

New Nonfiction by Jen Dreizehn: Anticipation



As a reserve unit we had a different family dynamic than the regular army. Since there were only three platoons in our company, the commander wanted to even out the women per platoon. My best friend and I were only two of ten females in our company. She was purposefully assigned to my squad. As a squad leader, this put me in an awkward position. Not only did Caitlin assume she'd receive special treatment in getting out of guard duty, but our friendship had been teetering since Matt proposed to me two months prior. He was young, dumb, and full of cum, but I loved him. These were my people; Caitlin with her buzz cut blonde hair and tall athletic frame and Matt with his dark skin, black hair, and very large...muscles.

March 19, 2003, I watched the bombings on CNN and on MSNBC I watched a Maintenance Company become prisoners of war. I heard President Bush declare cease fire on the radio. All of this happened while my army reserve unit waited in Fort Lewis, Washington. We missed the kickoff to the big game.

I arrived in Kuwait with 130 transportation soldiers on April 20th. We should have been in Turkey, but their country wouldn't let us infill to Iraq from their southern border alongside the Kurdish Christians. Instead, we were attached to 4th Infantry Division in southern Iraq. Once in country, 4th ID never heard of us, didn't need us – didn't want us. We were assigned to provide convoy security and transportation of supplies to the other unwanted bastard children of Dick Cheney's oil war: Czechia, Poland, Spain, El Salvador, and Mongolia.

Every day soldiers were killed in Iraq and convoys were the number one targets. Our enemy wasn't the Iraqi Army nor was it ever the Iraqi people. Once Saddam Hussein was captured on December 13, 2003, insurgents traveled from Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to flood Iraq with the opportunity to join the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda so they could attack US targets without needing a plane ticket or pilot's license.

The enemy used these so-called "snipers." They were untrained men with AK47s hiding behind a berm 200 meters from the road. Some used RPGs to penetrate armor. Others used IEDs. The first six months they would throw sandbags stuffed with car batteries from overpasses until they realized batteries don't explode on their own. Once cellphone service was brought to Iraq at the end of 2003, explosive technology advanced rapidly. Dead animals were stuffed with mines and initiators while being placed on the side of our main supply routes and detonated by someone standing close enough for a cell signal. Up until this point I had only seen goats stiff with rigor mortis and unexploded mortar shells protruding out their ass.

A mission came down for twenty-four cargo trucks, three humvees, and a maintenance wrecker. It required sixty-one of our soldiers. Caitlin and Matt were also going. The mission was scheduled to leave in two days. We were picking up equipment in Kuwait and dropping it off at Al Taqaddum Airport, an airbase west of Baghdad that was referred to as TQ. Our two passenger cargo trucks were enormous. They could self load and offload connex boxes from a palletized load system. Ten tires, as high as my chin, pushed this beast over every terrain possible. When standing outside the turret manning a machine gun my torso would be eight feet off the ground. None of our vehicles had been uparmored yet. All of our humvees had soft tops like a convertible Corvette. My soldiers mounted plywood over each cabin and ratchet strapped tripods so we could attach a .50 caliber machine gun or M19 and call them gun trucks.

Seven of us rolled out Monday morning to pick up broken down humvees in Camp New York, Kuwait, a remote makeshift base ten miles south of the Iraq border. A captain there warned us that the unit we were supporting would ask us to take the equipment further north, but to leave it in TQ. The rest of our convoy picked up connexes in Camp New Jersey and we met up at Nav Star. This was a fuel point on the northern Kuwait border. It's also a check point for convoy commanders and the MPs to give safety briefings. All sergeants and officers went to the briefing. I packed into the small trailer with other leaders and stared at the map on the wall. Due to the large size of our convoy, we had two clowns leading us. Manny from first platoon and Toro from third platoon. They were both platoon commanders and lieutenants, but didn't command enough respect to be addressed by rank.

We listened to the speech heard many times before. "Wear the proper uniform. No driving in the dark. Do not pull over unless at a check point or for ten minutes for maintenance emergencies. Lock in a magazine, but don't chamber a round. Watch out for black BMWs, red sedans, and white suburbans. No passing out food or water. Do not stop for children. Keep a look out for IEDs."

