

R . B . M O R E N O

What Happened Yesterday in Baghdad

Iraq has come a long way and it will continue to solve all problems. And there are so many problems...

—Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki of Iraq, July 22, 2009, White House Rose Garden

Once, when I was young and intent on becoming a Texas cattleman who also apprehended bandits, my parents commissioned a sepia portrait at the county fair. For about \$25, families could select frontier costumes and stand inside a saloon as flashbulbs illuminated the scene. My mother, pictured wearing ostrich feathers and a broach, refused to distribute the photo the following Christmas on account of liquor bottles visible in the background. But the original has hung for years in our hallway. The visage of the boy at her side is somehow indelible: my pudgy, adolescent jowls expressionless beneath a top hat, one small hand gripping a cane, the other pocketing a revolver. I hadn't examined it closely until recently. Then, late one August night, I saw what looked like the same boy online, in another portrait titled *Great Times Together*.

In this second photo, also in sepia but taken at a Mexican restaurant, 16 Iraqi youths crowd against a pockmarked wall and a series of wanted posters. In the foreground, four girls flaunt silk dresses. One of them grins as she holds up a burlap

sack bearing a label: "10,000 GOLD COIN." Another cocks her head above a corset that pushes her chest toward the camera. The boys look even more ridiculous. White teeth and leering eyes pop out from a bandana masking the tallest. To the left, a balding gentleman with a goatee raises his Stetson aloft. Three boys are brandishing pistols—one points straight at the photographer—and two others flash hand signs that might be mistaken, in the Denver suburb that shattered my car window the other day, for a shout-out to the Latin Kings.

In the middle of the posse, buried in an overcoat and a wide felt hat, is a boy from Basra whom I'll call H. It is H. whose blank expression still frightens me a little, allowing my mind to transpose my own face. Below the photo, on Facebook, H.'s friends have written comments in Arabic. "Sincerely awesome," reads one. Another asks, "If a total stranger saw this photo, what would they think of you?"

Not long after posing for their portrait, H. and his friends donned name tags and performed an Arabic song for a small American audience. We squat attentively in a circle, having agreed to become "conversation partners" for the Iraqis, who attend classes in the basement of Occupational Therapy, a brick building framing the entrance to one of Colorado's land grant universities, where I teach writing. The students have arrived in the American West—after a week in Washington that featured seminars on "Understanding U.S. Politics," as well as the IMAX film *Deep Sea 3D*—by way of an exchange program sponsored by the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. A few years ago, President Bush and Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki announced the program at the White House, during the zenith of the sectarian violence that followed the American-led invasion of 2003.

Today, as we gather for conversation in a room lined with tool belts and hack saws, the prime minister is back in Washington to meet a new president.

The idea that there should be singing comes suddenly. Makeshift drums crafted from cardboard and cellophane appear from hiding, and H. begins beating out a fast rhythm that everyone but the Americans seems to know by heart. Seated to my right is a girl named M., with a birthmark in her left eye. She tells me, in a whisper, that the song narrates a story similar to Romeo and Juliet, about lovers whose affection is forbidden, and that it's a favorite at Friday potlucks back in Iraq.

Days later, when we meet for another dialogue, the Americans join in the singing—this time "Happy Birthday to You," in English and Arabic, for a tall, baby-faced boy. As the song's last bars ring out, the other boys rush forward to smother their friend in a hug. Meanwhile, M., dressed in a long red t-shirt, has discarded her nametag ("I don't like name tags"). How old are you? Twenty. What do you study? Dentistry. Later I notice that instead of a self-portrait, M.'s Facebook

profile shows the cast of *Gray's Anatomy*. A status message she's posted there quotes Enrique Iglesias:

Would you dance,
if I asked you to dance?
Would you run,
and never look back?
Would you cry,
if you saw me crying?
And would you save my soul, tonight?

