

Letters
from
Iraq
April
& May
2004



JO WILDING

ColdType

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WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
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The Author

Jo Wilding is a 29-year-old activist, writer and trainee lawyer from Bristol, England. She first went to Iraq in August 2001 with Voices in the Wilderness to break the sanctions as an act of civil disobedience and to get a perspective on what was happening for the purpose of advocacy work in the UK. In November 2002 she forced the UK Customs and Excise to take her to court for breaking the sanctions. It was the first time the legality of the sanctions had been considered directly by a British court.

She returned to Iraq as an independent observer in February 2003 and stayed for the month before the war and the first 11 days of the bombing, before being expelled by the Iraqi foreign ministry as part of a purge of independent foreigners.

Her writing about the situation for ordinary people in Iraq was published around the world: the Guardian online, the New Zealand Herald, Counterpunch (US and internet), Australian radio and in Japan, Korea and Pakistan.

Before going to Iraq, she worked as a mental health advocate for Bristol Mind and in the Immigration Department at Bristol Law Centre, as well as studying part time for a law diploma. She completed the diploma in June 2003 and will start studying for bar qualification in September 2004.



FALLUJA, APRIL 11, 2004

I know what it looks like . . .

Trucks, oil tankers, tanks are burning on the highway east to Falluja. A stream of boys and men goes to and from a lorry that's not burnt, stripping it bare. We turn onto the back roads through Abu Ghraib, Nuha and Ahrar singing in Arabic, past the vehicles full of people and few possessions heading the other way, past the improvised refreshment posts along the way where boys throw food through the windows into the bus for us and for the people inside still inside Falluja.

The bus is following a car with the nephew of a local sheikh and a guide who has contacts with the Mujahedin and has cleared this with them. The reason I'm on the bus is that a journalist I knew turned up at my door at about 11 at night telling me things were desperate in Falluja – he'd been bringing out children with their limbs blown off. US soldiers were going around telling people to leave by dusk or be killed, but then when people fled with whatever they could carry, they were being stopped at the US military checkpoint on the edge of town and not let out, trapped, watching the sun go down.

He said aid vehicles and the media were being turned away. He said there was some medical aid that needed to go in and there was a better chance of it getting there with foreigners, westerners, to get through the

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American checkpoints. The rest of the way was secured by the armed groups who control the roads we'd travel on. We'd take in the medical supplies, see what else we could do to help and then use the bus to bring out people who needed to leave.

I'll spare you the whole decision-making process, all the questions we asked ourselves and each other, and you can spare me the accusations of madness, but what it came down to was this: if I don't do it, who will? Either way, we arrive in one piece.

We pile the stuff in the corridor and the boxes are torn open straight-away, the blankets most welcomed. It's not a hospital at all, but a clinic, a private doctor's surgery treating people free since air strikes destroyed the town's main hospital. Another has been improvised in a car garage. There's no anaesthetic. The blood bags are in a drinks fridge and the doctors warm them up under the hot tap in an unhygienic toilet.

Screaming women come in, praying, slapping their chests and faces. Ummi, *my mother*, one cries. I hold her until Maki, a consultant and acting director of the clinic, brings me to the bed where a child of about ten is lying with a bullet wound to the head. A smaller child is being treated for a similar injury in the next bed. A US sniper hit them and their grandmother as they left their home to flee Falluja.

The lights go out, the fan stops and in the sudden quiet someone holds up the flame of a cigarette lighter so the doctor can carry on operating. The electricity to the town has been cut off for days and when the generator runs out of petrol they just have to manage till it comes back on. Dave quickly donates his torch. The children are not going to live.

"Come," says Maki and ushers me alone into a room where an old woman has just had an abdominal bullet wound stitched up. Another in her leg is being dressed, the bed under her foot soaked with blood, a white flag still

clutched in her hand and the same story: “I was leaving my home to go to Baghdad when I was hit by a US sniper.” Some of the town is held by US marines, other parts by the local fighters. Their homes are in the US-controlled area and they are adamant that the snipers were US marines.

Snipers are causing not just carnage but also the paralysis of the ambulance and evacuation services. The biggest hospital after the main one was bombed is in US territory and cut off from the clinic by snipers. The ambulance has been repaired four times after bullet damage. Bodies are lying in the streets because no one can collect them without being shot.

Some said we were mad to come to Iraq; quite a few said we were completely insane to come to Falluja and now there are people telling me that getting in the back of the pickup to go past the snipers and get sick and injured people is the craziest thing they’ve ever seen. I know, though, that if we don’t, no one will.

He’s holding a white flag with a red crescent on; I don’t know his name. The men we pass wave us on when the driver explains where we’re going. The silence is ferocious in the no man’s land between the pickup at the edge of the Mujahedin territory, which has just gone from our sight around the last corner, and the marines’ line beyond the next wall; no birds, no music, no indication that anyone is still living until a gate opens opposite and a woman comes out, points.

We edge along to the hole in the wall where we can see the car, spent mortar shells around it. The feet are visible, crossed, in the gutter. I think he’s dead already. Two snipers are visible, too, on the corner of the building. I think they can’t see us so we need to let them know we’re there.

“Hello,” I bellow at the top of my voice. “Can you hear me?” They must. They’re about 30 metres from us, maybe less, and it’s so still you could hear the flies buzzing at fifty paces. I repeat myself a few times, still without

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reply, so decide to explain myself a bit more.

“We are a medical team. We want to remove this wounded man. Is it OK for us to come out and get him? Can you give us a signal that it’s OK?”

I’m sure they can hear me but they’re still not responding. Maybe they didn’t understand it all, so I say the same again. Dave yells, too, in his US accent. I yell again. Finally I think I hear a shout back. Not sure, I call again.

“Hello.”

“Yeah.”

“Can we come out and get him?”

“Yeah,” Slowly, our hands up, we go out. The black cloud that rises to greet us carries with it a hot, sour smell. Solidified, his legs are heavy. I leave them to Rana and Dave, our guide lifting under his hips. The Kalashnikov is attached by sticky blood to his hair and hand and we don’t want it with us so I put my foot on it as I pickup his shoulders and his blood falls out through the hole in his back. We heave him into the pickup as best we can and try to outrun the flies.

I suppose he was wearing flip flops because he’s barefoot now, no more than 20 years old, in imitation Nike pants and a blue and black striped football shirt with a big 28 on the back. As the orderlies from the clinic pull the young fighter off the pick up, yellow fluid pours from his mouth and they flip him over, face up, the way into the clinic clearing in front of them, straight up the ramp into the makeshift morgue.

We wash the blood off our hands and get in the ambulance. There are people trapped in the other hospital who need to go to Baghdad. Siren screaming, lights flashing, we huddle on the floor of the ambulance, passports and ID cards held out of the windows. We pack it with people, one with his chest taped together and a drip, one on a stretcher, legs jerking violently so I have to hold them down as we wheel him out, lifting him

over steps. The hospital is better able to treat them than the clinic but hasn't got enough of anything to sort them out properly and the only way to get them to Baghdad is on our bus, which means they have to go to the clinic. We're crammed on the floor of the ambulance in case it's shot at. Nisareen, a woman doctor about my age, can't stop a few tears once we're out.

The doctor rushes out to meet me: "Can you go to fetch a lady, she is pregnant and she is delivering the baby too soon?"

Azzam is driving, Ahmed is in the middle directing him and I'm by the window, the visible foreigner, the passport. Something scatters across my hand, simultaneous with the crashing of a bullet through the ambulance, some plastic part dislodged, flying through the window.

We stop, turn off the siren, keep the blue light flashing, wait, eyes on the silhouettes of men in US marine uniforms on the corners of the buildings. Several shots come. We duck, get as low as possible and I can see tiny red lights whipping past the window, past my head. Some, it's hard to tell, are hitting the ambulance. I start singing. What else do you do when someone's shooting at you? A tyre bursts with an enormous noise and a jerk of the vehicle.

I'm outraged. We're trying to get to a woman who's giving birth without any medical attention, without electricity, in a city under siege, in a clearly marked ambulance, and you're shooting at us. How dare you?

How dare you?

Azzam grabs the gearstick and gets the ambulance into reverse, another tyre bursting as we go over the ridge in the centre of the road, the shots still coming as we flee around the corner. I carry on singing. The wheels are scraping, burst rubber burning on the road.

The men run for a stretcher as we arrive and I shake my head. They spot

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the new bullet holes and run to see if we're OK. Is there any other way to get to her, I want to know. La, maaku tariq. *There is no other way.* They say we did the right thing. They say they've fixed the ambulance four times already and they'll fix it again but the radiator's gone and the wheels are buckled and she's still at home in the dark giving birth alone. I let her down.

We can't go out again. For one thing there's no ambulance and besides it's dark now and that means our foreign faces can't protect the people who go out with us or the people we pick up. Maki is the acting director of the place. He says he hated Saddam but now he hates the Americans more. We take off the blue gowns as the sky starts exploding somewhere beyond the building opposite. j10

Minutes later a car roars up to the clinic. I can hear him screaming before I can see that there's no skin left on his body. He's burnt from head to foot. For sure there's nothing they can do. He'll die of dehydration within a few days.

Another man is pulled from the car onto a stretcher. Cluster bombs, they say, although it's not clear whether they mean one or both of them. We set off walking to Mr Yasser's house, waiting at each corner for someone to check the street before we cross. A ball of fire falls from a plane, splits into smaller balls of bright white lights. I think they're cluster bombs, because cluster bombs are in the front of my mind, but they vanish, just magnesium flares, incredibly bright but short-lived, giving a flash picture of the town from above.

Yasser asks us all to introduce ourselves. I tell him I'm training to be a lawyer. One of the other men asks whether I know about international law. They want to know about the law on war crimes, what a war crime is. I tell them I know some of the Geneva Conventions, that I'll bring some

information next time I come and we can get someone to explain it in Arabic.

We bring up the matter of Nayoko. This group of fighters has nothing to do with the ones who are holding the Japanese hostages, but while they're thanking us for what we did this evening, we talk about the things Nayoko did for the street kids, how much they loved her. They can't promise anything but that they'll try and find out where she is and try to persuade the group to let her and the others go. I don't suppose it will make any difference. They're busy fighting a war in Falluja. They're unconnected with the other group. But it can't hurt to try. The planes are above us all night so that as I doze I forget I'm not on a long distance flight, the constant bass note of an unmanned reconnaissance drone overlaid with the frantic thrash of jets and the dull beat of helicopters and interrupted by the explosions. In the morning I make balloon dogs, giraffes and elephants for the little one, Abdullah, Aboudi, who's clearly distressed by the noise of the aircraft and explosions. I blow bubbles which he follows with his eyes. Finally, finally, I score a smile. The twins, 13 years old, laugh too, one of them an ambulance driver, both said to be handy with a Kalashnikov.

The doctors look haggard in the morning. None has slept more than a couple of hours a night for a week. One has had only eight hours of sleep in the last seven days, missing the funerals of his brother and aunt because he was needed at the hospital. "The dead we cannot help," Jassim said. "I must worry about the injured."

We go again, Dave, Rana and me, this time in a pick up. There are some sick people close to the marines' line who need evacuating. No one dares come out of their house because the marines are on top of the buildings shooting at anything that moves. Saad fetches us a white flag and tells us not to worry, he's checked and secured the road – no Mujahedin will fire

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at us. Peace is upon us, this 11-year-old child, his face covered with a keffiyeh, but for his bright brown eyes, his AK47 almost as tall as he is.

We shout again to the soldiers, hold up the flag with a red crescent sprayed onto it. Two come down from the building, cover this side and Rana mutters, "Allahu akbar. Please nobody take a shot at them." We jump down and tell them we need to get some sick people from the houses and they want Rana to go and bring out the family from the house whose roof they're on. Thirteen women and children are still inside, in one room, without food and water for the last 24 hours.

"We're going to be going through soon clearing the houses," the senior one says.

"What does that mean, clearing the houses?"

"Going into every one searching for weapons." He's checking his watch, can't tell me what will start when, of course, but there's going to be air strikes in support. "If you're going to do this you gotta do it soon."

We go down the street. There's a man, face down, in a white dishdasha, a small round red stain on his back. We run to him. Again the flies have got there first. Dave is at his shoulders, I'm by his knees and as we reach to roll him onto the stretcher Dave's hand goes through his chest, through the cavity left by the bullet that entered so neatly through his back and blew his heart out.

