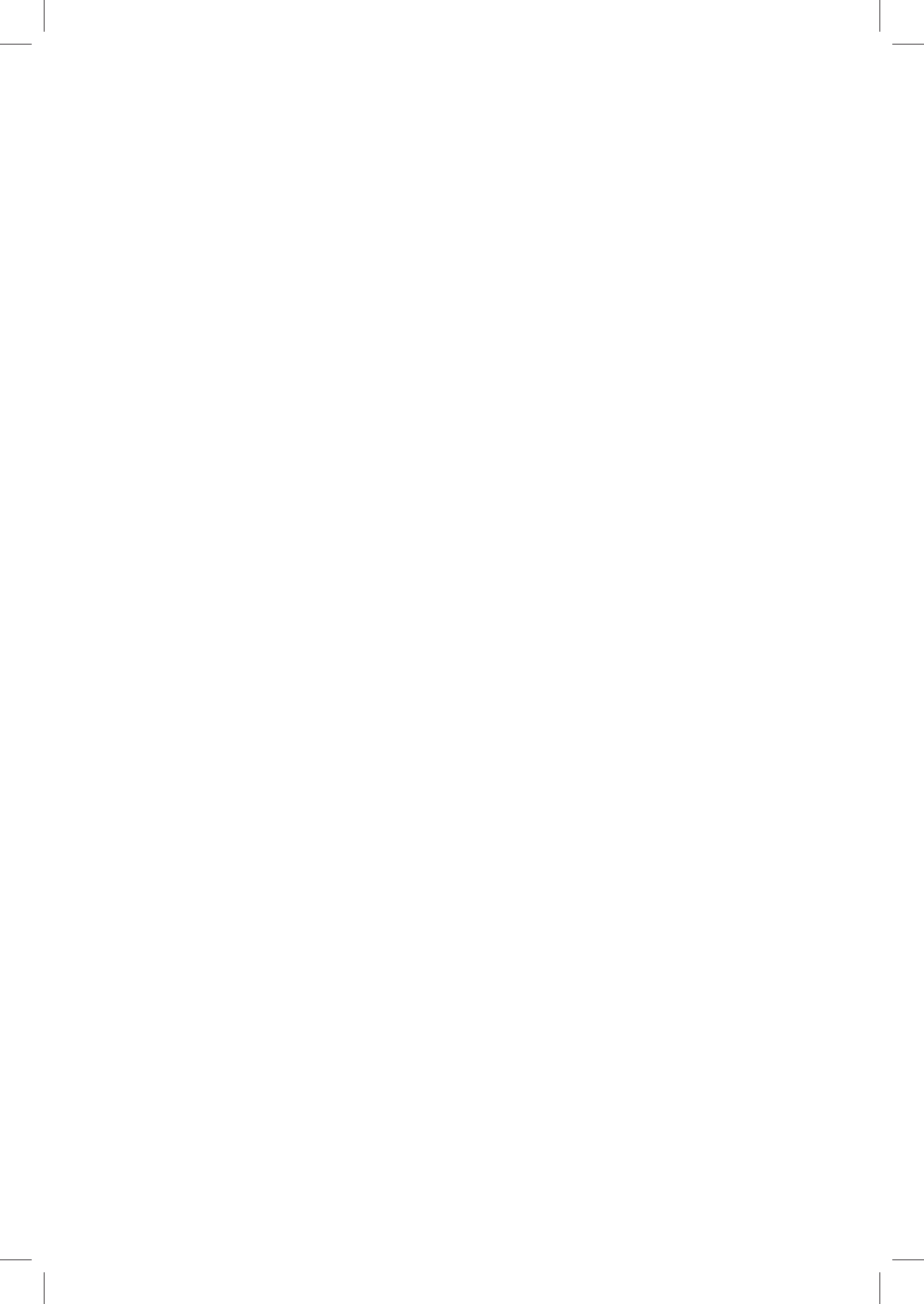


Falcons on the Floor



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Haneen consulted on *MLKNG SCKLS* and *Falcons on the Floor*, providing an authenticity that would have otherwise been impossible. Haneen also plays a vital part in the Understanding Campaign, an international Middle East awareness project that continues to grow.

This book is dedicated to Haneen and her family.



