

## *Video*

THE ARMORED CARS were wheeling up to the office building where the insurgents were trapped. The Americans began firing their cannons before they had even braked, encircling the building fast as if they thought it was going to run away. The insurgents were shooting back. I could feel the wind of their bullets flying up the street. I moved in closer.

A Humvee was burning. It was sending up billows of flames and black fog and crumbling into itself. The soldiers had parked it in the middle of the street in the middle of the day in the middle of Karada, as nice as any neighborhood in Baghdad, and gone into Al-Warda to shop for candy and sodas. It was like a 7-Eleven in the United States. The insurgents had been waiting for them in the office building across the street, on one of the high floors. When the soldiers cut the engine on their Humvee the insurgents fired their rocket-propelled grenade from an open window and the Humvee exploded.

"Hey this guy's legs have been blown off!" a soldier yelled as he ran behind an armored car. Two more soldiers came in crouched behind him, dragging the bloody mess.

The insurgents had stayed put. They'd ambushed the Americans and then waited for more soldiers to arrive so they could fight it out with them and then die. I walked in closer, pressed against the windows of the shops, which were pulsating against my flattened palms. Bullets were flying in every direction, yet when I looked up I saw the locals immersed in their routines. A woman was hanging laundry from her window, sheets and T-shirts. An ice cream shop was selling cones.

I slipped into a video store to get out of the shooting and

found it filled with young Iraqis. They were dressed in tennis shirts and a couple of them were discussing a videotape to rent. They looked frightened at my presence so I went back into the street and as I did an American soldier who was sticking out of the hatch on his armored car turned around and looked at me and waved his arms at me to get back, get back. I kept moving toward him and he fired his gun over my head. "Get the fuck back," he shouted. I stopped, not retreating but not moving forward, and he turned back to the battle.

In a couple of minutes the shooting stopped and the Americans drove away, leaving the neighborhood burning and smoking. They towed the Humvee but left the building aflame, belching and sputtering like a spent Roman candle. I stepped back into the video store. Everyone was still there.

"Me, I love the American people," Atheer al-Ani, the owner, told me. He stood behind the counter. Like others hanging around his shop that day, Ani spanned many worlds. His mother and sister lived in Chicago. He stocked mostly American films. He was wearing a yellow Izod tennis shirt. "These people who do this have no minds, no minds," Ani said. "They're stupid."

Still, Ani was flustered by the firefight that had just unfolded in this normally lovely neighborhood. He turned to a friend.

"Who are they fighting for, Saddam?" he asked his friend. "Saddam is finished. Right?"

"Right," said the friend. "Finished."

"The Forever War"  
Dexter Filkins, 2008

### *The Kiss*

I PULLED ON my running shoes and stepped into the street. It was a Thursday in July, twilight and well over 100 degrees. I was feeling a little reckless. If this ended badly, the only thing anyone would remember was how stupid I was.

We'd set up *The New York Times* office on Abu Nawas Street; there we lived and worked. It was an Ottoman-style house, with a gated yard and a veranda on the second floor that looked out on a boulevard that tracked the eastern bank of the Tigris River. In those first days, we didn't fortify the place: no razor wire or blast walls, no watchtowers or machine guns mounted on the roof. Cars motored past our front yard on their way to the Jumhuriyah Bridge a couple of miles up the road.

In the beginning, Baghdad wasn't that threatening. The other houses around us were either abandoned or rented by foreigners: the French Embassy and the BBC were around the corner. And the Iraqis in the neighborhood were unusually friendly, waving whenever we passed. Running at night seemed reckless, but given the otherworldly heat, running during the day was impossible.

So I set off. The reaction of my neighbors was immediate. Men looked up and waved, they held up bottles of water as I ran by. "Good, good!" one man said in English. "America good!" Abu Nawas was lined with fish restaurants that overlooked the Tigris; as I passed, men held up chunks of *masgouf*, their beloved bony fish, and asked me to join them. Children stopped their soccer games and ran after me; even the stray dogs gave pursuit. I felt I was living the scene in *Rocky II*, when the character played by Sylvester Stallone goes for a training

run in his Philadelphia neighborhood and all the children clamor after him.

I started running that same route every evening after that, usually well into twilight, but early enough that the streets were still filled with people. My reception was always the same: cheering crowds, squealing children and happy stray dogs. In an odd but real way, my five-mile runs up Abu Nawas Street made me wonder what the war in Iraq was about. All day long reporting in the country I encountered hostility and chaos, which was intense and growing and real. And yet at night when I hit the streets, in the fall of 2003, I could not find a trace of it. It was as if the city, in the heat of the afternoon, had exhausted itself, only to lighten with the setting sun.

One day early on, a young Iraqi boy ran up alongside me. He had been kicking a ball along Abu Nawas, and as I came running he left his friends and started running next to me in his bare feet. The locals sometimes did that, but usually they dropped off after 50 yards. The Iraqi boy, who was perhaps nine years old, kept running the two and a half miles to the Jumhuriyah Bridge; as I turned to run back on a trail along the Tigris, he dropped off to wave goodbye.

A few days later, at twilight, the same boy appeared again, picking up the trail along the Tigris. His name, he said, was Hassan. We ran together for a while, me in my running shoes, he in his bare feet. Hassan motioned across the Tigris, toward the sprawling compound that once housed Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace and which was now the headquarters of the American occupation. The Green Zone.

"Saddam house," he said.

