

New Fiction by Joe Millsap: Dreamland



Muhamet reaches for a plastic water bottle resting on the metal filing cabinet that serves as a nightstand. He drinks the last of it, tosses the empty bottle to the floor. It's early, no sunlight seeping in yet through the open seam in the plywood and sandbags that cover the only window. He rolls out of bed and pulls on clean coveralls and dusty work boots while the dull, familiar soundtrack of small arms fire echoes in the background. Before the war, the camp was a Ba'ath Party resort, a favorite of Uday's and Qusay's. When the Americans arrived they named it Camp Baharia, but everyone here calls it Dreamland.

He takes a deep breath, pushes open the door, steps out under a pale moon onto loose gravel that crunches under his weight. It's a two-cigarette walk to the Hydrologie office. A modest, regional wastewater firm based in Düsseldorf before the war, Hydrologie was now global, with expertise in logistics, cybersecurity, force protection. Hired as an electrical engineer, Muhamet spends his days cleaning portable toilets and repairing the generators and A/C units that keep Dreamland powered up and cool. When he reaches the office, he jams his cigarette into a bucket of sand by the door and steps inside, letting the aluminum door swing shut behind him. He flips on the overhead lights and trudges over to the calendar pinned to the wall above Fatmir's desk. With a black marker he draws a diagonal line through March 13th. Another week and this war will be the same age as his daughter.

He brews coffee and takes a cup out to the small courtyard behind the office, sinks into a white plastic chair. Holding a fresh Marlboro, he runs his fingers through his thinning hair

and looks out to the north, where he can see tracer rounds careen like little red meteors, the ricochets charting a random and ruinous path through the sleeping hamlets beyond the wall.

He lights up and inhales as a tangerine sunrise spills out over the desert. This is why he comes out here so early. Over time, the walls of the camp can numb the senses. When he isn't working, he passes the time watching movies or playing ping pong in the rec tent. But it's only here, sitting alone, a slight buzz from the caffeine and nicotine, that he manages, however briefly, to forget about the heat and the thousands of miles between his heart and home.

He ventures back inside and sits down at his desk, using his sleeve to wipe the dust from the framed photo of his family that was taken before he left Ferizaj, an old city in the rolling foothills of the Sharr mountains of Kosovo. The situation back home is far less dire now than it was three years ago, when half a million ethnic Albanians fled the country to escape Milosevic and his Serbian nationalists. By the time Muhamet left, he had the luxury of a return date. But fighting for peace and independence is one thing, and buying food and warm clothes for the winter is another. Leaving Kosovo was the only way he could earn enough to provide for his family. When he thinks too much about that day at the airport, he can't breathe.

Now the fifth-largest city in Kosovo, for centuries Ferizaj was an anonymous farming community in a forgotten corner of the Ottoman Empire. Then, in 1873, a new train station was built that linked it to the Orient Express, a massive rail network that stretched all the way from Istanbul to Paris. Over time, the flow of goods transformed it into the modern city it is today.

On his way to school every day as a child, back when Kosovo was still part of Yugoslavia, Muhamet would pass by a mosque that stood right next to an orthodox church. The only thing separating the two houses of worship was a shared courtyard. Today this phenomenon is a tourist attraction, a symbol of religious and cultural harmony in a region long plagued by sectarianism.

Nearby, just west of town along a country road his family would drive on weekend trips to the mountains, is another phenomenon: the fork in the Nerodimka River. It's one of only two rivers in the world with a natural fork that drains into two different seas.

And a few miles in the opposite direction is Camp Bondsteel. When half of Kosovo was unemployed after the war, this sprawling new NATO base became a lifeline. Thousands of locals, Muhamet among them, earned reliable wages in the warehouses, kitchens, chow halls, and laundry facilities on base. Muhamet drove a sanitation truck and ate Taco Bell six days a week, always bringing extra home for his family.

It was at Bondsteel that he first heard about the job offers in Iraq. By then, several men he had known his entire life had already signed up and left, and it wasn't long before rumors circulated about the bonuses they had earned for being in a war zone, despite living and working a safe distance from the front lines.

The morning before he left, Muhamet drove west of town, past the neighboring church and mosque, until he reached a small park. It was empty, and he sat in the cool grass and stared down at the fork in the muddy Nerodimka. Some of the water flowed to the left and some flowed to the right, some people prayed in churches and others prayed in mosques, and some people stayed while others left. Leaving was a big decision, but most days he felt more like a drop of water in the Nerodimka than a man making his own choices – part of a larger

system that is perpetually moving forward, twists and turns and currents carrying you to greener pastures or dumping you an ocean away from the people you love.

