

# The Baghdad Morgue

Sylvia Bowersox

"**Y**ou are taking the pictures at the Baghdad morgue today?" Sasha, my Baghdad boyfriend, asked through the smoke of his wake-up cigarette. "You will be good at this." I watched as he slid the Buddha-shaped ashtray, a gift from me, off his stomach to the mattress. He looked up and gave me that affectionate half-smile of his that never failed to make me shiver. Sasha was as necessary to my survival here as the air, my M16, and the nearest bomb shelter. His family had escaped from the Ukraine, and he had joined the U.S. Army after 9/11. To everyone else he was Sergeant Zelenko, or Alek, but to me, he was Sasha.

He looked at me with eyes that were faded blue. The tint on his irises was so diffuse that it barely registered as an actual color and was more of an impression than an attribute. When he looked at me, his pupils dilated, expanding over that suggestion of blue and accentuating its alabaster hue. I could never quite make out what I saw when I looked into his eyes. Was he a man, or the personification of my needs? In the middle of a busy day, I would find myself longing for the mystery of those almost-blue eyes and the comforting salted musk of his body. I had felt safe in his presence before he gave any reason to trust him. Effortlessly, he became my sanctuary.

"Of course, I'll be good at it. I'm good at my job," I said. "Today, my mission's to follow the Health Attaché around; and I make video footage, not pictures." I almost told him how scared I was about seeing dead people, but I gave him a kiss on his forehead instead, borrowed his cigarette for a quick drag, and returned it to his waiting fingers.

"What's your mission today?" I asked while investigating the mini fridge for my Boonie hat, and Embassy badge. I found cans of Arabic-brand Diet Cokes, two just about empty bottles of lube, a box of condoms and an old salami. "Hey, where's my stuff?" He puckered his full lips and pointed toward the other bed. I remember now. Lordy, what a night.

The mornings after Sasha stayed over in my trailer were a delight we enjoyed whenever my roommate, who worked at BIAP, didn't come home. I liked to sit with him and see if he had anything to say to me. I kept hoping he'd tell me how he loved me. Then I would be free to tell him that I loved him.

Those lyrical words came from him only once while his masculine weight was making me extremely happy. I came and cried and returned my version of his admission. We hadn't repeated those magnificent words to each other. In fact, we never seemed to say much of anything at all to each other. I couldn't figure out why I was always silent around him, especially since we had become a real couple with the possibility of an actual future.

We made love, made each other laugh, smoked together, sat by the pool together, looked out for each other, but rarely said anything, and we never repeated those words. At parties, he made himself the center of attention by telling stories of his childhood. He murmured Russian and Ukrainian songs into my ears, and though I couldn't be certain it was communication, I knew beyond a shadow of any doubt that it was foreplay.

This morning, the trailer was quiet, so I could hear the trucks arriving with the day's load of sandbag sand. The trucks announcing business as usual for the Iraqi day laborers. Those trucks sounded like they could use a tune-up, and a few of them probably needed new carburetors. But that could be said about every Iraqi vehicle I'd ever seen. Many Arabic

sentences, melodic and jerky, filled the air with the intelligibility of wild dogs arguing. I had to get going.

I held his glance for a moment, enjoying the sight until he broke contact and looked around my body to the bedside table for his cigarettes. I moved the jumbo container of baby wipes, sent from the States by an anonymous somebody who wanted to help, back to its proper place under the bed. There had been a lot to clean up from the night before.

The morning moment over, I stood up, gave him another kiss on the forehead, and was on my way out the door. Sasha lit another cigarette, and it looked like he might say something when an explosion came from the Karada checkpoint on the other side of the 14th of July Bridge—the city side of the bridge. The blast knocked four of my five paintings off the wall, causing him to drop his cigarette.

"Fuck, goddamn," he hollered, putting out the smoldering embers with his fist. The cherry from the cigarette had burned his chest. "Fucking hajis."

The percussion from the blast felt stronger than usual, and it hurt my chest. I instinctively jumped back into bed.

"Wow, a four-picture boom," I said. "We've been getting more and more of those super-strength booms."