We ran together some more, and Hassan motioned again across the river.

"Now, Bush house."

One night, without warning, a wall of razor wire went up across Abu Nawas Street. Somebody somewhere had decided that the Sheraton Hotel, which sat just 100 yards away, was too easy a target for the car bombers, who had just begun striking the city. A barricade now stood between me and the rest of the neighborhood. All traffic ceased.

A few days later, sensing the disruption they had caused,

the Americans made an opening in the razor wire so pedestrians could walk through. I resumed my running, but I never saw Hassan again.

One afternoon later in the summer, another Iraqi youngster pulled alongside me as I made my way down the street. She, like Hassan, was about nine years old. Her name was Fatima, she said, huffing next to me and looking up with enormous brown eyes. She wore sandals, and she was very dirty. She kept up the pace.

Fatima and I ran for a couple of miles, her sandals making a scraping sound on the pavement. After a time, she indicated that she needed a rest. We stopped at one of the open-air fish restaurants. Everyone seemed to know Fatima; she seemed to know them.

A man walked out onto the sidewalk, put a hand on Fatima's shoulder and ran a finger across his neck. "Mother, father finished," the man said. He pointed to the sky, as if to suggest they had been killed by bombs.

"Fatima live here," the man said, gesturing with his hand to encompass the restaurant and its environs.

Then a second man walked up, twisted Fatima around and gave her a long and ugly kiss on her lips. He laughed and walked away. Fatima looked at me with very sad eyes, and I suggested that it was time to go.

We ran some more and then, after a time, Fatima stopped. She looked up at me one last time.

"Bye-bye. Tomorrow, OK?" Fatima said, and she turned and walked up the street. I never saw her again.

# Still on the Couch

As my siblings move forward, I wonder if I'm being left behind

**F**OR HER 60TH BIRTHDAY, my mother rents a house by the beach and asks the family to join her there. The house is designed to sleep eight, but we are nine in total: my parents, two siblings, their spouses and children. And me.

We settle in, which for me means stuffing my duffel bag into the utility closet and stashing my pillow behind a lamp.

"Hey," I whisper to my sister. "Do you think if I got married they'd stop making me sleep on the couch?"

Sixteen years earlier, we'd rented a house in the same neighborhood with my mother's sister and her family. I had a bed then, in a room I shared with my sister. In fact, I shared beds with my sister and female cousins for nearly two decades of holidays and vacations, while my brother — the only boy — got the dregs of the sleeping accommodations.

Then, one by one, they got married, and I was bumped from bed to bed and, ultimately, to the couch: the couch at the beach house for my mother's birthday, the couch in my aunt's den at Thanksgiving, the couch in my parents' living room at Christmas. On Christmas Eve, when my sleeping quarters were deemed too close to Santa's chimney, I was upgraded to the spare bedroom, where I slept on the floor between the crib and a tower of wrapping paper.

"You can nap in our room if you need to," my sister offers, and my brother says the same. But napping isn't the problem. The problem is being extra. In a family of families, I am the odd number, the solo unit, the spare.

For years, my brother and sister and I hit our milestones together. We were students together, then graduates, then young adults. I suppose I'd always imagined we would raise our kids together, sharing holidays and vacations the way my mother and her sister have. But now my siblings have spouses and mortgages and kids, and I'm still sharing a bathroom in a College Park group house. They've left that life, my life, behind. I may not get weepy at the thought of matching dinnerware and onesies, but I understand the appeal of commitment and family. It's a lifestyle I admire and appreciate. It's simply not the one I've chosen for myself. Not yet, at any rate.

In the morning I wake up to what sounds like a herd of bison ransacking the kitchen, a few feet from my pillow. It

turns out to be my sister, who'd risen to feed the baby and then tromped downstairs to bang out breakfast for the rest of the family. I'm positive she woke me on purpose so she'd have someone to talk to, but I grumble and stomp out the door to jog and sulk about the injustice of my slumber being cut short.

It occurs to me that my sister probably hasn't had a night of uninterrupted sleep in more than two years, but for the moment, moping suits me more than sympathetic reflection.

But it's a beautiful morning, blue and green and gold, and it's hard to stay angry as my sneakers bear a soothing rhythm against the asphalt. I run past palm trees and sun-tipped marsh grasses and packs of women with strollers: one giant loop that leads me right back to the house, where my sister is scrambling eggs.

In the afternoon, we go to the beach. My brother and his wife coax a kite toward the sun while their baby dozes on a blanket. My parents carry the toddler to the water and teach her to splash and make sand castles, and I sneak off to finish my book. Summer sounds wash over me: the soft rumble of the waves, laughter and gulls, and my niece's voice, suddenly above me,

saying, "Noooooey?" Her name for me.

She is crouching in the sand, her round face inches above my book, smiling expectantly. When I sit up, she slips her pudgy fingers into my hand and leads me back to the water where my family is waiting.

"Did you send her to get me?" I ask, but my sister says no.

"She just started up the beach," she says. "She knew you were missing."

So I sit on the sandbar and reach for a shovel. We make castles until it's time to go home.

I've always pitied people who resist transitions — like the college graduate who keeps popping up on campus years after receiving his diploma — and I would never consider myself one of them. It's not that I'm resisting that next step; I just haven't taken it yet.

And so, here I am. In their bedrooms, my siblings are sliding their children into cotton pajamas. And I'm tucking a yellow bedsheet between the cushions for one more night on the couch. ■



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