quickly exited the vehicles. We swiftly disarmed each cop we encountered as we made our way to the headquarters building. We kicked in the door, pushed everyone up against walls, and demanded to speak with the person in charge. He timidly revealed himself, a short pudgy dark-skinned man.

We yelled. We bullied. We demanded. And out-gunned, the police chief relented (thank *Allah* this went as well as it did).

We got our guy back and tucked him into one of our gun trucks. Then we thought it'd be funny to disarm the Iraqi cops, so we grabbed all their heavy weapons, about 4 "BKCs" (Russian PKM machine guns) and a few AKs, and brought everything back to our compound. We laughed all the way home.

But our Captain didn't find it funny when several Iraqi police officials showed up at Camp David an hour later complaining about what we'd done and demanding their weapons back. Our Captain came undone, red-faced and nearly hyperventilating, yelling at us:

"What the fuck were you thinking!" He kept repeating, almost to himself.

Jim and I looked at him but didn't respond. The Captain was in no mood to hear our excuses, or argue. He was angry, yes, maybe uncontrollably angry, but I think he was also deeply embarrassed. And afraid. Our Captain was afraid of injury and death, much more so than Jim and I were, we already knew that, but I think he was also afraid of something else, maybe his biggest fear: ruining his military career. This was the first time he'd personally had to face our action's consequence, and I suspect he feared word might get back to his (and our) superiors. We'd get a slap on the wrist and probably a chuckle, but since he was technically in charge, he'd surely be scapegoated for our actions.

"You better give the fucking guns back!" he continued.

Jim and I still didn't respond. Then we quickly walked away before our discomfited Captain realized we weren't taking him, or this threat to his career, seriously—in our minds, the only thing to fear was cowardice. We knew we'd pushed him over the edge, but that just made the situation even funnier for us. We laughed awkwardly as we weighed our options. But we didn't

have much of a choice. So begrudgingly, we gave the guns back.

I wondered if the Captain would ever speak directly to me again. He did of course: a few weeks later he tasked me with a secret mission to dig through trash looking for bombs.

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So needless to say, Jim and I were a little apprehensive when a truck full of these same Iraqi police, with their weapons, emerged out of the darkness. This time we were the ones outgunned.

Gesturing to us and the surrounding area, one of the cops asked what we were doing: "*Shitsawi hun?*"

Willy could be seen through the windshield peeking over the passenger seat.

"*Walla inshoof a'la mutafegiraat* [we're looking for bombs]," I said. I expected a laugh, I thought the situation was pretty funny; but they just stared. I continued to explain, or at least attempted to explain, that our commander heard there might be an IED on this road and we were searching for it. I asked if they'd seen anything: "*itshoof walla ishi?*"

"*Lah*," was the curt response; they showed no interest in continuing our conversation. I could tell they were confused, maybe by my shoddy Arabic, and they must have thought we were complete idiots (which we were of course). Then without offering to help, they abruptly left us there on the road. "*Bishoofak ba'adayn*," see you later fellas.

Jim and I left too.

On the ride back, Willy was finally at ease.

Back at Camp David, Willy happily bounced out of the truck. I think he was ready to call it a night and snuggle into his warm bed (he slept with one of the interpreters).

“Now he finally gets out of the truck,” I said to Jim.

“Fucking pussy,” Jim said with his usual levity, and a dip in his lip. Then he spat on the ground.

Willy scampered into the interpreters’ building. He’d survived another day of our crazy war. And he’d have to survive many more days to come. We’d all soon go home, back to the U.S. to get on with our lives and military careers, but Willy would stay. Deployment after deployment, SF team after SF team, Willy would have to find a way to survive. We didn’t understand that. We never thought about the long-term consequences of our actions.

“Let’s go tell the Captain,” I said.

We found him waiting outside our team room in a small courtyard, looking up at the stars. “What did you find?” he asked.

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Good,” he responded casually, and went back inside.

And that was that.

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About a decade after I left the military, I saw my Captain in the dining facility of a compound belonging to one of the most elite units in the Special Operations arsenal. I had since gone back to school to study physics, graduated with an engineering degree, and was now hawking high-tech solutions and methodologies to problems the U.S. government wasn’t yet facing. Jim had retired after a long and successful career in the Army, and was now building his redneck dream home in the hills of rural Tennessee. And there was my former Captain, who was probably a Lieutenant Colonel or even Colonel by now, standing near the salad bar.

I hadn’t seen him since leaving Iraq in 2008, but he looked about the same, maybe a little older and a little stockier. I was the opposite, about 30 pounds lighter from sporadic bouts of fad dieting. We were both in civilian clothes, but I could tell he was still “in the fight”: probably hunting the next Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Well, not hunting himself. I’m sure he still sent enlisted soldiers to do the fighting. But even then, I envied these soldiers, the simplicity of their mission. I still imagined their experiences capturing and/or killing HVTs (High Value Targets) most closely aligned with my idealization of the heroic military life. In contrast, my experiences digging in trash looking for bombs felt meaninglessly reckless.

When I first saw the Captain, I reflexively smirked. Look who

it is, I said to myself conceitedly as chills ran up and down my spine. But how could he be here, amongst the bravest of the brave? The best of the best? How could they not see him like I did, as a coward who sent others into harm's way for his own protection and professional advancement? I knew in that moment, even after ten years, I still wanted to feel superior to my Captain. I still wanted to see him as the career-obsessed coward, and me, in opposition to him, the self-sacrificing soldier willing to risk everything, break any rule, to do what was right, what I thought was right.

But I also knew I was wrong. There's nothing right in war. My smirk had always been a defense mechanism hiding something deeper. I felt it almost immediately. It welled up in my stomach, my mouth relaxed, my countenance dropped. In Iraq, I just wanted the experiences of war—to feel what it felt like to be a hero—with wanton disregard for any of the long-term consequences suffered by the Iraqi people. But now, seeing my Captain, who after ten years had reached the pinnacle of the "heroic" military system I'd envied, I could no longer pretend. My actions overseas, disrupting a country in which I didn't belong, weren't brave. They were an attempt to live out a juvenile fantasy. Thinking my Captain a coward was just an excuse to justify this selfish pursuit.

I took a step in my Captain's direction. There was one thing left to do, the right thing. I needed to say, "I'm sorry." I was sorry for how I treated him. I was sorry for who I pretended to be. I was sorry for almost everything I did in Iraq. But for some reason, I hesitated, and he walked out of the room.

I guess that makes me a coward too.