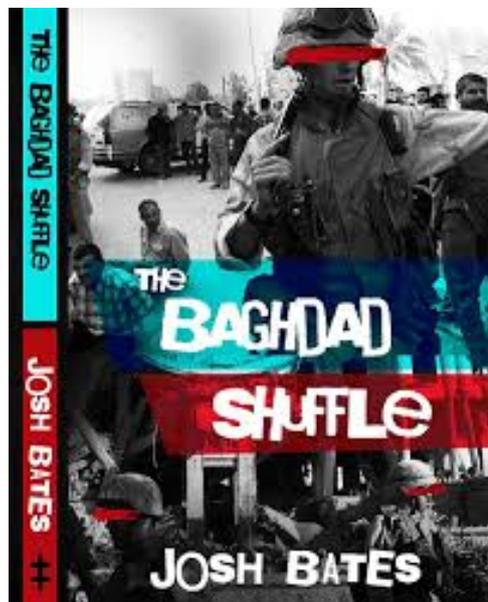


New Fiction by Josh Bates: Excerpt from The Baghdad Shuffle



The patrol was unsettling. The initial ‘liberation’ euphoria had soured. It was all bad vibes from the second we exited the Country Club. Hard brown faces casting the evil eye. Old men sitting in front of shuttered store fronts, sizing us up. We still didn’t have an interpreter, but I tried to press a few locals anyway. I showed them Izzat’s photo. I gauged reactions. No hints of recognition. Just hard stares and brusque wave-offs.

The sun blazed. This weather was the first taste of what lay in store once the real summer arrived. The midday streets were largely deserted. The city folk opted for rooftop siestas to beat the heat. Nothing shaking. Nothing brewing. It dawned on me that a quiet, uneventful patrol should be considered a good thing. I couldn’t dig it. The platoon needed action. Grinding away in the heat like this would melt morale for good. Also—I wanted some leads on this Izzat fucker.

We rolled into the last leg of the patrol route. Babil District. Previously home to the Regime elite. Gaudy mansions nestled along the Tigris. Miami Vice gone rococo. Call it 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Tasteless.' The 'hood was abandoned. The previous occupants no longer welcome. Even those that managed to keep their faces off the 'Deck of Cards' knew that sticking around meant a death sentence, either at the hands of infidel invaders or uppity Shi'a looking for some payback. A couple of the homes had been looted, but surprisingly most of the mansions looked unbothered.

We were about to head back to the Country Club when Benny popped up on the radio. "Sir, we've got some cops waving at us back here. Trying to get our attention."

"Go see what they want, Benny," I said. "Stay alert. Lots of bad guys out here impersonating cops." The image of Izzat in his police uniform was burned into my eyelids.

Benny dismounted and approached Baghdad's finest with one hand on the butt of his Berretta. O'Reilly and Blanky pushed out on Benny's flank, ready to help him dump the cops at the first hint of chicanery. Benny jabbered back and forth with the tallest cop. Benny only knew two words in Arabic so the tall cop must have had some English. Benny gestured towards the river and then walked back to his truck.

"Sir, this cop told me there's something we need to see in one of these houses," Benny said. "He says its bad. I don't think he knows what to say in English."

I huddled with Benny and the Iraqi cops. The tall cop said his name was Ali. That was a good sign. No self-respecting Sunni would ever use 'Ali' as an alias. It would be like an Irishman naming his kid Oliver Cromwell. So that lowered the odds of Ali being Mukhabarat in mufti. Ali pointed to a house sprawled out on the bank of the Tigris. Ali said he wanted to show us something inside. The crib had a distinct '80s vibe. All white

walls and glass brick. Suitable digs for a proper villain. Benny posted security and followed me and Ali through an unlocked door.

The inside of the house was cluttered. Kid's toys on the floor, dishes in the sink. Weirdly normal and domestic. Ali led us through a large TV room. Stacks of DVDs on the recessed bookshelves. The DVD collection boasted a high percentage of 'Skinemax' style soft porn. Those UN import sanctions must've been tougher than I thought. I reckoned you had to take what you could get in a nominally 'Muslim' country. On the far end of the bookshelf was a metal door that looked like it belonged in a bank vault. Ali shouldered the door open and motioned for us to follow him inside.

