

I wasn't a soldier

I ordered the prisoners to the back of the pickup truck. One by one they climbed in, not a large group, around seven or eight. Each of them obeyed as always but a particular woman refused. "Please just let him go," she cried, indicating to the child I didn't bother to look at. "Take the rest of us just not my son," she begged in her broken Arabic. I showed no reaction and shook my head in hopes that she'd stop. Instead, she fell onto her knees and placed her hands on my leather boots, "please young man! Let my son go..." her voice trailed off turning into loud cries. Was this woman insane? She's lucky her child is even alive right now. "Nasir!" a brittle voice yelled while running, I know the sound of those heavy boots, it was the lieutenant. "The attack on Halabja¹ is happening tomorrow." I furrowed my brows in disbelief, "already?" I whispered to myself. He noticed the woman wailing on her knees as he opened his eyes after collecting his breath. The lieutenant approached her and bent down to meet her eye to eye. The mother screamed as the lieutenant dragged her and her child into the truck. "Nisar!" He yelled at me, "We don't have time for this, just get them into the truck we need to make it to the prison before sunrise." He scolded, wiping his hands on his camouflage patched uniform. "It's been decided to attack Halabja tomorrow." The eyes of a teen boy in the truck met mine, both in shock. Did he understand us? "Isn't it too soon?" I cautioned. He placed his hand on my shoulders "It's perfect timing Nasir, their stupid celebration's happening in a few weeks," he scoffed, "can't even remember its name." "It's called Newroz² sir," I blurted. He lifted his hands off my shoulders and studied my eyes. "Yes, Newroz. Either way the attack will have less Kurds³ celebrating, which is

¹ Halabja: The capital of the Halabja Governorate in Iraq's Kurdistan Region. On March 16, 1988, the Iraqi military deployed poison gas, killing many of its Kurdish civilians.

² Newroz: A Kurdish festival commemorating the coming of spring and the start of a new year. The lighting of flames at the start of the evening of March 20 is the Kurds' primary symbolism of Newroz.

³ Kurds: A group of Middle Eastern individuals who speak similar dialects and have the same ethnic identity. The Kurds are the world's biggest ethnic minority without its own country.

why they've planned it for tomorrow." "Shouldn't we wait a little longer? It would make more sense-" He interrupted with a laugh, "Nisar, you are an Iraqi soldier." He said, narrowing his gaze, "or, are you one of those bastards in the truck who call themselves Kurds." I stare at him with my eyes wide open. "What? No, no sir I was just thinking-" "Well I don't want to know what you're thinking. These orders came straight from Saddam Hussein⁴. Let's start moving."

I jumped into the back with the rest of the prisoners and signaled the driver to follow the lieutenant's truck in front leading us to the prison. Although it is my job to keep an eye on them, I was distracted by my surroundings. We stood in the middle of Said Sadiq⁵. Once a relatively peaceful town of courteous people was now a distant memory of happier days. The town was deafeningly quiet, though for the unexpected gunshots from our soldiers that executed anyone who refused to obey. It was an eerie sight to see no matter how you looked at it. Lives were lost, arguably destroyed, and there was little to show for it.

The sun was setting on the horizon, the pitiful white ball had become a fiery orange. I could feel my faded green uniform clinging to my skin. Sweat beaded over my brow almost instantly. It was on days like these I'd come home from school from the scorching heat of the sun. My mother, as always, stood in the kitchen preparing our dinner, "how was your day gulakam⁶," she'd ask. We loved spending time with one another. Nothing made me happier than seeing my mother smile. Her eyes crinkled, and the corners of her mouth turned up. I would give anything to see my mother smile again.

⁴ Saddam Hussein: Iraq's fifth president who was in charge of the effort of genocidal terrorism against the Kurds.

⁵ Said Sadiq: A city in Iraq's Kurdistan Region's Governorate of Sulaymaniyah.

⁶ Gulakam: In Kurdish, gulakam means "my flower," but it is also used as a term of affection, such as darling, dear, honey, and so on.

We passed mountains at every curve; there seemed to be an endless amount of them. The prison was a couple of hours away, which meant we would probably arrive by sunrise. I wiped the smile off my face that formed while thinking of my mother. Prisoners. These people weren't prisoners, they were Kurds. I was taking these people away from their homes only to be tortured and beaten like dogs. I knew how they were taken from their home; I'd seen it myself. My mother never explained why my father was gone when I was young. All I remembered was two uniformed men barging into our home and arresting my father. I was curious to find out why, but I didn't protest after I'd seen how it affected my mother. She would skip meals and lost an unhealthy amount of weight in a short period of time. The hair she braided into a thick black rope became untidy and thin by the day. It was not too long ago I realized why my father was taken. He was Kurdish.