Sasha sat up. "This is a war zone," he said. "What do you expect? You should live in Pripyat." He ran his fingers along my collarbone and up my throat, stopping just under my chin. "Do you still have to go? Have you not a couple more minutes for me?"

I was silent for a moment as I calculated the lie, I would tell the Health Attaché, my boss for the day, and made a command decision. "You got until Big Voice gives the all-clear."

Our convoy of four SUVs had been bouncing toward the Baghdad Morgue for twenty minutes when we were attacked by a horrific stench. A fog so thick, so sharp, yet so familiar, it brought tears to my eyes. It reminded me of the putrid garbage of the dumpster behind that restaurant in L.A. the weekend before I left for basic training. No. This smell was worse than hot garbage, it was far worse. It was the nasty nail polish and stale oranges of that morning in my grandmother's room. The windows closed; the television too loud. She wouldn't wake up no matter what I did. I was seven. Nana Dot was dead.

My job on this mission was to shoot footage of the morgue for Dr. Henry Gonzalez, the Embassy Health Attaché. He'd know what the smell was. Before I could ask him, though, our swift-moving armored SUV slammed to a stop, which it frequently did. The hulking monster was designed to stop bullets and most explosions. That equaled one heavy-assed vehicle. You felt it when they let you into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. You have been locked in a bank vault. And a bank vault doesn't make sudden stops cleanly. But I was prepared, and even though my body kept going, slamming into the seat in front of me, my strategically placed protective gear kept me from getting hurt.

We were in a Baghdad traffic jam, surrounded by an assortment of cars and pickup trucks that didn't look like anything I'd ever seen before. Some were ancient Toyotas. Some were Hondas. Only a few looked like they had ever come off an assembly line, all shiny and new. Like the boxy blue, four-door sedan next to us packed with women in hijabs. But the rest of the Frankencars were a collection of rusty multicolored messes, missing bumpers, hoods or both. A few looked like someone had assembled them without reading the directions.

I should have been more concerned about our situation. Stopped as we were in the middle of Baghdad, we were vulnerable to the many shades of hell the war had to offer – IEDs,

RPGs, VBIEDs, small arms fire. But I was too preoccupied with the smell to take much notice. I scanned the scenery through the bulletproof, multipaned glass to see how the locals were dealing with the smell. They didn't seem to notice it.

All those people – children in blue school uniforms, men in *dishdashas* or brown polyester pants, women swathed in black cloth holding babies, and smoldering teenagers – must have found a way to live their lives around it. They didn't notice us either. Only the little kids waved. I waved back.

A blow to my window interrupted my waving, returning me to the war, to the smell. It was a passing teenager expending some of his anger. I couldn't blame him. I'd be angry too. I looked up in time to see a sweating Iraqi policeman attempting to direct traffic. He pointed to the vehicles and then to a tree of dark traffic lights before returning to the stalled cars, punctuating his demonstration with a frustrated sigh. I got it. No electricity. Of course there was no electricity. We were briefed every day on the sorry state of Baghdad's Infrastructure. The water was probably off, too.

While the security detail sitting in the front seat discussed solutions, I was finally able to talk to Dr. Gonzalez. "Sir, what's up with that smell?"

"Well, Sergeant Talbot, it's the smell of freedom," he said. "You do know that democracy is messy and, in this case, smelly, too," he added, smiling at me with hard eyes.

I was pissed at his response. The "democracy is messy" phrase was deployed at too many meetings and press conferences to accept it as an answer. It was a bullshit talking point, and he knew it. But before I could say anything, it sounded like something substantial landed near our protected vehicle. Our driver shouted into his radio, "We gots ta go—now!"

"It's the civil war, Catherine," Dr. Gonzalez said over his shoulder, monitoring our advance through the window. The convoy was plowing through the traffic circle; somehow, the Iraqi cars and trucks weren't in the way anymore. Dr. Gonzalez, oblivious to the security detail's heightened tension, kept talking. "Every night, our Army and the Iraqi security forces gather over two hundred bodies from these Baghdad streets."

The fucking civil war had turned war-zone Baghdad into a place where everybody was killing everybody— including children, women, and old people. I felt my face go numb. The smell was making me itch all over.

