

Animals

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The woman stood by the white, four-door sedan and wailed at the sky. She was a mass of flowing black fabric in the hot breeze. The driver's side of the windshield was shattered, and the splintered glass and rings of white around the bullet holes obscured the motionless silhouette in the driver seat. She did not heed the two soldiers walking towards her down the canal road.

Specialist Grant Morrison's gear clinked and clattered with each shaky step. His heart still thumped.

"Hey," said Sergeant Lantz.

Morrison peered at his team leader walking beside him. He was short and wiry. His thin, cracked lips curled around the bulge of Copenhagen in his mouth. He wiped perspiration from his long, reddened nose and spat on the ground.

"Fuckin' took you long enough to start shooting, Morrison," he shouted. Morrison heard it above the ringing in his ears that hadn't dissipated since the first sharp pops of their carbines firing moments ago. He did not reply.

It's never fast enough, he thought. No one shot at Iraqis as frequently or as quickly as Lantz. No one liked it as much.

Morrison's wet, grimy chinstrap tickled his cheek as he surveyed the white, chalky fields that stretched towards a hazy horizon spotted with dirty palm trees. The tall reeds that bordered the raised road quivered in the wind.

The woman's shrieks grew louder as they got closer. Their intensity told him he'd just killed someone.

They'd seen the car's dust trail from far away. It was the first vehicle to near their impromptu checkpoint that day. The monotony of staring down an empty canal road in the sapping Iraqi heat, entertained only by listening to the Humvee gunners behind them quiz one another on sports trivia, had been replaced with the annoyance of having to search a car. It turned into a pang of fear that cinched Morrison's stomach and sent blood surging through his limbs when Sergeant Lantz waved his hand and it didn't stop. It hadn't stopped when he fired a round into the dirt in front of it, either. Taking no chances, they'd shot into the engine block and driver's side windshield until it ceased moving. That it was a mechanical reaction, an adherence to rules dictated by the fact that cars could be bombs, did not prevent it from turning to dread.

"Hell, if we'd have stopped these assholes ten meters further back we'd be doing this in the shade. Leave it to Haj to fuck up dying," said Lantz.

The crass remark was nothing new. After the platoon had lost King to an IED and their lieutenant to a car bomb, everyone had grown more callous to everything, even the killing. But Lantz was different. He had a special hatred for Iraqis. One of his signature moves was to puncture kids' soccer balls if they patrolled past a football game, and he seemed to welcome any opportunity to shoot at them.

Morrison and Private First Class Mayfield, the lanky, blonde automatic rifleman of the three-man fire team, had once debated why Lantz was so hateful. Mayfield thought he'd been the type of kid to torture kittens because he was the runt and got bullied. Morrison figured something, or a few things, had happened in Lantz's first deployment that had sent him over some precipice. They agreed that either way he was disturbingly sadistic – even for a grunt.

Morrison stared ahead at the car. The woman alternated between wringing her hands and burying her face in them.

“I’ll take care of the wifey there. It’s your turn to search, anyway. You know the drill,” said Lantz.

“Roger,” said Morrison. His mouth was cottony. His heart still throbbed and his legs were still wobbly.

As they got within five meters of the car, the woman still didn’t look at them. Her eyes were riveted at the shape in the driver seat. Reddish-brown blood crusted her hands and her black gown fluttered.

Morrison knew what to expect inside. His frown deepened and the back of his jaw watered at the prospect of seeing the mutilation his bullets caused. He hoped the body was at least mostly intact. The first time he’d killed was the worst. A van had run a checkpoint and his squad had poured bullets into it. The first glimpse of the gory mess they’d made of three men gagged him; coupled with the knowledge that he was partly responsible for that mess, it was a grim shock. Afterward, he tried to tell himself that the Iraqis weren’t humans like him. He wanted to believe it but couldn’t, especially not after being unable to distinguish the small pieces of his lieutenant from the pieces of the suicide bomber that killed him. He knew they were all the same on the inside.

Sergeant Lantz rolled his head from side to side like someone preparing for a fight then stopped a few feet short of the woman.

“Hey. Hey, lady. It’s all good. We’re not going to hurt you. Calm down. Caaalm,” Lantz said to her, holding his hand up. “My God I hope those idiot Iraqi Police get here soon. This bitch is crazy loud. She was probably nagging at Haj and he couldn’t hear the warning shot. Either that or they’re just as retarded as the rest of this country.”