My mother died of her depression when I was twelve, I felt as if my entire world ended. We lived in the capital city of Iraq, Baghdad, surrounded by Iraqis and no other Kurds. Besides for the family next door, who found out despite swearing they'd never tell, no one else knew we were Kurdish. The family next door took me in after my mother. I promised myself that I would practice my Kurdish every night so I wouldn't forget my mother's tongue. It was a lot harder than I thought since the family only spoke in Arabic. Over time, I forgot my Kurdish. The family even gave me an Arabic name, Nasir. I didn't like it, but they insisted on it. When I was nineteen the father convinced me to enlist in the military. He told me it would be a great honor for our nation and that it would turn me into a warrior. The day I enlisted was the day I lost my Kurdish identity. Six years later, I am now a member of one of Saddam Hussein's many troops. I now wear the uniform of my enemy.

There were a few exchanged looks when I decided to sit down with the Kurdish people in the truck. When the lieutenant mentioned the attack happening tomorrow, I wondered if the boy who made eye contact with me understood Arabic. I could tell he was young, but his wounds and fatigue made him look older. His skin was shallow, and his curly hair was tangled. “Did you understand what the man was telling me?” I asked him in Arabic. When he looked up at me, I then realized that his eyes were also bruised. He nodded. “Where did you learn Arabic?” I asked. “Baghdad,” he replied. “I’m also from Baghdad,” I said half smiling. The boy looked at me confused. “What’s your name?” “Adil,” he replied. That wasn’t a Kurdish name, did he also have an Arabic name like me? “What about your Kurdish name? Aren’t you Kurdish?” He stared at me, shocked, why would a soldier ask that sort of question? “Ariyan, that’s my real name.” I remember that name. My Kurdish name is Ariyan as well. Or at least it was before I changed it into an Arabic-fitting name, Nasir. Did I even deserve to say that Ariyan was my name?

I took a look at the child whose mother begged me to let him go. After taking a good look at him, I realized just how young he was. He had a round face that matched his big round eyes, but his skin was pale and dirty as if he hadn’t showered in weeks. The rest were also comparably famished and unclean. Everyone here has a different story, I just wonder what those stories are. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the morning sky took on a pink hue, revealing the prison building from afar. I buried my face in my hands. I can’t let them be sent there. I’ve been doing this for years but today, something changed. With memories flooding back I couldn’t hold back. These were innocent people deprived of their lives.

Only one section of the jail was unguarded, it was the abandoned trench stationed not too far from the prison gates. All I had to do was steer the truck in the direction of the trench. I’m not sure how many of them would be able to escape, but I want to give it my all. My only problem

was finding a way to convince the driver to steer towards the trench. I looked up to see how much longer we had, with the warm morning light already streaming down the summit, there it was, the abandoned trench. I had to act quickly; terror mounted with every step. Without a thought running through my head, I shot the tire with the rifle tied to my chest. The truck immediately hit the trenches guard post causing clouds of smoke to fly out. Panic surged through me as I urged the people in the truck to escape but terror sealed my throat. I signaled them with my hands to run into the trench where they could hide until dark to then escape into the mountains nearby. The woman helped her child out of the truck and then herself. "Hey! What the hell are you doing!" The driver screamed as he tried to open the driver's door that was blocked. When I looked up, I noticed the lieutenant's truck ahead of us had come to a stop. Anxiety eclipsed my thoughts, I didn't think this through, now the lieutenant would find them. I helped the others out of the truck. Ariyan was the only one remaining, he was too busy helping the old man in the truck instead of escaping himself. "Ariyan, go!" I yelled because of the loud engine. He refused, "are you Kurdish too?" "Ariyan I said go!" Fear trickled down my spine as I heard the engine of the truck ahead become louder and louder. "Please just go with the rest of them," I begged, "wait till dark then lead them into the mountains to escape." He nodded and jumped out of the bed of the truck. "What about you sir?" I didn't think about that. It was too late to think about myself. "Don't worry about me," mumbled out of breath. The lieutenant's truck hit the front of ours causing it to shuffle. With pure fear in his eyes, Ariyan ran into the abandoned trench. I did it. I helped them escape, but the feeling of shame still grew inside me. After all these years, I now realized that I wasn't a warrior. I wasn't a soldier. I was just a murderer.

A bullet pierced through the side of my neck, a flash of light and a terrifying sound broke, and a gaping hole opened. Blood immediately spewed out. A crimson red pool formed

around me as I fell to the ground. The blood soaked into my battledress. My head spun as I tried to gasp for air. My thoughts became blank, all I could hear was the footfall that grew louder and louder, like bombs falling on my head. I know the sounds of those heavy boots. I know them well. Above me, the lieutenant bent down and leaned toward my face. My vision became blurry, but still recognized his fine, greasy hair and the small locks that fell into his empty eyes. “So, you are one of those bastards,” he chuckled. Small ragged gasps were escaping my throat. I felt something press against my head, it was a gun, his voice blurred as my mind went in spirals. There was one thing I could make out of mumbles before I felt him pull the trigger. “You’re just a dirty fucking Kurd.”