There's no weapon in his hand. Only when we arrive, his sons come out, crying, shouting. He was unarmed, they scream. He was unarmed. He just went out the gate and they shot him. None of them have dared come out since. No one had dared come to get his body, horrified, terrified, forced to violate the traditions of treating the body immediately. They couldn't have known we were coming so it's inconceivable that anyone came out and retrieved a weapon but left the body.

He was unarmed, 55 years old, shot in the back. We cover his face, carry him to the pick up. There's nothing to cover his body with. The sick woman is helped out of the house, the little girls around her hugging cloth bags to their bodies, whispering, "Baba. Baba." *Daddy*. Shaking, they let us go first, hands up, around the corner, then we usher them to the cab of the pick up, shielding their heads so they can't see him, the cuddly fat man stiff in the back.

The people seem to pour out of the houses now in the hope we can escort them safely out of the line of fire – kids, women, men, anxiously asking us whether they can all go, or only the women and children. We go to ask. The young marine tells us that men of fighting age can't leave. What's fighting age, I want to know. He contemplates. Anyone under 45. No lower limit. It appals me that all those men would be trapped in a city which is about to be destroyed. Not all of them are fighters, not all are armed. It's going to happen out of the view of the world, out of sight of the media, because most of the media in Falluja is embedded with the marines or turned away at the outskirts. Before we can pass the message on, two explosions scatter the crowd in the side street back into their houses.

Rana's with the marines evacuating the family from the house they're occupying. The pickup isn't back yet. The families are hiding behind their walls. We wait, because there's nothing else we can do. We wait in no man's land. The marines, at least, are watching us through binoculars; maybe the local fighters are, too.

I've got a disappearing hanky in my pocket so while I'm sitting like a lemon, nowhere to go, gunfire and explosions aplenty all around, I make the hanky disappear, reappear, disappear. It's always best, I think, to seem completely unthreatening and completely unconcerned, so no one worries about you enough to shoot. We can't wait too long, though. Rana's been

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gone ages. We have to go and get her to hurry. There's a young man in the group. She's talked them into letting him leave, too.

A man wants to use his police car to carry some of the people, a couple of elderly ones who can't walk far, the smallest children. It's missing a door. Who knows if he was really a police car or the car was reappropriated and just ended up there? People creep from their houses, huddle by the wall, follow us out, their hands up and walk up the street clutching babies, bags, each other.

The pickup gets back and we shove as many onto it as we can as an ambulance arrives from somewhere. A young man waves from the doorway of what's left of a house, his upper body bare, a blood soaked bandage around his arm, probably a fighter but it makes no difference once someone is wounded and unarmed. Getting the dead isn't essential. Like the doctor said, the dead don't need help, but if it's easy enough then we will. Since we're already OK with the soldiers and the ambulance is here, we run down to fetch them in. It's important in Islam to bury the body straightaway.

The ambulance follows us down. The soldiers start shouting in English at us for it to stop, pointing guns. It's moving fast. We're all yelling, signalling for it to stop but it seems to take forever for the driver to hear and see us. It stops. It stops, before they open fire. We haul them onto the stretchers and run, shove them in the back. Rana squeezes in the front with the wounded man and Dave and I crouch in the back beside the bodies. He says he had allergies as a kid and hasn't got much sense of smell. I wish, retrospectively, for childhood allergies, and stick my head out the window.

The bus is going to leave, taking the injured people back to Baghdad – the man with the burns, one of the women who was shot in the jaw and

shoulder by a sniper and several others. Rana says she's staying to help. Dave and I don't hesitate: we're staying too. "If I don't do it, who will?" has become an accidental motto and I'm acutely aware after the last foray how many people, how many women and children, are still in their houses because they've got nowhere to go, because they're scared to go out of the door or because they've chosen to stay.

Azzam says we have to go. He hasn't got contacts with every armed group, only with some. There are different issues to square with each one. We need to get these people back to Baghdad as quickly as we can. If we're kidnapped or killed it will cause even more problems, so it's better that we just get on the bus and leave and come back with him as soon as possible. It hurts to climb onto the bus when the doctor has just asked us to go and evacuate some more people. I hate the fact that a qualified medic can't travel in the ambulance but I can, just because I look like the sniper's sister or one of his mates, but that's the way it is today and the way it was yesterday and I feel like a traitor for leaving, but I can't see where I've got a choice. It's a war now and as alien as it is to me to do as I'm told, for once I've got to.

Jassim is scared. He harangues Mohammed constantly tries to pull him out of the driver's seat while we're moving. The woman with the gunshot wound is on the back seat, the man with the burns is in front of her, being fanned with cardboard from the empty boxes, his intravenous drips swinging from the rail along the ceiling of the bus. It's hot. It must be unbearable for him.

Saad comes onto the bus to wish us well for the journey. He shakes Dave's hand and then mine. I hold his in both of mine and tell him "Dir balak," take care, as if I could say anything more stupid to a pre-teen Mujahedin with an AK47 in his other hand, and our eyes meet and stay

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fixed, his full of fire and fear.

Can't I take him away? Can't I take him somewhere where he can be a child? Can't I make him a balloon giraffe and give him some drawing pens and tell him not to forget to brush his teeth? Can't I find the person who put the rifle in the hands of that little boy? Can't I tell someone about what that does to a child? Do I have to leave him here where there are heavily armed men all around him and lots of them are not on his side, however many sides there are in all of this? And of course I do. I have to leave him, like child soldiers everywhere.

The way back is tense, the bus almost getting stuck in a dip in the sand, people escaping in anything, even piled on the trailer of a tractor, lines of cars and pick ups and buses ferrying people to the dubious sanctuary of Baghdad, lines of men in vehicles queuing to get back into the city having got their families to safety, either to fight or to help evacuate more people. The driver, Jassim, the father, ignores Azzam and takes a different road so that suddenly we're not following the lead car and we're on a road that's controlled by a different armed group than the ones which know us.

A crowd of men waves guns to stop the bus. Apparently, they believe there are American soldiers on the bus, as if they wouldn't be in tanks or helicopters, and there are men getting out of their cars with shouts of "Sahafa Amreeki," *American journalists*. The passengers shout out of the windows, "Ana min Falluja," *I'm from Falluja*. Gunmen run onto the bus and see it's true, there are sick and injured and old people, Iraqis, and then relax, wave us on. We stop in Abu Ghraib and swap seats, foreigners in the front, Iraqis less visible, headscarves off so we look more western. The American soldiers are so happy to see westerners they don't mind too much about the Iraqis with us. They search the men and the bus, leaving the women unsearched because there are no women soldiers to search us.

Mohammed keeps asking me if things are going to be OK.

“Al-melaach wiyana, “ I tell him. *The angels are with us.* He laughs.

And then we're in Baghdad, delivering them to the hospitals, Nuha in tears as they take the burnt man off groaning and whimpering. She puts her arms around me and asks me to be her friend. I make her feel less isolated, she says, less alone.

And the satellite news says the cease-fire is holding and George Bush says to the troops on Easter Sunday that, “I know what we're doing in Iraq is right.” Shooting unarmed men in the back outside their family home is right. Shooting grandmothers with white flags is right? Shooting at women and children who are fleeing their homes is right? Firing at ambulances is right?

Well George, I know, too. I know what it looks like when you brutalise people so much that they've nothing left to lose. I know what it looks like when an operation is being done without anaesthetic because the hospitals are destroyed or under sniper fire and the city's under siege and aid isn't getting in properly. I know what it sounds like. I know what it looks like when tracer bullets are passing your head, even though you're in an ambulance. I know what it looks like when a man's chest is no longer inside him and what it smells like and I know what it looks like when his wife and children pour out of his house.

It's a crime and it's a disgrace to us all.



FALLUJA, APRIL 17, 2004

Kidnapped by the Mujahedin

Sergeant Tratner of the First Armoured Division is irritated. “Git back or you’ll git killed,” are his opening words. Lee says we’re Press, and the sergeant looks with disdain at the car. “In this piece of shit?” Makes us less of a target for kidnappers, Lee tells him. Suddenly he decides he recognises Lee from the TV. Based in Germany, he watches the BBC. He sees Lee on TV all the time. “Cool. Hey, can I have your autograph?”

Lee makes a scribble, unsure who he’s meant to be but happy to have a ticket through the checkpoint from which all the cars before us have been turned back, and Sergeant Tratner carries on. “You guys be careful in Falluja. We’re killing loads of those folks.” Detecting a lack of admiration on our part, he adds, “Well, they’re killing us, too. I like Falluja. I killed a bunch of them motherfuckers.”

I wish Sergeant Tratner were a caricature, a stereotype, but these are all direct quotations. We fiddle with our hijabs in the roasting heat. “You don’t have to wear those things any more,” he says. “You’re liberated now.” He laughs. I mention that more and more women are wearing hijabs nowadays because of increasing attacks on them.

A convoy of aid vehicles flying Red Crescent flags approaches the checkpoint, hesitating. “We don’t like to encourage them,” Sergeant Tratner

explains, his tongue loosened by the excitement of finding someone to talk to. “Jeez it’s good to meet someone that speaks English. Well, apart from ‘Mister’ and ‘please’ and ‘why’.”

“Haven’t you got translators?” someone asks him.

Sergeant Tratner points his rifle in the direction of the lead vehicle in the convoy. “I got the best translator in the world,” he says.

One ambulance comes through with us, the rest turn back. There are loads of supplies when we get to Falluja – food, water, medicine – at the clinic and the mosque which have come in on the back roads. The relief effort for the people there has been enormous, but the hospital is in the US-held part of town, cut off from the clinic by sniper fire. They can’t get any of the relief supplies in to the hospital nor the injured people out.

We load the ambulance with disinfectant, needles, bandages, food and water and set off, equipped this time with loudspeakers, pull up to a street corner and get out. The hospital is to the right, quite a way off; the marines are to the left. Four of us in blue paper smocks walk out, hands up, calling out that we’re a relief team, trying to deliver supplies to the hospital.

There’s no response and we walk slowly towards the hospital. We need the ambulance with us because there’s more stuff than we can carry, so we call out that we’re going to bring an ambulance with us, that we’ll walk and the ambulance will follow. The nose of the ambulance edges out into the street, shiny and new, brought in to replace the ones destroyed by sniper fire.

Shots rip down the street, two bangs and a zipping noise uncomfortably close. The ambulance springs back into the side road like it’s on a piece of elastic and we dart into the yard of the corner house, out through the side gate so we’re back beside the vehicle. This time we walk away from the hospital towards the marines, just us and the loudspeaker, no ambulance,

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to try and talk to them properly. Slowly, slowly, we take steps, shouting that we're unarmed, that we're a relief team, that we're trying to get supplies to the hospital.

Another two shots dissuade us. I'm furious. From behind the wall I inform them that their actions are in breach of the Geneva Conventions. "How would you feel if it was your sister in that hospital unable to get treated because some man with a gun wouldn't let the medical supplies through?" David takes me away as I'm about to call down a plague of warts on their trigger fingers.

Because it's the most urgent thing to do, we waste the rest of the precious daylight trying to find someone in authority that we can sort it out with. As darkness starts I'm still fuming and the hospital is still without disinfectant. We go into the house behind the clinic and the smell of death chokes me: the dried blood and the putrefying flesh evoking the memory of a few days earlier, sitting in the back of an ambulance with the rotting bodies and the flies.

The aerial bombardment starts with the night and we stand outside watching the explosions and the flames. No one can quite recall whether it's a theoretical cease-fire or not. Someone brings the remains of a rocket, unravelled into metal and wires, a fuel canister inside it, and it sits like a space alien on display on a piece of cloth on the pavement near the clinic while everyone gives it stares and a wide berth.

Someone comes round to give us a report: the Mujahedin have shot down a helicopter and killed 15 enemy soldiers. During the evening's street fighting 12 American soldiers have been killed. Six hundred were killed in an attack on their base but he can't tell us how, where or when. He says thousands of US soldiers' bodies have been dumped in the desert near Rutba, further east. I don't doubt that the US is under reporting its casu-

alties whenever it thinks it can get away with it but I suspect some over reporting this time. Someone whispers that he's the cousin of 'Comical Ali', the old Minister of Information. It's not true but it ought to be.

The cacophony of planes and explosions goes on through the night. I wake from my doze certain that rockets are being fired from the garden outside our room. Rhythmic, deep, resonating, the barrage goes on and the fear spreads in my belly anticipating an explosion from the air to stop the rocketeer. I can't keep still and wait for it so I go outside and realise he's at least a couple of streets away.

The noise quietsens as if soothed by a song of prayer from the mosque. Someone says that it's a plea to stop shooting. I don't know if it's true, but every time I hear different songs from the minaret I wonder what it means, whether it's a call to prayer, a call to arms, something else, maybe just someone singing the town back to sleep.