I spent most of the Iraq War producing features for a big news network in Washington. I came to think of myself, during that time, as fairly knowledgeable about modern Mesopotamia and its bloody tribes. Many afternoons, just before airtime and depending on the week's toll from car bombings and street battles, I would become the voice of a wailing man who had just lost his children, a shop owner unable to stay in business, or a lawyer explaining the plight of a detainee. The translated words of these men usually came noted in scripts that take on, for producers, the immutable qualities of scripture: NEEDS ONE MALE V/O (voiceover).

Along with the sounds and pictures of war that crossed my desktop, there was also the lingering possibility that one day, I would wind up in Baghdad as our bureau's producer. Thankfully, I think, that never happened. But in my mind Iraq remains a not-so-distant place. The men at desks on either side of mine were both sent. During one going away party, which felt more like a wake, we lavished our friend with hard candy, crackers, peanut butter, good luck charms, bourbon, and chewing gum. (He loves gum; it eases the stress, I imagine, of rock stars dying during graveyard shifts.) Finally, because it was hard to find in Baghdad, someone added a long, thick summer sausage. This producer returns to the little house by the Tigris every few months now. He complains of having to count cash—for the network's security guards, fixers, and cooks—in bundles piled high on his mattress. A photo posted online shows him playing Nintendo tennis with a veteran correspondent, her arms swinging high to return a volley. Even these days, Americans don't travel much in Baghdad.

The convoy enters a crowded neighborhood with houses
close in on either side

30 //We got guys running in front of us //
The street is suddenly empty. Then ...
26 “Small Arms! Holy shit. If you see fucking small arms
fucking light em up //
29 upsound shooting “goddammit, I can’t see it” then fade under
The convoy takes fire from all sides.
UPSOUND SHOOTING
Staff Srgt Jimmy Whetsone says they were expecting something like this.
36 //I believe al-qaida has moved into that neighborhood, down in the
south neighborhood there they are starting to collect//
END HUMVEE SOUND

The first Iraqi I befriend in the basement of Occupational Therapy is F. She’s seated at a table with four others, all young Iraqi men, and though we’ve only just met, she begins telling the story of her father’s death. For years the man headed a bank in Alwiyah, a financial quarter of east Baghdad that once housed middle-class families. F. describes the city’s neighborhoods as a daughter of Berlin or Buenos Aires might describe what is trendy and what is not; Alwiyah, it seems, has turned seedy and commercial. But she does this while blinking back tears. Her father’s passing came during Iraq’s first post-Saddam elections, in 2005. He had heart trouble, F. explains, and on voting day a curfew meant to protect polling stations also meant that she and her mother couldn’t get him to a hospital. And so he died, at home, in their arms.

Recalling this moment smudges F.’s mascara. She apologizes with a little laugh. Her face, I begin to realize, displays a perfect clash of conservatism and coquetry: a tight black head covering hides everything but painted lashes, nose, and chin, but over top of the covering she wears a black-and-white checkered flat cap, angled like Madonna’s or Missy Elliott’s. In less than a month, F. tells us, she will turn 21. So I ask about the drinking age in Iraq.

“Well, people in Iraq—they don’t drink, for religious reasons.”

“Psssshaw!”

F.’s answer is interrupted by my online twin, H., who is seated across the table. The drummer boy from Basra has darting eyes and a fondness for football (“Sorry, soccer”). For a few seconds the girl and the boy chatter harshly in what sound like practiced whispers. H.’s three companions, meanwhile, look uncomfortable. I ask F. whether she always argues with H.

“Oh no he’s my friend. I like him,” she says, glaring. Then, in Arabic, she mouths his nickname: “Mischievous.”

H. ignores the teasing and tries to apologize for the confusion with the confidence of a travel agent. “Today you can do anything in Iraq you want,” he says, scrawling his e-mail address in my notebook.

