

1 ON THE EUPHRATES

Najar Ali, a forty-eight-year-old Bedouin, whimpered as our chaplain carried him into the tent from the Euphrates riverside. The U.S. attack struck the area on March 3, 2006. The goal was to gain control of Iraqi insurgents. The attack's severity and magnitude were beyond imagination. The U.S. relief marshal dispatched investigators and relief workers. Rescue crews found the bodies of civilian victims spread all around, strewn in the sand next to their scattered belongings. Thousands survived the attack; many of them lost their homes and were seriously injured. Buildings were flattened, and there was debris everywhere. Nothing was spared—not homes, barns, or animals.

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Few places in the desert are capable of supporting even a small community for an extended period. So, the Bedouins of this area, with their herds of sheep, goats, and camels, migrate from one barely fertile area to another. Each place offers shelter and sustains them for a time as nature replenishes the others. In the vast arid expanse of Mount Sinai, as in the Negev and the deserts of Arabia, the tribes of the Bedouin follow a traditional way of life and maintain a pastoral culture of exceptional grace, honor, and beauty, as they journey by camel from oasis to oasis.

Most of the Bedouin tribes of the Sinai are descendants of immigrants from the Arabian Peninsula who arrived in Sinai sometime between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Today, many of Sinai's Bedouins

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Comment [WS1]: "Sustenance" is a great word but too erudite for this story.

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Comment [WS2]: You already mentioned this just above so don't highlight it in the sentence. Highlight tradition and culture by placing that information earlier in the sentence.

ON THE EUPHRATES

have traded their traditional customs for the pursuits and conventions of the modern world on the banks of the Euphrates. This river originates from two major sources in the Armenian mountains and flows into the Persian Gulf. Its entire course runs 1,780 miles, more than two-thirds of which is navigable by boat. The Euphrates River has an ancient history. The city of Ur, founded at the mouth of the river, was the birthplace of Abraham, and the majestic city of Babylon once stood on the river's banks.

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Many days have passed since the devastating attack on the Euphrates. The Bedouin man is still waiting, his injuries yet to be fully treated. Initially, those injuries were horrifying: a fractured skull, sheared-off limbs, compound fractures, and internal bleeding. The doctors worked frantically with limited medication. Nevertheless, his most severe injury can't be seen. It's a pain he carries deep in his heart. Virtually everyone lost a loved one in the attack. Hastily fashioned cemeteries overflow with new graves.

* * *

During the attack, the blood raced swiftly through Najar's veins as he carried a young, lifeless girl in his arms. He was devastated by the thought of being left alone in the world. The earthly hopes and dreams that he once carried now faded for him. A flash of memory went through his mind: the thin, hungry face of his young girl as a little child, trying to fill her lamp with kerosene on a dark night on the Sinai Mountain. A sigh echoed through his mind: "Oh, little girl, tell me what your life with your father has written on your face. Speak to me of the glory of your heart. Let us sing the song of remembrance." The Bedouin's eyes wandered over the dewy haze draping the vast field of a new harvest. Slowly the lids became heavy as feelings of love and loss lulled him into the oblivion of sleep.

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Najar Ali embraced death with his own arms. His only daughter, merely fourteen years old, died pressed against his chest, her garments covered with dust and blood. The young girl was laid to eternal rest down the mountain slope. Wind takes the mountains in its clutches, but the lonely grave remains, etched with words proclaiming the glory of God. By midday, the desert sun burns the body. By midnight, the moonlight tries to

Comment [WS3]: We don't usually use the word "chief" to describe sources for rivers.

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Comment [WS4]: These two sentences look like an afterthought. It might help to make them one compound sentence.

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Comment [WS5]: If he's waiting because he needs his injuries treated, write it this way.

I'm rewriting some of your words more poetically. This helps create empathy in the reader.

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Comment [WS6]: I'm changing these to contractions. Otherwise, it's stilted.

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Comment [WS7]: Take out "had" to make it immediate for the reader.

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Comment [WS8]: This sounds strange. A little girl is a young child now. How old is she when he is thinking about this? She's fourteen, right? We need to change this sentence a bit. We would be better off to switch "little" and "young."

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Comment [WS9]: This is a statement. To write it as a question, move the word "has" between

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Comment [WS10]: Changing this wording

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Comment [WS11]: I'm having some problem

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soothe the soul. Inside the grave, the silent beauty plays with angels, blessed with eternal peace where time and space no longer mist her view. The deadly bombs, the explosions, the fires waged by ruthless man, cannot hurt or disturb her anymore.

* * *

A crisp breeze drifted across, but it was warm for a February evening, and one would almost have thought autumn had come. Mrs. Carolyn Autry had just finished her dinner when the shadow of her only son Richard darkened the door of her house. Richard knocked and called, "Mom."

"Yes," Carolyn replied from inside.

Carolyn entertained the thought of not opening the door, not discussing her son's intentions again, but as there was no sense in ignoring him, she rose and opened it. Richard walked in and flung himself down on the couch. A pale distress was already on Carolyn's face. Richard said quietly, "I want to talk to you, Mom."

"It seems like the time for talking is over. You ignored me by enlisting in the Marines," she said.

"Yes, but I had a good reason."

She sighed, resigned. "Well, tell me the good reason."

"I intend to fight in the war in Iraq. I need to do my duty by serving my country, don't I?"

Before his mother could answer, Richard drew a folded letter from his pocket.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's an appointment letter from the Marines."

