

A SLIVER of LIGHT

THREE AMERICANS IMPRISONED IN IRAN

Shane Bauer

Joshua Fattal

Sarah Shourd

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For those who are not free

The grief you cry out from draws you toward freedom.

—*Rumi*

1. Shane

I stir out of sleep. The air is so fresh and cool, it's almost minty. Distantly, I hear a stream purl. Sarah and Josh are lying on either side of me, unmoving. A deep predawn glow infuses everything. A bat cuts jaggedly through the air. I sit up and stretch my arms and back, which sends bursts of energy through my body. Today, we are going to hike. There are few things I love more than this.

Brown mountains jut up around us, mottled with specks of green bushes and patches of yellow grass that looks like lion's fur. The trail we started on last night snakes upward, weaving a thin little thread through the valley. We wash our faces in a nearby stream. We fill up our many little water bottles, eat some bread and cheese, and walk.

Josh is light spirited and contemplative, jumping from one rock to the next as we set off up the valley. He's so good at shaking off weariness, putting that wholesome smile back on his face. Sarah and I trail behind him, holding hands and weaving our way between the rocks. None of us speaks, except to point out the occasional curiosity, like empty goat pastures hemmed in by short walls of piled-up rocks or the occasional cement prayer niches with arrows that point the pious toward Mecca.

Hours pass as we walk. Porcupine quills, cat feces, and perfectly round spiky purple flowers appear sporadically on the slowly thinning trail. Josh is a hundred feet ahead. A cloud of yellow dust is pluming behind him, rising above the dry grass and hanging in the hazy air. Are we on a human-made trail, or did some goat slice through this endless meadow, creating this tiny track we are trudging on? The heat is growing and I am easing into that state where my body is tiring, but I just march on autopilot, pulled by something toward the top of the mountain. It must be 11 a.m. How long have we been walking? Five hours?

At some point, we stop to drink from our water bottles, which are starting to run low, and Josh mentions that we're heading east. "We could just keep going and go to Iran," he jokes. I remark that Iran must be at least a hundred miles away. We keep walking.

We reach what looks like an old, disused road, clogged with large rocks. We decide to temporarily jettison some of our things, cramming blankets and books under a bush and building a little cairn on the side of the road to remind us where the stash is. Then we plod upward, winding up the switchbacks. The ridge has to be close. The horizon—saddled between two peaks—has seemed directly in front of us for a while now. At the top, we'll turn back. We'll have to, or we'll miss Shon. He, the fourth of our group, stayed back in Sulaimaniya to rest up and is going to meet us back where we started this morning. We'll have a night around the fire before we catch a bus back up through Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey, through the flat expanse of the Syrian Desert, and back to Sarah's and my little home, tucked into the beautiful sprawl and bustle of Damascus.

As we walk, I notice a cigarette pack on the ground. There must be people nearby. Maybe we'll find a village, have some tea, chat with the locals.

We pass an ancient-looking, broken-down stone shack on the side of the road. Sarah wants to turn back; I can feel it. Her energy is nervous, but she is trying to hide it. I'm used to this. She is strong and brave, but she's often a bit anxious when we leave cities, even when we're in the United States. She fears things like mountain lions and lone men. But she doesn't like to let the fear dictate her actions. She also doesn't like to be coddled, so I let her deal with it herself. Anyway, I want to get to the top.

"Would you rather . . .," she starts to ask Josh and me, before trailing off momentarily. She likes to play this game when we walk and, I think, when she's uncomfortable with the silence. I love how she

always starts it the same way, stating the first clause, then deciding on the second clause while the listener waits. Now she asks, “Would you rather get surrounded by five mountain lions right now, or five members of al-Qaeda?”

I think for a few seconds. “Probably mountain lions,” I say. “We could probably scare them off. I think if we were grabbed by al-Qaeda, we wouldn’t have much of a chance.”

“Don’t you think you could reason with al-Qaeda, though?” Josh says. “Speak to them in Arabic? Tell them you don’t hate Muslims? Tell them you’re critical of our government?”

“I don’t think it would matter,” I say. “But okay. I’ll go for al-Qaeda. Maybe you’re right. Maybe we could try to reason with al-Qaeda. There would be no reasoning with five mountain lions.”

Sarah chimes in. “I would definitely choose al-Qaeda . . .” She pauses. “You guys, I think we should turn back. It’s getting hot and we’re almost out of water.”

Then, as if on cue, a tiny runnel trickles across the road. We don’t have to go back just yet. The water is coming from a little spring, dribbling into a small, cement, human-made basin. I pour the water over my head by the bottleful and laugh as it runs down my skin. I can’t remember the last time I felt so free. Free of time. Free of worry. Free of the heat.

Could I be more content, more happy? We take a break, our insides cooled after five hours of walking, and fall asleep in the shade. I wake to the phone ringing. It’s Shon. He is on a bus and getting ready to come to meet us. How could the phone get coverage way up here? “Just go to the waterfall,” I tell him. “It’s right past the big campground with hundreds of people camped out. There are a bunch of tea vendors and stands selling souvenirs and stuff. From the waterfall, walk straight up the trail and up the valley. We’ll be coming down soon. There is no way we can miss each other.” I hang up as Sarah and Josh stir out of sleep.

2. Josh

I could hike all day like this.

“You guys,” Sarah says with hesitancy in her voice. “I think we should head back.”

“Really?” Shane sounds surprised. “How could we *not* pop up to the ridge? We’re so close.”

I turn to Sarah, thinking of her question about al-Qaeda and the mountain lions. I think of another discussion we had, wondering if Kurdish rebels would be in these mountains of northern Iraq and how nervous she was when we were hiking last night. It seems like she’s wanted to turn back for a while but kept quiet. Then I look at Shane and say, “Sarah feels strongly about this. I think we should talk it through.”

I’m being sensitive to Sarah, but Shane knows me well—he knows I want to reach the top, and he asks, “Josh, what do *you* want to do?”

“Well,” I say, “I think we should just go to the ridge—it’s only a couple minutes away. Let’s take a quick peek, then come right back down.” Sarah agrees.

Just as we’re setting out, Sarah stops in her tracks. She looks concerned.

“There’s a soldier on the ridge. He’s got a gun,” she says. “He’s waving us up the trail.” I pause for a second and look at my friends. They seem worried but not alarmed. Maybe it’s an Iraqi army outpost.

We stride silently uphill. I can feel my heart pounding against my ribs, but I want to look cool and confident. A different soldier with a green uniform and a rifle waits for us where our road meets the ridge. He’s standing in front of a round, stone building that we had previously looked at and decided would be our destination. He’s young and nonchalant, and he beckons us to him with a wave. He doesn’t seem hostile. When we finally approach him, he asks, “*Farsi?*”

“*Faransi?*” Shane asks, then continues in Arabic. “*I don’t speak French. Do you speak Arabic?*”

“Shane!” I whisper urgently. “He didn’t ask if we speak French. He asked if we speak Farsi!”

As I speak, I notice the red, white, and green flag on the soldier’s lapel. These aren’t Iraqi soldiers, Kurdish rebels, al-Qaeda, or mountain lions. We’re in Iran.

We follow the Iranian soldier along the other side of the ridge to a small, unmarked building. Around us, mountains unfold in all directions. There is no flag, nothing marking the building as Iranian, only a dozen soldiers in uniform milling around the building.

A portly man in a pink shirt starts barking orders. He’s scruffy and he looks like he just woke up. This man in pink must be the commander. His men take our stuff. He stays with us as his soldiers dig through our bags.

He doesn’t take his eyes off Sarah. He gets on his radio and communicates something incomprehensible, but still, he keeps his eyes on Sarah’s body—scanning up and down. I can feel Sarah tensing up between Shane and me, and I’m getting worried.

