Up the Road a Piece

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The window by my head offered almost no view, but through a gap beneath the hatchback of our Humvee, I could see what was left of the body we had just run over. A bundle of rags and bone, well-bloodied and rolled up onto itself as if furled. The pant legs flapped on the concrete and suggested an orientation to the remains, some sense of upper and lower, head-torso-legs. My breath caught in the back of my throat, and my point of focus narrowed to a pair of femurs, snapped into halves, jutting up out of the twisted fabric and free of all responsibility.

I hadn't spent much time outside the wire. For the past four months, I'd sat in an operations center wearing headphones, translating Iraqi Arabic into English for a military intelligence unit out of Fort Hood. Although temporary duty at Camp Victory was a pleasant change from Camp Ironhorse, which was decidedly on the wrong side of the tracks and far too close to Sadr City, it was a dull assignment. Coming off a long night shift, yawning my way out of Division headquarters, I'd run into a friend of mine from college, an officer. He turned me around and started introducing me to people he knew throughout the building, overstating my translation skills at every step. Amongst the introductions was a Civil Affairs lieutenant colonel. He needed another translator for a mission that day. Would I be willing to go for a ride? We'd be out for only a few hours; our escort would be provided by National Guardsmen, an infantry unit from somewhere in Texas assigned to pick up odd jobs like this one. "They've been here eleven months already," the colonel told me as the convoy approached a few minutes later. "Be nice to them."

The vehicles that pulled into the gravel in front of us were predictable: four Humvees, two with machine guns mounted atop. Under the dirt and dents, they were a motley array of camouflage patterns from three decades of National Guard duty: olive drab in places, sand brown in others, with a bit of woodland green-brown-black thrown in for good measure. The men who clambered out of the trucks were no different. Men in dusty and sweat-stained uniforms, mustaches and stubble-tinged gray.

The Guardsmen eyed me with a suspicion generally reserved for overly large pieces of luggage at the check-in counter of an airport. One of the men, a major and evidently my vehicle commander, pointed at a driver's side passenger door on one of the trucks and told me to get in. The four vehicles pulled out into the road as one, and we headed outside the gates and into the city of Baghdad.

Twenty minutes later, we were at a standstill, waiting to get onto Route Irish and across town. Traffic was backed up along the ramp, and military police units crept past us in both directions, blue lights flashing atop their vehicles. Our gunner shouted at a vehicle that was leaving the site of whatever disturbance lay ahead, and the gunner in the military police vehicle shouted back: suicide bomber, his car blew up in the middle of the ramp. Nobody near him at the time, probably an accidental detonation. Some Iraqi police and medics were trying to clean it up. The driver said *Good riddance* to no one in particular. The man next to me let his rifle sag toward the floorboards, and sat back to wait until the cleanup was completed.

An inch at a time, we approached the scene in the middle of the on-ramp. I peered out each of the windows in turn and the vehicle crept forward. No one else moved. They just sat in stony silence, a silence that was comfortable for them. No explanation was offered to the new kid. I didn't need an explanation, though. Through the windshield I could clearly see a rectangular hole in the ground, ragged but plainly in the shape of an automobile. It wasn't cartoonish: there were not blackened edges, there was no smoke coming from the ground. Just a hole. My imagination filled in the rest, starting with the basso profundo thump and wave of pressurized air that we'd felt a half mile back. I sat quietly and wondered what else might be ahead of us.

Exhaust hung in the air, adding to the already rich everyday scents drifting in from nearby homes: food cooked and rotted; fires built of plastic scraps; sewage. The major looked forward, lips set in a tight frown. When I first saw the bomb crater, we were still one hundred meters away. Now we were within ten meters and I was still staring at it. I'd never seen one, and I was the only one in the Humvee for whom this was new. The rest of these guys had been in Iraq since early 2004, and now they were getting to be what we called short-timers. They had seen their share, done their part. This hole in the ground and everything that went with it was old news to them. I had no idea what to expect next, and so sunk deeper into the small security available to me, squeezing the pistol grip of my M-16 and craning left and right to get a better view through the tiny windows around me.

The driver's fingers tapped out a ragged rhythm of the steering wheel, and he swung his head back and forth, scanning the roadsides around us. The man next to me shifted his rifle to his shoulder once more. The compact M-4 was held as high as the cramped quarters would allow, as if he might need to open fire within our vehicle at any moment. It occurred to me that my rifle, unadorned, clunky and ill-prepared for an urban battlefield, suffered in comparison to my neighbor's M-4, with its collapsible stock, elaborate telescopic sights, and snub-nosed barrel. His weapon mimicked him in its alertness. It seemed to possess a visceral, vital connection with its owner. I had none with my rifle: we had shared nothing. Half an hour ago I would have called my rifle well-maintained; now it seemed too bright, too clean. Too unseasoned. I had no clear notion how either of us might respond to whatever was ahead of us.

At the ten-minute mark, tension gave way to haste. The driver and the major decided to barrel through whatever roadblock lay ahead of us and get moving again. I could see that military police from another unit had cordoned off a section of the road, and a couple of their medics were looking hopelessly out into the road ahead of us. There was a path around them, though. With an oath and a sharp twist of the steering wheel, the Humvee squealed up off the road, around the cordon, and back onto the road. I bounced around. As we popped back onto the concrete, the major spoke to the driver. “Hey, watch it,” he said. “There’s a guy in the road.”

The body felt like little more than a speed bump beneath our tires. Perhaps the driver felt differently: maybe the slippery grinding mass under the tires pulled the wheel to the left or right for moment. Maybe not. I couldn't meet the driver’s eyes in that moment. Instead, I looked into the floorboards beneath my boots, as if I might meet the gaze of the man we'd run over. A wave of cold swept through me. I craned in my seat to look behind us, in case I could see anything through the narrow crack above the tailgate of our truck.

Although it no longer had human dimensions or attributes, the body had attendants. Two medics, Iraqis in neat white uniforms next to a tiny white ambulance, stood by the side of the road and shook their fists at us as we sped off down the on-ramp toward Route Irish.

I had no idea how to react. I froze and waited for the men around me to say something, do something. The laughter started above me; it was not what I was expecting. The gunner, perched atop our vehicle, swiveling through 180 degrees with his machine gun so that he could look behind us, cackled when the body appeared from beneath our vehicle. A comment passed across the front seat of the Humvee: that guy's not getting up again. The major laughed, slowly and quietly, as if not quite sure of the sound, then everyone was silent once more.

I'd met them only half an hour earlier, and I could only remember the driver's name. Not that it mattered; I was sitting right behind him, and anyway, he only paid attention to the major in the seat next to him. Nobody looked at me or spoke to me: I wasn't part of their unit; I wasn’t part of their orbit. I was eleven months up the road from wherever they were, assuming that where they were was an inevitable destination. But I wasn't with them. I was still with the man in the road. I was with the body that receded, furled up on itself like a flag wrapped around a flagpole.


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