"Has it already advanced this far? Oh no, sir. No, you will not join the Marines," she protested weakly.

"Why, Mom?"

"Don't ask what I don't wish to tell," she begged, and flashed her appeal to him from her upturned face and shadowed eyes. The words seemed to astonish and disturb Richard.

"I'm more serious than you think, Mom."

"What a blind young thing you are," she said with irritation.

"I need to, Mom." He gave a sigh of discontent.

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Comment [WS12]: This must be two sentences. She can't sigh out the words.

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Comment [WS13]: If she protested weakly, then don't use the exclamation point.

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“It’s a shame that we parents raise our children in such dangerous ignorance. You want to get involved in war because the politicians say it’s your duty—whether their motive for fighting is a good one or not. They don’t care what happens to the general hardworking public. They don’t care if you get hurt or die!”

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“I bear the responsibility to serve my country, Mom.”

Carolyn fell into thought. She felt the argument shouldn’t be ended there, but she was worried and defenseless and pressed to say what she wouldn’t reveal. She couldn’t think more about it; it made her too miserable. She believed if she broke down by falling into some fearful snare, her last state would be worse than this controversial situation.

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“Richard, all of the wealth and fame this world has to offer mean nothing if all my children aren’t with me. I long for only one thing in heaven or on the earth, to be with my children. Please understand, and save yourself from the terrible fate that threatens my nightmares!”

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Oh God, I can’t think of it! If my boy dies, I will surely die too, she thought.

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It was evening. The two customary gate lights at Carolyn’s house were illuminated, casting a golden pool onto the driveway. Richard left the house while his mother watched his car slowly disappear under the dim street lights. The autumn-like, dry wind continued to blow.

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Richard Autry grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania, where corn trucks grind their gears as they rumble down the ragged green hills. He had always dreamed of becoming a Marine: the living symbol of hope, courage, and uncommon valor. He joined the Marines right after finishing college and was sent to Iraq on an undisclosed mission.

Comment [WS14]: They don’t call them corn trucks. Perhaps talk about seeing combines grinding their gears.

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I was there with our troops on that fateful day. It was two-thirty in the morning when Captain Martin began organizing his forces to launch an attack on the insurgents. One battalion was to cross the desert on foot and then proceed to a small village directly across the river. At the same time, two more battalions were to fan out in the lightly forested area to the right. As all the forces approached the target from the west, the captain’s half dozen armored cars were to launch a head-on attack down the road. At three o’clock, as the first battalion

Comment [WS15]: The term “secret mission” is a cliché.

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was just beginning to get in their vehicles, mortars exploded all around, creating a fearful roar. Captain Martin, who was hidden behind a stone wall a few yards away from my own refuge, fought with the enemy over a Kevlar helmet belonging to Richard Autry, who had died on the spot.

* * *

More than forty million American military men and women have served and fought to defend the freedom of our country. Final tributes are rendered to those who helped secure the blessings of liberty.

In Arlington National Cemetery, the body of Richard Autry lay in a closed casket, recently arrived from Iraq. In silent ceremony, soldiers folded the American flag in the form of a triangle, showing only the stars depicting the states of the union against a blue background. One soldier placed the flag on top of the casket, just above the left shoulder of the deceased fighter. At the conclusion of the graveside ceremony, the pallbearers lifted the flag waist-high and held in there while one of the soldiers played Taps on a solitary bugle. The other soldier presented the flag to the veteran's younger sister, Robin, from a grateful nation.

With a quick, beating pulse, Robin's mind rebelled at the complex pattern of victory, honor and finality bestowed on her brother. Her heart was stained with the impurities and earthly taints of the senseless death of a young brother. Defying restraint, tears of sorrow streamed down her radiant cheeks, her future silenced by the shattering chaos of death.

As the silver dawn breaks upon the Susquehanna River, dewdrops shine like pearls on green blades and new blossoms across the hillside. Not far away, Richard's mother lies alone on her deathbed, trying to remember the many dawns and twilights of days gone by. Her last request is for a tombstone that says, "Died of a broken heart."

* * *

Over the miles of sand, by the winding bank of the Euphrates, the Bedouin walks slowly. Far beyond human vision, above the clouds, his mind tries to grasp the image of his daughter in heaven. In spite of a mixture of grief and pain, he tries to hang on to hope and faith in divine fulfillment. He tries to understand the

Comment [WS16]: The word "racket" is used to mean much smaller sounds.
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Comment [WS17]: I took out the passive sentences by adding soldiers. Don't use passive sentences in your short stories. Tell who is doing the action. It's much more personal for the reader.

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Comment [WS18]: The grateful nation needs to be present in the form of the soldiers.

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Comment [WS19]: This sounds like a heart, not a mind.

Comment [WS20]: She's rebelling from his death, not victory and honor.

Additionally, those two are not complex by themselves.

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Comment [WS21]: This sounds trite. The rest of your work is believable except this.

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ON THE EUPHRATES

workings of the eternal seer and the mysteries of his creation. He cries aloud, "Oh gracious one! Take me away from this world. Oh Lord of heaven and earth, have mercy on me."

The gentle breeze creates wondrous waves in the river as the setting sun usurps the light from the universe. Although the Bedouin had been content in his poverty, his heart is now full of pain and sorrow next to the rolling beauty of the Euphrates.

Babylon still stands, watching the ruins and destruction of a lost civilization. Equally oblivious to the broken hearts of the Bedouin and the soldier's dying mother, the Euphrates, in its ancient beauty, courses to the sea.

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