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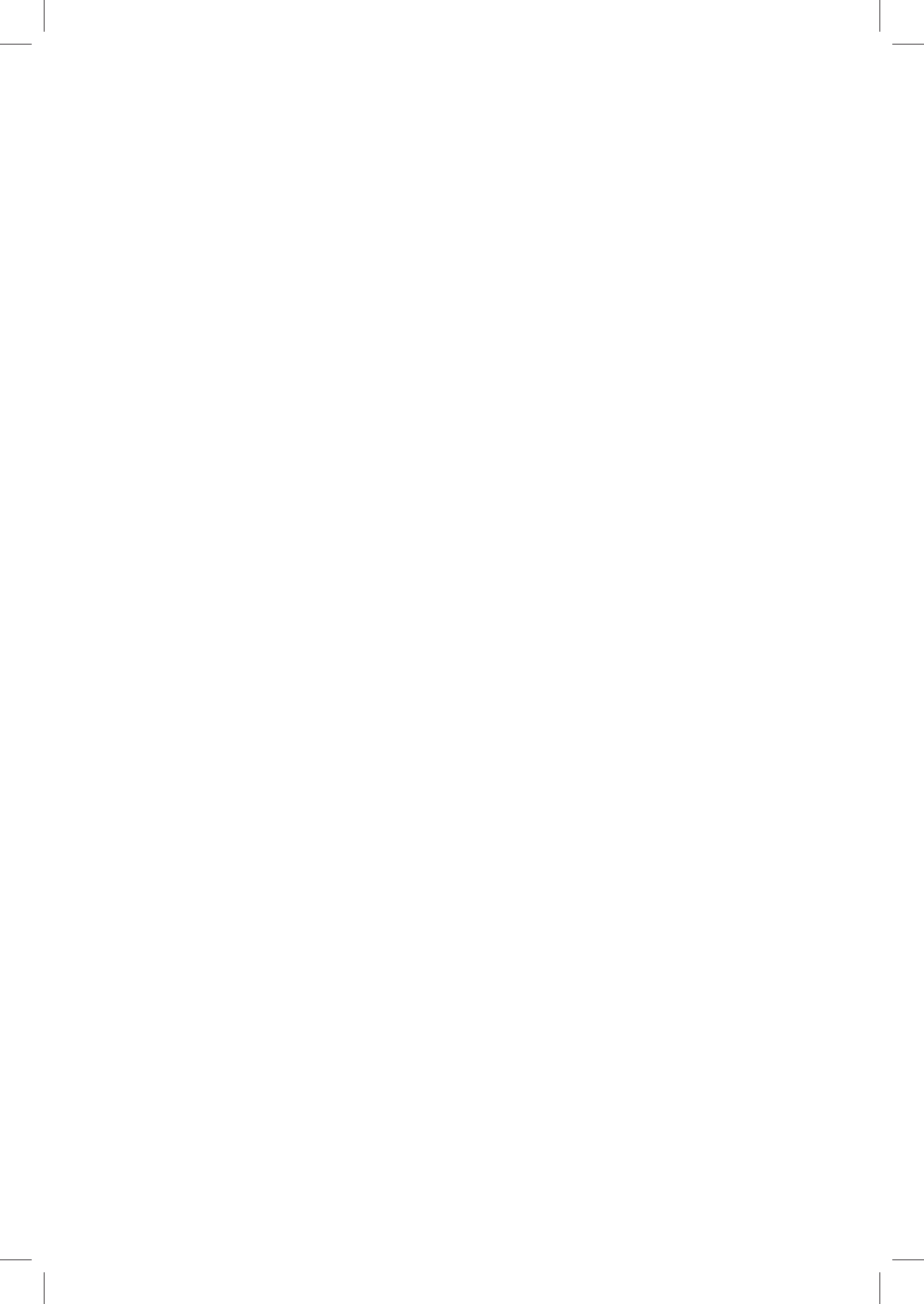
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I cry out to the Gulf: "O Gulf,
Giver of pears, shells, and death!"
And the echo replies, as if lamenting:
"O Gulf: Giver of shells and death."

Rain Song

Badr Shakir al-Sayyab



Before the war

I walked with my hood down. The ice-sharp wind slicing hairlines in my shin bones. That late Maine November. Never thought I'd miss the snow.

My brother, five years older, had joined the military too, but only after college. He was more patient than me. With two useless degrees in Medieval Literature and American History, he joined the Marines, became an expert marksman. He met a woman in Germany. Lovely. He excelled as a Ranger, saved every extra dime, returned from the Gulf War with only a missing big toe, early onset carpal tunnel and a big smile. He married the German. He bought lakefront property. Now he lives in Vermont, far enough from my parents to keep them from visiting every other month.

His life is perfect, 'cept for missing that toe.

The week he left for boot camp he pulled me into his bedroom before dinner. I was almost seventeen. Mom seemed unable to climb stairs wearing an apron and Dad, not home yet, sat furi-

ously in traffic. So this was the safe hour. It was the hour we perfected our butterfly knife opening, added footnotes to the *Anarchist's Cookbook* with the intensity of PhD candidates and schemed perverse revenges on homeroom rivals: light bulb bombs, Bouncing Betties, pipe grenades, zip guns, shotgun shell traps – scribbled diagrams for instruments we only daydreamed about. We'd heard kids lost fingers trying that shit. We liked our fingers the way they were.

His room was always dimly apocalyptic, lit from a single red bulb in the center of the ceiling. My brother leaned on the banister, making sure Mom was occupied, and pushed me inside. Locking the door, ceremoniously punching me in the shoulder – the sure bet something exciting was about to happen. He walked to the corner of the room. His bass guitar leaned against the wall.

He pulled his dresser back and reached down. He pulled out a lockbox. Handed me the key once it was open. He pulled out a pistol, a semi-auto silver and expensive pistol, and cocked it back to show me it was unloaded – waited for my wide eyes to blink.

“Dad gave it to me. Early Christmas because I ship out next week.”