Death funk. Strong enough to gag a maggot. I should've known we wouldn't make it one full patrol without stumbling across some sort of mutilation-torture caper. Ali flicked on an overhead fluorescent light. Apparently, the generators still had some juice. The room was small and windowless. An empty safe in the corner. A large desk with a computer, several notebooks, and a money-counter. A dead guy seated behind the desk. He was bound to the chair, his face pulped. Dude didn't go easy. Both of his eyes had been burned out. All the fingers from his right hand were lopped off. The severed digits formed an ersatz Stonehenge on the floor.

Judging by the smell, the dead guy had been here a few days. Long enough for advanced decomp. Whatever had gone down, it was worth documenting. I sent Benny back to the trucks to grab a camera.

Ali pointed to the dead man. "This man. Saddam man. Very bad."

"Mukhabarat?" I asked.

"No. No Mukhabarat," Ali said. "Money man. His name Saeed Hasan."

“Money man? Did he work for the Finance Ministry?”

“Yes. This man work Finance Ministry.”

Finance Ministry. The Oil-for-Food skim. Linkages re-linked. My mind raced. I forced myself to breathe deep and stay quiet. I scanned the room. There—under some papers next to the money-counter. A satphone. Add it up with the safe and the money-counter.

“Was this man a hawaladar?” I asked.

Ali side-eyed me. “You know hawala?”

“Yes,” I lied. I didn’t know anything beyond what Fuad told me. “Was this man involved with hawala?”

“Maybe hawala. I don’t know.” Ali frowned. He looked eager to explain but lacked the words.

“Ali, how did you find this room? How did you know this man was here?”

Ali’s frown turned to worry. “Bad smell. Man told us bad smell. Show us.”

It seemed unlikely that a random citizen called Ali off the street and led him to the scene. My guess is that Ali and his two cop buddies were casing houses door-to-door to see what of value might have been left behind by their erstwhile masters. That would explain the empty safe. Snatch the cash and then notify the Americans to make it seem like you weren’t involved. I didn’t blame him. With the regime kaput, Ali would be shit-out-of-luck in the pension department. I was willing to chalk up anything Ali scored from the safe as reparations for future funds denied.

I pulled Izzat’s photo out of my cargo pocket and showed it to Ali. “Do you know this man?”

Ali studied the printout. Instant recognition. Ali swallowed a couple of times. "Yes. He is bad man. Saddam man."

"Mukhabarat?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How do you know him?"

"My boss. He give my boss money."

"Do you know his name?"

"No. No name. Colonel. Rank is Colonel."

"Why did he give your boss money?"

"I don't know. Before America come Baghdad. He give boss money. But no policeman. This man Mukhabarat."

Benny returned with the camera. We photographed everything. I made Benny roll the dead guy's fingerprints. Benny hit me with the 'why am I always on corpse duty?' stare. I ignored him and bagged up everything we could carry. I thought about dragging the body back to the Country Club but decided against it. The prints and the photos would have to suffice. The Country Club didn't have room for any more dead Iraqis.

I asked Ali to come back with us to the Country Club. I wanted Souza and Staff Sergeant Kinney to take a run at him in the mother tongue. Ali became visibly nervous. He probably thought the Country Club was just a layover en route to Guantanamo. I assured him he wasn't being detained and said he could bring his two cop buddies. Ali's comrades didn't seem to dig that idea, but we talked them into it. The three Iraqi cops squeezed into the gun trucks and we headed back to the Club.

I walked into the HUMINT Exploitation Team's hooch. Souza was still asleep. Probably the first shut-eye he'd had in almost three days. Normally I'd have let him sleep it off, but I was

too amped on the possibility of Ali leading us to Izzat. Kinney was awake, typing fast into one of those small rubber laptops. Souza had a poncho liner pulled over his head despite the heat. I kicked his boot. Souza bolted upright, confused eyes tried to focus. He recognized me after a beat and tried to lay back down. I lit a Miami and stuck it between his knuckles.

