

Friday in thick August heat, the holy day of rest, the result of an online classified ad. Everything around her now ticks to a stop. Distant, limp trees on dry plains and the foothills lining the city blur in haze. A giant yellow generator vibrates, next to a small white trailer, where two guards—barely 18, barely heavier than their kalishnakoffs—sleep away the afternoon. For now, it's new. No bitter dust storm battles the clouds, blackbirds aren't yet buzzards, the dog has yet to thump by tied to a moped.

The young Kurdish woman, four yards down, pinning laundry and banging rugs against cinders, spots her, breaks the quiet—

*My home. Go my home, come!*

Running from her yard, the Kurdish woman takes her arm. And then the woman's husband in his white muddy pick-up. Come, he echoes his wife, a torso stretched through the window.

She goes. Up to their small apartment, warm and doll-like. The young woman parts the heavy red curtains, waking the man asleep on the floor, kicks him toward another room.

*Here-her-her-sit*, the Kurdish husband sings, pointing to the corner—a window spot, a pinkish cushion, some stray black seeds, maybe watermelon, and something grainy, maybe sugar, caught in the stitching.

She offers them the Kurdish word for thank-you. In return they give her a Kurdish phrase that translates as *on your eyes!* She knows this means *your welcome!* She has nothing more than this. From them she can take nothing more than this. Blackbirds pass, just beyond the window.

She'd said Iraqi Kurdistan and Everyone asked, *Why go there?*

Because. Why go elsewhere?

Because. She decided to think things were possible, despite anything and everything she knew. The word *possible* nuzzled, nipped, until a hole began and crawled through to where, over twenty some years, she'd slowly gone buried under herself. Not a peek of light anywhere. The word *possible* came to break it all up, throw her out, show her stuff. Because she answered the online ad and two weeks later the Kurdish Regional Government offered a year-long contract as an editor and journalist at their English-language newspaper. Because they needed someone who spoke and wrote in English. Because she needed money and could make decisions fast. Because she believed her resume was weaker than she was. Because the paper was government funded—a safe, secure job with a translator and driver, free accommodations in a guarded and spacious villa. Because it was Northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, the Land of the Kurds, the Cradle of Civilization, The Other Iraq. *Because you will fall in love with it here.*

Ask about them and she'd say they're okay—the two other women in this guarded and spacious villa. English teachers, and just as new: O from North Britain, putty arms, shifting bags of duty free Marlboros, toppled Absolute Vodka. Y from Boston, Louis Vuitton luggage, a delicate voice that calls home daily, candy-colored everything.

Their villa sits at the lip of an arid valley, near a sandbagged checkpoint, inside the alloy fence line, close to the USAID compound, a Lebanese import and trade company, Chinese engineering company, oil-this-and-that company, land mine removal organization, two Australian private security agencies, three Lebanese-owned bars, a roadside petrol stand, and several other villas, all in varying stages of completion, all in varying states of guarded.

Kurdistan's long, coarse cough, roots down, rattles deep, shoots up the torso, bleeds off flares like a sparkler, snags the throat, fragments the mouth, and nose. Just four days and it takes these three women. But it gives them something to say, some communal point among the sprouts of their difference. It takes them, this cough, the congestion of dust and generator exhaust, every time they push open or pull closed the villa's iron gate.