“No shit,” I said.

“I can't take it with me.”

And I understood.

We marveled at the gun. Released the magazine and stripped out the bullets and cocked it and practice-fired. He put the pistol back and said, “You hold onto that key.”

And as he knuckled me again in the top of the shoulder, the boney part, it felt like he was offering access to his bedroom, too. It was a weird honor, standing there with plates of macaroni and cheese partly devoured and petrified on stereo speakers, lacrosse sticks and posters of Kathy Ireland on the wall. It felt like another

world. He was offering his room as a sanctuary from the unfettered parental attention I was about to endure.

“Cool,” I said.

Then he left for Boot Camp, and I was alone.

* * * * *

All the time I spent in there, Mom thought I just missed him. She might’ve been right.

Weeks later, during Thanksgiving break, I sat in his old room, on his old bed, perfectly made and warm. The baseboard heat rose around the skirt of the comforter. I held the cordless phone in my hand, pulling the retractable antenna in and out.

I knew Katie’s number.

I could dial it without looking.

A plate of food steamed next to me on the bed.

Saturday leftovers – Dad’s favorite and my favorite: turkey sandwich with a slice of cranberry sauce as thick as a hockey puck, gravy and mashed potatoes – both sweet and white – billowing from its seams.

I couldn’t take a bite. I let it congeal like my brother had let his old plates mummify on his bureau, on the stereo.

Dad had the volume turned too loud. TNT was playing *The Wizard of Oz*. Monkeys flew from the living room TV.

I dialed half of Katie’s number and turned off the phone. I wanted to mash the phone face-down in my turkey sandwich.

Early in the week, we had blinding snow squalls. They lasted only half an hour, but that was long enough to slick the roads. Our school bus driver had taken his time navigating the un-plowed surfaces. We passed stuck cars unfit for winter and everyone on the bus kept unusually quiet, peeping out the white-washed windows.

The temperature plummeted. And I remember it was windy because all the Christmas figurines that had been prematurely planted were strewn across lawns and driveways like mass suicides – a plastic reindeer dangled off a neighbor’s roof by a string of flashing lights. Wise Men and Mary toppled like bowling pins.

I went right home, immediately sucked into whatever video game I was obsessing over at the time.

Sometime that night, Katie’s mother had been hurrying home from her weekly book club. She hit a patch of black ice and slid. The van careened over a little bridge and flipped, crushing like a tissue box. Snow banks cushioned the blow, and she hung suspended in her seatbelt, pinned for hours, semiconscious and praying between nods. The horn honked for a minute but no one heard.

Two kids carrying toboggans spotted her brake lights from the guardrails. The kids took turns holding her hand through the busted glass. The ten o’clock news called that a “miracle.”

Paramedics arrived.

Snow mobiles and ATV’s were the only vehicles able to access the wreck. A helicopter medivacked her to Maine Medical Center where she lost a leg from the knee down – barely saved the other. I heard all of this the next day at lunch from Kevin, whose mother was a nurse.

“Lost a leg,” Kevin kept repeating.

The Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Katie’s family surrounded a hospital bed, heads lowered, and, instead of saying grace, they begged for the morphine to keep the razors of pain at bay. I suppose they were lucky. Of course they were. Though miracles are never without suffering of some sort.

I could’ve called, but what to say?

I dialed half her number, buttons illuminated in the dark,

and hung up. There was nothing to say. She probably wasn't even home. The phone glowed like a little office building in my hands. The buttons were lit windows. Somehow I thought my brother's room would give me the courage to call, because I knew he'd call. No matter if Katie knew about any undisclosed and longstanding crush – he'd call.

I stuck my finger in the mashed potatoes oozing out the side of my sandwich. I licked it. It was all I could eat.

The door was cracked.

Only a spade of hallway light shined through.

Sometimes I'd sit in his room with the Sega Genesis playing loudly through the stereo. I'd just stare at the big pixelated heroes on the screen and listen to the music. My brother always had a better TV than me. He played *Rambo* the video game better than the real Rambo could be Rambo.

From the living room, the Wicked Witch melted into smoke. Mom laughed and laughed, snorting a little, making Dad and my uncle laugh too. That was her favorite part, the melting witch.

Snow came.

Flurries outside the window made everything quieter than normal, like the world had been sprayed thick with fixative, and we were waiting for it to dry.

Waiting for everyone to pass out, I lay on my brother's bed with the dial tone in my ear, as if by listening hard enough I might hear Katie crying, too.

I knew I'd have to walk it.

* * * * *

Sneaking out wasn't hard.

We'd been good at it, my brother and I, making practice runs even when we had no secret rendezvous with a girl or plans to smoke-out the old club house tucked a few acres back in the woods. In hindsight, Dad probably knew the whole time, probably thought it good for the behind-the-line reconnaissance missions he fantasized us performing in the future – extended crawling through pinecones and rotted logs, socks clogged with mud-like pastry bags. His liberal policies with knives and BB guns were all part of some elaborate military doctrine.

As long as at least one of us signed up. We were both happy to.

I checked the hallway, making sure my parents' room was blackened – no late night aura from their television.