Then the MPs gave their security brief of the area west of Baghdad. The MP pointed to the map as she explained recent attacks in each town we would pass. "Nav Star to Scania is amber alert. Most attacks are on civilian supply trucks and are from 21:00 – 06:00. Your main threat will be getting caught in the crossfire as MPs protect civilians. From Scania to Baghdad is red alert with most hits from 18:00 – 09:00 targeting military convoys. An intersection of the two supply routes MSR Jackson and ASR Tampa, just south of Baghdad International Airport, is the latest location of the majority of fatalities. From Baghdad to Fallujah red alert is also in effect. The only difference is that the insurgents don't care what time of day it is. They don't want us there and they will

use all force to keep us from coming back.”

The MP warned us to stay alert because we need to be ready to get out of every situation. She reminded us to go over our recovery procedures because we “will” lose trucks. Everyone in the room laughed, not out of disbelief, but nervousness. This meeting could have only lasted five seconds and been summed up in just two words, “You’re fucked.”

The sun had set so we couldn’t leave until morning. A berm surrounded the compound in a bowl of dust and diesel. Our vehicles were staged in convoy order at the center. Fifty meters away, a line of engines rumbled, waiting to quench their thirst at the fuel point. I wiped a muddy mixture of dirt and sweat from my chin. The 115° heat cooled to 95°. Across the lot, behind rows of blue port-o-johns, Burger King staked their land, monopolizing soldiers’ hunger for home.

I went back to my truck to find Matt. I climbed on top of the warm cab and thought about what I’d say. Darkness descended beyond blaring stadium lights. The stars hid and the moon refused to shine. As I thought about what the MP said, I got scared. I didn’t want to die out here. I didn’t want anything to happen to Caitlin or Matt. What would I do if they were hit? How could I protect them? How could I stop them from bleeding out? I wanted their trucks right in front of me so I could see them at all times.

Frustrated with his absence, I got off my truck, walked up and down the lines of our convoy and found Matt hunched over a steering wheel, sleeping. I was so scared about what could happen that I got angry with him. I blamed him for not being there to panic with me. I apologized and explained what came out of the briefing. We slept on top of a connex together. Every night before we went to sleep, we prayed. It was my turn to pray, but I couldn’t. The Old Testament was written across the very sand I stood. They say there are no atheists in war, but the longer I stayed in Iraq the further I wanted to

distance myself from a god who came from this land.

We rolled over the border at 06:00, Tuesday. Manny led the convoy in a gun truck with Caitlin standing outside the back manning a .50 cal. I drove first shift as Rodríguez, my driving partner, stood outside the turret and manned our SAW. I named our truck "George" and our SAW, "Jorge." I don't know why we always named our equipment. Perhaps personifying them made them a reliable member of our team?

We stopped at a check point in Talil for fuel. This is next to Ur, which is the birthplace of Abraham, the patriarch of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. Toro was in the humvee behind me. As we waited for everyone to finish fueling, I walked back to talk. We could see Matt six trucks back standing about 10 feet off the road. Toro asked me what I'd do if Matt stepped on a land mine. He's always full of drama. He made a smartass remark and said I'd just flip through my little black book and say "next."

I looked at Matt, then at Toro and said, "I wouldn't be with anyone. All of you guys are idiots."

We continued north on MSR Jackson and pulled over so one of the trucks could change a tire. Everyone got out to pull security. Toward the end of the convoy an Iraqi civilian walked up to a soldier and tried to take his weapon. The call came over the radio, so I alerted Manny in the lead vehicle. I

asked the soldiers if they shot the Iraqi and they said no. When Manny arrived to assess the situation, the Iraqi was pinned to the ground and his ankles were duct taped together. As Manny tried to take over, the man kept trying to grab his rifle and knife. His valiant act turned to sobbing and rubbing sand in his face and mouth. We heard shots in the distance, but couldn't tell if they were being fired at. Manny had us move the convoy five miles up the road as he took care of the Iraqi. Caitlin later told me that Manny looked scared and she thought he was going to crap his pants. He told them to get the humvee ready as Iraqi police were taking over. Manny jumped off the man and into the humvee and sped off.

Our speed picked up to 50 MPH. This time I manned Jorge while Rodríguez drove. I knew the intersection of MSR Jackson and ASR Tampa was coming up. I kept lookout as we passed through layers of overpasses, on ramps, off ramps, and underpasses, like a pretzel. The sides had ditches that could easily be used as fighting positions. The road had craters and patches of burnt metal. Most of the dividers were crushed. Once we got through, there was a convoy of marines guarding the other side, waiting for the first bullet to fly, but it never came.