He watches us scoot closer together. He puts down the radio and laughs at our fear. Then he walks away.

His soldiers jockey for position to examine our belongings: cameras, an iPod, wallets, a compass, a cucumber, hummus, baklava, and two books. One book is about the history of the Crusades; the other about the struggle of Iraqi Kurds for independence. They flip through our passports, talking among themselves. The only word I understand is “*Amreekaaii*,” *American*.

I keep asking, “Iran? Iraq?” trying to figure out where the border lies and pleading with them to let us go. Shane and Sarah do the same, talking to different men and hearing different answers. Some point to the ridge; others point to the road we walked on. Some evade the question. I scrutinize each soldier, trying to discern: How much hope should I have? How scared should I be? Most of the soldiers act reassuringly. “No worry,” one of them repeats in English, “no worry.”

Sarah finds a guy who speaks a little English and seems trustworthy. He points down to the ground under his feet and says, “Iran.” Then he points to the road we came on and says, “Iraq.” He is saying we were in Iraq when they called us over. We start making a fuss, insisting we should be allowed to leave because they called us over their border. He agrees and says in awkward English, “You are true.”

It’s a remote outpost and our arrival is probably the most interesting thing that has happened out here for years, but eventually the excitement dies down and the innate banality of the place returns. They feed us pasta and give us tea. Some soldiers laugh among themselves. Others try out English words on us. Shane, Sarah, and I don’t have any strategy. We’ll cooperate, reason with them, or argue with them, but we don’t want to go any deeper into Iran than this. We want to walk down the mountain, meet up with Shon, and make our way back to Syria.

The English speaker approaches us again after having talked to the commander and says, “You. Go. Iran. You. Go. Mariwan.” He says it’s not up to him; these are the boss’s orders. Shane and Sarah recognize the Farsi word for *boss*, *ra’is*, because it’s an Arabic cognate.

Nothing we say matters. The wheels are already turning. Shane asks the commander if he can make a phone call. To my surprise, he actually points Shane toward cell phone reception, though he threatens to shoot him if he tries to run away.

A few minutes later Shane returns to where we’ve been sitting. “Shon was getting on the bus for Ahmed Awa when I called,” Shane says quickly. “I told him to contact the U.S. embassy and I made sure that he knew that they’d waved us across the border. Shon got off the bus immediately. He sounded panicky.”

Shon’s often panicky. Nonetheless, it was his anxiety that forced us to buy Iraqi SIM cards for our cell phones so the four of us could call one another. Now, at least someone knows what’s happening to us.

An SUV rattles up Iran’s side of the mountain.

Sarah turns to me and Shane. “Quick, guys, what should we do?”

“Fuck,” I say. “We don’t have much of a choice.”

“I don’t think we should go in the vehicles,” Shane says.

“Me neither! But what else can we do?” I say.

“We could go limp, like at a protest,” Sarah suggests.

The SUV pulls up in front of us, and the soldiers start to yell at us. We don’t budge.

“What should we do?” Sarah repeats hurriedly.

The soldiers close in. I say, “Let’s go limp. At least, we can say that they dragged us in.”

The soldiers carry Shane and me into the SUV. They don’t touch Sarah, but they bark at her. She hesitates briefly, then gets in the car of her own accord.

3. Sarah

The SUV kicks up clouds of dust as the soldiers drive us down a dirt road flanked by low shrubs. For five minutes we skirt the mountain ridge; then we ease into a web of rolling hills and begin to descend. I peer out the front window, but as we jerk over the rocky terrain, I can only catch a few glimpses through the shrubs of what lies ahead.

When we take a sharp turn onto a paved road, a startling view opens up before us. The wide, open valley is dressed in its summer skin, with swaths of pale green peppered with bald areas where dry, orange soil peeks through. In contrast to the muted colors of the earth, the sky is shockingly blue.

My brain feels divided, my thoughts bubbling over with fear and curiosity. What do I know about this country I’m being driven into? I know our governments have hated each other for decades, but part of Obama’s platform was a promise to open dialogue with Iran. Last month, when it was announced that President Ahmadinejad would be reelected, huge protests erupted all over the country. Until recently, international news on Iran was dominated by footage of demonstrators, the “Green Movement,” being gunned down and arrested in the streets, as well as allegations of others in custody being tortured and raped by the Revolutionary Guard.

What does any of that have to do with us? A few minutes ago, all of it was irrelevant to my life. Now, I’m being forcibly driven into a country I know little about and never intended to visit.

Still, we’re nowhere near Tehran—we must be in the Kurdish part of Iran. I wonder if the Kurds are treated like second-class citizens in Iran as they are in Turkey and Syria, or if they’ve won a degree of autonomy as in Iraq. As my eyes scan the horizon out my window, I have an impulse to take out my notebook and write down my first impressions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite my fear, it’s still oddly exciting to be here.

“Sarah,” the soldier in the front seat says as we drive, making eye contact with me in the rearview mirror. He motions for me to put something over my arms. Iran is the only Middle Eastern country other than Saudi Arabia and Qatar where the law requires women to dress modestly. I also know that Iranian women are known for boldly resisting this mandate. I nod at the soldier, hastily untie a long-sleeved shirt from around my waist, and put it on.

We enter a small, dusty town. When I see a few women covered in black from head to toe, I feel even more conspicuous. Suddenly, our car pulls over and stops. I glance in the rearview mirror and realize that again the driver is looking straight at me. “Sarah,” he says, and points to the street. I look in the direction he’s pointing but see nothing. He points again. I grab Josh’s arm and lean over him to look at Shane.

“What the fuck,” I say. “Is he telling me to get out?”

“I don’t know,” Shane says. “Just stay there. Don’t move.” Suddenly, my door opens and another soldier gestures for me to get out.

“No!” I shout. I grab the handle and slam the door. The soldiers in the front seat begin talking heatedly. I give Josh an exasperated look and squeeze his arm tighter. Then I reach my other arm across him to grab Shane’s hand.

We watch the driver get out of the SUV and stroll across the street into a small shop. Why are they singling me out? I feel my body tensing up, ready to fight if I have to. A few minutes later, the soldier emerges from the shop. On his arm he has draped several pieces of patterned fabric. He knocks on my window and I slowly roll it down.

“I think he wants you to choose one, to cover your hair,” Shane says.

Shane’s right. My fear is instantly replaced by indignation as I think how unnecessary all this is. I imagine myself back in Sulaimaniya later tonight, waving the headscarf at Shon as we retell the details of our harrowing day in Iranian custody. Reluctantly, I choose a red one with green and orange flowers, turn to the driver’s mirror, and carefully wrap it around my head.

4. Josh

After our long drive down the mountain, we arrive at a police station. Inside, I am seated at a desk across from an interrogator. On my left, another man sits in a plastic chair. Beside the desk, there is a two-gallon pot of tea with a single Lipton tag hanging out. Shane and Sarah wait in the backroom, where I sat when they were each interrogated.

“What is your name?” the interrogator starts off.

“Joshua Felix,” I lie, using my middle name printed on the passport to disguise my Arabic last name.

“Your religion?”

“Christian,” I lie again, hesitant to admit that I’m Jewish.

“Write it down.”

He tells me to sign and fingerprint the bottom of each page that I answer.

The interrogator stops thumbing my passport and says with solemnity, “We have an eyewitness.” He points to the guy in the plastic chair. “He says you were in this town, Mariwan, last week. He says that he met you on the street and asked you where you were from. He says you told him you were French.” The guy in the plastic chair smiles at me.

We were in Iraqi Kurdistan for the past few days and Syria before that . . . Why is this guy lying?

“I swear I’m not French. I’m American. You have my passport.”

“Okay, if you are American,” he says with a straight face, “then spell supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.” I don’t answer. I stare at him in disbelief. I feel foolish for having taken him seriously at all.