Combat boots would be enough. Even with a fresh ankle-deep snow, the trails were compacted by snowmobile and cross-country skiers. My boots laced high, sealing most of the dampness out. I got my best gloves and hat from the bathroom, drying by the tub, and laid them on the bed next to my jackknife and a flashlight.

I crept downstairs. I stepped light-footed on the kitchen tile. I planted one foot right as the ice maker crashed a fresh round into the bin. Uncle James turned over, snoring and gasping in his semiconscious gravy-coma. The sofa bed squeaked. Someone farted, asleep.

I covered my mouth, vinyl gloves snuffing out a laugh.

Then everything was frozen again.

The clear sky radiated moonlight off the snowfields. From the kitchen window, the tree line – maybe a quarter mile away – looked like a handsaw sticking up at the stars, each treetop a tooth.

Leftovers lined the counter. I opened a bottled water and

ate two oatmeal cookies, washing them down before pocketing the bottle.

Dad never replaced his Golden Retriever, Xavier, after he died. He only used the burglar alarm during vacations or when Mom got spooked by her crime shows. Dad had other means of protection – methods of protecting his property that I'm sure he fantasized about as often as he read the paper.

That night, the system was disarmed.

This made covert operations out the deck and down our backyard slope as easy as sliding down a water slide.

Four miles wasn't a difficult hike in fair weather.

That night was different.

Against the white-washed gales and with the open pastures encouraging the wind to rip open my hood, sandblasting my ears, I walked – hands in my pockets, down and down and across the black. Fault lines in the sky split clouds like weightless rock.

I hugged myself the way I wanted to hug Katie.

* * * * *

Clear roads wound between pure white snow plowed high from earlier storms. I remember missing school twice in one week before Thanksgiving that year, and people quoted the Farmer's Almanac like the Bible: *Gonna be a chilly one, once in a decade cold, Holy Moses! You feel that?*

State utility trucks kept the trails under the power lines free of boulders and fallen trees, and in some un-drivable lengths, hikers and ATV enthusiasts maintained wide and crooked pathways. Off the road I turned east, following the steel supports that suspended the power lines like giant crucifixes. The gusts increased. My nose burned cold. Up those hills the wind roared through the

trough dug into the forest – the wide clearing like a trail blindly scratched into the earth.

An old truck rusted, tires stripped and seats pillaged, chin-deep in the accumulating drifts. Other kids had mangled it years before we'd explored its rotten seats and found places to bang new dents. So many initials were chiseled into its panels it was hard to tell what color the original paint had been.

Fresh snowmobile tracks lead me up craggy accents.

My boots crunched deep. Great craters staggered behind me. Snow painted my legs knee-high, crusting layer on layer, and I beat the snow off my jeans just to see it grow back.

“God, it’s cold.”

I must’ve said that a dozen times.

Slipping down hills, I kept close to the margins of the trail, strangling saplings for support. The light of the moon cast no shadows. There, in the wide trails where the wind pushed on the high-voltage lines – their welded skeletons groaning like frigates floating in the sky – I tripped on snow-buried stones and hiked with frozen shins past the rock we used to call *Turtle Rock*. Those were the days when we found it necessary to name things.

I climbed, grabbing roots and fangs of jutting rock to summit where ice sheets made it nearly impossible to pass. I re-laced my boots. The strings were packed white. Sweat soaked the lining of my gloves. I took them off, wiped them on my thighs, and slid them back on.

I drank some of the bottled water.

Sitting on a bare rock, I wiped my nose with the rough vinyl glove and sniffed back shivering drips that threatened to freeze over my lip. The wind died down. The pines lining the trail relaxed.

Sprawling rooftops dotted the western grassland where old suburbs cluttered and new subdivisions bricked off what farmland

remained. And like thermometers slid into the prairies, television and radio antennas blinked red, white, red. It snowed and snowed. The relentless blankness wanted to erase me, too. I leaned forward, blowing heat into my palms, bouncing it back to my cheeks and nose. Powdery ice peppered the stripe of skin on my lower back.

Stay still – freeze solid, I thought.

My knees bent. I was up.

Where the power lines veered south with the main trail, I entered the woods through a path hacked into thickets and naked blueberry bushes, abandoning the reliable order of the wide trail. This was the quickest way to Katie's neighborhood. And in the safety of clustered trees, the wind died further, replaced by a stilted cold and forest sounds – ghostly shuffles like shaking horses, popping branches sulked by frozen weight. Icicles toasted each other in the canopy.

I kept on through the skittish light.

I held my flashlight, clicked it on, waved the light back and forth but it wasn't needed. I pulled back my hood. The crisp air stung my earlobes. I sipped panting breaths, my mouth like a smokestack, before pulling the hood back tight around my head.

I wondered if I'd forgotten to turn off the portable phone.

I scrunched my toes inside my boot, keeping them warm, and tried not to think.

I tried not to think about anything. Two miles of nothing.

Glimpses of streetlight teased me through the darkness. Trees shimmered and vibrated. I exited the woods where a brook tunneled under the street. Traffic beyond the chimneys and ridges sounded like plywood dragged over cement, long steady scrapes fading in and away.