It only took us another fifteen minutes to get to Baghdad International. Just outside the gate we stopped due to traffic. I sat on top of George and looked at a small boy standing next to our truck. He was about four, wearing a long white robe without shoes. In his arms he carried peanuts, soda, and candy that others had thrown to him in passing convoys. He looked up at me and said "water, water."

I had a stack next to me so I tossed him a liter. He placed all the junk food into his robe and folded it up like a basket. Then he picked up the water and stumbled off. I looked at him and thought, my children would never have to beg for food or water. They would never be without shoes. Does this little boy know what toys are? Does he have someone that hugs him and tells him he is loved?

We didn't want to risk driving at night, so we stayed in BIAP. Toro convinced Manny that we should leave at 04:30, drive to the edge of Fallujah, wait on the side of the road until the sun came up, then drive as fast as we could through town. We all knew that the sun comes up at 06:30. We also knew that TQ was only 50 miles away. The logic was not working for any of us.

The next morning, we rolled out of BIAP at 04:30. As I manned Jorge, I turned on my night vision goggles. There was no moon, so vision was limited. All I could see was barren farm land. Both Matt and Caitlin were in front of me, so I could keep an eye on them. We pulled over as planned. All lights and engines were off. Everyone dismounted and pulled security. I stayed on top of George for a better view. No one spoke.

Caitlin broke the silence and whispered, "Hey Sergeant Schick. Are Manny and Toro writing a book?"

"About what," I asked.

"Ten Ways to Get Killed in Iraq. Let's review what we're doing wrong. We're driving in the dark at prime ambush hours. We're now sitting targets on the side of the road. As we sit here, each vehicle that drives by can warn Fallujah that we're on our way."

All we could do is laugh. I suppose that's what soldiers do, laugh in the face of adversity. A group of three white suburbans passed.

At day break we moved forward, into Fallujah. On the right were gorgeous condos two stories high with balconies. Trees lined the front of the buildings. On the left were run down

apartments, street vendors, and shops. We drove down the four-lane road with no traffic. Men stood along the street glaring at us. I looked from side to side expecting someone to jump out and say "boo!" but the only sound was engines rumbling. The men remained still. They didn't walk. They didn't talk. They didn't shake their fists. They stood there as if someone had snapped their fingers and time froze.

I wanted to take a picture of the beautiful mosque in the center of town, but I was afraid they might snap out of it and decide to shoot. There was a mural in the middle of the road of Saddam. His face had been scraped off and spray painted black. Someone pasted a poster of Saddam's head on top of it. A bridge crossing the Euphrates River was in sight. Shortly after, our maintenance wrecker called over the radio, the last truck had made it through. That's it? We did it! No RPGs, no shots fired.

As we entered TQ airbase, four Apaches flew by. They patrolled the base all day. All the trucks offloaded except our seven from Camp New York. My cargo wasn't supposed to be left there. Instead, it belonged to a base ten miles north on the other side of RPG Alley. We waited around for hours while Manny did everything to have our load dropped here instead of at the next camp. We parked next to a building painted with twenty black silhouettes. We didn't know what it was used for, but it looked like a firing line. The field next to us was filled with broken down MiG fighter jets. They had been dug up months earlier when someone found them buried in the desert. Their long, angular fuselage, painted in a dull, radar-deflecting gray, could cut through the air like a blade. One of the jets had a penis drawn on the cockpit glass covered in grime. This product of the Cold War's arms race had a sleek and menacing silhouette. I was amazed that some of the most powerful jets in the world were sitting there, useless.

Manny directed us to drive over to the airstrip and drop our load. Rodríguez stood behind our truck signaling as I lowered

the equipment to the dirt. A bright light flashed in my mirror. Then – boom. Our truck shook and I looked out the window to see a huge fireball turn into a thirty-foot tall mushroom cloud next to the We never found out what caused the explosion, but one thing's for sure, we weren't in it.

We dropped our load and joined the rest of the convoy. There was plenty of sunlight and we had a long drive back to base camp, yet Manny insisted we stay here for the night. It didn't make sense. We wanted to get the hell out of there. Later we found out that we weren't supposed to drive through Fallujah. The town was off limits. Instead, the MPs could guide us through an alternate route connecting to MSR Jackson. The problem was the MPs weren't going to take us for two more days.