After that, he wraps up the interrogation. They take us back outside and into the SUV. They try to separate me from Shane and Sarah, but Sarah interlocks our arms and yells at them until they relent. No one tells us where we are going.

All afternoon, they’ve been shuttling us to different buildings. In the medley of officials I have already met in the police stations, I’ve found no potential allies, no one willing to listen. Everyone is lost in the bureaucratic quandary of what to do with these Americans who showed up near a border area.

In another police station, they feed us dinner, give us some blankets, and put us in a large, empty room. I lie down next to Shane and Sarah, under a mess of wool blankets. My legs feel tired from the long hike this morning. I think about my mother and father and hope they don’t know what is happening to me. I go to sleep, anxious and exhausted.

The next day, they wake us at sunrise and we drive. By midday, we arrive at another city and they take us into a nondescript apartment with all the blinds closed. I don't know where we are. Various people come and interrogate us with little skill, seemingly asking whatever questions come to mind. Different translators come and go. The last one says these men picked him up at the university. He says he doesn't know what's going on. He looks frightened.

After dark, a new man comes. They bring me out of the bedroom that Sarah, Josh, and I have been held in. It's apparent that they expect me to answer the same stupid questions, through this translator for the third time today. "I won't answer anything until you tell me who you are and what is happening to us," I insist. He leans back in his chair and laces his ringed fingers over his protruding belly. "We are a nongovernmental organization," he says, grimacing.

"What. Are. You. Going. To. Do. To. Us?" I ask with rising anger in my voice. Sarah and Josh, apparently hearing my protestations, come out of the room and stand behind me. Someone else materializes and trains a camcorder on us. The man leans forward in his chair, leaning his forearms on the desk between us, and says, "In about one hour, you will know everything."

An hour later we're in a car. Beneath the night sky, the city is smearing slowly past our windows.

Who are these two men in the front seats? Where are they taking us? They aren't speaking. The pudgy man in the passenger seat is making the little movements that nervous people do when they try to pretend everything is normal: coughing occasional, fake coughs; adjusting his seating position compulsively; fiddling with the doodads on the dashboard with mock interest. Everyone in the car is trying to prove to one another, and maybe to ourselves, that we aren't afraid. But Sarah's hand is growing limp in mine. Something is very wrong.

"He's got a gun," Josh says, startled but calm. "He just put it on the dash." In a busy roundabout, our car swerves to avoid an oncoming vehicle. The pistol falls from the dash and scuds across the floor. My heart stops and my mouth goes dry. The pudgy man picks it up and sets it on his lap. We turn onto a road that leads out of town. The city lights fade behind us.

"Where are we going?" Sarah asks in a disarming, honey-sweet voice. "Sssssss!" the pudgy man hisses, turning around to face us and putting his finger to his lips. The headlights of the car trailing us light up his face, revealing his cold, bored eyes. He turns back to face the front. The solitary lights of country houses stream by like little meteorites. The car falls silent again.

He picks up the gun in his right hand and cocks it three times.

Sarah's eyes widen. Her posture stiffens. She leans toward the man in front and, with a note of desperation, says, "Ahmadinejad good!" (thumbs-up!) "Obama bad!" (thumbs-down!) The pistol is resting in his lap. He turns to face us again and holds his two hands out with palms facing each other. "Iran," he says, nodding his head toward one hand. "America," he says, lifting the other. "Problem," he says, stretching out the distance between them. He checks our faces to make sure his message registered, then drops his arms.

Sarah turns to me and starts. What does she see? Her eyes are penetrating. "Do you think he is going to hurt us?" she asks. I don't know whether to respond or just stare at her. I am terrified. We walk into our fear together, letting it surround us softly like fog. The immediate prospect of death seems so different than I had imagined it. In my mind, I see us pulling over to the side of the road and leaving the car quietly. My tremulous legs will convey me mechanically over the rocky earth. I will be holding Sarah's hand and maybe Josh's too, but I will be mostly gone already, walking flesh with no spirit. We won't kiss passionately in our final moments before the trigger pull. We won't scream. We won't run. We won't utter fabulous words of defiance as we stare down the gun barrel. We will be like mice, paralyzed by fear, limp in the slack jaw of a cat. We will just stand there. Each of us will fall,

one by one, hitting the gravelly earth with a thud.

Sarah pumps Josh's and my hands. Her eyes have sudden strength in them, forced yet somehow genuine. "We're going to be okay, you guys. They are just trying to scare us." Yes, maybe they are just trying to scare us. This can't be true . . .

Where's Josh? He seems so far away. His head hangs low over his chest and he is staring blankly at the back of the seat. How did I get him into this? I wanted the Middle East to be lovely for him. For years I've been trying to get him to visit. I promised him he would love it. I *knew* he would love it. His eyes squeeze shut as his face floods with emotion and he tries to force it back down. Then they open again. Then they close tight. Maybe we should choke these two in the front seat before we become too resigned to our fate. I could get the pudgy man and Josh could get the driver. Could we drive back to the border? How far is it? Where are we? What about the car behind us?

Our car turns and its headlights illuminate a giant, red steel door. As soon as we stop, it swings open and we pull inside a dark, empty compound surrounded by ten-foot-high cement brick walls. There are a few gray buildings inside. No one is around but the man who opened the door and another standing on the steps of the main building. Will they do it here, hidden, out of view? We all get out silently. They tell us to bow our heads and they walk us into the empty country jailhouse.

Once, almost four years ago, I was walking along a set of train tracks in Oakland with Sarah. It was summer, just before dusk, and we were drunk on our new love. We had just discussed the possibilities of our future: Could I settle down someday, have a home? Would she travel, maybe even move to the Middle East? Yes, I could! Yes, she would! We talked in that delicate way new couples do, not committing to any future plan, just dancing, each of us seeing if it was safe to take things further. As we walked, a train approached slowly from the opposite direction on the adjacent tracks. We stopped, leaned back against the frames of our bikes, and watched the graffiti-covered cars slowly roll by. The world felt perfect. The ker-klunk of the train was perfect. The breeze on my face, perfect. As I watched the groaning mass of metal, I was at once calm and excited. I thought I had given up on finding anyone who could fit into my life, who could handle the constant moving and risk taking. But at that moment, I was sure we could make it work. The train continued to roll past us and as the engine drew farther away, I heard the faint dopplering sound of a whistle. For some reason, I turned my head to the left at the sound of the third or fourth whistle. On our track, a train towered over us like a life-sized still photograph. The next thing I knew, we were off the tracks and the train was smashing by. We were in each other's arms. Our chests were heaving. Neither of us knew who saved whom and we liked it better that way.

This—now—feels like that. When the metal jail cell doors clang behind us, I fall into Sarah's arm with the same sigh of relief and the same exhilaration for being alive as I did then. The prison cell feels like life. Compared to the immediate potential of death, the uncertainty of captivity seems like a gift. Moments start to take shape again. Sarah and I kneel down, and I weep into her shoulder. Something pours out of me—a deep guilt. "I can't believe I got you into this," I say, looking into her eyes. "I could never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

She grabs my face and, almost sternly, says, "I got my own self into this, Shane. This isn't your fault. Do you understand me? This is not your fault." Part of me believes her, but most of me doesn't.

Josh sits with his back against the wall. "I want to have kids someday," he says. Sarah calls him over and the three of us embrace. And the three of us breathe.

6. Shane

On our second morning in the jail, Pudgy returns. They are taking us back to Iraq, he says. It's all over. It must be 6 a.m.

