

New Fiction – “Iqbal” by Dan Murphy



Across the eight-lane roadway from the observation post was a gas station where Iraqis waited for days, siblings and cousins trading shifts and standing guard, eyeing the other clans and tribes. Pierstein crouched behind a chest-high wall of dusty sandbags and hugged the shade it created just outside the post's front entrance, a long piece of floppy plywood propped against the doorway and secured with a string on a nail. Trash tumbled in the road, clung doubled-over to the curbs. He wiped his brow and watched them mill around through the line. They paid no attention to the Detroit chug of turbo-diesels pulling up on Pierstein's side of the road.

He called back into the OP, “Log run's up.” His voice skipped off the ceramic floors of the three-story mansion's interior and wound up the marble-columned atrium to the upper floors, finally muffled out against the sand bags stacked in the window frames. The roof had fortified posts with bulletproof glass, and central Fallujah and its desert environs spanned out unbroken but for minarets and crackling calls to prayer that mingled with smoke clouds from burning garbage.

Pierstein heard Corporal Baylor's throaty notice to fall out

followed by the heavy-laden footsteps of 1st Squad scuffing down the tiled stairway inside.

Pierstein walked out into the nascent daylight as the first truck stationed itself in front of the house next door. The turret gunner swept his weapon outboard, slumped and mechanical. A covered trailer hauling cases of water and rations followed the second truck, and Cullen stepped out of the passenger side.

"Any ice today?" Pierstein asked.

"Negatron, dude. Generator's still down."

"Well, fuck our lives," said Pierstein.

Cullen snapped to attention and saluted, "Fuck our lives, aye-aye." He let the trailer hitch drop and clang against the frame. "Plenty of piss-warm water though."

Pierstein's squad filed out to the trailer. "Got another surprise for you though, Piers."

"Finally get your dick hard?"

"You'd like that wouldn't you? Nah, but this might get you up." Cullen opened the rear door. A gaunt man, blindfolded and soiled, with a patchy beard and big goofy ears sat with his hands zip-tied behind his back so that he had to slouch deeply, his knees crammed into the back of the driver's seat. A black gash poked out from under the blindfold. His left cheek was a dark pulpy purple and his lower lip was split, the corner of his mouth pinched red and raw. A silty mist swarmed the sunlight passing through the truck around the man's face. "Think you two have met." He shrugged. "Sorta."

The man's stench cut through the burning garbage and diesel, and Pierstein gagged and turned to his side and spat.

"Yep. This piece of shit smells like straight shit." Cullen

leaned past Pierstein and gave the man hard shove. "Don't ya, you fucking Muj fuck?" The man was stoic. Pierstein was not impressed.

Pierstein was unsure at first but then recalled the elvish ears from the posters all over the FOB. Iqbal bin Hassan. S-2 said he was the guy behind the scope, shadowing the battalion's movements throughout the city and pulling the trigger at choice, vulnerable moments. Pierstein recalled the hole where Ben's face should have been, his battle buddy like a mannequin propped up against a heap of rubble. Pierstein had scrubbed his trousers for an hour but couldn't get the blood out. He was down to two pairs now. S-2 said a lot of fucking things.

Iqbal's breath was slow, tidal, though he must have known where they were taking him. It occurred to Pierstein that Iqbal probably knew better than he did. This was a confrontation Pierstein knew he was meant to relish. Another platoon had picked him up three days before, and the CO had come to find Pierstein to tell him They got the son'bitch, but Pierstein was relieved that they would not let him see Iqbal.

Cullen tried to fill the space opposite the open truck door like a valet, peering around, scanning behind the truck and checking the windows of the neighboring homes. Pierstein stared. "That's him?"

"That's him," said Cullen.

Pierstein stepped closer to the truck. He started to reach out to touch Iqbal, looking for a parallel to how Iqbal had reached out and touched them. His heart beat dragged. No cry for blood rushed to face or his fists. Looking at Iqbal, defenseless and whipped, he felt like retreating, like dropping his gear and shutting his eyes.

"That's the dirty haji fuck right there, bro, fucking Muj motherfucker." Cullen peered around some more.

