

An Excerpt from My Adventures in Iraq—2003

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The daytime temperature bobs between 135 and 143 degrees, a dry heat, as if that makes it any better. We've been in this hell hole, just outside Baghdad, since May. We still have no doors, windows, or air conditioning in our building.

I'm going crazy from the mortars, alarms, and gunfire, not to mention living with a dozen other female soldiers. Private quiet space and some time to myself are nowhere to be found. I'm certainly not finding either of these things in my quarters. On top of all this, there is the constant surveillance by nosy and bored soldiers. The leadership is convinced each day that "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" I need an escape. I need a way to relieve stress and find some solitude. A bicycle seems to be the answer.

I search stores via the Internet, looking for a bike that can handle the climate and daily ventures around my sprawling Army post. My criteria are simple: no more than \$100, including shipping, and a small frame, because I'm short. The task proves more difficult than I anticipated. Plenty of bikes are outside my budget, and many of those under \$100 are too big or sissy-like. Finally, after a week of searching, I find it.

But will they deliver it to Iraq? Actually, they just need to ship to an APO military address; the military will fly it to Iraq. *How difficult could that be?* Really difficult. After more searching, I find a bike at Toys R Us, a lifesaver in my mind. Not only is my bike under \$75 but shipping is free. My bike is perfect, a twenty-four-inch mountain bike, yellow, and just plain beautiful.

Days pass, and no sign of my bike. I've come to understand the concept of waiting two to three weeks for anything shipped to me in a theatre of war via the United States Postal Service. I have to hand it to all the mail handlers, truck

drivers, and pilots, though: they really do their best to get the mail through to the soldiers.

By now, it's late August and the sergeant in charge of picking up the mail walks into my windowless building. "Damn it, Sergeant, your damn bike is here! Do you know how heavy that piece of shit is?" she says. "I'm the only one doing mail today, get out here and help me." Maybe she's just jealous of my bike.

This is it! My Toys R Us bike has arrived. My sanity break is here. I imagine myself riding in the open, somewhere far from Iraq, where I'm not being shot at every day. After my shift ends I hop on and ride to see Tammi and Natalie at the quartermaster's unit in the hanger, which is really a giant concrete dome. My perfect yellow bike is a hit there, too, and several soldiers ask to ride it. *Why not?* We all need a little fun in the hell hole.

The next things I see are wheelies, bike tricks, and smiles on faces that haven't had reason to smile in a long time.

"Sarge," one of the young soldiers asks, "can I take this bike on the hanger and see if I can ride it down?"

I figure a three-foot drop to the ground won't hurt anything. It doesn't. A couple more guys try it and, then, something happens. Testosterone surges and now there are twenty guys cheering on the two soldiers taking turns riding my bike. It starts at three feet up the hanger. Then ten feet, then half way up and, after fifteen minutes of the soldiers calling each other unmanly names, one asks me if he can ride it from the top, about sixty feet down. I have to think about this. *What's my risk assessment? What benefit can be gained? Can he really make it down the hanger?*

"I really should say no, the risk assessment is too high," I say to the sergeant standing next to me. "But I want to see if he can do it." He agrees with me, so we both say okay. The climb up is long, taking a lot of effort from the kid. I start to notice the mortar and bullet holes in the building, not to mention the severe angle

from the hanger to the ground. Even if he can avoid the hole in the hanger, I figure he won't make it past the transition to the ground.

The young soldier pushes off, down the hanger.

“He doesn't have to pedal. Oh my God, he is picking up a lot of speed and that can't be good,” I think, “Crap. I should have said no.”

The moment seems to take forever. “He's almost at the bottom now. He's made it. He's actually made it. Uh oh, he's losing control. Crap. Crap. Crap.”

And then, he hits a patch of gravel. I see the back tire slip and he flies up above the seat and into the air, as if in slow motion. Now he's coming down, over the seat and rear tire.

“This can't be good. Crap. Crap. Crap.”

He lands in a cloud of dust, falling and sliding; we all gasp. I want to close my eyes and look away, but can't. I think for sure he'll never have kids after this. He tumbles to a stop; the dust settles and the crowd is silent. We just stand there, watching, contemplating the impending court martial, and waiting for any movement.

And then he jumps up, shouting, “Wwwwhhhhhheeeeeee!” He wants to do it again.

When we see he's okay, we all move over to my perfect yellow bike. It's totaled, back tire bent in half, pedals sheared off, fork twisted and frame bent. God bless those kids, swearing to me that they could fix it, no problem. It was something so precious to me that's now destroyed. But it was worth it, a break from our time in hell.