The woman screamed the same phrase at Lantz over and she pointed to him then to the car repeatedly. Her pockmarked face was contorted in distress and glistened with tears. Her wrinkled eyes and blemished skin made her look middle-aged, but Morrison knew in Iraq everyone looked older than they really were.

His body armor creaked as he squatted to check underneath the vehicle first. Leaking fluids dripped into a puddle on the dusty road. The rusted undercarriage looked like the dozens of others he'd searched. As he stood up, knees popping, the rear passenger door opened.

Morrison's gasp caught in his throat. He fumbled putting his carbine to his shoulder and nearly fell as he backpedaled and stood at the same time. His thumb flipped the safety off.

"Oh shit!" said Lantz. He raised his weapon, and the walkie-talkie on his shoulder blared with their new lieutenant's frantic voice demanding to know what the commotion was all about.

Morrison blinked and put the safety back on as a girl of about three took tentative steps from behind the door. Her purple and black dress was several sizes too large. Her chubby cheeks were pulled down by a deep frown and her large ears poked out from wavy black hair. She took a few steps out then stopped and gazed at Morrison from behind the fender. He was breathing hard again and his heart raced.

"It's just a kid, Sergeant," said Morrison. When he lowered his weapon the girl ran around the car and to her mother. She hugged her mother's leg but the woman ignored her.

"Sneaky little bastards...Okay, man, get this thing searched," said Lantz. "Sir, it's a little Haj kid that climbed out of the back seat," he said into the walkie-talkie.

Morrison trod over to the opened passenger side door and looked at the slumped driver. Gashes splayed open his bald head and the white of his skull glared in the sun. His pot belly bulged through the *thawb*. The garment was tan but several gunshot wounds bled through and it was smeared with bloody handprints. The familiar smell of metallic blood, meat, and the sweet scent of coolant came to him in a rush as he put his knee on the passenger seat and searched through the car.

Black bags of vegetables littered the floor of the passenger side. Prayer beads hung on the rearview mirror and a dirty plastic doll lay on the backseat. He kept looking at the lifeless driver as he searched. His skin already looked rubbery.

The corpse didn't invoke a reaction; there was no gag or paralyzing revulsion like the first time. Similar to then, he still imagined what it must have been like inside the vehicle when the bullets started ripping through it, but he thought of much more besides. Had the little girl screamed when the rounds pierced the windshield and her father? Had she held her hands over her ears? Did she grip her doll? Then he realized how close they'd come to killing her – and how close he'd come to shooting her when she came out of the car – and he envisioned what *her* mangled corpse would have looked like. He shuddered as he crawled out.

The girl's eyes followed him as he circled around the front of the car and reached through the driver's window to pop the trunk. When he searched the trunk there was only a spare tire and burlap bag full of rusting tools.

"There's nothing here, Sergeant. Just the usual," said Morrison as he walked around the car to stand beside Lantz.

"Roger," said Lantz. The woman's sobs were quieter now. Lantz spat and squeezed the button on his walkie-talkie. "Sir, it's clean. What do you want us to do with the driver?"

"Just pull him out and search him. 2nd platoon's patrol is close with that wrecker and the Iraqi Police to clean up the mess," their lieutenant's voice crackled.

"Jeez," said Lantz, pointing to the little girl. "Look at that. She doesn't even give a shit. Figures. I'm telling you, these people are animals," he said. He shook his head. "C'mon, help me pull this Haj out."

As he spoke the little girl eyed him then looked at Morrison. Her expression had not changed. It was muted and shocked, but it was also

cold. The mother stared at the ground. Her shoulders heaved with each sob.

“She’s in shock. She doesn’t know what to think,” said Morrison. His voice was distant. He took off his sunglasses and hooked them onto his body armor. He looked into the little girl’s eyes and tried to soften his visage.

“Yeah, well, that’s because animals don’t think like we do. C’mon, let’s get this over with,” said Lantz. He started making a “shooing” motion with his free hand. “*Imshi*, lady, get the fuck out of the way. *Imshi*.”

Morrison scowled at his team leader’s back. The woman put a hand on her child’s shoulder and backed away. Her muttering was guttural and choked by crying.