Almost there. Katie's house was visible from the top of the hill.

There, the snow was deeper.

Over a clearing and through rolling farmland, I kept my face down, hood puckered and shoulders pinched to my chest.

Around Petty Lake – which was more of a pond but fishable, a good swimming hole too – I re-entered the woods that overlooked Katie's neighborhood. Along the low ridge I came to another lookout besieged by teenage debris. I sat on the rock I'd sat on maybe a hundred times before and stared at the dark window – Katie's bedroom – where drawn curtains kept my imagination firing.

Two cars were in the driveway. Her father's and an uncle's. And, on the house, where Christmas lights usually shined brightly, only wet icicles grew. The family's lawn figurines moped motionless, elves and Santa frozen in mid-cheer. No plumes from the chimney, either.

I rubbed my aching legs. Overlooking the house, all I wanted to do was let Katie cry on my chest 'cept I'd only ever hugged her once and that was at a party where everyone was drunk and you were one hug away from getting puked on. My shirt smelled like her perfume for days. I must've smelled that flannel shirt a dozen times before it just smelled like a regular old shirt.

Salt trucks crisscrossed the neighborhood, doing doughnuts in the cul-de-sac. The bill of a plow ground across the cement like an ax blade over a grindstone. Someone honked and honked.

I would've been smart to write a note, using Mom's good stationery and even an envelope. Katie would've known I'd walked all that way or begged for a ride just to deliver it, but there was nothing to say. Maybe she'd smell that letter like the way I smelled my shirt, but I doubt it.

Keeping still for as long as my body could handle it, I shivered and stood and hopped in place to keep warm. I sat back down,

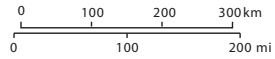
sniffing and wiping my face with the back of my hand.

Just knock on her door, I told myself, if she's home, just offer her a hug and leave. Just do it. Jackass. Coward-ass-jackass.

But I couldn't.

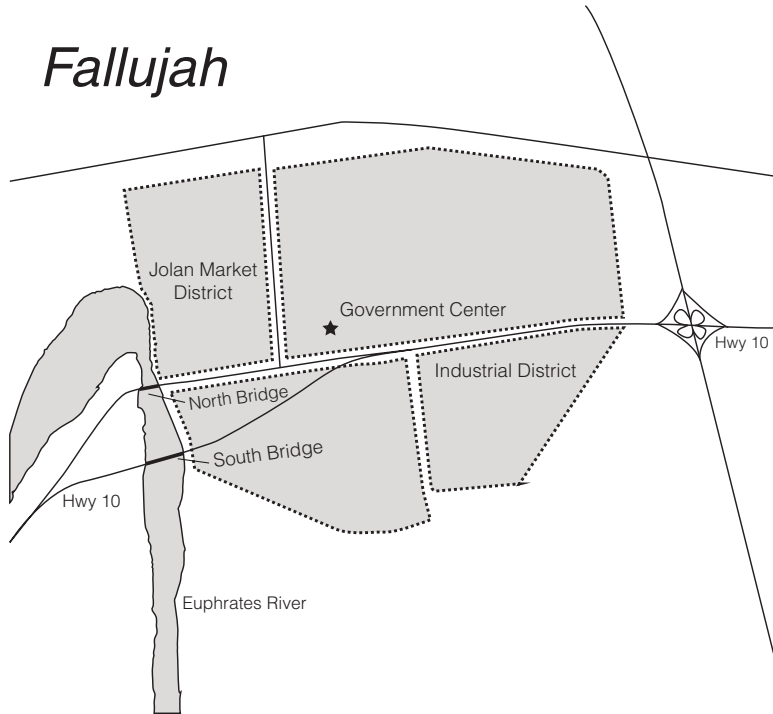
After taking one last look at Katie's window, where I always imagined the top of her brown head would rest, by the window, hair pulled up in a rubber band like at school, the pony tail I could spot from across the gym out of a thousand swarming perms and bobs and calm shell bangs, I trudged back home the way I came – the longest way to a lesson I'm still walking.

Iraq



Half Fallujah

Fallujah



1

Beyond the desert, the road extended into blackness. No streetlights or sounds. The ground, cold as a corpse.

Khalil Hammadi wished the Digging Man would just explode. He figured if the Digging Man happened to detonate, he could just go home.

That would be that.

Khalil could live without the money.

He knew he was supposed to be standing, alert and ready. He sat and then squatted, bouncing in the dirt. It was impossible not to fidget in the dust. Sand choked his sneakers. It blew into his tracksuit's waistband, itching. He sat when his knees felt like dry rubber and the man he was watching was too busy digging to care if Khalil, his Spotter, was squatting or sitting or watching the roadway.

Somehow, squatting illustrated the Spotter's alertness. Sitting was too close to sleep. In the arid blackness where the moon

couldn't see, sleep came easily. Chances were, if the Spotter wasn't alert, both the Digger and the Spotter would wake up bound on a concrete floor in a locked room – or worse.