Pierstein stepped closer. The diesel hummed, and a gust of wind sprinkled a glittering of sand through the open doors. He watched it collect on Iqbal's swollen lips. Pierstein let his rifle hang loose and shifted it to his back. The scents of gas and sewage danced back and forth. He could see a thin piece of string tied in a simple knot around Iqbal's wrist. Too slight to serve a tactical purpose, Pierstein wondered if it meant something, a friend back home or a reminder not to bite his nails. He wondered for a moment if Iqbal ever jerked off during the long hours hunting behind his gun, waiting for a Marine to wander into his aperture, the same way they all did on post. Did he feel guilty about it after? Like he had sullied the mission?

Pierstein pumped his fists, rolling his fingers in and out of a ball, wishing his arms would leap out on their own, but somehow Iqbal's placidity was contagious, and Pierstein could not find the way to violating it. The failure huddled in his stomach. He tried to believe he would stay as calm as Iqbal was if the roles were reversed and winced the question from his mind, a new failure altogether. It was not like he would ever get his trousers back.

Was it even calm he was seeing in Iqbal? Hard to tell with the blindfold, without knowing what his eyes were doing. His even breaths and slouched posture could just as easily be his body opting out. Probably he had not been allowed to sleep for days. But Pierstein was inclined to believe it was fear that held Iqbal in check, the second-to-second will to not make another mistake, to not invite more pain or abuse, to breathe each breath so that it will leave room for the next. In the three previous days, the man, whoever he was, had learned not to beg or cry, learned only to survive the next minute.

The working party stopped, the drivers, the guys up in the turrets, his squad cradling cases of food and water mid-step, all watching him, all waiting for the show.

"That's the motherfucker."

Pierstein heard his squad leader from the house. "That's him?" Corporal Baylor trooped across the dirt lot from the house wearing only a t-shirt under his flak, arms sinewy and bulging. Baylor didn't say anything else as he dropped his rifle against Pierstein's chest and went in. Cullen peered around again for onlookers.

Baylor did not touch Iqbal's face. Gripping the nape of his neck and shoulder with one hand, he put his other to the spot where abdomen meets oblique, about a fist's width in front of the kidney. Pierstein watched Baylor's uppercut land over and over again, ashamed of his relief that someone else was doing his job for him. Iqbal let out a couple involuntary grunts and yelps, but he never cried out. After the fourth or fifth punch, Pierstein looked away and all he heard were muffled gags and impacts like fruit splattering on the sidewalk from fifty stories up.

Pierstein wondered about that: why the gut? Wasn't the face more satisfying? The one whose effect you could measure and say That spot right fucking there? His blood on your knuckles? The one he will see in the mirror and recall the exact moment he received it—from you—and wince when he turns his head over his pillow and wakes up because of it? Feel it chewing food, dragging on a cigarette, bending his forehead to the ground. Chuck Norris never round-housed dudes in the hip.

When they finally pulled Baylor off Iqbal, he was not throwing punches anymore. He had Iqbal by the collar in a sort of combat conference, practically mounting the guy in a cultural exchange of sweat. It sounded like growling at first and strings of Baylor's saliva unfurled on Iqbal's swollen face. It was only when Pierstein and Cullen were pulling him off that Pierstein heard what he was saying to Iqbal, over and over again through his teeth: Baylor.

Later, thinking back on it, Pierstein realized why Baylor had chosen the gut. The face was already bloody and bruised, a pulpy blast zone previously claimed. Baylor wanted agency, and his wrath would not be felt on the face. If he had the time, he would have tattooed his name on Iqbal's oblique or anywhere else. But all he had was a few seconds, so he claimed his spot.

Free of Baylor, Iqbal crumbled out of the truck and started puking in the gutter, the mealy bile nestling in the bright green household sewage. Somebody said something about a corpsman. They let him linger there a minute unmolested. Pierstein was not sure if this was a deliberate mercy, that Iqbal should have this respite to reflect on his misery and talk it out with someone in his head, or if it was an exhibition in its own right—the dominated bared at the pleasure of its dominator.

Cullen eventually hooked him under the arm pit, said, "Get the fuck up," and crammed him back in the truck and slammed the door home. Baylor told the squad, "Let's get these guys out of here." Pierstein still had Baylor's rifle, and he watched as Baylor slapped the dust from his hands off on his trousers before reaching for it.