After about two hours of driving, we pull off for breakfast at a little roadside restaurant tucked into a ravine. The pickup that has been escorting us follows. Mustachioed men in baggy Kurdish pants and cummerbunds plop casually out of the truck bed. They walk slowly to the restaurant, bandoliers hanging loosely around their shoulders, AK-47s dangling casually at their sides. Their ease puts me at ease. Our relief that we are going back to Iraq is palpable. Sarah walks aimlessly and swings her arm high and loose as she gazes up at the rock walls all around us. I meander around, plucking a little purple flower from a bush and pressing it into my book, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, as a souvenir. In the restaurant, Josh snatches a tray of tea from the waiter's hands and serves it to our guards with a smile, humming Bob Dylan songs under his breath. They bow their heads, slightly but graciously, clearly tickled. We linger over our breakfasts of kebabs and eggs.

When we leave, we drive on and on, past salt flats and fields of sunflowers. Hours stack upon hours. "Iraq?" I ask Pudgy. "*Areh, areh.*" He nods, *yes, yes*, and points up ahead. He does this every time we ask, as if Iraq were perpetually around the corner. Reality is slow to set in. It isn't until we have been clearly heading east for two hours that one of us finally announces that we are driving to Tehran. At one point Pudgy turns to us and holds out his palm as if balancing something delicately on it. He looks at his hand and says "Obama" as if the name were perched there. Then he blows across it—poof!—as if scattering dandelion seeds. That is his explanation for what's happening to us. For the rest of the drive, we oscillate back and forth between a heavy silence and discussing what to do if we're separated. If they pull us apart, we decide we will hunger-strike until we are reunited.

By midday we're in Tehran, where we're transferred to the custody of burly plainclothes men. They put us in a white van with tinted windows, blindfold us, and drive us for about fifteen minutes. When we stop, we are taken into a building and we sit in chairs, clutching one another's hands. Leather shoes click past. Black chadors wisp into the thin line of vision underneath my blindfold. We are made to dress in light blue fatigues and pose for mug shots, holding boards with numbers on them. The only thing keeping me from falling deep into my own fear is a strong desire to comfort Sarah. She keeps searching for reassurance that we're going to be okay. She is trembling slightly, tightly gripping Josh's and my hands.

A man tells us to go with him. We follow, hand in hand, in and out of doors and hallways, still blindfolded. Now I am trembling. Suddenly, after turning a corner, they start pulling at Josh. They've tried to separate us from him several times in the last few days, but now they are serious. I hold on to him tightly, letting my body be pumped with each of their tugs. Someone twists my other arm behind my back and I shout like an animal in pain. My brain is skipping tracks, but my body is still groping automatically. It feels sort of like when you fall off your bike, or the split second between getting punched in the face and finding yourself on the ground, when everything is black and jumbling. Amidst everything, I hear Sarah yelling, "No! Noooo!" repeatedly.

Then Josh lets go of me. "I'm going," he says. "I'm going." I feel the instant relief that comes with submission, then the loss. He floats swiftly away in the dark sea of bodies, and Sarah and I are immediately pushed upstairs. As we climb the stairs, Sarah is bent over, crying and shouting, "Josh! They took Josh!"

"It's okay, Sarah," I say stupidly. What else is there to say? "It's going to be okay."

Upstairs, they push Sarah into a cell. "Let me stay with my husband!" We aren't married, but she's hoping they'll keep us together if they think we are. "Please! Please!" she begs. "Plea—" The heavy, metallic sound of a closing door cuts off her voice.

I enter the cell across from hers submissively. The door closes. I let my back fall against the wall. Slowly, I slide down to the floor and let the weight of my head fall onto my knees. Everything is drowned in silence so thick and black that it feels like its own entity. It fills the room and squeezes up against me.

I take off my blindfold and look around. I see the carpet, a tightly knit bluish gray. I see the marble tiled walls, gray with threads of black knotted throughout. I see the thick steel door with its little foot slot and window, both sealed with their own metal doors. I see the thin plastic door that leads to the little bathroom with the little toilet, the little sink, and the snaking bidet. I am irrevocably present. It is just me and these things. Ten feet off the ground, the sun spills in through the grated windows like orange daggers. The fans in their ducts whirl. The world turns with a slow groan.

Sarah's muffled sobs pulse nearby. The bottom has fallen out of whatever vitality was inside me. We lost. Sarah and Josh are gone. All they left me was Sarah's sobbing. I am grateful to them for leaving me at least that. No, I hate them for leaving me with that.

7. Josh

My body is theirs. My sandals clap loudly on the floor as I try to catch my momentum and keep my balance. After every few steps, they spin me in circles. My mind tries desperately to remember the way back.

The door shuts behind me. The clanging metal reverberates until silence resumes. I stand at the door, distraught and disoriented. I should roar like a lion; I should cry like a baby. Now is the time to blaspheme the world, but I would be faking it. Whatever script, whatever drama I thought I was in, ends now. Whatever stage I thought I was on is now empty. The director left and so did the audience.

Slowly, as if I were sick, I dodder to the corner of my cell and take a seat on the carpet. There is nothing in my eight-by-twelve-foot cell: no mattress, no chair, nothing—just a room, empty except for three wool blankets, with a bathroom attached. My prison uniform blends in with the blue marble wall behind me, and the tight blue carpet below. Shane and Sarah are probably sulking in the corners of their cells too. We agreed we'd hunger-strike if we were split up. Now I don't feel defiant. I just feel lost.

Sarah's glasses are in my breast pocket. She gave them to me to hold for her when they made us wear blindfolds. She didn't have pockets in her prison uniform. I empty my other pockets: lip balm from the hike and a wafer wrapper—the remnant of my measly lunch.

A creeping sense of aloneness takes root. I don't know what I'll do in here for the rest of the day. Beyond my bewilderment, I fear the encroaching emptiness. I sense the hovering *blankness*—a zone of mindlessness that looms over my psyche and lives in the silence of my cell.

8. Shane

The day after our arrival, men remove me from my cell. They seat me in a chair-desk combo—the kind used in high schools—facing the corner of a room. I'm blindfolded. I don't know where I am, except that it is in or near Tehran. I'm convinced we're in an unassuming building in some alley—a kind of secret prison. We must be in an outlying neighborhood. Why else would I hear birds chirping?

I can hear a group of men whispering behind me. Chairs are shuffling. The sweet pungency of dried leaves hangs in the air. My oversized blue prison shirt exposes my chest. The air is cool, but not sharp.

Last night, Sarah and I discovered we could whisper to each other in short bursts through the grate on the bottom of our doors when no one is nearby. Neither of us has heard from Josh since yesterday. We haven't eaten since we arrived.

Things are moving forward. We are going to clear this up. They will ask me questions and they'll understand they made a huge mistake. They don't want an international scandal. They are figuring out how to ease out gracefully.

“How are you?” a voice melts in softly. “The interrogator is going to ask you some questions. I wi-

write them down in English and you will write your answers.” I am trying to act relaxed, nonchalant, and confident of my innocence. The interrogator makes brief, bullish utterances. The translator hands me a piece of paper.

Q: What was your mission in coming to Iran? Who sent you here?

“I didn’t have any mission,” I say. “I never meant to come to Iran. Your guards waved us over the border—”

“Please just write your answer.”

It was either Iraqi Kurdistan or Lebanon. Sarah had a week off work at the American Language Institute in Damascus, where we’d been living for a year. Shon and Josh were visiting. We wanted to take a trip. Sarah and I loved Beirut, but it was just a few hours away. We could do that anytime. Why not go somewhere farther away, somewhere none of us had been? Sarah had wanted to go to Iraq for a while. I’d been to Baghdad and Fallujah as a journalist, but never to the “other Iraq.” Kurdistan is a different place, almost a different country. I’ve read write-ups on Kurdistan as a tourist destination in several publications, including the New York Times and Vanity Fair. About a million tourists go there every year.