Khalil squatted and thought about that – being captured, being questioned. He stomped it down in the corner of his brain to be forgotten. Looked around him. No noise troubled the night. No traffic or aircraft.

Khalil hadn't spotted one approaching car or suspicious form crawling along the horizon, and the chilly night air was dampened by afternoon rain. Quick gunfire knocked kilometers away like woodpeckers. Flashing mortars made a flipbook of the cityscape. Some explosions were closer than others, thunder cracking seconds after the flash. He didn't care.

Telephone poles lined the roadside and vanished into starlit dunes. Khalil in his black track suit. He like the invisibility.

Before he could stand, the Digging Man was back with his shovel slung over his shoulder. His oily nose glistened.

“No sitting. No sleeping. Understand?” He knocked Khalil's face with the shovel's dark and oily handle, rapping its steel against cheekbone. Then the Digging Man trotted off to work. Khalil's cheek pulsed. Eyes watered.

The road and the dirt underneath it grumbled. Kilometers in the distance he saw the last few seconds of artificial sun and then rising smoke where it had shone, billowing like crumpled carbon paper.

Oil fire maybe, between here and Ramadi, Khalil judged, *probably off the highway.* Now the night was wide awake.

* * * * *

The Digging Man, lanky and hunched, looked twice in each direction, surveying the highway for headlights or movement. He carried the shovel like a dead limb against his leg to mask his intentions. Khalil waited for him to vanish before rubbing the hinge of his jaw. *Bastard. Tall bastard.*

Why would such a tall man take such a dangerous job, he thought? Anyone could see him. He should just leave the tall bastard to be shot. Khalil slid his back against the tree, careful not to snag the jacket's nylon. Around him there was no life except a herd of goats grazing against the cobalt backdrop, clustered and slow.

The explosion carried on the wind. It smelled like someone had sliced open a battery and held it under his nose. Khalil took out his cell phone.

The man's shovel made occasional sparks in the blackness and rang a rare *clang* when its steel struck crumbs of concrete. He dug furiously, grunting and huffing.

Cloud cover made the moonlight marble dull, its ruffled gray sheets tossed haphazardly above.

No one could know what the Digging Man had buried once the digging and the burying was done.

But people were looking.

It was their job.

* * * * *

Watching the Digging Man, following him from the pick-up point to the blast sight, paid 50,000 dinar. Easy for half an hour's work. It required a cell phone and patience, but – most of all – trust between two men who might have met that evening over tea. This was the lowest risk job, the job of recruits and people too feeble to dig quickly. Khalil, as able-bodied and trusted as he was, preferred this assignment. It was safer. Less stress. No touching the

thing that goes in the hole. Easy and painless and detached.

He'd only seen one digger vanish – his body dropping as if he'd been thrown off a building, cracking on the asphalt with a sound that no human should make.

Digging the hole for the thing, with the thing sitting millimeters from your ankles, its white tape like a bandaged foot and wire intricately woven into red and green and black braids, paid 100,000 dinar. It was a considerable amount. It meant exposure to night-vision goggles, soldiers skirmishing in small teams across overpasses and creeping peep sights of rifles leveled at distant green figures, lone men with shovels lingering along roadsides for too long. Most of the digging men did it once and never again.

Some digging men enjoyed the adrenaline-spiced danger, the accomplishment, the exhilaration of hitting the switch.

He'd transplant the thing with trembling fingers, resting it in the hole and, using his feet like trowels, cover it quickly before arousing suspicion. Dust coated shoes ran in the night. Then the thing would be ignored, buried like a pet in the far corner of a yard.

Every shopkeeper and crooked policeman eyed it, told their loved ones to keep clear.

Detonating the thing earned 200,000 dinar.

Too much for some to decline. The risk was high. Capture meant torturous death. But, if ignited accurately, if the explosion was precisely timed and the vehicle close enough to the roadside, escape was assured by the roaring confusion. All the trigger man had to do was run and never look back.

Lying in the brush a few hundred meters away, head invisible from the road, he'd hold copper wires in each hand like two incandescent hairs. They'd be so thin it'd be impossible to imagine their potential. The wispy strands would beg to be wrapped

around the battery trembling in his other hand.

He'd wait and wait.

Buses would pass, filled with workers. Men crammed in sedans returning home. People with gas canisters might stroll by. Dogs. Always dogs limping or dogs running. The target would approach. Wires would be wound. They'd send the spark, the blasting cap igniting a fiery plume, sand erasing the sky. The concussion would hit people in the chest like a giant fist. A chassis flipping in black plumes of wrinkled smoke with the column of traffic backing into each other while vehicles scrambled over curbs. Sand would cloud the roadway. Truck doors and tires would litter and burn.

That was murder, Khalil knew. It was murder no matter which way the *Fedayeen* branded or renamed it, and he couldn't and hadn't and probably never would *murder*, and in the stagnant April evening he stretched his legs and yawned as the Digging Man grunted, heavy and transfixed. Tiny headlights winked and disappeared. The Digging Man stopped digging.

He wiped his hands on his pants.

Panting, he set the thing in the hole.