In the morning, the cease-fire negotiations begin again, centred, like everything else, in one of the local mosques. For eight days, people say, the US army has fought for control of a town of 350,000 people and now, with the fighters still armed in the street, they're trying to negotiate the terms of a cease-fire.

A body arrives at the hospital, a wound to the leg and his throat sliced open. The men say he was lying injured in the street and the marines came and slit his throat. A pickup races up and a man is pulled out with most of his arm missing, a stump with bits sticking out, pouring blood. He bleeds to death.

Two French journalists have been admitted to the town, under the protection of the mosque, and for their benefit the body is swaddled head to foot in bandages, carried to a van with no back doors and driven away by two boys including Aodeh, one of the twin boys we met on the first trip.

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Earlier a little girl was brought out, a polka dotted black headscarf around her face, pink T shirt under a black sleeveless cardigan with jeans, sparkly bobbles on her gloves, holding a Kalashnikov.

She was clean, her clothes were fresh and she was very cute, 11 years old, and after the photo one of the men – her father I think – took her away as if her job was done. I hope and believe she was only being used as a poster child, that she wasn't really involved in the fighting. She's no younger than the lad from the other day who I know is involved in the fighting, but I wish he wasn't either. While we wait, we chat with the sheikh in the mosque. He says the hospitals have recorded 1200 casualties, between 5-600 people dead in the first five days of fighting and 86 children killed in the first three days of fighting. There's no knowing how many have been hurt or killed in areas held by the US. A heavily pregnant woman was killed by a missile, her unborn child saved, the sheikh says, but already orphaned.

“Falluja people like peace but after we were attacked by the US they lost all their friends here. We had a few trained officers and soldiers from the old army, but now everyone has joined the effort. Not all of the men are fighting: some left with their families, some work in the clinics or move supplies or go in the negotiating teams. We are willing to fight until the last minute, even if it takes a hundred years.”

He says the official figure is 25% of the town controlled by the marines: “This is made up of small parts, a bit in the north east, a bit in the south east, the part around the entrance to the town, controlled with snipers and light vehicles.” The new unity between Shia and Sunni pleases him: “Falluja is Iraq and Iraq is Falluja. We received a delegation from all the governorates of Iraq to give aid and solidarity.”

The ceasefire takes effect from 9am. Those with vehicles are loading stuff

from the storage building opposite the mosque and moving it around the town. The opening up of the way to the hospital is one of the terms of the deal, so we're not really needed anymore. It's starting to feel as though there are different agendas being pursued that we could all too easily get caught up in, other people's politics and power struggles, so we decide to leave.

At the corner of town is a fork, a paved road curving round in front of the last of the houses, a track leading into the desert, the latter controlled by marines, who fire a warning shot when our driver gets out to negotiate a way through; the former by as yet invisible Mujahedin. The crossfire suddenly surrounds the car. David, head down, shifts into the driver's seat and backs us out of there but the only place to go is into the line of Mujahedin. One of the fighters jumps into the passenger seat and directs us.

"We're hostages, aren't we?" Billie says. No, it's fine, I say, sure that they're just directing us out of harm's way. The man in the passenger seat asks which country we're all from. Donna says she's Australian. Billie says she's British.

"Allahu akbar! Ahlan wa sahlam." Translated, it's more or less, *God is great. I'm pleased to meet you.* The others don't know the words but the drift is clear enough: "I think he just said he's got the two most valuable hostages in the world," Billie paraphrases.

We get out of the car, which in any case feels a bit uncomfortable now there's a man with a keffiyeh round his head pointing a loaded rocket launcher at it. They bring a jeep and as I climb in I can't help noticing that the driver has a grenade between his legs. I'm sure it's intended for the Americans, not for us, but nonetheless it's clear there's no room for dissent.

Still, it's not till we turn off the road back to the mosque and stop at a house, not until David and the other men are being searched, not really

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until a couple of the fighters take off their keffiyehs to tie the men's hands behind their backs, that I accept that I'm definitely a captive.

You look for ways out. You wonder whether they're going to kill you, make demands for your release, if they'll hurt you. You wait for the knives and the guns and the video camera. You tell yourself you're going to be OK. You think about your family, your mum finding out you're kidnapped. You decide you're going to be strong, because there's nothing else you can do. You fight the understanding that your life isn't fully in your hands any more, that you can't control what's happening. You turn to your best friend next to you and tell her you love her, with all your heart.

And then I'm put in a different car from her and I can only hope they take us to the same place and try in vain to notice where we're going, recognise some landmarks, but the truth is that I'm without any sense of direction at all and have trouble remembering left from right, even on a good day, but in any case there's no one on the streets but fighters, nowhere to hide.

Donna, Billie, David, Ahrar and I are delivered to another house, cushions around the walls of a big room, a bed at one end of the room beside a cabinet of crockery and ornaments. A tall, dignified man in a brown keffiyeh sits and begins interviewing Donna – her name, where she's from, what she does there, what she's doing in Iraq, why she came to Falluja.

He decides to separate us, has the others move me, David and Billie into the next room under the guard of a man in jeans too loose for his skinny body, trainers and a shirt, his face covered except for his eyes. It's not much to go on but I doubt he's beyond late teens, a little nervous, calmed by our calmness. After a while he decides he shouldn't let us talk to each other, signals for silence.

Billie's not well, hot and sick. She lies down on the cushions, head on her

arm. The fighter brings a pillow and gently lifts her head onto it, takes all the stuff off the cushions so he can fold the blanket over her. The other one brings a cotton sheet and unfolds the blanket, covers her with the sheet and then replaces the blanket around her: tucked in by the Mujahedin.

It's my turn next for questioning. I feel OK. All I can tell him is the truth. He wants to know the same things: where I live, what I'm doing in Iraq, what I'm doing in Falluja, so I tell him about the circus, about the ambulance trips, about the snipers shooting at us. Then he asks what the British people think about the war. I'm not sure what the right answer is. I don't know what the national opinion is these days. I try to compute what's least likely to make him think it's worth keeping me.

If people oppose the occupation, he says, how is it that the government could carry on and do it? He's genuinely interested but also sarcastic: surely, the great liberators must be truly democratic, truly governing by the will of the people? Instead of the extended version of Jo's rant about the UK constitution, he starts asking about Billie. I know what her answers will be so it's easy. I dodge the issue when he moves on to David and hope he won't press me. I don't know him very well, I say, because I don't know if he wants to mention that he's also a journalist. I tell the man I've just met him. I just know him as Martinez.

He thanks me and we're done. David's next. Donna, Billie and I talk quietly about the interviews and the boy guarding us doesn't object. Someone asks if we want chai. Warm giggles come from the kitchen; maybe the two young men imagining that their mates could see them now, masked, Kalashnikov-wielding, brewing tea for a load of women.

David's interview is short and when I come back from the outside toilet, still alert for an escape route, as improbable as I know it is, the others are all back in the main room again and the tea is ready. Billie's bag comes in

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to be fished through, a camera, a minidisc recorder. The man goes through the pictures on the camera, the missile outside the clinic and a few from Baghdad, listens to the interview with the Sheikh on the minidisc.

Donna's camera has similar pictures of the missile, some of the street kids, some from around the flat. The tape in the video camera is from the opening of the new youth centre in Al-Daura, backing up her testimony that she's the director of an organisation which sets up projects for kids. The other tape contains a performance by the Boomchucka Circus, backing up mine that I'm a clown.

No one brings in my bag or David's. I think it's best not to mention this, in case there's anything to offend them in either of them. In particular, I think it's best they don't notice anyone's passport in case it encourages them to look for all our passports because Billie's contains a stamp from Israel. It's from when she was working in Palestine but it's better not to spark the suspicion in the first place. Ahrar, the questioning over, is close to hysterical. She's more frightened of her family's reaction to her having been out all the previous night than of the armed men holding us. We cuddle and stroke and pacify her as best we can, tell her we'll tell her family it wasn't her fault. The trouble was that, by the time we left Baghdad to come here, it was already too late for her to get home the same evening, and now she's afraid it's going to be a second night.

I quietly start singing, unsure whether that's allowed. The others join in where they know the words. By the end of the song her sobs have stopped and her only word is, "Continue," so we do, song after song until the prayer call begins and it's impolite to sing at the same time.

Ahrar gets tearful again. Donna tries to comfort her. "I have a big faith in God," she says. "Yes, but you don't know Mama," Ahrar wails.

Before the war and before we came to Falluja the first time I remember

feeling that it's impossible to know how you'll react to something like being under fire. I couldn't have imagined either how I'd react to this, this unpredictable situation, these masked and armed men, the fear, the uncertainty. Repeatedly they tell us not to be afraid, "We are Moslems. We will not hurt you."

My instinct tells me I'm going to be OK. Still my mind wanders to the question of whether they'll shoot us against a wall or just open fire in the room, whether they'll take us out one by one or we'll all be killed together, whether they'll save the bullets and cut our throats, how long it hurts when you're shot, if it's instantly over or if there's some echo of the agony of the metal ripping through your flesh after your life is gone.

I don't need those thoughts and I push them out of my way because I know the others are going through the same thoughts: what's this going to do to my mum? What's going to happen? What's it going to feel like? It wouldn't be fair to mention it aloud so there's be nothing to do but sit and stew with it. There's nothing we can do about this situation but wait it out and keep our heads together.

But what I tell myself is this: I can't change the course of this at the moment and if they do point a rifle at me or hold a knife to my throat and I know it's the last moment of my life and there's nothing I can do, then I'm determined not to beg or flinch because I was right to come to Falluja and to try to evacuate people and get supplies to the hospitals, and to die for trying to do that isn't ideal, but it's OK.

They bring our bags in and I make a hanky disappear. The guard, a different one now, is unimpressed. It's black magic. It's haram [sinful]. It's an affront to Allah. Oops. I show him the secret of the trick in the hope he'll let me off. Then I make a balloon giraffe for his kids, who he's taken away to the safety of Baghdad.

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“My brother was killed and my brother’s son and my sister’s son. My other brother is in the prison at Abu Ghraib. I am the last one left. Can you imagine? And this morning my best friend was killed. He was wounded in the leg and lying in the street and the Americans came and cut his throat.”

That was the one who came into the hospital this morning. Oh shit. Why wouldn’t they kill us?

But the day goes by and we carry on breathing, dozing, talking. They bring food, apologise for not bringing more, promise again that they’re not going to hurt us. As it gets dark, behind the windows partly blocked by sandbags, they light a paraffin lamp. The room gets hotter and hotter and it’s a relief when they take us out to the car to move again, although change feels somehow threatening at the same time.

The new house is huge, with electricity. The four women are shown to a room and David has to stay in the main room with the men. This was his biggest fear all along, being separated from the rest of us. We take off the hijabs that we’ve kept on all day. One of the men knocks on the door and, looking at the ground, tells us they’ve checked everything and, Inshaa Allah, we’ll be taken back to Baghdad in the morning. They can’t let us go now because we’ll be kidnapped by some other group. They feed us, bring us tea, supply us with blankets and we find pretexts and excuses to nip through the main room to check on David, bringing him half an orange, a chunk of chocolate, so he knows we’re still thinking of him. He’s more vulnerable than us because we’ve got each other to laugh and sing and talk with. Everything that’s happened, although you can never be sure, says they’re not going to hurt women. David’s not so comfortable.

The night is filled with the racket of what sounds like a huge plumbing system somewhere beyond the house, a rhythmic series of explosions in quick succession like an immense grinding noise: apparently it’s the sound

of cluster bombs. Billie and I hold each other's hands all night because we can. In the morning there's still a knot of doubt in my belly. They said they'd take us home after the morning prayers, more or less at first light, and it's been light for ages. Maybe they just told us we'd be released to keep us calm and quiet. But they do let us go: they take us to one of the local imams who says he will drive us home. At the edge of Falluja is a queue of vehicles, some already turning back from the checkpoint. The passengers say the US soldiers fired as they approached. We get out of the car, hijabs off, and start the whole rigmarole again, loudspeaker, hands up, through the maze of concrete and wire, shouting that we're an international group of ambulance volunteers trying to leave Falluja, we're unarmed and please don't shoot us.

Eventually we can see the soldiers; eventually they lower the guns, tell us to put our hands down, they're not going to shoot us. "My bad," one says. Apparently it's US slang for acknowledging your own mistake. "We're not going to fire any more warning shots." We tell them we've got two cars to bring through and ask about the rest of the cars. They agree to open up the checkpoint to women, children and old men. The trouble is, most of the women don't drive and so can't leave unless their husbands are allowed to drive them. We persuade them to let through cars with a male driver even if he is 'of fighting age', if he's got his family with him.