The body slumped further towards the passenger side when Lantz opened the door. He slung his weapon behind him. Morrison stared at the girl, who was eyeing Lantz.

“Wow, he’s going to be heavy. Look at the gut on this dude,” said Lantz. He whistled. “Ha! Grab hold of a leg and I’ll get the arm. We’ll just yank his fat ass out of here.” He turned his head to Morrison when he lowered it under the roof of the car. “Hey, you going to help or what?”

Morrison’s temples throbbed and his helmet felt tighter. He wanted to scream at Lantz to shut his mouth but only glared.

“What are you zoning about over there? It’s not like this is the first time you’ve done this. Thank God it’s not. You were a useless mess that time,” said Lantz, shaking his head.

There had been many after that but there were never kids around. Morrison could not shake the image of the girl huddling in the backseat out of his mind.

“I’m fine,” barked Morrison. The hardness of his tone surprised him.

“Easy there, killer. And hey, high speed, put your fucking eye-pro back on,” said Lantz with an edge to his voice.

It didn't intimidate Morrison like usual. This time it disgusted him. He put on his sunglasses and bent down beside his sergeant to wrestle the corpse out. He was close enough to see the flecks of Copenhagen on stuck on Lantz's lips.

They clinched folds in the man's *thawb* with their gloved hands.

"One, two, three," said Lantz. They grunted as they pulled him out and he flopped to the ground with a thud. His right leg was still inside the car. The woman shrieked and the little girl stared. "Oh, great, there she goes again."

"Mista! Mista! Please," the woman screamed at Morrison. She walked toward the car with outstretched arms speaking Arabic rapidly. When Lantz reached for his weapon she stopped and fell to her knees. The little girl stood beside her.

"Fuckin' bitch. Make sure she doesn't sneak up on me while I search this asshole," said the sergeant.

Lantz kicked the man's leg off the car. He knelt by the corpse and used both hands to pat it down. He frisked the arms and legs and pulled out the cigarette pack in the man's breast pocket and tossed it on the ground. Morrison was staring at the woman and child. Lantz wiped his face with the sleeve of his camouflage blouse and tongued the snuff in his lower lip. He gave Morrison an annoyed nod.

"Well, help me turn him over. Goddamnit, Morrison, get in the game," he said. Morrison leaned over and grabbed the *thawb* at the man's waist and they rolled him over. The corpse's arm knocked against Morrison's leg. He pulled his foot back. Lantz made quick work of patting him down and stood.

"Sir, he's clean, do we need to bag him?" Lantz said into the walkie-talkie. He took off his gloves and tossed them into the canal.

"Uh, that's a negative. Patrol is close. Just stand fast."

“Roger that, sir,” said Lantz. He sniffed and pulled his weapon to his front.

The woman was kneeling on the road with her head hanging, and her daughter stood looking at Morrison now. A couple hundred meters away, the dust trails of the convoy appeared. Sunlight glinted off one of the Iraqi Police’s Toyota trucks. The lines of the blocky Army wrecker were blurred by the shimmering heat. The sounds of the diesel engines were faint but growing.

Lantz pulled the snuff out of his mouth with a hooked finger and ran his tongue around his teeth. It was loud when he spat with his dry mouth.

Morrison stood still, eyes locked on the girl. She had not moved. The image of what it would have been like inside the car played over and over; shrieks, the zip of bullets, the rapid clinks of metal being punctured, the tinkle of breaking glass, the smells of burning tracers and then the viscera. The little girl would never forget it. Morrison knew he wouldn’t either.

“Got a girlfriend now or what?” said Lantz. He took a drink from his Camelbak hose and swished the water around his mouth.

The convoy pulled up behind the family and the woman’s sobs were drowned out by the rumbling of diesel engines, slamming doors, and the shouts of the emerging soldiers.

“So shitty. That poor little girl,” said Morrison. He shook his head.

“Fuck ‘em. You need to quit being such a Haj lover. The animals should have paid attention. Not our problem,” said Lantz.

The little girl stared at Morrison while her mother hung her head in her hands. He stood there and felt the dull ache in his throat rising. The grim-faced soldiers behind her got closer and Lantz shouted greetings to them.

Animals, he thought. Animals indeed.