"The human body emits more than thirty chemical compounds immediately upon death," the doctor said with his professional smile. "Those compounds can smell quite rank."

I think I knew what was coming.

"The miasma assaulting our senses at this moment, Sergeant Talbot," he went on in a gentle voice, "is the combination of messy freedom and the dead decaying in the morgue and on the street."

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to explain that I had done temp-work next door to the county coroner's office in Los Angeles, near LA County Hospital, but I'd never smelled anything like this. Then I remembered the electricity was always on in Southern California. Meat left out in Baghdad rots.

At the morgue, when the Iraqi door guard at the front saw us coming, he sprang into action and handed me and Dr. Gonzalez little jars of what smelled like Vicks VapoRub. He gave us instructions in Arabic and mimed scooping the stuff and smearing it under his nose.

"Shukran," I said, using the Arabic word for "thanks," and glopped it on.

What I wanted to yell was some variation of "Leave me the fuck alone. What the hell is wrong with you people, killing each other like this? Civil war, my ass, don't you have enough problems?" But I didn't know how to say any of that in Arabic. So, I repeated "shukran" and returned the jar. The goop made the world smell like Vicks-scented dead people. And as we went inside, I thought, please, God, don't let me fuck up.

Our guide was the female pathologist working in the morgue that day. She was a small, middle-aged woman in a rubber apron and heavy gloves. Her glasses were held together with tape. "Don't picture my face," she told me multiple times, blocking my lens with her hands. I agreed not to put her in the footage.

Since coming to Iraq, I had become extremely adept at shooting footage without including Iraqi faces or identifying features. Whereas virtually every Iraqi I had ever come across wanted me to take their picture, very few wanted to be in my video footage. They didn't want the insurgents to murder them for the crime of being in my footage, otherwise known as helping Americans.

The pathologist and Dr. Gonzalez stayed close enough so that I could hear slices of their conversation. The pathologist asked for money, more help, and a corrective for the storage situation – putting bodies on ice when the electricity was off. But since Iraqi law said that they could not be buried until an autopsy was done, the pathologists had to attempt to keep them fresh. Dr. Gonzalez gave her noncommittal affirmations, but he eventually said something about finding a refrigerated trailer.

I followed the group into the main room. Under the low ceiling, the dead people weren't on gurneys, or tables, or in body bags or anything. They were on the floor. Some had been covered with ice, but the ice had mostly melted, and now they were lying in puddles. I couldn't

help thinking that the bodies in those puddles used to be people, and even though they no longer looked like they could have been people, they still contained third grade, and all their birthday parties, and dancing, falling in love, crying and being happy.

All these used-to-be-alive people were beaten and broken, with shock frozen onto what was left of their features. Some of them were missing arms or pieces of faces, others had burn marks on their bloated bellies, and some had angry, purple spaces between their legs instead of genitals. I ordered myself not to cry. Everyone expected females to cry, so I couldn't allow tears to gather and roll down my face.

I was in the middle of forcing myself not to cry when Dr. Gonzalez called me over.

"Sergeant Talbot, I need you to record video of the autopsy room."

I quickly reengaged my soldier-documentarian persona and joined him in what looked to be a cave, as in a hole in a mountain cave. At the far end of this cave-like room was a pair of swinging doors. I switched my Sony to autofocus and pointed the lens at the mouth-like opening controlled by what at one time must have been shining, medical-grade metal doors, but now were as dead as the piles of dead lining the walls. The Vicks allowed the spoiled meat, disintegrating sweet oranges, and what could have been boiled nickels to get in and swallow me whole like a boa constrictor. I could smell myself being digested. Even so, I couldn't stop. I had to do my job.

"Sergeant Talbot, please include all of the stacked bodies in your footage."

"Yes, sir," I said and could feel my words reverberating through every lifeless form. They were stacked like firewood with branches of bloated, greenish fingers and dried fluids. It took about ten of the figures for me to realize that none of these bodies had heads.

"Dear God, where are their heads?" I hadn't meant to say this with my outside voice, but Christ, I was using my camera to bear witness. I suddenly realized how the soldiers who liberated Auschwitz must have felt.

"What's wrong, Sergeant Talbot?" said Dr. Gonzalez.