The fear in Falluja is that, when most of the women and children are gone, the town is going to be destroyed and everyone killed, by massive aerial bombardment or with a thermobaric weapon or something. Ahrar tries to explain that the men who want to leave are the ones who don't want to fight.

"Oh, we want to keep them in there," the marine says. "There's fighters coming from all over Iraq into Falluja and we want to keep them all in

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there so we can kill them all more easily.” But these are the ones who want to get out, those of the locals who don’t want to fight. It doesn’t matter though: we’ve got all we’re going to get out of them. We tell the crowd of anxious refugees and leave another local imam as the go-between. The road is quiet but for our small convoy until another roadblock. The imam talks to some locals, tells Ahrar there are Americans ahead. Hijabs off again, we heave ourselves out of the car for another round.

In the sickly, hot silence there are a few cracks but no responses to our shouts. Dust erupts from a house a way off and we wonder if we’re walking into a battle. Shouting in English, trying to be as obviously foreign as possible is the only tactic for walking into marines’ lines but it’s a bit of a risk when the lines are not clear. We keep yelling for them to give us a wave if they can hear us. There’s no response.

“Wait a minute,” David says. “Are those marines or are they Muja?”

Oh shit. Tell us we’re not walking into a Mujahedin line. We hesitate. Maybe we need to go back to the car and get the imam to come instead.

“No, I think it’s OK. I think they’re marines.”

“Decide! Tell us!” As if he’s got any more information than the rest of us.

The men start gesturing, big arm movements, pointing to their left, our right, go towards the bridge. It’s a signal, which we’ve been asking for, but it doesn’t mean they’re not another group of kidnappers. Finally one yells. They’re green berets, which is why they didn’t quite look like the marines we’d got used to. Billie and I go back towards the cars to signal for them to come. No one fancies walking the aching gap between us and them again, but for time and time and time the cars don’t move, despite our arm waving, my roaring through the megaphone. Finally they shift and we scurry back into the relative cover of the bushes around the bridge.

“Are you crazy?” asks one of the soldiers.

I feel a bit closer to insanity than I did before that walk into the unknown, I have to confess, as mortars thunder out of their encampment. He tells me not to worry, they're outgoing. Of course there's some comfort in this. An outgoing mortar is preferable in many ways to an incoming one, but it seems at the same time like a bit of an invitation, RSVP, written all over it. Past them, the second car leaves us. David hugs the driver like he'd just brought him back from the dead and joins us in our car. There's still Abu Ghraib, still Shuala, still who knows what between us and home. Ahrar wants to stop and phone her mum from a roadside booth in the middle of Shuala and even the imam is looking panicky as the call drags on, his carload of foreigners just sitting waiting for someone to notice us. Exhausted and exhibiting the early symptoms of tetchiness, we drag her back to the car and escape. It's only when we walk through the door of our apartment that we're sure we're coming home, all of us yelling and talking at once, telling the story, laughing over the surreal moments, hugging each other, retrieving hidden passports from underwear.

"We're laughing about it now," Billie says, "but there were moments . . ."

On the news they say Nayoko and the other Japanese hostages have been released, that Watanabi, the Japanese photographer who hung out with us when we took the circus to Samawa, has disappeared with a colleague. They say the cease-fire is holding in Falluja. Harb comes round to tell me off, but I'm unrepentant. I still think it was the right thing to do. They took us because we were foreigners acting strangely in the middle of their war. They found out what we were doing and let us go. On the way out we were able to open up the checkpoint which meant people were able to get out of Falluja to safety. If that was all we did it would still have been worth it. But still in a quiet moment later on I whisper a thank you to the cheeky angels who look after clowns and ambulance volunteers.



BAGHDAD, APRIL 21, 2004

With the refugees

“**T**his is my honeymoon,” Heba said, in the crowded corridor of bomb shelter number 24 in the Al-Ameriya district of Baghdad. Married just under a month, she fled Falluja with her extended family. “There were bombs all the time. We couldn’t sleep. Even if you fell asleep, nightmares woke you up. We just gathered the whole family in one room and waited.

“It is better here than in Falluja. We hear bombs but they are far away and not so many. But there is no water in here: we have to go outside for water for drinking, cooking and washing ourselves and our clothes and we buy ice. There is no fridge, no fans, no air conditioning, no generator and only one stove for us all. We have to go to the garden for a toilet and that’s a problem at night. Everyone has diarrhoea from the ice that we bought.

“Now I am a bride but I couldn’t bring any of my clothes.” As if there would be any privacy anyway, the 88 members of 18 families piled on mattresses in the long narrow passage from the door to the kitchen at the end, from where a stream of tea and sweet sesame biscuits is flowing, part of the commemoration of Heba’s uncle.

He died seven days ago, the day after they arrived in Baghdad. Heba’s dad, Rabiia, said his brother died of sadness. Because all the family’s identity documents were in Falluja, they were unable to get the body from the

hospital. Rabiia met some friends, doctors who worked in the hospital, and they were able to help him get the body back after a day.

He sent two of his sons back to Falluja with their families yesterday and they phoned him at seven in the evening to tell him not to try to come back. Things are worse than before. They are trying to get back out of Falluja but all the roads are closed. His nephew tried to get back into Falluja today with his family but likewise found all the roads closed. "Now everyone in Falluja is in prison."

Their story is the same as thousands of others. Faris Mohammed, secretary general of the Iraqi Red Crescent, believes that about 65% of the 300,000 population of Falluja have left their homes in the recent fighting. Of these 200,000 displaced people, most are staying with extended family in Baghdad or elsewhere or have been given shelter by strangers with space to spare. About 200 families are homeless.

"We left because of the bombs," Rabiia explained. "The kids were frightened, crying all night. We left on April 9th. Lots of our relatives had cars but there were problems getting fuel. We got all 18 families together and then waited at the checkpoint. The Americans made us wait hours in the sun to exhaust us. The children were crying with hunger. Then the Americans changed the route we had to take and made us travel by a long side road.

We all arrived at different times – some slept in the cars at the checkpoint and arrived in Baghdad the next morning. They would only let through one young man as the driver with each car and only if there was no old man. Some of the families here couldn't get their young men through so they had to come by the river. There was no fuel, no water, no generators, no hospitals there, so families couldn't live."

His youngest son Mustafa is eleven and wakes up crying every night,

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saying there's going to be a bomb. Miluuk says it's not just their son: all the kids are having nightmares. Her brother-in-law's child has started sleep walking, asking to go back to his house. Two of Miluuk's daughters, Zainab and Maha, have decided to quit school. Maha has developed a blood pressure problem and a stomach microbe that was caused by the bad water. A nurse called Hadil from Falluja visited them and gave them a list of medicines they need, a couple of injections for one of the women who's pregnant, some medication for stomach ulcers. He runs a pharmacy but has already donated all the medicines he had. Rabiia asked the Red Crescent for help but as yet they've had nothing. He built a toilet with his own money but there's not much left.

Miluuk's sister Sabriya teaches disabled people in the Shuala area. She never got married because of all the wars. "Wars eat your youth. When I was in college we made a census, boys and girls. There were about half girls and half boys but now there are maybe ten times as many girls.

"I can't explain to you. I feel hopeless. I don't know what the future will bring. I thought life would change, things would settle down, this war would be the last for Iraq. They said they came to give peace and human rights but now we're figuring out that that's not true. They don't understand Iraq so they make problems that lead to conflict. They said they would rebuild but they're destroying. Clean water and electricity would be enough."

The story is the same wherever you go. The women feel depressed, the children are distressed, people are trying to get back into Falluja and finding the roads closed; those still inside Falluja are trying to get out and finding the same obstacle.

Two men, two women and eight kids sat in one of the white tents of the new Iraqi Red Crescent camp set up for families fleeing Falluja. Forty fam-

ilies have registered but these two are the only residents so far because there's no sanitation. Unicef promised to provide it, according to Qasim Lefteh, the manager of the camp, but have so far failed to show up and sort it out. Meanwhile they've got permission to use the toilets in the school next door to the football fields they're living on.

Fifty eight members of the extended family left after aerial bombing killed several of their neighbours. "Two of my relatives died and I buried them with my own hands," Adil explained. "There is no way to the hospital so even if they are not killed, injured people are treated at home and there are no medicines; so they die.

"Even if the ambulances tried to come, the Americans tried to shoot them. I saw the Americans shoot at a man and we stayed there from morning till night and no one could help him. The Americans shot at the ambulance. I could see them. They were on the tops of the buildings.

"Many times it happened. Whenever we saw ambulances the Americans shot at them. They even took over a minaret. They shot a family of women and children going to the market and killed them. A family of 25 people was killed when the Americans bombed their house. We saw a fighter plane firing rockets at their house."

Their house was in the Shahid district which was heavily bombed. The government hospital is in the same district and was not destroyed, as some reports indicated, but closed down by the American troops. There was a lot of bombing when they left and the aid which had come into the town couldn't be distributed. As they drove out they could see rockets being fired.

The kids were listless. Thirteen-year-old Sara kept giving me shy smiles and when the grown-ups had gone, she came and sat with me, asked why. "Why did the Americans destroy our homes? This is not their country.

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Why did they invade our town? They made us homeless, to wander from house to house asking for help. Bombing went on all day and night and people sent cars from Baghdad to get the people who needed to leave.” Her brother Hadil is only four but has already learned to hate Americans after he was playing with a toy gun in the street and the troops raided and searched their home. Sara was full of fury.

It took a while to score a smile out of any of the little ones. When the others went off to look at some of the aid that had been given, I started clowning them, blowing bubbles and making balloon animals. Hadil and Hamoudie sat wide-eyed for a couple of minutes, edging closer, and Mustafa, little and in green. Hamoudie popped one first, his face transforming as the soap splattered on his face. The adults faces relaxed into smiles too when they came back and saw the kids dancing in the middle of clouds of shiny bubbles.

“If they open the roads we will go back,” said Eman, Sara’s mum. “Life here is miserable. The Red Crescent are nice to us but there is no work, even for the men.”

The Red Crescent has been supplying food and medicine to Falluja since April 9th but decided to set up a camp for the hundreds of people fleeing. “We chose a site in Namiya district, about 7km south of Falluja but when we arrived to start setting up, the area was already a battle zone. We withdrew another 10km to a site 17km south of Falluja but then the battle spread there, too. When we returned, we found some of the tents already burnt,” Faris Mohammed explained.

“We tried to choose sites that were near the road but the problem is that sometimes in these situations the insurgents shoot at troops as they pass and the troops shoot back at the insurgents, so we decided to set the camp up in Baghdad instead, away from the borders of Falluja.”

But he was adamant that the claims made about Red Crescent ambulances being used to move weapons and insurgents are false. “None of our ambulances has gone missing and we have not been using them to move weapons. During the conflict we were the only Iraqi organisation with permission to go in and out of Falluja. There were no problems from either side until Wednesday, when we had supplies coming in from Dubai. We sent them straight to Falluja but the Americans sent them back saying each vehicle had to have specific permission 24 hours in advance.”

When I got home, Raed said the colour had come back to my cheeks for the first time since the Falluja trips. “I think you have been playing with children,” he said. It’s true. It did make a difference. The violence starts to pervade everything: Karlu and the other kids on our street were playing Hostages as we left in the morning, Ahmed holding one hand over Karlu’s eyes and making sawing motions at his throat with the other hand.

And the news says there’s more fighting in Falluja.



BAGHDAD, APRIL 26, 2004

Kids remember these things

Rabiia lowered his voice and informed us that two of the women are crazy. They talk all the time and their rooms in the camp are untidy. They are the mothers of widow-headed households, more refugees from Falluja. White haired under her abaya, toothless, her face lined with the contour map of her life, Fawzia's eyes lit up at having new people to talk to. She chattered happily in Arabic to Anna, who didn't understand.

Her daughter-in-law Ikhlas is a Kurdish woman with a tiny daughter, Jwana. The strain cracked her voice as she explained that her sister Sena's husband died two years ago and now her husband is responsible for all of them, without work and crammed into a room in a house which a local man opened up to families fleeing Falluja, near to the bomb shelter where the rest of the family are staying. There's no kitchen there for eight kids, six women and a man. Sena, too, started to cry. Four of her children were with her; the fifth staying in Falluja with an uncle.