It is one of the only pro-American parts of the Middle East, more so, I would say, than even Israel. Iraqi Kurdistan, one security contractor told me while I was in Baghdad last February, is where people like him go on vacation. That makes sense—the United States virtually handed Iraqi Kurds their autonomy. It was the least the Americans could do after what happened in 1991. That year, George H. W. Bush made a radio broadcast encouraging Iraq’s Kurds and Shiite Arabs to rise up against Saddam. Apparently believing they would be supported by the U.S. military, both peoples revolted. Saddam killed thousands of innocents and rebels. During the bulk of the massacre, the United States stood by. Eventually, the United States enforced a no-fly zone in the north and south of the country, ostensibly to allow the return of Shia and Kurdish refugees who fled the Iraqi military’s killing spree. The Iraqi troops withdrew from the north and a de facto Kurdish regional government was established, creating an autonomous region.

We visited Kurdistan because it is nothing like Iraq proper. At the border between Turkey and the Kurdish region, officials happily stamped our passports with tourist visas. To get a visa to Baghdad five months earlier, I had to transfer money from Damascus to my fixer so he could bribe officials. In Kurdistan, we visited a castle and ate pizza on the streets. We watched the city of Sulaimaniya erupt in festivities after Kurdistan’s parliamentary elections. I witnessed elections in Baghdad months earlier and the streets were dead. People were afraid of bombings and shootings. Driving was forbidden. In Kurdistan, there were fireworks and music and dancing. It was beautiful.

It seemed like everywhere we went during our first two days in Kurdistan, there were pictures of fantastic mountains on display, so when we arrived in Sulaimaniya on our second night, I asked our taxi driver if there were any places to hike. The place to go, he said enthusiastically, was Ahmed Awa. When we asked our hotel manager the same question, he gave the same answer, pointing to a large poster vaguely reminiscent of a Swiss hamlet with snowcapped mountains and poorly photoshopped waterfalls. “Ahmed Awa looks just like that,” he said. Next to the poster, taped to the wall, was a picture of a waving European-looking couple standing in front of a waterfall at the actual Ahmed Awa.

Sarah, Josh, and I wanted to go and camp overnight, but Shon didn’t. He thought it was a bad idea and, anyway, he wasn’t feeling well and wanted to spend more time in the city. He’d meet us there the next day, he told us.

We arrived at the waterfall at night. It was underwhelming—more a small stretch of rapids than a cascade—but in the Middle East, water is always an attraction. Hundreds of people were camping out with their families. Men played backgammon and poured tea out of thermoses while little children chased one another in and out of tents, squealing with laughter. The air smelled of the apple-flavored

tobacco smoke of water pipes. Vendors sold tea and kebabs everywhere.

We asked a tea vendor if there was a trail we could hike on. He pointed us to a wide, well-used path hugging the stream. We walked by moonlight, hearing the music and laughter from below as we stepped carefully over protruding tree roots. The beginning of the trail was lined with stands, closed because of the late hour, displaying cowboy hats, flashlights, and those packets of crappy dry cookies for sale. We walked for a while, then found a soft spot to stop for the night.

In the morning, we hiked. The tea vendor probably didn't expect we'd walk for hours.

A: We never meant to come to Iran. We had no mission in Iran. We had no mission at all. We were tourists in Iraqi Kurdistan. Our taxi driver and hotel manager recommended we go there. The driver's number is in my phone. You can find the hotel. Call them. They'll tell you.

I hand the paper back over my left shoulder. He reads it aloud in Farsi. The tongues of several mouths tut loudly in disapproval. He hands me another sheet of paper.

Q: What American officials did you meet with in Iraq?

There were those teenage soldiers on the Iraq-Turkey border I talked to with Josh and Shon, but I wouldn't call them officials. They were sitting, looking bored on their Stryker.

"Where are you from?"

"Mississippi. You?"

"California."

"California?! What are you doing here?"

"We're on vacation."

"Vacation? You came here for a vacation?"

A: None.

More tutting.

Q: Iraqi officials have said that the police warned you not to come near Iran. And an Iraqi newspaper said that you were spies.

The spy part doesn't surprise me. I've been detained for short periods a number of times in the Middle East on suspicion of espionage. It's the default allegation against any foreigner doing something unusual. In Iraq, each political faction has a newspaper, and newspapers in the Middle East aren't exactly known for checking their facts. But what is this about the police? Did he make that up, or did the local police department quickly drum up a story to cover its ass?

A: The word *Iran* was never mentioned to us during our three days in Iraq. Police never warned us about anything.

Q: You were carrying with you a compass, a map, a GPS, and a professional camera. Why?

A: I am a photographer and I carry my camera everywhere I go. I take pictures all the time. I was taking pictures of our hiking trip. Josh had a compass on him from his travels before. I didn't have a GPS. I think you are talking about my iPod. That is a music player. We didn't have a map either.

Q: How do you know Josh?

We met six years ago. We were both twenty-one. It was summer, and I had just come back from Yemen, where I had been studying Arabic, and found myself in the backyard of a West Oakland house with tall unkempt grass and fruit trees bursting with figs and lemons. I sat around a picnic table with other people, and we ate pasta with fresh basil and drank cheap wine. Could I park my RV in the driveway of their collective house and live there? Sure, they said.

A few days later, I drove the lumbering thing in. Inside the house, I found some people holding carrots and chatting over a bucket of peanut butter. I grabbed a carrot and dunked it in the bucket. One of those people had a big laugh and a gentle demeanor and sang Bob Dylan under his breath often. He was so obsessed with Gandhi that he would sometimes drink olive oil straight because he read that Gandhi used to do it. In that kitchen the two of us would critique the United Nations and

discuss the Middle East and how to manufacture peanut butter. We would go on hikes and camp on the beach. We would trade books and dance crazily.

A year later, he would move away, off to a sustainable living community to live and work at an environmental education center in Oregon and I'd go visit him in what seemed like a paradise after crack dealers started preying on our house in Oakland. We'd pick vegetables from his garden, gather duck eggs, and talk about our lovers and our projects. As the years passed, we grew and changed. He went deep into the land and his little town, and I spread out into the world, making a modest living by selling stories to newspapers and magazines. I'd try for years to get him to come to the Arab world. Eventually he would and he would like it; then he would end up here, in Iran, in prison.

A: Josh and I lived together when we were in college.

Q: How do you know Sarah?

I think it started with a cup of Turkish coffee. I preferred to add a little sugar before the water boiled up—it brought out the coffee's sweet notes and I wanted those notes to be delightful, but subtle. I served her the coffee on a little Bosnian tray, in my kitchen, pouring it from a tiny copper pot into a tiny cup. As we drank it that first time we met, we talked about the Middle East and her work with the Zapatista rebels in Mexico. We laughed a lot.

Or maybe it really started when we walked around a Bay Area suburb, along the border region where the city's growth was checked by swampland. We walked out into the reeds and I pushed her back. She grabbed hold of me and pulled me down with her and we kissed. It wasn't the first time we kissed, but it was the kind of kiss that makes you know that something is starting that will change you.

A: I met her in my early twenties. We went to antiwar protests together.

Q: What is your e-mail address and password?

A: I'm not giving you my e-mail password.

They put a stack of nine empty, numbered pages in front of me. "Tonight, when you are in your cell we want you to write your complete biography."

A guard grabs my arm gently to escort me out. The translator stops us. "I hope this will be cleared up very soon," he says. "If it is true that you have protested against your government, then we want you to be free. You are a human being like me. I am going home to have dinner with my family and you deserve to do the same. I hope I don't see you again." He chuckles softly and puts his hand on my shoulder. The guard leads me away.

9. Sarah

"Sarah, eat this cookie."

"Not until I see Josh and Shane."

I'm sitting blindfolded in a school chair. A cookie sits on the desk in front of me. The interrogator is saying something to me—what is it? I have to force myself to focus.