In the framed photo on his desk at Dreamland, they're laughing, huddled together in the snow in the main square in Ferizaj, in front of the cubist mural of a waiter that covers the side of the Hotel Lybeten. A passing stranger took it a few days before he left, on the last night they all went out together as a family.

Fatmir arrives at the office and mutters a tired good morning. Muhamet wipes his eyes and sits up in his chair when he hears him come in. Trailing Fatmir are two Marines, one tall and dark-haired, the other short and stocky, his head shaved clean. Muhamet recognizes them from 2/6, an infantry unit from North Carolina that arrived at Dreamland around the same time he did. Fatmir introduces them.

"The American law firm of Preston and Godchaux?" Muhamet says, grinning as they shake hands. He cringes to himself and is grateful when they laugh at the joke.

They sit down together at the small table in the middle of the room. The Marines notice Muhamet eyeing the green sea bag lying on the floor at their feet.

"Right, almost forgot," Godchaux says. "We brought gifts." He opens the bag, pulls out two new pairs of combat boots and a box of cigars, pushes them across the table to Muhamet.

"For us?" Muhamet says. "What for?"

Godchaux shrugs, smiles. "Fatmir says you're his best driver and his best mechanic," he says.

"We hear you're good with generators," Preston adds. Muhamet glances at Fatmir.

"I already told them we aren't allowed to leave the camp," Fatmir says. "If we did..." He snaps his fingers, thinking. "What's the word I'm thinking?"

"Hypothetically?" says Preston.

"Yes, exactly. If we did, *hypothetically*, there could be no paper. Handshake only."

Godchaux speaks next, but Muhamet has a hard time focusing and only hears some of what he says. They want him to join their nightly convoy that resupplies the Marines scattered across their area of operations. There's a faulty generator at one of the observation posts, and the portable toilets and showers need service from Hydrologie's "honeywagon." They assure him it's a one-time request, to support a "hygiene surge" ordered by their commander. In turn, they'll pay Muhamet and Fatmir each five hundred U.S. dollars – equal to three months' pay back home and two weeks of his Hydrologie wages.

Muhamet clears his throat. "Your vehicles, they have armor?"

Godchaux and Preston exchange a look. "That's right," says Preston. "And a lot of firepower. Nobody messes with us out there."

"You tow my truck and I ride with you? Behind the armor?"

Godchaux frowns. "I wish we could do that, Muhamet, I really do," he says.

"Unfortunately..."

He tries to explain, says something about "maintaining a tactical posture," but Muhamet isn't listening. He's thinking about the roads, how dark they must be at night. His palms feel clammy. He imagines straining to keep his truck from rolling over into an irrigation canal.

The Marines promise to stop by again the next morning to check

in. The convoy leaves at dusk.

When the door closes behind them Muhamet says, without looking up, "If you like this plan, why don't you go?"

Fatmir smiles patiently. "One, because I can't fix a generator, and two, because I have a shop to supervise." He places a hand on Muhamet's shoulder. "It's your call."

He spends the rest of the day and a fitful night of sleep mulling it over, surprised that he's even considering it. The money would help, of course. And Dreamland is teeming with contractors like him in search of a payday. If not him, they'll find someone else, and they won't even have to pay as much.

Unable to sleep, he walks to the phone center and uses a prepaid card to call home.

"It's me," he says, softly, when Samira picks up. It's late in Ferizaj, too, just an hour behind.

The call woke her up, he can hear it in her voice.

He calls often, and sometimes, on days he's feeling particularly homesick, he writes long, poetic letters that she reads aloud to Adriana, their daughter.

"I was hoping it was you," she says.

"Who else would it be?"

"I don't know, someone calling with bad news. But I don't want to think about that. Guess what?"

"Tell me."

"It's snowing."

"No. This late in the year?"

"I know, I wish you were here to see it. It's so pretty. The river is frozen over."

He can hear the furnace popping in the background, and he imagines walking home in the snow, stomping the slush from his boots and stepping through the front door to a roaring, cozy fire. Samira takes his coat and hands him a mug, and he feels the first sip of steaming rakia coating his throat and chest.

"Muhamet?" "I'm here, love."

"How are things there? Has the rain let up?"

"Yes, no more rain, but it's getting hot now. I wish I was there."

After they say goodnight and hang up, he leaves the phone center and heads for the gym, where Fatmir looks up from his stationary bike. "I'll do it," he says.