Beyda, at 18 the youngest sister, fled Falluja with them and another stayed in Falluja where her husband, only 33 years old, died a couple of days ago from a heart problem. Rabiia told us about him on the last visit: he had to be taken by boat across the Euphrates to the hospital because the roads were closed. He spent a day there and then died. His mother is

sick and can't look after herself and his father is too ill to take care of her.

Sena's daughter Sheyma sat still white with shock, unspeaking, unsmiling, fourteen years old and utterly despairing. She's left school. There doesn't seem any point in it. There doesn't seem any energy to find hope to invest in the future.

The little ones still smiled and laughed at the bubbles and balloons but when I gave them drawing things, unprompted, they started drawing aeroplanes dropping missiles on houses, some kind of structure with an Iraqi flag firing back at the aeroplane. Iraq is chaotic and dangerous and I'm glad the others left before it all got worse but I wished then that my clowns were here to turn tanks and bombs into magicians and jokers again.

Because they fled with so little, they need almost everything now. Heba and Israa sneaked me away to tell me they needed underwear and sanitary towels. Living from hand to mouth, with no work because all their jobs are in Falluja, there isn't even enough for obvious basics. Rabiia said he's running out of money to feed the extended family.

Ali, Heba's new husband, was in the army for two and a half years, until the war. Waiting in the trenches, there were explosions everywhere. He'd no desire to fight anyway and when two bombs fell nearby and didn't explode, he got in the pickup and left, took off his uniform and came to Heba's family's house. He was lying down when we arrived, in pain with his upper back after being hit by a car a while ago.

Israa is 23 and a philosophy student in Baghdad university, planning to be a teacher when she's finished. She normally stays with other family members in Baghdad during the week and the universities have reopened now after the more widespread fighting, so she's still able to go to university, but most of the Falluja students have stopped going in protest. When

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she arrived she was told about the boycott and decided to join it, but like Zainab and Maha, like Shayma, a big part of the reason is not protest but exhaustion, depression, homesickness, warsickness, hopelessness.

When gossiping about our lives became too much like a counselling session, we opted for a lighter note, for something utterly insignificant, giggling about Enders' hair, which was sticking out not unlike a clown's ought to, except that he's a journalist, trying to conduct a serious interview with their dad. They wanted to know who cut it. No one, apparently, for quite a while, so I said I'd do it.

There are now 24 families of Rabiia's extended family staying in Baghdad, three of them headed by widows, totalling 121 people. One son, Ahmed Firas Ibrahim, is still trapped inside the town after he went back. Rabiia said he's advised all the other families not to try to go back yet. The Al-Jolan district was attacked, he said: the locals were not fighting that day, when the Americans came and started raiding houses. The women were screaming and the Mujahedin came out to try and defend them.

"We had to leave our houses unguarded," Rabiia said. "We have heard that the Americans are going into empty houses but not taking anything. We have heard that there are some people starting to steal stuff from the houses but the imams are forbidding it and punishing people who do it."

Rabiia is no Saddam fan: "Saddam is a criminal. I used to be in prison for many years. They put me in a room where I could not see the sun. It started in 1971 and I stayed in Syria for four years in exile because my party, the Arab Nationalist Party, was banned. Then he excused us and we came back to Iraq but I was arrested in the mosque and jailed for 15 years for being in the party. They put electricity in my ears. I told them I no longer had contact with the party.

"There are a lot of Baathists in Falluja and a lot of Baathists everywhere

in Iraq, but the people fighting in Falluja are just defending their homes and families. I was hoping for something positive from this occupation, but I used to have work, at least, and now there is none. We could throw them out with violence but the violence wouldn't stop there, once it started. I still believe in my party and I am angry at Bremer."

He was in the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the ICDC, which used Shelter No 24 as a station, so he knew the building would be unlocked and he could bring the family there. He was told to go to the local assembly to register in order to get help but refuses to do it because he's convinced that there's a plot between the local assembly and someone from the Red Crescent to get aid and keep it for themselves.

Of another agency, he says they make people stand in a line and give supplies every four days. It's embarrassing, he says, and he won't do it. As much as I know there is still a lot of mistrust, as much as I know that it is sometimes warranted and that there are dishonest people in power here, as much as I can empathise with his pride being wounded at having to stand in line for handouts, I also know it's the only way the family can get any meaningful supply of aid but no matter how many times I told him it was the only way, he still repeated, "I cannot."

The phone has been their main source of news from Falluja, getting through when they can to family and friends who are still inside, but the landline to the shelter has been cut off and now they rely on people getting out. Each day we ask them, ask the Red Crescent, ask the people in the camp; each day they say there's been fighting, there's been bombing, there's no way in through the farms or there's one way in through the farms. When the terms of the cease-fire permitted a certain number of families per day to return, people hesitated, unsure the cease-fire would hold, reluctant to drive back into the aerial bombardment.

LETTERS FROM IRAQ

There are 67 families now at the Iraqi Red Crescent camp, seven of them new arrivals today. The toilets are finally being built and should be finished by midday tomorrow; meanwhile the women are using the facilities in the school on one side of the camp and the men are using those in the mosque on the other.

Qusay Ali Yasseen, spokesman for the IRC, said there are a lot of kids, especially, suffering from diarrhoea, either from unclean water they had to drink on the journey or from unhygienic conditions since they arrived in Baghdad, their immune systems suppressed by trauma and shock. Chest infections are also rife among the kids because of the heat. Some of them walked for a day or two to safety.

In the middle of each day, local people arrive and unload trays, boxes and pans of food. They have taken on the responsibility of feeding the increasing numbers of homeless, Qusay said. Through the day, other locals arrived in cars to offer help. A three truck convoy flying Unicef banners unloaded boxes of parts for a water tank, a 70 foot tent for a children's area and several crates of crayons and paper and other kids' stuff.

For today though, and until the tent is up, there was nothing for the kids and Boomchucka lived again, yelled through the camp by small people with too much energy and nervous energy to contain. We played parachute games, blew clouds of bubbles and did a good bout of therapeutic shouting on the dusty gap between tents. The kids – proof of how little they've got – begged us to come back tomorrow. The trauma is still fresh with them: you can see it when the planes and helicopters scream overhead. You can see it in the desperation of their need for diversion.

Before we left, they started chanting, "Zain, zain, Falluja," [*good, good, Falluja*]. Kids remember things like this: who made them homeless, who killed their relatives, regardless of any later argument that it wasn't as sim-

ple as that or it was all their parents' fault. The news, again, says more fighting in Falluja. Some journalists rang to ask us about the new plan that the US has come up with, as if those of us here know anything about it except that they're making war on another whole generation.

So they told us. They told us if the local fighters don't hand over their weapons by Tuesday there's going to be a renewed attack by the US and already the marines have moved into the Spanish base in Najaf ready to invade the city. They say they won't enter any of the holy sites but Sadr's a cleric so the chances are that's where he'd be and Najaf is a minefield of holy sites, including an immense graveyard that's a guerrilla fighter's dream and there's immense potential for antagonising the entire Shia population. I wonder if there's going to come a time when Iraq runs out of 'why's.



SADR CITY, APRIL 28, 2004

Death in the morning

Asraa's mother, her sisters, sisters-in-law and cousins heard an explosion about 11 in the morning and another about three in the afternoon. They hear a couple every day, just in their small area of Thawra, or Sadr City. The second one, the afternoon one, went through Israa's bedroom ceiling.

"I was in my house," Israa's husband said. It was around three on Saturday, April 24th. His friend came to visit, so he was sitting with him in the visitors' room with Nuredin and Huda, the older two children, while Israa lay down with the youngest child, Abdullah.

"I went to ask my wife if she would make tea for us, but she said she was too tired, so I went back to my friend. After a while I heard a horrible explosion. My friend went out to see what had happened. I thought our house was OK because nothing happened to the room I was in. My friend said, don't come out; stay in the house. I pushed past him. I tried to go out but there were people coming up the stairs towards me saying the explosion is in your apartment.

"I opened the door to the bedroom and saw light coming in through the ceiling but it was full of smoke and dust. I couldn't see anything. I was trying to feel my way, to touch something, calling Israa, Israa. I found her body with her belly open and her bowels outside. I went out of the room

and told my friend she was not there.

“Two of my friends went in and took the little one from her arms. She was still cuddling him. I couldn’t believe something bad had happened to the person I loved. I said, if my son was fine then my wife was, too. I kept telling myself I didn’t see her body. I gave Abdullah to my friend and then went to check on the other two kids who were still in the room I was in before. They were very frightened.

“When I came out, I heard one of my friends telling another that Israa was dead. I can’t remember anything else until I woke up with the kids beside me and people crying all around. I can still hear the explosion in my ears. I didn’t see the mortar, but I’m sure it was the Americans. They came to the house later and took away the shell pieces. They couldn’t say it wasn’t them that fired it.

“They told the owner of the house they will pay compensation if they prove it’s an American shell. But what could they have been aiming at? In my neighbourhood there is a hospital, a school, houses, an electricity plant. Do they want to attack those? I believe it was the Americans who fired it, but even if it wasn’t them, it’s because of them. Even if someone else fired it, it’s still because of the occupation.”

Nuredin, at six the oldest of the three kids, lay in his dad’s lap chewing a plastic ruler. Abdullah just cried and cried in the next room with the women. “No one can comfort him,” his grandma said. “He needs his mother. The children will stay with Israa’s family; their dad stays sometimes with her family, sometimes with his. Israa was thirty, working in a nearby tax office.

“What am I going to tell my grandchildren when they grow up and ask what happened to their mother? That she died defending her country? She died asleep in her bed.”

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From the roof of the house, you can see the monument to the Unknown Soldier, shaped like two blue halves of an egg, which has been taken over as a US base. The owner of the house said all the neighbours who saw the explosion told him the mortar came from that direction.

The other explosion that Israa's sisters heard was around the corner, a mortar hitting the pavement outside the front of another residential house, killing a grandfather and a little girl. It happened an hour or so after the explosion in the Chicken Market killed 12, maybe 14 people and injured at least 35 more.

The stories, the individual families, the overall numbers are important as a record of what is happening to ordinary Iraqis now. But there is also this: Thawra is described by Western media as a "slum city", home to between two and a half and four million Shia people, mainly poor, densely crowded and bullied ferociously by Saddam.

A dozen men gathered in the room to tell us about the death of the child and the old man. Mohammed told me how they welcomed the Americans when they first arrived. "I gave them cigarettes. We thought anything would be better. Even Saddam at his worst was better than the Americans." Another son pulled shrapnel from his pocket. The explosion, he said, filled the houses, shattering all the glass, and killed three people and injured ten. One victim, Jassim, was a 58-year-old builder. He was unwell and walking in the street because it was supposed to be good for his health. Six-year-old Zainab was walking to the shop to buy eggs with her three-year-old sister Noor and their grandma, Thanwa, both of whom were injured when Zainab was killed.

"All we know is it was a US mortar," Faisal said. "It had the markings on the shell pieces. We don't know which direction it came from. It was calm and quiet that day. They bombed to try to provoke us so then they can kill

us. There are no foreign fighters here. We don't accept strangers here. They raid houses saying they're looking for foreign fighters.

"All this trouble is because they closed a newspaper, because it exposed the truth about Bremer. Why didn't they close the newspapers that exposed the scandal about Bill Clinton and Monica? We didn't do anything to them. They drive through here on patrols all the time and there haven't been any attacks from us because we are waiting for orders from Najaf."

A vehement debate broke out over Sistani and Al-Sadr, over whose orders were to be followed. "Why do you differentiate between Sistani and Al-Sadr?" one demanded. "They are the same," another insisted. They differed a bit over whether there were differences; they also differed over whether the Americans were unequivocally worse than Saddam. The latter, in his time, closed more newspapers, for example.

Still they were unanimous in wanting the Americans to leave now. "Immediately," Hussein said. "They didn't do anything for us. They only invaded. They only brought terrorism." They talked about the impossibility of sleeping with helicopters constantly overhead, about the nightly house raids and arrests of young men, about the frequent explosions, mortars falling close to the hospital.

Kerim wanted us to see his mother in the hospital. We didn't have the proper permission to go in but the Facilities Protection Service guards who had seen all the bodies come in didn't much care for the sensitivities of the Ministry of Health and its procedures. An old man was sweeping the floor with a palm branch as the guard told us about a mortar hitting the neighbourhood next to the hospital at 5am the day before yesterday.