"Do you think we care if you eat, Sarah?"

They do care. I know that much. I've been on hunger strike since they split us up two days ago. At first it was difficult, not eating, but I'm learning how to conserve my energy. When I stand up, my heart beats furiously in my chest, so I lie on my back on the floor most of the day, sleeping as much as I can. Terrible thoughts and images occupy my mind—my mom balled up on the floor screaming when she learns I've been captured, masked prison guards coming into my cell to rape me—but I've found ways to distract myself, like slowly going over multiplication tables in my head. I do this for hours at a time, starting with the twos and going up into the teens until I have to stop and start over again. When it becomes impossible to continue, I sing songs to myself in a whisper.

"Sarah, why did you come to the Middle East to live in Damascus?" the interrogator asks. "Don't

you miss your family? Your country?"

"Yes, of course I do. But it's only for a couple of years. I can't believe you're asking me this—do you realize how scared and worried my family must be? It's horrible what you're doing. Why can't I make a phone call and tell them I'm alive?"

It kills me that I can't even comfort my mother. When I was six, she put everything we had—my toys, books, clothes, blankets, and the cat—into a small rental car and drove us from Chicago to Los Angeles. My dad loved me and had always been sweet to me, but their marriage was volatile and our home was often an unhealthy place. When bad arguments between my mom and dad began to lead to violence and injuries to my mom, she knew we had to leave. We had to start fresh.

My world exploded on that trip. Snaking through narrow canyons and valleys of wildflowers set me on fire. I remember arriving at the Grand Canyon, jumping out of the car, and running straight up to the edge. As the beauty engulfed me, I could feel my mom's fear and hesitation tugging at me from behind like an invisible string. She never knew whether to discourage my wildness or not. She wanted to let me run free, to trust me. More than that, she wanted me to trust myself.

I snap back to the present. The interrogators have returned to the room. There are four or five of them, and they come and go so often, I'm only vaguely aware of their presence or absence. One of them—he seems like the boss—is pacing and talking angrily in Farsi. He seems to circle in close, then recede, as he continues ranting. They tell me if I eat their cookie, I can see Shane and Josh.

"Let me see them first—then I'll eat."

"Sarah, you say you are a teacher. Have you ever been to the Pentagon?"

"No, I've never even been to Washington, DC."

"Please Sarah, tell the truth. How can you be a teacher, an educated person, and never go to the Pentagon? Describe to us just the lobby."

"I've never been to the Pentagon. Teachers don't go to the Pentagon!" I want to ask him if he's ever left Iran, or if he even has a notion of what Iran is like outside this paranoid cabal. At times, their questions are so absurd, I almost have to stop myself from laughing, partially because I'm weak from not eating and partially because I can't really convince myself this nightmare is real.

"Now, tell us who sent you to Iran. Who do you work for? Who pays you to go on these missions?"

"I never intended to come anywhere near Iran. You know this! We don't even speak Farsi. Would a female spy be stupid enough to waltz into Iran without a headscarf?"

"Sarah, you crossed our border illegally. We need to know why."

"The border isn't even marked. We didn't know we were near it. Do you even know exactly where it is?"

"Of course we do, Sarah."

"Then why don't you show me a map? If the border is the road, then your soldiers called us off the road, into Iran. We didn't walk in by choice."

Their story is ridiculous. Spies would have to be suicidal to enter Iran the way we did, without supplies, visas, or even basic knowledge of Farsi. Any suspicion they have will disintegrate once they verify what we're telling them, right?

The guards always take Shane and me out of our cells to be interrogated at the same time. We've spent hours discussing our interrogation strategies. A few days after we were brought here, I discovered a plastic tube sticking out of the ceiling in my bathroom. When I stood up on my sink and spoke into it, the sound traveled to Shane's cell, emerging from a similar tube that opened into his bathroom. I have to stand on the tips of my toes and cock my head at an almost impossible angle to reach it, but it works far better than the grate at the bottom of our cell doors we used at first. Also, it isn't as close to the hallway where the guards walk by—so hopefully we won't be caught.

They ask me to draw a map of our apartment in Damascus. "Sure," I say. "Good idea. Why don't

you go there? You will find out that everything I've been saying is true. You will find a stack of ungraded papers on my desk, bookshelves full of books that criticize the U.S. government's policies, criticize Israel. I'm sure the Syrian government would have no problem with you searching it."

I hand over the dozen or so pages I've carefully written. Like switching channels, I tune out their conversation and listen to the birds outside the window. I grew up strong, like my mother wanted me to. It was hard to get by on a nurse's salary and we struggled—but my mom made a good life for us in warm, beautiful California. I went to good schools, had lots of friends—but like any parent, she couldn't protect me from the world forever. When I was sixteen, I was raped while on a date with a slightly older guy. It took me years to pull myself out of the self-loathing and depression that violation caused. I learned to love myself again, but the trauma of being a rape survivor follows me everywhere.

Now, in prison, I have a hard time falling asleep because I'm afraid someone will come into my cell and catch me off-guard before I can defend myself. Even on the hike before we were captured, I was preoccupied by the thought of coming across soldiers or lone men on the trail. My fear seemed to contradict my objective knowledge of how safe and popular Iraqi Kurdistan is for tourists. I told myself I was overreacting and I still think I was, but maybe my fear was telling me something, like that we were simply too far from the other people camping by the waterfall, that we hadn't seen a map detailed enough to tell us exactly where we were. Maybe I should have listened.

The translator stops speaking and there is silence. Then, I hear the slow, deliberate rasp of paper being torn. The interrogator throws the papers in a pile at my feet. I feel myself emotionally detaching from the situation; his angry voice sounds farther and farther away, in the background. In my mind I can see myself from a vantage point, high up on the ceiling, sitting blindfolded in this small wooden chair with four or five angry men circling me like vultures. Maybe every moment of my life, every hardship and challenge, has been in preparation for this. If my mother could talk to me right now, I know what she would say. She would tell me that I'm stronger than these assholes, that they can't hurt me. All I need to do is believe in myself, in my ability to get through this, and I will.

"He says this is not useful to us, Sarah," the translator says, almost apologetically. "You will have to write it again."

10. Josh

"Deplorable means bad." I answer my interrogator, "When I say Israel's treatment of Palestinians is deplorable, I am saying Israel treats the Palestinians badly." I'm acting civilly, but I want to scream at them, "I'm not the enemy you think I am!" Why are they asking me about the Palestinians? We both oppose American support of Israel. But these guys don't care. To them, I'm an American, and America threatens to attack Iran. America slaps sanctions on them, supports Middle East dictators, bombs their neighbors, and arms the Israelis. To them, I am my government.

In one sense, they are right: I am their enemy. A couple months ago, there were huge protests throughout Iran. At the time, I was in Sweden visiting my brother. Stockholm's sizable expatriate Iranian community protested in solidarity with the uprising in their home country. My brother, Alex, and I documented the anti-Iran rally in Sweden. I've been praying in my cell that Alex doesn't e-mail me about it. If he doesn't know I'm detained, he may send me his next version of the video.

"Why did you come to the Middle East?" the interrogator asks.

"I came to visit my friends."

I give that answer, doubting it will suffice for my interrogators. It didn't even satisfy my parents. When I told my father that I planned to visit Syria, he asked sarcastically, "Are you going to meet Hamas in Syria? Hamas's leadership is in Damascus."

He was prodding me. My father interprets my pro-Palestine stance as a personal rejection of him. ~~We can argue logically about the Israeli occupation, and he'll even agree with me at times.~~ In the end it always comes back to his fear that I don't love him and his side of my family enough. We've ruined too many family outings debating Israel/Palestine, and I wanted him to know my trip to Syria wasn't meant to hurt him.