"Well, sir. It's. Ah. Sir, where are the heads?"

"I'll explain later."

After I had recorded the last of the decapitated forms, the three of us, followed closely by our security team, entered the autopsy room. Dr. Gonzalez posted me in a far corner of the overused rectangular space, and into a puddle that covered my boots to just above my ankles. The juices gradually melting the cowhide of my Army issue desert boots, threatening to gain access to my feet by sneaking in through the wool fibers of my socks.

"I need archival footage of this entire room," said Dr. Gonzalez. "Can you get everything from here?"

"Yes, sir,"

"Good, now stay put."

"Yes, sir."

Because of movies and TV programs, I knew about this room, the autopsy room. The shiny, medical-grade steel utensils especially made for cadavers: drawers filled with them, slabs carrying them, knives covered in them, power saws with memories of them, and the intensely bright lights that lit them, fucking up the color balance of my footage. Goddamn it, the melted ice had seeped through my boots, and reached my feet. My feet were soaking in ice, blood, and dead people muck. No, no, not blood.

With great effort, the pathologist pulled out one of the drawers. I heard Dr. Gonzalez proffer his compliments to her. He called me.

"Sergeant Talbot, record the contents of this drawer, please."

I think he called me a couple of times before my waterlogged feet would move. It was another dead person. This one had a *kafiya* tightly wrapped around what was left of his throat. I guess some of them got their heads back. I deduced that the pathologist must have found a way to reunite this dead person with his parts.

Dr. Gonzalez confirmed my suspicions. "Matching heads with bodies is a primary duty of the morgue."

So, where are the other heads? I thought. Goddamn it what a question. I wondered how long until this pathologist joins the other dead. Eventually, she would die in a storm of bullets because someone would recognize her and tell someone who knew someone who was on a mission from Allah. Or she'd be kidnapped, raped, and beheaded. Dr. Gonzalez's cell phone rang, and he stepped away to take the call. I used that moment to talk to the pathologist.

"Are you ever worried about getting killed?"

She shrugged and held her index and middle finger straight together with her thumb as the trigger.

"Pow," she said and laughed.

She was close to making me mad. "You've got to get out before the insurgents kill you."

She laughed again, and said "Inshallah," with her eyes turned to heaven.

The doctor returned and ordered me to "go with the pathologist, I'll be right with you."

The pathologist said something in Arabic that I decided meant, 'this way please.' So, accompanied by one of our security guys, I followed her up the stairs into a little room, one

flight up from the autopsy room and the main chamber of horrors and melted ice. As we moved, my wet wool socks squeaked and rubbed away pieces of my feet. Our destination contained an expansive television screen and about a dozen white plastic chairs filled with crying women wearing identical black *abayas* staring at the TV.

"What am I looking at?" I asked the pathologist.

"Heads," she said, pointing to the screen.

I found myself watching a PowerPoint presentation of disembodied heads. Head after head after head went by. After the initial shock of "Oh my God, those are heads," I found them fascinating. I noticed the differences between them, suggesting the personality of the former person. I didn't turn away. Then, three of the women who had been crying the whole time were suddenly crying a whole lot louder. They must have recognized one of the heads.

I didn't say another word to the pathologist. What was the point? Until the day someone from one of the insurgent groups sent someone to kill her, she would bravely stand in the middle of that low-ceilinged, dank room. Every day from 0800 to 1400, she would stand in front of bodies stacked neatly on one side of the room, and heads piled up like coconuts on the other—working—always working. Positive Dr. Gonzalez would eventually bring her the tools and equipment she needed. She was going to die, and there was nothing I could do about it. There was nothing I could ever do about it.

When we arrived back at the palace, everybody got out, except for me. I always had difficulty escaping from any of the armored SUVs, but now I couldn't open the damn door. I saw Sasha standing under the green marble falcon at the entrance. How'd he know when we'd be back? He must have asked somebody. He knew everybody. He was chain-smoking and leaning on the shoulder of his friend, Private Joe from Minnesota. Joe was all dark and sinewy like that

actor from the movie *Jarhead*. Sasha was my Mikhail Baryshnikov only better. He was fantastic, danced only with me, and knew the name of every weapon ever created. Actually, the two of them looked like every other infantry guy on loan to the palace—haggard teenagers with no hair. They were beautiful.