Manny didn't want to sit around, so he decided we'd leave in the morning at daybreak and drive through Fallujah. With the sun directly above us we wanted to get it over with now, but Manny stood his ground and we stayed. TQ sits on top of a hill with Habbaniah Lake on one side and Fallujah on the other. As I looked out over the city, gun shots erupted. Another convoy had left ten minutes ago and now they were fighting for their lives. The shots went on till 02:00 the next morning. Matt and I continued with our nightly prayer. We prayed for the protection of the other convoys leaving, for our safety as we slept, and thanked God that we didn't leave. Matt pointed out that the flares looked cool, like fireworks, but there wasn't anything to celebrate. Someone could have been dying.

05:00 wake up was silent. No more shots. No more flares. As we got ready to leave, I put my arms around Matt and held him for five minutes. We didn't say a word, yet in our silence we told

each other things words can't describe. I gave him a kiss and climbed into the turret. Rodríguez drove again. As we lined up our trucks I put on my bullet proof vest. The 200-round drum that holds ammo for Jorge was busted open. I didn't have any way to strap the additional SAW ammo to me, so I pulled it out in rows of 100 links and strapped it across my chest like Rambo. I looked ridiculous, but if I had to jump out of my truck, I would have plenty of ammo.

I grabbed a Red Bull out of the cooler and passed one to Rodríguez. It's the closest thing to a beer we were allowed to drink. I sat on top of George and sipped. On our right was a convoy of tanks parked in the dirt. The soldiers looked at us as we got ready to leave. They stared at me with my links of ammo around my chest. I know what they were thinking, but I had no way of conveying my ammo carrying situation, so I took the stares, the pointing, and the laughs.

We left the gate and the guards waved goodbye to each of us with fake smiles and a "give them hell" fist in the air. I stood outside the turret with Jorge clenched in my fists. I looked down at my hand and realized I was losing circulation in my arm. I loosened my grip and tried to relax. I flicked off the safety and pointed the barrel toward the ground.

I squinted at the wind then adjusted the bandana across my face to keep debris and bugs from tearing into my skin. Caitlin stood in back of the humvee in front of me manning the .50 cal, with her blank stare toward the horizon. I knew what she was thinking and feeling.

My mind started racing. I wanted to snap my fingers, freeze time, put us in Kuwait, and feel safe again. Cars zoomed by, going against traffic parallel to us with their hazard lights flashing. I imagined them warning the town of our arrival. Staring at Caitlin caused tears to well up in my eyes. Then I finally snapped out of it. What's wrong with me? I don't panic. I don't cry. I am always in charge. God has taken care

of us through every foolish situation we've gotten ourselves into. Why would He stop now at the end of our mission? I quickly prayed, "God protect us and don't leave us now."

We came to the bridge over the Euphrates. The sun was rising and a beautiful orange sparkle reflected off the water. Mist was in the air, engines roared, the wind blew harder, our wheels raced, and a Christmas song was stuck in my head. Our trucks were so loud I knew no one could hear me, so I went ahead and sang the chorus to "O Holy Night:"

"Fall on your knees.

O hear the angels voices.

O night divine.

O night when Christ was born."

It felt odd singing this Christian song, by someone who didn't want to be a Christian, in a nation that didn't celebrate Christmas. As we entered town, I took off my bandana to show my face and I pulled my hair out of its bun to show my long blonde hair. The insurgents hate women who show their face, so I wanted to make sure they knew I was a woman as I looked them straight in the eyes.

Just as before, the men froze next to the road. My eyes panned up and down each building. Every window was empty, each balcony vacant. I could see Matt had already made it to MSR Jackson and was out of the town. Another 500 meters and it would be over for me. A man stood at the very end of the town with his hands behind his back. He wore blue oil-stained pants and a filthy white shirt. The hate in his eyes beamed past his rugged beard. Our eyes locked onto each other as our convoy slowed for the turn. I stayed focused, waiting for him to make the first move. He stood there, watching, as I exited town.

Free at last I looked back counting each truck that turned

onto MSR Jackson. As the last gun truck made its way into the turn a man threw a rock at the driver and hit him in the neck. Toro laughed loudly and teased, "Dude, you got stoned in Fallujah!"

We made it back to base. The guys couldn't wait to joke around and share the near misses with death. Outside every tent you could hear shouts:

"Oh my god!"

"What the hell?"

"How is that possible?"