* * * * *

In the cradle of an emaciated palm tree where no patrols could see, Khalil used the light of his cell phone to view the photograph torn from a newspaper days before. Though the open phone's bright screen might attract unwanted attention to him and the Digging Man, he sat against the tree's thick scaled stalk and squinted, gawked – thinking, *me for all the world to see*.

Al Jazeera and *Arabiya* Television flashed the photo hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. People worldwide, he knew, saw his face. Behind his face was the bridge and on the bridge hung the

charred silhouettes swaying like ruined food. But it was his face in the center of the photo and his face everyone knew.

Everything had changed since.

In the streets, men looked at him longer. They tilted their necks up or, squinting from plastic lawn chairs under awnings, nudged their friends as he passed. Boys pointed, some yelling his name with dirty cupped hands, *Khalil! Khalil!* He waved back at them the same way they'd seen on TV. He'd signed three autographs; one of them on the back of a jacket because the admirer had no copy of the photo.

It was a simple photograph. A strategic photograph.

Two massacred silhouettes silently begged people to shout, to scream, to find something to wave – and if the closest thing was your hand, they waved that with as much fervor as the afternoon's fever allowed.

Two burned men – tied and hung – abstract hunks hinting at a greater whole; their previous suffering was increasingly apparent in the excitement of the onlookers, their indignity as plain as livestock, otherworldly and abysmal. And before it all stood Khalil.

Hundreds of photos were taken that day, but someone at the Associated Press chose Khalil's pleasantly anguished expression, his outstretched arm, only him. Khalil knew exactly why.

* * * * *

The deed was done.

After brushing dirt over the closed roadside hole, the Digging Man jogged back to the palm tree where Khalil stood with cell phone folded into his black track suit pocket. The man propped the shovel against the tree. The roadway was silent except for his heavy panting. He sopped sweat from his large forehead with the

unbuttoned wings of his open shirt, leaning an elbow against the palm's terracotta stalk and breathing in deep, wheezing inhales.

A kestrel flew overhead.

Neither spoke.

In the dark of the moonless sky, eyes closed, the man craned his chin heavenward with his lips tightly bloodless, and Khalil, searching for something to say, thought the man was trying to see where the bird had flown.

Everything was still. The man stood in the pitiless air.

They walked on.

* * * * *

The Digging Man abandoned his shovel in the shadow of the first building they approached, planting it silently in the dark. Pressing the pad of his thumb into a fresh blister on his palm, the man opened its tender white cap where his wedding ring met his joint, wincing as they walked east into the drowsy city. Khalil tried not to watch.

From his breast pocket, the man pinched 25,000 dinar, discretely slid them across the bench. He waited for Khalil's fingers so the notes wouldn't take to the wind. The man leaned back. One leg crossed.

Khalil counted and said, "This is half," with as much nonchalance as he could muster. "Where's the rest?"

"So. This is what you earned," he explained.

"50,000's what. That's what I get," Khalil hissed. He made a movement to stand, but stayed seated as the man jerked his weight toward him in preparation – a fair warning. Sipping his water with a tight grip, he was ready to cock back and hit, the bottle crushed in his fist. Khalil added, "That's what was agreed."

Bringing the bottle down, the man reached to his back one more time and produced a cheese and cracker Handi Snack. Buckled in the middle from his pocket, the crackers were intact and the cheese glowed orange in the dark as if the manufacturer decided to mix in florescent liquid. The man peeled off the plastic top and set it on the breeze. Khalil would have licked any speck of cheese from the plastic.

He lifted the packet to his nose, red glasses reflecting two giant Handi Snacks in their greasy lenses. He dipped the crackers, like tiny ceiling tiles, into the cheese, dunking generous gobs and chewing slowly.

His grin infuriated Khalil.

“We agreed you would watch. The whole time,” he said through his chews. “You played with your cell phone half the time, so you get half your money.”

Part of a cracker, apparently unfit for consumption, fell from the man’s fingers. He smashed it into the dirt.

Khalil turned the ground with his sneaker so hard, rocks sanded his toes through the hole in the rubber sole.

“I was not *playing*,” he nearly screamed.

“And you were not sitting either, huh?” Snapping the crackers each time he dipped, the man started using the little red applicator to spread the cheese in delicate waves, setting the package on his knee. The water bottle had only a splash left, so he let the rest dribble over his dirty hands, each fingertip dripping beads in the gray soil, instantly disappearing.

“I wasn’t playing with my phone.”

With his hands in his pockets, he crumpled the corner of his photograph and it was almost impossible not to flip it open like a badge for the man and maybe, maybe he *hadn’t* seen the photo in the papers or on satellite news. The tall bastard was so busy drink-

ing bottled water and nibbling Handi Snacks and planting bombs for Mr. Hassnawi that he'd somehow missed the most important day in Khalil's life.

Khalil mashed the dinars in his jacket pocket with the photo. He wanted to toss them at the man's flaking nose. Who was *he*? A cattle farmer or an unemployed welder? Another nationalist with nothing left?

"It doesn't matter anymore. Go home," the man said with a dismissive hand flick, as if he knew what was in Khalil's pocket and what little it meant. "There'll be more work anyway. Always."