My skin was raw, where I'd glopped on the Vicks. It made me sneeze. My boots were glazed with sand, and my socks were wet, but they were not soaked in blood. I had only stood in melted ice, and dead people muck, but not blood. My feet felt like I'd spent too long soaking in the bathtub, covered in bubbles. But there weren't any bathtubs or bubbles in Baghdad. There were only dead people, their muck, and melted ice puddles of blood.

I considered shooting out the windows with my M16. I could move the selector to semi-automatic fire and blast my own way out. But since the windows consisted of ballistic glass with a shield of polycarbonate, it wouldn't work.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gonzalez had climbed back into the SUV.

"Sergeant Talbot," he said in his best Embassy Health Attaché voice, "today you executed your mission with impressive professionalism under harsh, wartime conditions. I'm going to recommend you for a commendation."

I wanted to cry or scream or something, but there were a thousand miles between us filled with dead people, and all I could manage was a breathless "Yes," and a thank-you-for-noticing nod. I looked away from the doctor and saw Sasha standing outside the vehicle. He opened the door, but Gonzalez stopped me before I could escape.

"Sergeant Talbot, where are the tapes?" he said.

I stared at him blankly.

"The footage you shot at the morgue. You haven't lost it, have you? If you've lost the tapes, we'll have to go back."

I didn't want to go back there.

"We could go back tomorrow, Catherine. As a matter of fact, you could help the pathologist with her puzzle."

I didn't want to help the pathologist with her puzzle. I didn't want to see those bodies again—ever. I had captured about ninety minutes of footage from those rooms—with the blood and melted ice. I was done. Help the pathologist with those bodies, those heads, with that job? No. I had to find those tapes.

"Oh, God, where are they?" I cried out to God, the one who didn't play fair. My heart was beating so hard it was sending out electric shocks to my extremities. Oh, God, they're gone, they're gone. No, they can't be gone.

In plain view of everybody, I was panicking like some first tour civilian who'd never heard an explosion before. But I couldn't stop myself. "I've got to find those tapes," I told Sasha. It was like I was searching for my lighter. And I needed my lighter; I really, really needed my lighter. Where the fuck was my lighter?

Sasha found my tapes. He pointed out that they were where I always kept them, in the hard-plastic utility case, under my camera. My darling had saved me.

I wandered away from everyone and entered the palace. I saw soldiers and civilians of all shapes and sizes, but I couldn't hear them. I was a spirit, floating above everything. The Arabic lettering on the wall told me that I had caught my death at the morgue. It was growing like a baby inside me. It had soaked into my boots and was smeared above my lip. Yesterday, I

wouldn't have believed that such a thing was possible. But this was Iraq, and death hung around like fleas ready to inseminate any girl who got too close.

Joe and Sasha caught me at the entrance to the south exit access point. I needed to rid myself of the bags I carried, the clothes I wore, my weapon, my protective gear, my camera. It all had to go back to the Earth—so I could ascend unencumbered into the arms of my death.

We had to wait until the little sally port was full of people before closing the door to the palace and opening the adjoining door to the enclosed backyard that held the dining facility, the pool, the smoking tree, my trailer, and all the other trailers.

The dead filled the little transitional room and sullied the sparkling white of its walls and the cigarette-strewn stainless-steel floor. Nobody looked at me, and nobody said anything that I could hear. Sasha held a fresh pack of cigarettes, and when the door opened, he guided me to the smoking section at the sunbaked picnic table under the dying tree.

"You'll want one of these," he told me.

And I knew that I did want one of them because I could hear him, and lately I was always desperate for a cigarette, and him.

Dropping my equipment, I slid to the dirt to cast out my boots and green woolen socks. They were demons. Joe gathered the hated items and subdued them at his feet. I was taking another deep drag off my beautiful cigarette when Bill, the fireman from Kansas City, joined us under the tree. He motioned to Sasha for a cigarette and then sniffed the air like a puppy.

"My Gawd," he said, "who died?"