Thanwa pointed through her abaya at the places where shrapnel had pierced her body. Kerim's cousin was lying nearby. In front of the house

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when the mortar hit, he had serious internal injuries, part of his bowel severed. “Most of the women in here were hurt in the chicken market explosion,” she said. The Souk Ad-Dejaj actually sells scrap metal rather than birds.

“It was only a mortar,” Saad the security guard explained, but they heard the explosion from the hospital. People buy refilled gas canisters from flatbed vehicles or horse drawn carts which traipse around the city, the drivers hooting or banging a stick on a canister to advertise their arrival. The mortar hit one of those. “They found the driver’s head on the roof of the market.”

People are adamant that they didn’t hear any shooting before the explosion. Mayada Radhi was washing clothes at home, opposite the market, when she heard the blast. Shell fragments blasted through the door. She went outside to look for her two children, didn’t find them and came back indoors where she saw the blood on her own body, felt the pain and passed out. Hamid, her brother-in-law, a boy in a football shirt and baseball cap, was woken up by the explosion and came out of the house to see pieces of bodies lying in the street.

Five of the family were killed last year in a bombing in the southern town of Kut: only her mother and a brother and sister survived. The hole in the road, the pitted walls of the buildings, the strainer-like front of the lorry standing in the middle of the market place, the dried blood spatters tell a story which rated a mention on the main networks but little more.

In the epic traffic jam surrounding the entire Karrada area, a man with a patched up face and a towel around his shoulders in a pickup indicated that he’d been hurt by an explosion. We opened the windows and he told us he was injured at the Chicken Market.

This is what’s become of the bit of town that welcomed the Americans.

The temperature hit 40 degrees Celsius (that's 105 F for those among you who think that way). It's almost too hot to do anything, certainly too hot to sleep when there's no electricity and sometimes no water, either. That and the traffic jam meant we didn't make it to visit and entertain the kids at the camp.

Late, maybe half past eleven, Rana phoned to say there were loads of soldiers around her house; she thought they were going back to the hospital next door to arrest more of the patients.

For the first time all day the air coming through the windows was cool, the streets were deserted but for the packs of scavenging dogs, so at last you could drive through the city. But, when we got there, the soldiers were gone and there was no one to watch us change the wheel on the taxi, push start it and traipse back home.



BAGHDAD, APRIL 30, 2004

Woman's world

Zaid's sister Zainab got engaged today. Everyone was exhausted from dancing all afternoon at the party but it was the first time we'd seen each other in months so no one was too tired to dance some more. Tying sashes around my hips and their own, they moved the rug to create a dance floor under the ceiling fan.

You generally see the women in anything from long loose clothes, with or without a hijab, to a full-on tent, gliding along like a black phantom with even their faces covered, but the underwear stalls in the market can be taken as fair warning of what might lie beneath.

The tassels of the sashes flicked wildly back and forth with the movement of their hips, their heads back, shoulders quivering, swaying down to the ground where they kneel facing each other shaking their busts, wiggling everything there is to wiggle, sensuous, sexual, energetic, whether the music is Arabic or western. They do a clicking thing with the fingers, palms together, clamped by the thumbs, fingers outstretched, the first finger of the right hand making a loud clicking against the knuckle of the first finger on the left. There's another rhythm, holding one hand above the other, clicking the fingers on one hand then the other then clapping the palm of the top hand against the closed fist of the lower hand so it makes a sound

like a horse galloping.

Asmaa has been looking for work but can't find any. She used to teach computing before Bibo, the younger child, was born, first in a public college then, after she had Mimi, in private lessons. Now there's no work to be had; women, especially, struggle to find jobs because the sanctions and then the war have extinguished so many jobs. It's boring and frustrating to be at home all day, especially for someone like Asmaa with good qualifications, not going out because there's nowhere to go if you're unemployed and it's not safe to wander about.

"We do all the work of the house and then we chat on the internet and we download music and dance and we watch TV." They know they're among the luckier ones to be able to afford the internet in their house. I had to laugh at myself, watching TV with them, music videos on the Arabic channels, again a mixture of western and Arabic singers, gorgeous women in tiny clothes gyrating. Since the recent foreigner-kidnapping spate, we've all been disappearing under mountains of clothes, hijabs – the head covering, jubas – the long coats and abayas – the loose black cloaks.

When we were held in Falluja, some of the guards were of the belief that even the most innocuous music could encourage dangerous sexual feelings in women. It was "haram" – sinful. We invented the term "haramo-vision" for all the raunchy dancing on TV when we got back. Asmaa and her sisters-in-law raucously told rude jokes, talked openly about sex. Like my friend Sabriya, their favourite channels are the sex channels, which they watch for both entertainment and ideas. "Iraqi women love the sex channels," they both said.

Even Sabriya's tiny house – a single bed in a square cabin of metal, a wooden extension built on to it and an outdoor kitchen and toilet – still

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has a TV. For those who can't go out it's a breathing tube to the world outside. Women have not completely disappeared: you still see them in the markets, on the buses, working in the banks, begging in the traffic queues. You still see them inside the universities. In Karrada you still see them, a few of them, dressed up and shopping.

But as Asmaa said, there is nowhere to go. The coffee shops are the preserve of men. The streets are dangerous. The shops are just depressing if you haven't got any money to spend. There are no cinemas. There are few places where women can meet and just share gossip and company.

In the Sufi mosque at Friday prayers, the women greeted each other with hugs and hundreds of kisses, whispering eagerly at the back while the kids frisked about, until a woman in a huge white outfit, the Prayer Police, came past to tell them to face the front, be quiet, keep their children under control. When she'd gone, the chatter would start again.

Lines of women prayed, standing, bowing, kneeling, a young girl praying next to her mum, a smaller one going through some of the motions but mostly trying to balance on her head in some semblance of the bow from a kneeling position. A tiny, curly headed girl in a white frilly dress danced about, tumbled over one of the grown ups.

The Prayer Prefect came through the hall spraying rosewater on all the women's faces, her own face now joyous, the severity gone, stopping to plant kisses on some of the foreheads, including ours, so the room smelled of roses and the breeze from the four fans on each pillar cooled our skin where it was wet and not swathed in abaya.

The imam's voice was piped through from the men's part of the mosque next door, asking for strength for the people of Falluja, calling on them not to give in to the Americans. Everyone moved to the front to stand close together for the final prayer and then the real business began of exchanging

ing the week's news. Men gathered outside waiting for wives and sisters and in-laws who were queuing for the return of their shoes, reluctant to cut short the only social occasion of the week.

Leaving the room, some of the women pulled down face coverings so that only their eyes were exposed, even the space between the eyes concealed behind a spur of fabric. Sabriya told us that in her neighbourhood the most heavily covered women are often the most promiscuous. Apparently there is a way of having intimate relations without, biologically speaking, losing one's virginity.

And then they were gone, hidden away for another week and I went on to the tent camp because I promised to go back and play games again with the kids from Falluja. There are 97 families living there and the overflow who can't be squeezed in are staying in a school nearby. There's a cooking tent now, so they're not reliant on local people to provide food. The toilets are built and a water tank is working. The kids' tent is due to go up tomorrow. One of the children from the camp was killed yesterday along with another child from the neighbourhood. They were playing near the camp when they were apparently caught in crossfire between Iraqis and Americans, gunfire, mortar fire: no one seemed quite sure. Either way the trauma, the boredom, the constant closeness of death was all too evident on the kids' faces as they greeted us with uproarious glee.

They were too manic even for a fairly raucous game like Cat and Mouse, so we played a lot of parachute football, made plenty of chances to just dance about shouting under the billowing rosy glow of the parachute and yelled "Boomchucka" a lot. The relief of having the children diverted for a while was all over the women's faces. Some of the children still shrink from the helicopters, others rage at them as they thunder over, shaking the ground, churning the air.

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The men came out to play as well, one or two recognising us from the mosque and the clinic in Falluja. Someone forwarded me a column from a UK newspaper sneering at the idea of a circus in Iraq at a time like this. Sorry, but you're wrong. Play is what these people need, not just the children.



FALLUJA, MAY 2, 2004

Blaming the Americans

There is life, again, on the streets of Falluja. There are hugs, there are greetings, there are children watching the town refill from gateways that look out onto the roads where we ran and rode with stretchers and bodies and terrified families. Boys waved at each other across roofs that have been, for the last month, the preserve of snipers. The patchwork of territories and no man's lands is home again.

On the outskirts of Baghdad on Saturday afternoon, a US army fuel tanker was burning furiously and at the checkpoint on the main highway beside the Hay Askeri [Military Quarter] district of Falluja, US soldiers were turning away an exhausted looking family crammed into a Kia, a small Chinese made minibus. Thus far you might not notice anything has changed. Their orders, in the last couple of minutes, were not to let the media in either. Gunfire sounded. They said there were still snipers over there, indicating the buildings of Hay Askeri, couldn't say whether theirs or the Mujahedin's.

The Iraqi soldiers, wearing armbands of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps were new, though, in camouflage uniforms and assorted shoes. Part of the security problem in the last year has been that the Coalition hasn't properly equipped the Iraqi police and army. It's common to see the police in

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blue shirts, IP arm bands and their ordinary jeans and trainers, which makes it hard to tell a genuine checkpoint from an Ali Baba one.

The checkpoint was, apparently arbitrarily, only letting through 200 families a day, of around 8,000 thought to have left, so the thin dusty back roads that were our way in and out during the fighting were the main route for the returners. Saad came through earlier in the day to check that it was safe. There was no fighting on Friday or Saturday and no checkpoints this way, he said.

Seventeen family members were travelling back together in a pick up. They left 26 days ago, on the fourth day of fighting, because of the air strikes. They stayed, crowded, with relatives in Abu Ghraib. They turned off the road onto a dusty track beside the river, two men and a woman in the front, another man in the back holding up a white cloth, 13-year-old Hussein leaning on the bare pole behind the cab. One of the boys held his arms in the air in celebration as we drove into Falluja.

Everyone raised a hand in greeting to the ICDC guards who waved us straight through a checkpoint. Everyone raised a hand also to the Mujahedin fighters in ones, twos and little clusters around the town, their faces still cloth-covered, Kalashnikovs still at hand, walking in and out of houses, one holding up the Iraqi flag, one in a black balaclava guarding a corner.

They are waiting, Saad said. "They will shoot the Americans if they come back. We will not accept their patrols. We blame only the Americans for what happened. The fighting in Falluja was because they were shooting civilians. Let them have our oil, we don't care, but let us live in peace. This is only people from Falluja fighting, not foreigners, because of the tribes. If the Americans kill a father or a brother then the tribes want revenge, but we don't let strangers in."

A car flashed its lights, slowed down, passed bags of food to the people in the pick up, offered another to us. Women, men, small children stood by a shop, its shutters open, food on sale in scales and bags. As the pickup slowed down the kids jumped out, ran in through the gate as if to check, then dashed back out to fetch me. Hussein and Betul wanted me to see their garden, a small green space with slender trees growing up poles. They pointed out where flowers had been in the spring, asked for their photo taken, two brothers and two sisters, all dwarves.

Hussein's best friend and next door neighbour, a tall thin boy with dark smudges of malnutrition under his eyes, had been back a couple of hours. They shook hands, Hussein bouncing with excitement, Ali looking nervous and exhausted. Their dad showed us the hole in the ground that they'd had to use as a well after the electricity was cut to the whole town, early on, as collective punishment.

Abdulkabr's house was just around the corner, a pile of refilled plastic water bottles in the corner of a room whose floor was covered with pebbles. A trench runs through the hallway because there's no drain, a couple of blankets spread out beside it. The back of the house is open, steps leading up to the roof. It wasn't damaged by the bombing, they said: "We were already poor, without them attacking us."

The last drop-off was a few streets away, the children running across the road to reunite with the other part of the family who had got back earlier in the day, cuddling the baby, reorienting. Safa'a wiped her eyes on her abaya amid her laughter, and embraced her children and everyone else's. You have to come back, she insists, when we've straightened things out.

Before we left they gave us a list of phone numbers for the rest of the extended family still in Baghdad, so we could call them when we got back to town and tell them it's safe to go home. The fuel tanker was still burn-

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ing as we drove back at sunset and still this morning, as aid vehicles and families flowed towards the checkpoint.

Again the seemingly arbitrary limit of 200 families a day was in place, a family comprising up to 25 individuals. All but the driver, women with infants and invalids were required to walk through the checkpoint, to be frisked with a wand while the vehicle was checked with mirrors on the underside.

Lots of them left a month ago, just as the fighting started, and have moved between relatives ever since. Almost as many were leaving as coming in, driving out to fetch the family members still outside. Nazar was going to fetch five surviving relatives from hospital; his mother Zahra and his year-old nephew Sejad had been killed by a missile that landed among them, fired from a US plane as they fled their home, walking to find a vehicle.