"Mr. Hassnawi won't be happy with this," Khalil threatened, immediately regretting it, sucking in as if he could vacuum the word back out of the air. The man would either knock him out or walk away. Either would bring consequences other than pain.

"Yeah?" the man laughed. "Hassnawi has more important problems to take care of, Khalil." Using his name for the first time, using it like a teacher, like he had some authority at all. "He'll make me give the money back to *him*, all of it, and he'll have one of his men beat you, or worse. What *then*?"

Khalil curled his lips. "At least *you* won't have my money," he answered, sliding down the bench, away from the man's reach.

Licking the red stick from the Handi Snack, carefully scouring its plastic for every particle of pasteurized cheese, the man refused to dignify Khalil's comment and, instead, flicked the little implement at Khalil's feet.

Goosebumps rose like tiny rivets on Khalil's arms.

He shivered.

People moved behind them, singing loudly. Two older boys walked a dog on a chain. The dog stopped to sniff something and the boys paused a few feet behind Khalil and the man.

One sang:

“Yeah ... gimme some new sheet.”

The other:

“Yeah ... gimme some new shit.”

“Yeah ... gimme some new sheeet.”

Then again. And again, until they turned down an alley with the sniffing dog sniffing everything and the chain jangling angrily.

The man tugged on the bottom of his shirt, trying to shrink the creases and wrinkles, with no success. He flipped up his collar, swatted away the sand snuggled around his neckline. With his fingers he combed out the grit in his hair, scalp and eyebrows, and when he felt fully shaken out, he popped his collar down. Bent, he swabbed the trenches between sock and shoe, snapping the elastic off his socks where too much ankle exposed itself from the rising hem of his ill-fitting pants. Groomed, satisfied, he sucked his teeth and faced Khalil.

Khalil braced for a fist or a kick.

He said, “You’re clever, Khalil Hammadi. I knew your father. He was too smart to be driving trucks day and night for a shit salary – for a life of *shit*.” With a clenched jaw he said, “He’d be proud of you. Standing for something now.” The man never looked toward Khalil, his eyes hovering above the cityscape as if looking for Khalil’s father to hover down from the heavens. “*In-shallah*, he is.”

Khalil said nothing. He ground the rocky sand and felt pebbles gluing themselves into the hole in his shoe.

“But you can’t be lazy, not for a second. We are fighting for the future of our country. People are counting on you – not just me, you know?”

Balling a dinar in his fist, Khalil let the Diggin Man vent while he squeezed the bills harder and harder, compressing them into a little ball.

“I’ll tell Hassnawi you did a perfect job, I will, but this means next time,” turning toward Khalil, “you do it perfectly. No sitting or playing around – even if some other guy is digging the fucking hole.”

This was too much.

Squeezing the money into a sweaty gob of fiber and filth, Khalil wanted to cave in the man’s cratered nose, lodging broken glasses into cheek with the hammer of his heel.

The Diggin Man stood.

In the shadow of a passing cloud, the man picked at his blister. He spoke to his hand.

“Be patient. Soon. This world will turn, Khalil,” he said flatly, the blister like an amphibian eyelid embedded in his palm. “It will turn its head toward the righteous and never look back.”

Khalil pulled his fists from his windbreaker’s pockets like two rocks tied to rope. He raised them toward the back of the man’s head.

“The world will turn and see *me*,” Khalil hissed through his teeth, not exactly sure what he meant, and stepped forward with a fist cocked, ready to swing.

Still talking into his palm, unaware of Khalil’s fist, the Digging Man urged, “Go home. Be happy with half your pay. It’s half more than most people have.”

Behind them, the sky spread black. In the deafening dark, the man’s thick eyeglasses tilted to the side as if leading him in the direction he would turn. Finally, he loped away, disappearing as another helicopter swooped from the North, motivating him to gallop. Then he was gone.

Sand and paper scraps practiced their waltz in the wind. Khalil squeezed his fist so hard he thought the dinar in his hand might compress into a diamond. When he unclenched the fist,

it was the photograph of the Blackwater mercenaries that he had balled and crushed, not the dinar.

Khalil peeled it open and scrutinized the ruined photo. With the light from his open cell phone, the little screen casting a sickly neon glow. He rubbed his thumb along the perimeter of his photographic head, ears, up the extended arm to the bridge – the bodies – those bodies.

He cycled through the saved numbers in his phone out of habit before flipping it shut. No one to call. No reception anyway. Screw this dumb waste of a night.

It didn't matter if this clipping was ruined. Dozens of newspapers were stacked under his bed. An infinite number on the Internet and networks. Salim probably had a copy saved on his computer, too.

He hated sun up.

Thirst beyond thirst, his mouth felt flecked with lint. It'd be twenty minutes until he'd tiptoe into the back door, a soda in his hand, sleeping on the couch where he always slept.

Behind him, beyond the dunes and the sulfite smoke muddled in the breeze, the two boys led the chained dog and sauntered back, one singing, "Go."

The other, "Go."

Then, "Go."

And together,

"Go, getcha getcha getcha getcha freak on –"