He arrives at the staging area just before dusk. A stiff wind has stirred up the desert air and painted the row of armored vehicles a mix of deep orange and shadow gray, the patterns shifting with the setting sun. The motor pool is a beehive of activity: silhouettes of turret gunners greasing up their crew-served weapons, mechanics in tan flight suits making last-minute repairs, Godchaux gathering his drivers in a semicircle for the pre-brief. There's a detailed model drawn in the dirt. Parachute cord marks the route, small rocks represent the vehicles. Popsicle sticks from the dining hall for the hamlets, twigs and bunchgrass for the vegetation, red dice for the radio checkpoints.

Godchaux – shorter than his troops, square and muscled, his freshly shaven head glowing pink – spots Muhamet and makes his way over. "Glad you could make it," he says, smiling. "You're

just in time.”

He turns to address the drivers. “Ok, everyone on me,” he says. His voice booms. He pauses while the young men standing before him, who look to Muhamet more like orphaned boys than grizzled fighters, gather around. “This here is Muhamet. He works for Hydrologie. You’ve seen their trucks all over the camp. He’s Santa Claus tonight, so make sure he has everything he needs.”

Before Muhamet can ask, Preston appears and pulls him to the side as Godchaux kicks off his convoy brief. He’s grinning, holding something white and fluffy. “Santa Claus beard,” he says. “Cheers the guys up when we deliver their mail and supplies. Normally we draw straws to see who

wears it. It’s rare that we have a guest.” He looks down, then back up, like he’s just remembered something. “Shit,” he says. “You’re Muslim, aren’t you? I didn’t think about that till now.”

Muhamet lets out a full-throated laugh. Maybe it’s his nerves, or the look of doubt on Preston’s face, over something so silly when they’re about to do something so serious. Whatever the reason, it cuts through the tension in the air. He grabs the beard by its elastic band. “It’s okay,” he says. “We celebrate Christmas in my country, too.”

Preston pats him on the back and motions to another Marine, who hands him a Kevlar helmet with night vision goggles attached to the front, a flak vest weighed down by thick ceramic plates, and a small digital camouflage backpack that contains a pair of Nomex gloves, wrap-around ballistic eyeglasses, and a handheld Icom radio and headset for talking to the other vehicles in the convoy.

“Here, like this,” Preston says, moving the goggles back and forth on the hinge to lower them to eye level and back up. “It might feel weird at first, but your eyes will adjust. Just

take it easy and follow the truck in front of you. If anything seems off to you, or you need something – anything at all – just hold the talk button down here and speak clearly. We'll take care of the rest." He smiles. "Good to go?"

When Muhamet gives a thumbs up, he can feel his hand tremble.

After Godchaux ends his brief with a reminder to stay alert and follow radio protocol, Muhamet climbs up into the cab of the Hydrologie truck, starts the engine, checks his mirrors and gauges, tests the pump switches by turning them on and off. Then he jumps down and does a walkaround, checking the treads on the tires, looking for a screw or nail, anything that might cause a slow leak, and takes a quick inventory of the long metal box that's bolted to the back of the cab in front of the sludge tanks. There's a tire jack, a toolkit, some spare generator parts, a backup pump hose, eight twelve-packs of toilet paper for the resupply. Satisfied that everything's in order, he dons the flak vest and helmet and climbs back into the cab. Idle chatter, inside jokes and wordplay that's hard for Muhamet to follow, fill his Icom headset. He closes his eyes and takes deep breaths to calm his nerves.

It's dark when the Humvee in front of him finally inches forward. He fights the instinct to turn his headlights on as they weave through Dreamland's date palm-lined streets. *Preston was right*, he thinks to himself. *I can't see a thing.*

They halt just inside the front gate. Seeing the Marines dismount, he puts the truck in park and follows along. A voice from the front of the convoy calls out "Condition one!" When every weapon is loaded, they climb back into their vehicles.

Muhamet's Icom crackles, followed by, "Victor One, Oscar Mike." Moments later, the convoy is rolling through the gate and the radio banter goes quiet. The lead Humvee calls out the first checkpoint when they reach Route Michigan.

The first stop is the police station in Karmah, on the outskirts of Fallujah, where the Marines from Echo Company live with a dozen Iraqi police. Even Muhamet knows Karmah's reputation for violence. He'll have twenty minutes to fix a generator, clean and restock the chemical toilets, and fill the mobile shower units with fresh water.

At Route Golden, the convoy turns left through a break in the median. Golden is a two-lane road that starts on an incline. When it levels out, the minaret of a mosque comes into view. Narrow dirt roads splinter off the main route at random intervals, the turnoffs overgrown with wormwood and other thick brush. They're essentially long driveways that connect the paved road to small hamlets of sandstone houses that twinkle under the moonlight. Muhamet sees something move up ahead, and in the quiet of the cab he can hear himself gasp. There's something by the road, and now a second shape emerges from behind the first one. Eyes. Four of them, green and glowing.