Abdul Wahhab is a computer technician at the Trade Bank of Iraq. He was about 100 meters from the square when the white sedan exploded. He remembers two small helicopters hovering overhead—shooting into the square. He could see the flashes from the muzzles of their guns. Wahhab turned his car around and started weaving through the traffic to get away. [Duration:0’21”] <WAHHAB: I used my car horn and was shouting to the people go, go go move move okay and suddenly I use the middle mirror inside the car and I saw the armored cars behind me.> [...]

In his rear view mirror he watched the Blackwater SUVs closing in, swallowing the ground between them. Then he heard heavy thumps on his back windscreen. The Blackwater contractors were throwing water bottles at his car. Then it got worse.

[Duration:0’26”] <WAHHAB: So suddenly there is something stop my car. When I turn around a saw a big car hit my car from the right side and the window of the front door it’s broken. I feel my hands get broken, I know that they are shot me. So I open the door and drop myself in the street because I thought that they wants to kill me.>

M. is from Baghdad’s Karada district. Track pants, a soccer jersey, and a baseball cap conceal the fact that he is studying medicine and will start earning money soon as a resident. His English is impeccable. He says that for most of the past decade, his family has lived near the Green Zone, which can be both a good and a bad thing. The coming and going of Marines kept a lid on violence erupting in other parts of Baghdad. But in 2006, during the unrest that followed a Sunni group’s bombing of the sacred Mosque of the Golden Dome, shells fell on M.’s house, then failed to explode. He spreads his arms wide to show me the size of the munitions. “Old shells,” says the young doctor, chortling in a hollow-sounding way. “Those guys didn’t know how to put them together.” He pushes a pair of Coke-bottle glasses a little farther up the bridge of his nose. Neither M.’s parents nor his siblings were hurt, but the attack on Karada, intended for Americans in the Green Zone, pulverized spirits along with roof tiles.

Later, the teacher facilitating today's dialogue suggests that the Iraqis follow the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., that they promote an ethic of nonviolence among their countrymen.

"I'd just like to say one thing," M. interjects. "The last guy who tried that, who really represented that? His name was Imam Husayn, and he was murdered in front of everybody." (This is more or less true: history records that Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib, a Shiite grandson of the prophet Mohammed revered for opposing tyranny, was beheaded in the Battle of Karbala, in 680.)

(**SNEAK AMBI, MARKET SOUNDS AND GENERATOR,
LEAVE UNDER**)

IN BAGHDAD'S KARADA NEIGHBORHOOD, 30-YEAR-OLD
KADOUMHUSSEINWORKEDINHIS SMALL CONVENIENCE
STORE AND SAID AS A SHI'ITE AND AS AN IRAQI, HE WAS
GLAD TO HEAR THAT THE CEASE-FIRE WAS EXTENDED:

CUT (ARABIC, NEEDS MALE V/O) We heard about freezing the
Mahdi army activity for another six months. It's a good step and we bless
it, and we congratulate Muqtada al-sadr for this brave decision. We hope
it's a step forward to support national reconciliation between the Iraqi
people and to achieve stability in this country.

OFFICIALS SAID SADR'S DECISION MAY BUY MORE TIME
FOR IRAQ'S POLITICAL LEADERS TO COME TOGETHER,
AND THE U-S SAID IT WAS READY TO INCLUDE MOQTADA
AL-SADR IN THAT DIALOGUE. BUT SOME IRAQIS SEE
TODAY'S NEWS AS AVOIDING

JUST ONE OF MANY PITFALLS SCATTERED ALONG THE
ROAD AHEAD.

Talk in the basement shifts to bribes. M. says that corruption is everywhere, especially in Baghdad. Just as in Washington or Denver, medical residents want to be assigned to major hospitals, not outlying suburbs. Test scores can get them downtown, but money also helps with placement. "I would pay, I would," he says. I ask if he could buy higher scores directly, but M. insists that's not possible now, because of reforms at the Ministry of Education. Still, everyone brought to this table by the U.S. embassy—M. in his track pants, a boy from Al Anbar with walnut-colored skin and a glassy stare, and A., from Irbil, with muscular arms decorated in tattoos—says they paid cash for a real Iraqi passport. One student quotes 250 U.S.

dollars, others 400. “And it came back properly signed in three hours,” someone adds. Paying less for the same document would mean waiting about eight months, they explain.