Joe answered in a don't-upset-the-crazy-person tone: "Cath shot video footage at the Baghdad morgue today."

"Oh, I guess it's pretty wild out there right now," Bill said. "Is that why she's the way she is?" he stage-whispered to Joe.

"Yep," I answered, hugging myself and rocking back and forth with my eyes half-open. "I didn't step in blood, and I can prove it. Look," I lifted my right leg in a war zone version of a yoga move, pulling up my trouser leg, uncovering a bloodless calf.

"I know, sweetheart," Bill said, examining my leg for a moment before stepping away. He returned with the thick firehouse hose. "You might not have stepped in blood, sweetheart, but everybody deserves a shower from the fire hose every so often."

Bill blessed me with an impromptu baptism in my time of confusion. His beautifully warm water cleansed my soul and caused my uniform to cling to my skin and the Vicks to consider letting loose and dripping back into the Earth. I was with my friends in Baghdad. It was all right until Bill's rain took me to that summer when I was eight, and my gang of kids would gather every morning to explore the neighborhood together. We would take advantage of every unsupervised hose and water source to escape the heat. There weren't any parents until lunch, but no one was worried; we kids were safe. We had no idea that there was a world outside, a world our daddies and mommies did their best to keep us from knowing about. How could we have known there was a place called Iraq, and in Iraq-of-the-future, there were places where kids got slaughtered, and their tiny bodies got piled with bigger bodies in pools of melting ice?

Big and small, those bodies were stacked up like the logs daddies would stack along fences for fireplaces. Higher and higher, and those logs and those bodies were piled and were missing things; they were missing the things that showed up on the television in that little room with the white plastic chairs and the crying women wearing lots of black cloth.

I should have felt something about being back in my trailer, my Baghdad home. I vaguely registered that Sasha was with me, and Joe was sitting on the steps outside, not smoking the cigarettes I had forced him to take.

"My Katyusha, my little warrior," Sasha said, kissing my eyelids through the layers of dead people.

I allowed him to finish the kiss, then removed the rest of my clothing and threw them out the door and onto Joe's unsuspecting head. Joe didn't say anything; at his feet lay the rest of my uniform: boots, socks, interceptor vest, M16. He must have fished them out of the various garbage receptacles where I had dropped them on our way back to my trailer.

It looked like Joe didn't know what to do with them.

Naked, I got down on my knees and reached under the bed for that container of baby wipes. I stood up with it in my hands as the second of the daily attacks on the palace compound exploded in the distance. It knocked my last picture off the wall—a sizeable, unsigned oil painting of an old Iraqi couple in sapphire headscarves. Their faces were contour maps of agony.

Sasha tried to cover my body with his embrace. I pulled away and held the container closer to my breast, like a shield. I wasn't ready for him. We stood in silence, facing each other, breathing.

My empty lungs pulled in accelerated sips of air that made me feel like I was suffocating, like I might succumb to the contagion of death. With great effort, I slowed my breathing, using techniques I had learned in a yoga class. I whispered my favorite mantra, "I exist." "I" with each inhale and "exist" with each exhale. "I exist," modulated into "I still exist," which evolved into "I still exist even though they no longer exist," and then devolved into "God, please help them,"

and then, finally, "God, please help me." The words brought tears, and I repeated them over and over until I felt calm enough to say, "Sasha, help me. I need you."

I dropped the container. My boots and weapon were leaning on the wall by the door. He draped a blanket over my shoulders, and in one loving motion, had me in his arms. I listened to his body ringing love into my empty spaces.

"My darling, Katyusha."

"Help me."

He gently eased me into bed and laid down alongside me. I breathed him in and marveled over how much I depended on him for strength. As he kissed my face and petted my hair, I wondered if he might depend on me just as much.

**Sylvia Bowersox** is a U.S. Army veteran who spent three years in Iraq. She has a BA and MA in Literature, and recently received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). Her poetry and short stories focus on deployment life and the challenges faced when coming home. She was a finalist for the 2022 Bridge Award for Playwriting with her play *Lawn Ornaments*, a veteran's experience in the VA system. Sylvia and her service dog Timothy are featured in the documentary film *To Be of Service*.