“Rise and shine,” I said. “We got work to do.”

We sat in the HET hooch and chain smoked while I brought Souza and Kinney up to speed. Kinney got Ali and his comrades set up in separate rooms and worked out an interrogation plan. Souza monkeyed around with Hasan’s satphone. Eventually he pulled out another piece of vintage-looking spook kit and hooked it up to the phone. Within a few minutes he’d downloaded the numbers and call log. Souza speed-typed a report and sent the phone numbers up to the signals intelligence boys. Once the numbers were on task, we’d have a good shot at geolocating the phones. In the meantime, Souza ran the call numbers against an existing intelligence database. Lots of international calls. Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, France, South Africa. Lots of calls to Mexico. Two calls to numbers in the US. It felt congruent with Fuad’s take on the hawala networks, but it still wasn’t the concrete proof we needed to get CIA to bite.

Kinney returned from the interrogation booth. Ali provided some additional info on his boss. The boss’ name was Thamir al-Tikriti. Thamir was related to Saddam. A second cousin maybe. Ali seemed certain that Thamir served in the Mukhabarat back in the early ‘80s. Sometime after DESERT STORM he’d transferred to the Special Republican Guard where he retired as a Brigadier General. Recently, he’d been brought out of retirement to serve as the Chief of Police in Baghdad. Ali said that up until Thamir fled a couple of weeks ago, he and Izzat met regularly at Police HQ. Ali didn’t know the exact purpose of those meetings, but claimed Izzat regularly delivered large attaché cases that he assumed held money or

other important financial documents. Ali wasn't sure where Izzat or Thamir were now.

Saeed Hasan remained a mystery. Ali and his buddies confirmed that Hasan worked for the Finance Ministry, but they couldn't provide any details. Ali didn't think the mansion was Hasan's house. Apparently, he wasn't high enough on the food chain to rate a sweet Babil crib.

I fired up my third Miami and closed my eyes, trying to assemble a possible narrative. Proper nouns danced through my brain-housing group.

"OK, so we have Izzat the spy potentially serving as some sort of bagman for Thamir the Police Chief," I said. "Thamir disappears, but Izzat stays behind in Baghdad to hit the bank. We know Izzat met with Fuad at least once, and I'm betting it wasn't just to buy black market whiskey. Fuad alluded to the fact he was gathering info that night we caught him at the souk. Then we get a kid witness saying a guy matching Izzat's description was circling Fuad's crib the same night Fuad leaves us a note saying he's going off the grid. Fuad also hips us to the Oil-for-Food skim-hawala caper. We find Hasan tortured to death in a room that fits the bill as a hawaladar's office. Hasan was probably killed a day or so before Fuad goes to ground, but we don't have anything to connect Hasan to Fuad, Izzat, or Thamir. Does that about cover it?"

"Pretty much," Souza replied. "We know Fuad and Izzat are connected, and we know Izzat and Thamir are connected. Hasan is still a wild card. We can't be certain of how or even if he's connected to the skim. All that said, we don't have the dope on the call-log analysis yet. If we get lucky maybe the calls will link Hasan to the Finance Ministry, the Police, or maybe even the Mukhabarat. But don't hold your breath. Establishing linkages from satphones to those organizations is one thing, but sussing out any useful context is gonna be a

long shot.”

Staff Sergeant Kinney jumped in. “In the meantime, we’ve got Ali and his buddies in play. We set up a comm plan to keep in touch. Unfortunately, the cell network is still down hard and we don’t have the budget or the inventory to start outfitting every Omar with a satphone. That said, the cops know to come back here to the Country Club according to the schedule I gave them. Normally I’d never want to ‘group date’ sources like that but under the circumstances, it was all I could do.”

Souza and I nodded in agreement. Now came the hard part. The waiting.

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