“Who do you talk to for this?”

“Anybody. They’ll come to you,” A. tells me. “I could get you one myself if you wanted.” A. says he has been to Syria twice by bus to visit family. He also keeps in touch with Iraqis who have fled farther abroad—to Norway, Sweden, the UK, the UAE.

“Could you get me an American passport?” I ask him. At this question the table falls silent. A. shakes his head.

THE PLANNING MINISTRY WAS A NIGHTMARE UNDER SADDAM, AND IT’S STILL BAD:

CUT (ARABIC, NEEDS MALE V/O) Unfortunately, the problem is still happening, even after the fall of the old regime—the first thing is always the payoff. The official says how much are you going to pay me, then we can discuss the contract.

AS IT HAPPENS, THE PLANNING MINISTRY HAS ITS OWN BOOTH JUST ACROSS THE WAY. SPOKESMAN ABD ALZAHRA AL-HINDAWY SAYS CORRUPTION IS A PROBLEM, BUT IT’S A TWO-WAY STREET:

CUT (ARABIC, NEEDS MALE V/O) I will not deny these problems, for sure there are corruption cases. Unfortunately there are some contractors who also want to get contracts illegally, so there is corruption from that side as well.

One Baghdadi girl named Z. feigns embarrassment at the talk of corruption. “You don’t pay bribes to everyone,” she says, stifling a grin. “Just to most people.” Somehow, along with a number of other students here, Z. is celebrating a birthday. But she is also refusing to eat the sheet cake that the teacher has brought from the supermarket.

“We have a tradition that no one else can eat cake until the birthday girl does,” explains the teacher to the rest of the class, which locks eyes on Z.

“I’m not hungry,” Z. replies, crossing her arms above a black sequined blouse and rolling her eyes. (Later, over lunch, she is outed as a gifted pastry cook.)

As we depart, after shaking hands with the boys, I extend my hand to Z. and forget, for a moment, Islam’s proscriptions against fraternization, which today’s

meeting has already tested. Z. watches my hand as she might a viper weaving through the shallows. Then she leans forward at the waist, halting the snake's progress with a kind of Japanese bow.

specialist major puts another piece of breakfast sausage on his hook.

ACT: I TRIED BREAD AND CORN BUT THAT DIDN'T WORK AS WELL AS SAUSAGE.

rumor has it the fish developed a taste for meat under saddam hussein because they were regularly fed with his victims.

ACT: THEY SAID THEY HAD WOOD-CHIPPERS ALONG THE SHORE LINE OUT HERE AND THERE WAS BLOOD AND BODY PARTS IN THEM STILL.

staff sergeant DAVID PINNEY has heard the rumors too.

ACT: CARP ARE CARP. THEY ARE GOING TO EAT ANYTHING I THINK PEOPLE STORIES GET A LITTLE, YOU KNOW. I DONT THINK THERES ANYTHING TO IT. KIDS (LAUGHS)

rumor also has it that these soldiers can expect another tour here in the future. seth major hopes that is not the case.

ACT: I REALLY DONT WANT TO COME BACK AGAIN.

As one year at the network became two, then three, and finally four, it became easier—too easy, I think—to stride into wood-paneled studios and become a taxi driver bleeding from shrapnel in his back. Or an Iraqi police captain whose queue of recruits has just evaporated into dust. Affirmation of my “tracking” came in quiet little nods from engineers manning dials at the control boards. But certain characters, I came to find out, were better voiced by colleagues. The bearded editor upstairs, for example, would appear at my desk just before happy hour in Baghdad, after taking in a script, to become the voice of a cleric delivering a sermon. The red-faced staffer with a house on the Bay, on the other hand, usually stood in for farmers. And the field producer, who rides to work on a skateboard, prefers insurgents.