"Dad, I'm not going to Gaza—I'm just visiting Syria. You know I don't care for Hamas, just like I don't care for the Israeli government."

"Okay, Josh, just tell me: are you going to Syria to spite your father?"

"Dad! A part of me is going there because of you, not in spite of you. It is through you that I've been interested in the Arab world."

He was born in Basra, Iraq, in 1948 and was airlifted to the new State of Israel in 1951. These airlifts—known as Operation Ezra and Nehemiah—relocated my father as a toddler, along with 125,000 others, 95 percent of Iraq's ancient Jewish community.

His childhood memories took place in Israel, but they smell like home-cooked Iraqi food, and they sound like classical Arabic music. By age sixty, he now has lived in America most of his life, but he wants to be buried in Israel when he dies. One of the reasons I liked the idea of visiting Iraq was to see the country where my father was born.

I heard him take a couple deep breaths over the phone before responding, "Okay, okay. You know . . . Damascus is supposed to be very beautiful. You're going to have a great time. But please keep in touch. You must tell me about it—the music, the parties, everything. I would probably love Syria, but I'm not allowed there. You know, I grew up with a lot of Arab Jews from Syria, Halabis. Be sure to visit Halab and send me some photos, would you?"

"I'd love to, Dad."

The interrogators want more from me. They press, "So, you visit your friends even if they are in Syria? Don't you have friends in America?"

My mother similarly questioned traveling to Syria.

"Mom," I told her, "Shane and Sarah have been there for a year. It's safe."

"But you're Jewish!" my mother chided me over the telephone.

"Why do you think that Syrians are anti-Semitic?"

"They are not Jewish! Sarah is not Jewish, is she?"

"No."

"Exactly!"

My mother is probably freaking out right now. She expected to hear from me every few days while I was in the Middle East. I didn't even tell her I was traveling to Iraq. I figured I would mention the trip after I safely returned to Syria. I wish this weren't happening to her.

To my translator, I explain why I was traveling abroad. I want them to understand me. If they can see who I really am, maybe they'll release me. At the least, they'll have sympathy for me even if they don't have the power to free me. Hoping to ingratiate myself with them, I also emphasize my critical views of the United States.

"I was teaching for an undergraduate study-abroad program for American students during the spring semester. I traveled and taught about public health in Switzerland, India, China, and South Africa. I encouraged my students to be critical of the medical establishment and to analyze the links between capitalism and illness. The program focused on the social determinants of health, not just germs. We discussed lifestyle choices, diet, alternative medicine, and environmental quality as ways to promote public health. When the job ended in May, I wanted to visit friends abroad before returning to America."

I don't want to talk about my interest in the Arab world because I want to avoid talking about my

father and international politics. I'd rather not mention the word *Israel*, which I've visited a handful of times, even if I'm criticizing it. I avoid my heritage. It feels like my original sin.

My interrogators leave me alone for a moment as they converse. I cannot attach any meanings to their Farsi words, but I remain attentive, hoping for a clue to what they're saying. One interrogator repeats my name slowly. "Jo-shua Fat-tal, Yo-shua Fat-tal." Damn my name! Yoshua was an Israelite spy in the Bible. Fattal is Arabic. One interrogator concludes, "Josh Fattal, *Yahudi Arabi*."

Now they know. They ask me, "What's your religion?" I knew the Christian façade wouldn't last. But am I really Jewish? I don't believe in the Torah, in Adam or Eve, or Noah or Moses. I don't keep kosher, and I don't obey the Sabbath. Judaism is a religion; it is a choice. It doesn't run in my blood or anything tribal like that. Sarah and Shane don't consider themselves Christian. Why should I consider myself Jewish?

But I can't help it. I feel Jewish. Maybe I shouldn't hide it. It's the truth. But I feel like I'm confessing when I answer their question: "I am Jewish."

11. Shane

My hunger is my strength. Three times a day, the slot on my door opens and a tray of food is handed in. I take it and hand back the full tray of food from the last meal. At first, I try to block the entry of meals with my hand, but the guards always insist, so I eventually submit. But they can't make me eat it. Today is the third day, and I've decided to start hiding the food from myself in my bathroom. The smell makes me hungry, not just in my stomach but in my bones. But I can tolerate that hunger. I can tolerate the dizziness. I can handle the momentary blackouts when I stand up too quickly. Whenever I hear, or think I hear, the guards' footsteps, I rush into my bathroom, grab the food, set it by the door, lie on the floor, and suck in my stomach to accentuate my ribs.

The hunger gives me something to focus on, a purpose. Everything I do is a strategy, to beat the hunger and to beat them. I focus my attention on not walking, on conserving every bit of energy I can. I keep my stomach full of water at all times. I refuse to take even a nibble of the food, because I think it will bring my stomach back to life.

I spend my time on my back, surrounded by the objects of my entertainment. I turn a two-liter bottle from side to side, watching the water flow from one end to the other, making little waves. I open and close the cap of my toothbrush. Click, click-click, click-click-click-click. I fold up bits of paper cup and shoot them at the window with a rubber band.

I eagerly await mealtime so I can have the satisfaction of noncompliance, the little feeling of victory to carry me through the following hours. Sometimes after refusing, I can't help pacing laps around the cell. The refusal brings me to life, makes me feel the strength in my slowly weakening muscles. I know deep inside I can't beat them, but I need the fight itself to keep me going.

12. Shane

I'm back in the interrogation room. As I sit, waiting for the interrogator, I hang my head dramatically to suggest I am fading from hunger.

"I suggest you cooperate with them," the translator says to me. "They are being nice now, but they can use other methods to make you answer their questions. They say you should not complain—your situation is easy. Do you know that there are five Iranian diplomats being held by the Americans in Iraq? Diplomats! They have been holding them for more than two years."

The interrogator enters and immediately asks me, again, for my e-mail address and password. I immediately give him the password for my two accounts. I want this to end as soon as possible. I have

nothing to hide anyway, so why not be an open book?

Q: ~~We have proof that you have connections with U.S. intelligence agencies. You have been in contact with groups like the Center for Defense Information and the Council on Foreign Relations. These are very secretive organizations. What is your relationship to them?~~

A: These groups are not intelligence agencies. They are think tanks. I interviewed them for articles that I wrote. I don't have any special relationship to them. I simply went to their websites and clicked on the "Contact Us" tab.

"These articles were only a cover-up," the translator scolds. "This is a very common strategy with the CIA."

Q: If you are such a peace-loving journalist, would you be willing to write an article that we assign you?

A: I could not do anything for you while you are keeping me in prison.

I want this to be over. I want to go home.

"We know that you had connections to Palestinians in Damascus," the interrogator says. "We know you met with Hamas. We know you have made phone calls to officials in the Israeli government."

"Yeah, I interviewed them for articles during Israel's bombardment of Gaza," I say. I am getting exasperated. "Go online. You can find them."

Questions follow questions. He tells me to list every Palestinian I have ever met. I name a few officials of Hamas, and leave it at that. I want to stay focused, but this has been going on for so long, it's getting hard for me to stay sharp enough to think through the possible implications of every answer before writing it down. I don't know how to engage with them anymore, especially when every aspect of my life in the Middle East is being formed into evidence of espionage.

Q: We know you lived in the Palestinian neighborhood Yarmouk. Why did you live there?

I moved to Yarmouk because the falafel there was like nowhere else in Damascus. I loved how the streets felt lived in—how they filled every night with scraps of fruit rinds and newspapers and plastic bags yet were clean by the morning. I loved how Ahmed cooked. I loved how Omar talked about poetry and books. I loved how Yamen could listen like no one else and had wisdom beyond his years. I loved the nights at Mazen's—the dancing, the discussions of war and justice, the laughs, the sound of ice cubes in glasses, and the sweet, anise sting of araq. Mazen did five years as a political prisoner, but he didn't talk about it unless asked.