A local man, Salam, with a small minibus had already brought back his own family and started ferrying others back. He'd brought two families from Baghdad this morning, and was returning for more. He hadn't heard that only 200 would be allowed through in the day. It would take him another couple of hours to get back so he'd have to go in the back way.

He stayed in farms around the town through the fighting; his own house was fine but there are many, he said, whose houses had been destroyed in Hay Julan, Hay Shuhada and Hay Askeri.

But it's not a happy homecoming for everyone. Maki at the clinic said there are still people missing, who haven't yet turned up either living or dead, and the casualty figures from the clinics, hospitals and mosques have yet to be collated.

Several hundred, at least, can never come home.



BAGHDAD, MAY 5, 2004

America's shame

The thing about prison is that you're locked away. No one can see you unless they're let in or you're let out. Suddenly – and I am relieved that the world knows about it at last – the abuse of prisoners in Iraq has become partly visible. The photos made news in a way that countless Iraqi people's stories did not. The Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) has been taking statements and testimonies from released detainees and their relatives for months – www.cpt.org – as has an awesome Italian woman called Paola Gasparoli and there are several Iraqi human rights organisations working on individual cases. And yes, they do also work on cases relating to the old government.

The pictures which have been published cause outrage and rightly so but they are the tip of the iceberg. Women are often detained because their husbands are wanted. There have been many reports of them being kept naked. There have also been a lot of women detained because they were prostitutes used by high-ranking officials of the old leadership. A woman human rights worker from one of the major organisations working on detainee issues disappeared into a US prison for two months. It is known that many women have been detained, including over a dozen bank clerks, to force them to pay for the discrepancy between the genuine cur-

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rency handed in and that given out in the January changeover. They were told to pay out new currency for all notes handed in, even suspect ones, because there was no way of verifying which were real. But to be imprisoned is deeply shameful for a woman, mainly because it is assumed that she will have been raped, so most are unwilling to talk about what happened, even confidentially and there is as a result very little information about women detainees.

One prisoner told CPT about hearing rumours of a mass grave under the prison. He said that he and fellow prisoners dug under their tent and found recently dead bodies a few feet down. There were stories, independently back up by various former detainees, of demonstrations against conditions in the camp being brutally suppressed by soldiers and another man reported one incident where the prisoners were shouting “Freedom” and soldiers opened fire, killing four men and injuring three.

There are reports in the cases known to me, to CPT and to the local human rights organisations of the following: Extrajudicial executions during a raid which turned out to be on the wrong house. Violent arrests of children from their school. A prisoner having his toenail being pried off by guards. Prisoners being forced to swallow liquid. Psychological torture: being left blindfolded in an open air passage, a tank driving towards them so they thought they would be run over and killed. A minor reported having his buttocks held apart by soldiers who were kicking his anus.

The following appear routinely throughout the statements of detainees and their families:

- Beating and kicking of prisoners and of residents during house raids.
- Soldiers and guard treading on backs and heads.
- Guns pointed at children or held to their heads during raids.
- Denial of water.

- Denial of food or very low quantities and poor quality of food, sometimes including pork which is forbidden for Muslims.

- Denial of blankets, shade or air conditioning.

- Excessive chemicals being added to water so it is dangerous to drink.

- Denial of washing and toilet facilities, both within the prison camps and during long road transfers.

- \\– Hands being tied behind the back for prolonged periods, including when this prevents the prisoners from drinking water.

- Hands being tied so tightly that the arms swell. Denial of medical attention or being taken to a military ‘doctor’ who kicks and otherwise abuses or else ignores and refuses to examine the prisoner.

- Overcrowding of tents so that there is not enough room to lie down to sleep.

- Prisoners being forced to kneel or squat all day and to remain in the sun all day in temperatures of up to 120 degrees F.

- Detention of minors. Individuals being kept for their entire detention in only underwear or nightwear, having been refused the chance to get dressed when arrested at night, sometimes suffering severe sunburn as a result.

- Severe verbal abuse.

- Theft of money and jewellery by US soldiers during the raid.

- Failure to return documentation, IDs, passports and other personal property that was with the prisoner when detained.

- Use of Kuwaiti military as translators and prison guards, who are apparently particularly aggressive with Iraqi detainees, believing that they are taking revenge for the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Additionally there is no provision for detainees to be given access to legal advice or representation. From arrest, it can take weeks even to be

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processed. There is limited provision for family visits and relatives have to wait at prison gates with the tag number of the prisoner. Most are told to return in several weeks or months.

It may be impossible for the family to find out the tag number, because names are transliterated into English and stored in a computer. There is no standardised transliteration system for Arabic into English and a tiny difference in the spelling of a name could make it impossible to trace the prisoner, leaving the family uncertain which jail the person is in or even whether he is still alive and lost in the system somewhere. There is a huge amount of evidence that US forces are acting on false information and 'malicious tips' which they do not bother to investigate or verify before carrying out raids and arrests. Accusations include harbouring wanted members of the old regime who had in fact already been arrested, being a member of the Fedayeen or trafficking weapons, with one man who had been repeatedly tortured by the Baathists being jailed for being a Baathist.

The fact that the 'information' is false is evidenced by the fact that so many are released without any charges or evidence being brought against them. Of 63 former or current detainees interviewed by CPT members, not one was convicted of anything. Unfortunately, because the review board meets so irregularly, it can take many months before the release without charge is effected.

Mass arrests also occur, with soldiers seizing every man in a given area after an incident, which may have involved only one or two individuals, or during a raid. In some cases the raid has been on the wrong house and the soldiers have admitted the mistake but nonetheless arrested the young men in the house.

The detentions often mean the loss of the family's only earner and also the only driver, so that children can't get to school, and in some cases loss

of the family home if they can't pay the rent. There are indications that some families have managed to retrieve individuals from the prisons by way of bribes to people working with the coalition forces. Others say they would gladly pay if they could find someone reliable to give money to. Depression is ubiquitous among the prisoners and some families report severe behavioural changes following release.

This information relates to US prisons. I'm sorry that I haven't got any for the British troops in the south. There are one or two local human rights groups down there but fewer international activists and fewer journalists. The pressure needs to be kept up so the detainees don't just disappear again. The governments involved have to be pressed for more information and to take responsibility for and control of their troops.

Lawyers acting for the US soldiers charged are claiming that it was a system-wide problem and their clients are not responsible because they weren't given clear guidelines. Do you really need a guideline to know you're not meant to beat, kick and sexually abuse a prisoner? But their individual guilt shouldn't be used to absolve those higher up the system of theirs.

The commanders are responsible, right to the top of the military, right to the political leadership, the ministers and secretaries of state whose job it was to provide clear rules, supervision, protections, to know what was going on and to get rid of individuals responsible. They won't take that responsibility of their own accord. It's left to us to persuade them.



BAGHDAD, MAY 6, 2004

The price of life

I've moved down the street. This has mainly advantages but one notable disadvantage in that I'm a couple of hundred metres closer to "The Green Zone", as in "They're bombing the..." The Green Zone, for those who have never needed to know, is the heavily fortified bit which most of the decision makers and foreign workers in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) never leave because of a theory that it's somehow more dangerous to be on the streets of Baghdad than walled into the most heavily attacked part of it.

Sure enough, first thing in the morning there was a car bomb just outside it. Another advantage of the new apartment is that there's a generator right outside my window, powering a roaring air conditioner. The Fourteenth of July Bridge provides access from Abu Nawas Street, across the Tigris, and soldiers manning the checkpoint approach the cars waiting to cross. It seems the soldier came as usual to look in the car before it reached the checkpoint and the driver detonated it, killing himself, the soldier and six other Iraqis.

In Falluja, they are still finding bodies, bodies in the rubble of the houses crushed by aerial bombing by the US in Al-Julan, Hay Askeri and Shuhada, bodies buried in gardens, bodies being brought to the football fields turned into cemeteries. There are some very tiny graves. There are

people still missing. The 600-deaths estimate put out by most of the media seems on the low side. If the killings of four US mercenaries were the reason for the attack on Falluja then the ratio is at least 150 Iraqis to one American, maybe 250. From the other side, the Iraqi side, the resistance side, the Iraqi life is worth more. If the killings of 18 Fallujans shortly before the killings of the mercenaries were the spark for the latter then one American life is worth just four and a half Iraqis, a little less than the six-to-one of the car bombing.

There is, of course, a difference between armed self-defence when your town is being invaded, like Falluja, and setting off bombs in the street but in the end it comes down to this: there has been enough killing. There has been too much killing.

The US military says it will begin patrols through the town again on May 10th. The many people of Falluja that I've talked to say they can never accept US troops on their streets again after all they've done. They say the Mujahedin are still there, are waiting, will kill them if they try to re-enter the town. Perhaps the US command is hoping that, having gone home after so long away, people will have lost their will to go through it all again and will beg their sons and brothers and fathers not to fight anymore, leaving the troops an unhindered passage back into the town.

There's already been a massacre in Falluja, a living town turned into a desert of humanity where to step outside to look for food and water or to flee for safety was to risk death from a US gunman on top of the next building, where young men died fighting, in uniforms and in tracksuit pants and trainers. With every death, the journey back gets longer. There doesn't need to be any more.

Meanwhile we've been trying to get into Najaf and Kerbala, where Sattar is setting up field hospitals to help deal with the sick and the expect-

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ed and actual casualties. He's a civil engineer, now running a driving company since the sanctions and the Baathists combined to eradicate the possibility of work that he was qualified for. During the war, while looking for some neighbours in the hospitals, he realised that hundreds of people needed help and volunteered. In Najaf the troops closed down the main hospital, which houses almost two thirds of the 950 or so beds the city has.

The extra difficulty in Najaf – apart from the obvious one of US troops preparing to attack the city – is the increasing number of factions involved. The various leaders are starting to publicly express disagreement and people in the town, dependent on the pilgrim trade for their income, are none too impressed with the economic effects of the stand off. Again every step, every fracture created, is one bit further from peace.

That all this is going on makes it hard to leave, that and the fact that I love this place and quite a few of the people in it, but I'm going to, in a few days, as I knew I'd have to one day. It's impossible to get the Boomchucka Bus going at the moment – because of the security problems and the heat, not as a result of any kind of engine problems – and it's already hotter than the hottest summer day in Britain and I'm too tired to want to do anything.

I went to say goodbye to the boys. Six months ago they were filthy, glue addicted, violent, with no self-esteem at all, living on the streets around Abu Nawas and Baba Sherji, the ones who were rejected by all the new orphanages setting up because of their anti-social behaviour or who couldn't settle in one and returned to the streets. Nahoko used to wash their clothes and feed them. Donna and Uzma and some others came and set up a shelter for them in a basement which provided a stepping stone for most of them to move on into long term accommodation in an orphanage run by the Kurdish Children's Fund.

Now Aakan is back with his mum and has been for a few weeks. Maybe he'll end up back at the house for a few more spells, respite or space or something, but they're working on it. A few of the older ones have got jobs a few hours a week and seven are going to school, including Ahmed and Laith, with whom Imad and I used to play counting games when they weren't dazed on solvents. You couldn't have imagined them going to school then, or when the circus first worked with them in January.

Nothing's changed at Mother Teresa's orphanage. Yasser and Omar and Alaa pickup more and more English each time I see them: Alaa's most-used words seem to be, "What are you doing?" You could set up a balloon animal factory in their room and none of them would get tired of it. Omar likes trying to pump them up but hasn't quite got the strength or co-ordination to push the air in. Ilyas is still singing "Oh Donna" over and over again. Probably we ought to have taught her another song for the sake of variety. Some Australian doctors are going to give Noor some prosthetic limbs.

I know there are issues about Mother T herself but the nuns and volunteers there are good people and it's the best place I've seen here for disabled kids. They asked us if we can get some child-sized exercise bikes. Most of the kids can't walk and there's no way for them to get any exercise. Not being the engineering type, I thought we could just get a small bike and put it on a stand instead of wheels. Alas it's not quite so simple because the front wheel needs some resistance, so we're going to show the diagram to the welders next door and see what they can do.

A few things have changed at the camp at Shuala. There's been no aid at all for a month, partly because most of what was available went to Falluja and partly because most of the international organisations had to pull out for security reasons. There are no jobs for the same reasons – the

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security problems and the fighting. Even we are afraid to go out, they said, even the Iraqis. Wasn't I afraid to go out?