Sometimes, late at night, frantic requests for voiceovers would come from someone working the morning show on the far side of the building. This person was usually a talented producer, but one who hadn't yet heard the Arabic screams or Kurdish whispers still trickling off the satellite dish of a correspondent on the ground. In these moments I became a little proud, I recall, of tracking voiceovers in just two takes. One full of the anger or agony that our script seemed to suggest.

Another in a dull monotone, the kind of voice that could suffice, on deadline, for any kind of pain.

NIBRAS NASEER—A RAIL THIN 18 YEAR OLD—FLED IRAQ MORE THAN A YEAR AGO—AFTER HE SPENT 10 DAYS IN A HOSPITAL, HE SAYS, FOR INJURIES—THE RESULT OF SEVERE BEATINGS.

(doorbell—hot—and under—cross fade with kids sound) [...]

US SOLDIERS HAVE DISMANTLED A NUMBER OF TORTURE HOUSES IN IRAQ. IN PLACES LIKE THESE—FEW WERE SPARED, SAYS NASEER. INCLUDING AN 11 YEAR BOY. THE KIDNAPPERS ACCUSED HIM OF SPOTTING FOR US SOLDIERS—POINTING OUT EXPLOSIVE DEVICES HIDDEN IN HIS NEIGHBORHOOD. THEY FORCED HIM TO ADMIT HE HAD HELPED THE AMERICANS.

well, this little kid—they were beating him but not like us. What can you expect from a little kid, he was crying all the time.

what happened to the little boy? They took him out—and they killed him the same way—and I went crazy—I lost my mind.

AS NASEER TELLS HIS STORY—HIS SHOULDERS HUNCH SLIGHTLY. THE ONLY OUTWARD FLICKER OF EMOTION COMES WHEN HE RECOUNTS HIS UNEXPECTED RELEASE AFTER HIS FAMILY PAID A THIRTY THOUSAND DOLLAR RANSOM. HE HAS NO IDEA WHY HE IS ALIVE. OR IF HE WILL EVER GET OVER WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO HIM.

Our third and final morning in the basement begins with another circle. This one should form, explains the teacher, according to the hour at which the students went to bed last night. The glassy-eyed boy from Al Anbar shuffles to the far end of the line, says he didn't sleep until 7:45 AM thanks to a can of Monster energy drink. The room erupts in laughter. Most of the other students have clustered around 2:00 AM—the same hour that our campus's dormitories fall silent. But most won't say what kept them awake. Awkward silence sets in. Then, after some prodding, a Christian girl attending school in Irbil admits to a "complicated" interlude with R., a Muslim boy.

Again the Americans fan out among tables for conversations; this time I am joined by L., the student from Irbil, and another H., from one of Iraq's notorious

western provinces. This H. wears severe, carefully-applied eye shadow that forms green butterflies at her temples. She talks longingly about Kurdistan, whose tolerance of minorities and religious differences “reminds me of coming to America.” She describes a kind of magic, too, in walking Colorado streets with handsome boys like R. and not having village elders ask questions. Back home, H. says, she must tell the world “We’re just friends.” Her egalitarian wonder has been fed by literature. “I’m reading George Orwell—1984—and it’s just like Iraq, just like Iraq,” she tells me. “Also Salman Rushdie.” I recommend *Fahrenheit 451* and she nods excitedly. “These are books where there’s a political message, in the story, that you can’t quite see, yes?”

L., meanwhile, longs for South Dakota. Years ago her Christian (“but not religious”) parents managed to send her to a public high school near an Indian reservation, where the bitter cold reminded her of Kurdistan. I tell the girls about my grandfather’s birth farther north, in farming country that lacked electricity. About the horse-drawn wagon with a woodstove that carried him to school, about the cold sermons in a white church, and about the day the first light bulb came to town.