I loved that hour in Yarmouk, which I've found nowhere else, at about 4 a.m., when pious old men shuffled to the mosque to begin the day and clutches of young people walked home with a swagger to end their night. I loved that everyone lived so close together—more than 112,000 people in 0.8 square mile!—that the sounds of music blended with the sounds of gossiping women and kids playing soccer in the alley and pigeons cooing in our windows. I loved to sit and type my articles about Iraq or Palestine or Syria to the accompaniment of those sounds.

I loved the daily conversations. Is Obama better than or the same as Bush for the Middle East? Is Faulkner better in Arabic translation than in English? Should secular Palestinians back Hamas and Islamic jihad—groups they despise—in the face of Israeli bombardment?

If only you could have seen our last night in Yarmouk, before we left for Iraq, then you might understand why I lived there. If you could have seen Emily and Basel's wedding, the way we all paraded down the streets—Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Americans, Italians, Brits, Nigerians, Poles—from the ceremony to our apartment. We poured onto Yarmouk Street and our Palestinian friends jubilantly chanted "Down! Down with Hamas!" as bearded onlookers watched, discomfited, from the sidewalk. I know if I told you this, you would say these particular Palestinians were obviously agents of the West, influenced by their Western friends, but the chants were their own and they despised the U.S. and Israeli governments at least as much as anyone else in the camp.

If only you could see into our apartment that night—the way Magda and Abu Hashish’s hips cut sideways into the music and the sweaty air as their hands drifted above their heads. The way the smoke hung on people’s skin. The bowls of hummus and lentil soup. The way that, after everyone left or drifted off to sleep, Shon and Yamen and I couldn’t let the night end. “You don’t need to go,” I told Yamen. “I know. I know,” he said, patting my knee. I’m not going anywhere. Let’s just enjoy this moment.

The mournful notes of Umm Kulthum drifted in from a courtyard across the alleyway. We listened and smoked in silence. She was telling us that the night was over and that we should mourn it as endings deserve to be mourned.

I moved to Yarmouk because it was so wonderfully gray. The buildings were gray. The alleys gray. The blacks and whites—the tones that you hold so dear—dissolved in Yarmouk. I loved Yarmouk because it was the antithesis of people like you.

A: We lived in Yarmouk because it was cheap and because Sarah’s Arabic tutor lived there.

Without skipping a beat, he hands me a piece of paper with a picture of a crowded street. There is an arrow pointing to one random person’s head in the crowd.

“Where is this and who is that person?”

“This is one of Sarah’s pictures from Sulaimaniya. I have no idea who that person is.”

It feels like we are enacting some kind of cheap spy movie. He has looked over the pictures on Sarah’s and my cameras and is acting like they hold the secret to an extensive plot.

“What is happening in this picture?”

“That is Sarah and her friend walking to a mosque in Damascus.”

He hands me another picture.

“That is Sarah with her students.”

“That is Sarah having a picnic with her friends.”

“That is me, Sarah, Josh, and Shon at the Iraq-Turkey border with the sun setting behind us.”

He hands me another picture of a bunch of young-looking shoulders with guns hanging off them. *God. That’s Tel Aviv. Shit. They know we’ve been to Tel Aviv.* The image is from Sarah’s camera. She had erased the pictures from our Israel trip, but they must have recovered them using special software. Suddenly, I feel like I’ve been caught hiding a real crime. I’ve been hoping to keep it secret that any of us have ever been to Israel. Even in normal circumstances in the Middle East, like living quietly in Syria, a visit to Israel is grounds for permanent expulsion from the country. I can only imagine what it could mean in our current context.

“Those are Israeli soldiers at a bus station in Tel Aviv. We went there to visit our American friend Tristan Anderson, who the Israeli military shot in the head with a high-velocity tear gas canister while he was protesting with Palestinians in the West Bank. He was in the hospital.”

“Write it down,” he says.

I write for what seems like an hour. Then he hands me another picture that is slightly blurred. It is a picture of a missile. *We’re fucked.* Sarah took this picture out a bus window in Israel, somewhere between Haifa and Tel Aviv. “What?” I remember her saying as she snapped the photograph. “They have a *missile* on the side of the road?” This image is the perfect piece of spy evidence for our captors: the Americans were in Israel, doing their military work; then they came here to spy on us.

It’s hard for me to remember that I don’t actually believe that talking to Palestinians or visiting Israel or Palestine is a crime. I am starting to feel actually guilty.

13. Sarah

One evening four days after we arrived at this prison, the guards lead me to the interrogation rooms.

They tell me to take off my blindfold. I see Shane seated in a tiny room dominated by a large mirror. On a small table next to him sit two plates of beans and rice.

“Where’s Josh?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says. “They just told me to sit here and wait.”

“He’s already eaten,” says a voice behind the mirror. It’s our translator.

“That’s a lie. Where is he?” Shane asks.

“We’re not eating until we see him,” I say.

“It’s too late for us to bring him tonight—we need to go home to our families, Sarah. If you eat now, you will see Josh after the weekend. If you don’t eat, you won’t see him at all.”

Shane looks exhausted, slouched over in his ugly, light blue prison uniform. Neither of us has eaten in four days, but I know I’m over the initial hump and can keep going. Faced with this cruel, unnatural choice, I don’t know what to do.

“We’ll see him tomorrow?” Shane asks.

“Yes, if you eat,” the voice answers. Shane and I pause, looking into each other’s eyes for the first time as prisoners. Reluctantly, we agree, but we tell the translator we’ll stop eating again if he reneges on his promise.

I push down the nagging fear that we’ve made the wrong decision and fall limp into Shane’s arms. My lips find his lips, his hands grab my hands, and our foreheads come together like two palms in prayer. That’s what I think of—prayer. His touch feels sacred.

“I love you,” I say.

I glance at myself in the large mirror next to us. *God, I think briefly, I look as bad as Shane does.* My black hijab makes me look severe. The dark circles under my eyes seem to cut into the dry, splotchy skin around my cheeks. How could I have already changed so much? Suddenly, I hear a brief scraping sound like the hard soles of men’s dress shoes against concrete. The sound is coming from behind the mirror.

“Why are you watching us?” I ask. “Can’t you give us some privacy?”

“Sarah, you have three more minutes. Please hurry.”

Two days later, back in my cell, I glance toward the window and note the gray-blue sky. It’s almost dinnertime. I hear Shane cough in the hallway—the signal we send to each other when one of us is taken out of our cell. My head jerks up and I look around, wondering how long I’ve been sitting in a semi-catatonic state, staring at the wall with unfocused eyes.

They must be taking us to see Josh. I jump up and start pacing the room, feeling the initial excitement of activity succeeded by doubt and unbearable tension. I order myself to take ten deep breaths. One, two, three . . . Then my cell door opens, and a female guard hands me my blindfold and motions for me to get dressed. They lead me to the same small, mirrored room. When I take off my blindfold, I see Josh and Shane sitting next to a table stacked with food.

“Josh,” I say, throwing my arms around him and kissing his cheek, “I’m so glad to see you!”

“Don’t talk too much,” a voice says from behind the glass. “Only eat.”

Josh smiles at me and we all begin to eat eagerly, chomping down on juicy beef kebabs that we wrap in flatbread and dip into some kind of creamy yogurt dip, washing everything down with orange juice. As we eat, we share snippets of information under our breath. Josh tells us that he’s just now breaking his fast.

“They lied to us,” Shane says. “They told us you’d eaten.”

“At least we know the hunger strike worked,” I say, making a mental note never again to take the interrogators at their word. “I think they might let us out soon,” I continue, “and they clearly don’t want us to look famished when they do.”

“Josh, are you okay with asking them to fly us to Beirut?” Shane asks. “It will be a good place to

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