There's static on the handheld, followed by Preston's baritone: "Fuckin' dogs."

They weave through the serpentine barriers at the IP station, where a working party is waiting to offload the supplies from the seven-tons. Godchaux jumps out of his vehicle and ground-guides the convoy into a defensive posture while Preston helps Muhamet back his truck up to an opening in a row of Hesco barriers. Muhamet cuts the engine and steps down from the cab. Lifting up his night vision goggles, he's stunned by the ragged appearance of the working party. They look like the feral dogs they just passed on the way in: pale and skinny, dark circles around their eyes. Muhamet whiffs a nauseating mix of body odor, cigarettes, foot powder.

"Look, Santa's a fuckin' Haji." They're pointing at him now,

laughing. Only then does he suddenly feel ridiculous in the beard.

He knows this vibe from his time at Bondsteel – a mix of youth and tribal hostility toward outsiders that's more bark than bite. Thinking fast, he grabs the end of the vacuum hose from the back of the truck and holds it up in the air.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he yells. "You have been good this year, boys and girls. Allow me to suck your shit!"

The working party doubles over in laughter, and Muhamet goes about his work while they offload the trucks. He cleans the toilets and refills the shower tanks, and Preston points out the generator and holds a flashlight for him. Muhamet takes a knee to get a closer look, and when he bends down he notices three men sitting on the opposite end of the courtyard. They have long beards and they're wearing dark pants and light blue shirts with the sleeves rolled up.

Preston squats down by his side. "See how they just sit out here all nonchalant, no body armor or nothin'?" he says. "Like they know they're safe somehow." He nudges Muhamet. "Watch this," he says, standing up.

"Evening, pig fuckers!" he hollers. The three men glare at Preston, who waves back at them. "SalaamAlaikum!" They frown and say something that Muhamet can't hear over the gargle and spit of the generator.

From the IP Station they head north to a small observation post on the north end of town. They have a schedule to keep if they hope to make it back to Dreamland before sunrise.

Muhamet tails the Humvee in front of him as they turn back onto Golden. They move slow, scanning the road ahead, ready to stop on a dime. It's still and quiet under the curfew, and

with the first stop behind them he lets his shoulders relax for the first time all day.

“Watch your asses,” Godchaux growls over the Icom. They’re approaching a traffic circle the Americans call the Lollipop. On one side is the mosque.

As soon as Muhamet’s truck enters the roundabout, there’s a bright flash. Something has knocked the wind out of him. He feels a vibration surge through his body, like a fault line cracking open his insides, then nothing.

He comes to face down on the side of the road, a loud ringing in his ears. Voices in his headset sound distant and muffled, and he tries to speak into his handheld but nothing comes out. He tastes metal, and before he can think about it his vision narrows and he loses consciousness again.

When he wakes up, he tries to stand but stumbles, his legs rubbery. Out of nowhere, Godchaux appears and grabs his arm to keep him from falling. He can feel something wet under his clothes. He reaches for his thigh, expecting blood, but pulls his hand back to see blue liquid from his truck.

He leans back against a berm and sees the charred remains of the truck halfway submerged in the canal. Metal fragments are scattered across the road and the adjacent field. A medevac helicopter clatters overhead.

But when he looks up he’s surprised, and delighted, by what he sees: falling snow. It looks beautiful through his night vision goggles. An ethereal, emerald green flurry. That he realizes is a cloud of ash and burnt toilet paper whipping around in the air from the force of the blast and the rotor wash.

Godchaux reappears. Maybe he never left. “Are you okay?” he

shouts in Muhamet's face. Muhamet points up at the snow, not knowing it's just ash and burnt toilet paper swirling from the force of the blast and the helicopter's rotorwash. Godchaux looks up, then back down at Muhamet. "Just sit tight," he says. "Doc's on his way."

His head throbs, his heart beating in his throat. He nods at Godchaux, who disappears again behind the white cloud of a fire extinguisher someone is spraying at a burning Humvee tire. His Santa beard has melted away and his mouth feels gravelly. He wipes an index finger along his gums, to scoop out the debris, and pulls out the pink fragment of a molar. Feeling his vision start to close in again, he gazes up at the eerie green snowflakes, swirling around and around, waiting for gravity to take hold. He sticks his hand out, hoping to catch some, but he feels dizzy and steadies himself against the berm. He closes his eyes and thinks of home. With a little luck, he'll make it back before Christmas and take the family to Gjyla, their favorite restaurant. Samira and Adriana will wear the new coats he can afford to buy them, and they'll warm themselves by the crackling brick hearth until their table is ready. He smiles at the thought of it when he feels himself being lifted into the air and carried away.