Our conversation ends abruptly with the arrival to the basement of plastic babies—a dozen of them dressed in terrycloth. The Red Cross is sponsoring CPR practice. “I’m glad to know how to do this,” says L., “but I could never do it in real life. Especially not with a baby!”

INTHENEXTROOMFIVEYEAROLDZAHRAHASHORRIFIC
BURNS ON HER THIN ARMS AND BACK. DOCTORS ARE
TRYING TO SAVE HER ALMOST SEVERED LEFT HAND.
SAJADAH HAMID READS HER STORIES.

Nat sound: her grand mother—(and continue ambi tail for next track)
SAJADAH, IN A TRADITIONAL LONG BLACK ROBE AND
HEAD SCARF, EXPLAINS HER GRAND DAUGHTER WAS
BADLY BURNED WHEN THEIR BAGHDAD HOUSE WAS HIT
BY A BOMB.

(Arabic with English provided)

“She saved her sister from the fire and that’s why her hands caught fire. Her sister died.”

ZAHRA LISTENS INTENTLY TO THIS EXPLANATION. HER
FACE BRIGHTENS WHEN ASKED HOW SHE IS DOING.

“I am comfortable here. They all like me here.”

Tonight, as I page through some 800 scripts from features and interviews produced for the network, I am beginning to suspect that I know very little about Iraq. Except, perhaps, for that fact that so many thousands have been hurt, so many more love their homeland and so few feel at ease. Take my new friends, for instance, the boys and girls who might be kidnapped if they were named in an American essay. They have returned to Iraq to spend their nights posting messages online.

“Stop Killing Iraqi Christians,” reads a Facebook invitation from one student.

“Colorado: How are you guys? Miss you so much.” This from the tall, goofy-looking kid who told me he tosses fried bread over the walls ringing the Green Zone, in exchange for money.

“Miss you all. I want to see you,” writes the girl named M. “How are you?”

“Miss you too,” the boy named M. replies. “I feel so sad and devastated by what happened yesterday in Baghdad, although I still have my friends.”

My other friend in Baghdad, the one with piles of cash on his mattress, is pushing a year in Iraq, all told, and sensing a kind of perpetuity. Early one Tuesday in September, with satellites blinking overhead, we tapped out a slow conversation.

1:17 AM Couldn't turn 40 in Baghdad or D.C. for that matter.

1:19 AM How's this shift? Any better or worse?

1:22 AM Well, the security situation is better. (Kind of—some good days, some bad.) But I am used to everything now.

1:47 AM Glad I caught you, man! We'll talk again soon.

1:48 AM Sorry I had to dip away. Let's please stay in close touch!

1:49 AM No worries, stay safe and keep the gum handy!

1:49 AM Gum is very important in Baghdad.

Some weeks later, with incumbent Prime Minister Maliki talking up Iraq's security, two minibuses carrying bombs said to be assembled inside the Green Zone tore apart on crowded Haifa Street, outside the Ministry of Justice. The attack killed 155 people and wounded hundreds more. Then, in early December, another barrage: 127 killed, over 400 wounded, and the remains of suicide vehicles left smoldering outside three government ministries, including Justice.

But it was an ear-splitting Monday morning in January, with parliamentary elections looming, that nearly took my friend's life. This time the targets were hotel compounds frequented by foreign journalists, including the Al Hamra, which sits

across the street from the little house by the Tigris; “an inelegant, 10-story wedge of concrete and glass,” wrote one reporter of our compound’s namesake. An Iraqi man working there told a colleague that his “chair was by one of the windows and shrapnel ... went through it. Luckily [I] wasn’t sitting in the chair.” Luck did not favor 36 people that day in Baghdad, and then half as many the following morning, at the city’s crime lab. And as dawn breaks here in Colorado and my clock radio begins to murmur, I can’t quit staring at *Great Times Together*, nor wondering how this friend and that one fared the night. I fall to wondering too, now, about what has become of the voices I left behind.

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