The women scolded me for staying away so long, asked where I'd been. "The children miss you. They're always shouting 'Boomchucka' and asking when you're coming." I apologised, from under a heap of children but still it was good for the soul of a very tired clown.

Aala explained, unprompted, about Falluja as the kids played with the drawing things I brought, Abdullah covered in felt tip ink. The old Iraqi flag features a lot in kids' pictures lately, since the new flag was introduced, Shia and Sunni alike. These are the ones I'll miss most, the tribe of girls and Abdullah and Abbas who have become more and more bold and boisterous over the months, rediscovered the clowns within themselves, and Marwa, the beautiful and clever one, now 12, who wants to be a doctor but hasn't been to school for over a year. Abu Ahmed has been ousted as representative of the camp and Abu Bassim elected to replace him. Beyda rolled her eyes as Abu Ahmed explained the conspiracy behind his removal and, when he was gone, everyone else explained the conspiracy for which he was removed. Mistrust is virulent. Both the conspiracies and the conspiracy theories are products partly of the love of intrigue combined with a lack of other entertainment and partly of the sores of years of living with surveillance and corruption.

Between them they've raised the money to run some more electricity cables from the nearby pylons into the camp and Saida wanted to know if I could bring them fans to keep the mosquitoes off at night. Of course I couldn't, but I did say I'd try to find an aid agency that could, and one that could pay for her operation as well as carrying on looking for one that could provide a doctor and build the school.

We gossiped. Beyda grumbled, understandably, about her husband's

preference for his other wife. “He only comes to me to say hello and then he goes to her. I’ve only got one daughter.” But her sister Fadma, who got married in January, is pregnant now, due in November. Fadma was engaged for five years before she and Ali could afford to get married.

Ali was called up to the army when he was 18. He and his friends turned up for training but weren’t given proper uniforms, food or wages. The money wasn’t enough to support the two young nieces and other family members he was responsible for supporting, so after his first month he paid off an officer to give him false papers and cover for him and didn’t return from leave.

“I carried on working, using the false papers, until I was caught at a checkpoint and I was put in prison for a year in Kirkuk, where my unit was based. When I was released I was returned to my unit and I did the same again but after that whenever I was caught I paid a bribe to the police who caught me, so I didn’t go back to jail again. When the war happened all that was over, but Bush has betrayed us again.”



BAGHDAD, MAY 8, 2004

Tell them everything

A loud scraping noise and a jolt announced the arrival of the other car in the back driver side of ours. It was gentle, as collisions go, and the deformity of the bumper was quickly rectified but the debate over whose mother had been a canine looked like taking a bit longer to settle, so we paid the driver and found another who, admittedly, didn't know the way but at least he was moving.

The highway towards the university is partly on a flyover which affords a perfect view of the layers of smog that envelop the city. For a lot of the way the road was quiet, which is not common. "I hope there's not another Fatwa," Anna said, referring to the order not long ago from Al-Sadr that students should not go into university.

The young women were all immaculately dressed, not a hair astray between them, let alone an eyebrow, black lines around their eyes, lips painted. This is the only place they get to meet up with their friends, the most likely place to meet a future husband, so apparently it's worth getting up at stupid o'clock and making the kind of effort I and my friends only used to make for a big night out. I'm sure the wearing of hijabs on campus is less down to conservatism or religious belief than the only way out of hours of tortuous hair styling.

Anna teaches English conversation to the final year students at Baghdad University, and wanted to talk to someone with a British accent and I wanted to talk to them about university twinning links. Because it's all over the news here the same as everywhere else and because I introduced myself as a clown and trainee lawyer, the topic of conversation moved quickly onto the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. The other students muttered, "Shame," as Mohammed mentioned it. "There is a contradiction," someone said, "between what they do and what they say they will do."

Heba said her neighbour's house had been raided one night and three men, the father and two sons, were taken away. That was seven months ago; two have been freed and one is still detained. The reason given for their arrest, according to Heba, was "talking loudly against the Americans".

Lots of the students nodded at her account. Muger's house was raided too, on false information, he said: someone told the Americans that there were guns in their house. Most of them had heard of the Geneva Conventions, although few knew anything about what they were, and wanted to know how one went about acquiring any rights under them. Ahmed explained the Conventions as, "Some informations about the rights of presidents," an indication, perhaps, of how limited their use has been in Iraq. I explained about the different Conventions, the essence of the protections they contain and the problem of enforcement, that there is no court which can uphold them against a powerful country, particularly one which chooses to exempt itself from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Of course, the prisoners in Abu Ghraib are not all classified as prisoners of war because most were not taken in anything resembling a combat situation.

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A young woman called Hana said it's because they are Muslim. She listed Bosnia, Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya as places where Muslims are abused either by or with the complicity of the US and UK. Someone else pointed out that the people of Central America have also suffered abuse and torture at the hands of the CIA, along with plenty of other non-Muslim countries.

The belief that religious bigotry is behind all of this runs deep, but we moved on to how power corrupts: power in the hands of prison guards, in the hands of a single and unassailable national leader or in the hands of one all-powerful country. Anna's family is from Maryland, where several of the guards that have so far been exposed are from. Some of them worked in the big prison there before going to Iraq with the Reserves. She said people are wondering, if this goes on in an Iraqi prison, whether the same thing isn't happening in Maryland, too.

The worst thing, though, the students agreed, was the arrest of women. They said the same as I have heard from a lot of other places, that women are often arrested if the wanted man can't be found, just like Saddam used to do. Lamia explained, "The families send messages to the women inside the jails to tell them to kill themselves, or not to come home, because they are a disgrace to the family."

I asked why but she was embarrassed to tell me. Why, if they're wrongly arrested, is it any shame on her or her family? "Because they think it is certain that bad things have been done to them in prison," Haythem said.

"They expect that the woman was raped in the prison and that is a disgrace to the family because they were unfaithful to the husband or they are not virgins anymore. It's not if it was her fault, but it will be her disgrace," Mohammed said. The other students looked away. This, more than anything, was too horrible to talk about.

Anna had to tell them about their final test, next week. There was one a couple of weeks ago, accompanied by a fine array of excuses for not turning up. “There was a bomb at the end of my street,” “The highway was blocked by the Americans” and “It was my wedding” were my personal favourites.

Shayma said her new husband heard of her by reputation and came to ask the family for her hand in marriage. The family agreed and the couple met, just once before getting engaged. The engagement lasted eight months and they were married a couple of weeks ago, a couple of weeks before her university finals.

All the girls said they want to get married. “Of course.” It’s not even seen as optional. It’s like asking whether they want to graduate. “Your family will choose your husband,” Beyda explained. “It could be someone you chose, who went to your family to ask them. You have the chance to say no to the man they suggest, but you don’t want to risk that no one else will want you.”

I’ve heard similar things from other women: one friend was married at 19 to a man she had ‘a little affection’ for and her sister at 27 to a man she didn’t love at all, each of them fearing that if they passed up this chance they might not get another. After a small conference the girls thought perhaps about half of the marriages were happy. Once you were married, though, you couldn’t go out to work. There are, of course, married women who work, but they said it would be expected of them that they stay at home.

The university is not obviously filled with radicalism and student politics. Like most people in Iraq, students have been pounded with politics for enough years to want to avoid them. But still you can see the boundaries of society being pushed on and around the campus. There were young

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women in knee-length skirts and figure-hugging clothes that you rarely see elsewhere, perhaps a reflection of the relative safety of the campuses, though a lot of them were still wearing hijabs, and young men and women are able to meet and talk in a way that's unusual outside.

Equally, though, there were women in full abayas, hijabs and black gloves, with their normal clothes underneath.

There was no electricity in all the time I was in the university, which meant no fans and certainly no air conditioning. Papers and files flapped back and forth like giant butterfly wings. Exams must be unbearable in this. At the end there was a birthday party. Taif, a student on the MA course, won't be 23 until July, but she wouldn't be able to invite both male and female friends to her house for a party. This, the end of the academic year, was as close to her birthday as she could celebrate with the whole group. Even in the university Taif stands out, with curly reddish brown hair, a bright yellow patterned skirt, short sleeves and loud, rapid speech in accented but excellent English.

It said "Westlife" on the classroom door, probably the most popular band among young Iraqis, along with Backstreet Boys and N-Sync. Interestingly, the same was true last February, Iraqi youth being apparently less fickle than their British counterparts.

I left laden with e-mail addresses, Mohammed requesting that I arrange for Iraqi teachers to come to England to learn because "they don't know anything." Ali caught up with me to say, "Some of the students in this class are Shia and some are Sunni and they are not sorry that the old regime has gone because they are criminals. Believe me." Finally Asmaa took my hand and said, "Please, when you go, tell people all that you've seen here. Tell them everything that's happening to us."



BAGHDAD/LONDON, MAY 12, 200

No time to give up

You are going back to England? Could you please tell Tony Blair we've had enough of his bombs?" I promised Ma'ali I'd pass on her message. She and Manal and Nihad and Dalia all came to say goodbye, in the girls' housing at Baghdad University, and Farah came to give me the book list for her project. She's writing a thesis on the political discourse of the Iraq debates between Tony Blair and Ian Duncan Smith. I know, I know, why would you want to subject yourself to that, but she's fascinated by their use of words to play around with the facts and people's beliefs.

The trouble is, and it's the trouble for a lot of students, that they can't get the books and the journals. I would rather, of course, wave a wand and rehabilitate their libraries and give them much more comprehensive access to subscription web resources, but my wand batteries are flat so ...

If anyone thinks they can get access to journals and books and British library resources which can be either photocopied, scanned and e-mailed or sent in with someone who's heading that way, let me know and I'll send you the list. If anyone has remote access to sites like Lexis, and is willing to share their password with Farah, that would also be very helpful. Farah also said her favourite band is Blue. This is because, in their videos, they are naked and her parents, because they're just pop videos, let her watch them.

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In the end I haven't created as many twinnings as I hoped to. This month just gone and the next one I planned to spend following up all the contacts we made through the circus with schools, youth centres, disabled kids, homes and so on, and that's not been possible in the current situation, but I've got all the contacts that will make it possible to get them sorted over the next few months.

The humanitarian flight out of Baghdad International Airport is run by a non-profit organisation flying aid, sick people and NGO workers in and out of conflict zones. The pilots are South African, the aeroplane second hand from Qantas Link with a recorded safety announcement in Australian, the window seat and the aisle seat one and the same, with in-flight refreshments in a cold box by the door.

Nada, an Iraqi doctor working for the International Medical Corps, was leaving to Jordan for some training. She'd never flown before and the corkscrew take-off, climbing to fifteen thousand feet while still over the airfield to stay out of rocket propelled grenade range, unsettled her stomach a bit.

Waleed was in Jordan, keeping his head down for a couple of weeks after getting death threats. He didn't know if it was because he worked for the BBC, because he said something derogatory about Saddam or because of some grudge. He was making use of the time away, working on a documentary about heavy metal across the Arab world and its relationship to devil worship.

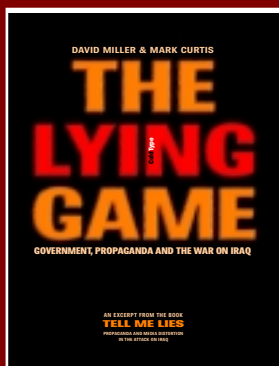
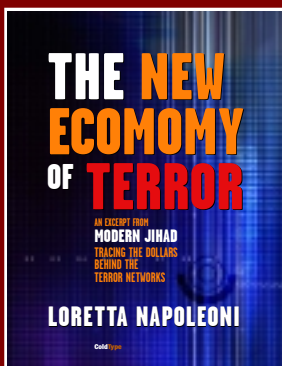
Faris Daraneh saved me from falling apart when I rediscovered the merits of a kind, obliging travel agent over a cold, unreasonable, heartless computer. I sat next to a Welsh smuggler and father-to-be on the plane, coming back from his holidays. Salih picked me up at Heathrow airport, bought me falafels and played Basra folk music all the way into London so

I wouldn't feel homesick. People trudged about looking miserable, not realising that I'd just left behind a load of people who, not all but many of them, would give almost anything to be here, not that they'd necessarily be any happier than those people if they were.

It feels good to walk down the road unnoticed and unshouted at and to not be invited to share intimate relations with three quarters of the men on the street. It feels good not to worry about bombs, random shooting and kidnapping and horrible to know that, for all my Iraqi friends, that's still an everyday issue and there's no going home and getting away from it all.

This is not the time to forget the Iraqi people. This is not the time to give up the struggle for peace and justice.

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