

New Fiction from Patrick Mondaca: “The Ministry of Information”

Too often your mind wanders back to those places where God has turned his face away. For example: the prison your platoon guarded in Baghdad in the early months of the war. Displaced Iraqi families were making new homes under the comforting shadows of your machine guns and you kicked soccer balls around the dusty yard with delighted Arab children like you would have had they been your own nieces and nephews.



But they were not your nieces and nephews, and at the end of the day they would sleep in jail cells stained and streaked with the blood of their countrymen, tortured and executed by now-deposed Saddam Hussein and his two crazy sons. When you walk down the narrow hallways, peering through iron cages, you

marvel at the claw marks in the walls, made by human claws, and at the shoestrings and bootlaces and belts, broken and frayed, tied to the window grates where the doomed had tried to hang themselves, where desperate people would now be grateful for the shelter.

As you lounge on the roof of the prison, baking within the overwatch position on the roof—which is just a makeshift tent rigged from ponchos encased in sandbags with cheap folding camping chairs you've purchased at the PX back in Kuwait—smoking shisha from a hookah in the heat of the afternoon sun, you begin to better understand why you are there.

Marwan, the Iraqi kid from across the way who's been acting as an unofficial translator, tells you more of what you've heard on CNN and Fox News and read in the New York Times and Stars and Stripes. The torture and the death. The rape and pillaging. The opulent wealth and endless greed.

One late afternoon, after you've been in place for a few days and the locals start wandering over to barter, or look on curiously, a couple of girls come to visit. They look to be in their late teens and they don't have their heads covered. They come asking for cigarettes, or Pepsi, or something of which you wouldn't have thought that's the thing they'd be looking for after having been invaded just a few weeks earlier, but they do and they stick around to chat in their limited English. One is blonde, probably dyed, and they are unafraid to talk to American soldiers, they ignore your weapons and body armor, and they ask things that every girl would ask a soldier, about your wife or girlfriend and if you have children, that kind of thing.

Marwan has seen this before. Maybe with the Marines in the weeks prior. "Turkish," he says, and makes a face. "Prostitutes, I think." They invite you for tea in their apartment, on the tenth floor across from the prison. That's

high up. You have an image of yourself spiraling face first to meet your death from blunt cardiac trauma while Turkish whores rifle through your wallet, your squad leader gingerly rolling over your smashed head with a gloved hand and wondering where your BDU pants are. What his after-action report would sound like. You think that this is not a good idea.

“Come on, man,” says the PFC most enamored with the girls. “We’ll go and come back before anyone knows.” The girls follow the debate with hopeful expressions. For tea, they insist. Yeah, right.

You do think about it. The logistics of it. One up, one down. Cover me while I cover you, that kind of thing. What the hell, right? You could all be dead by morning. You don’t even know what you’re doing here besides babysitting an empty prison rapidly filling up with displaced Iraqis.

But the Turkish girls go home, much to the disappointment of the PFC.

The shift is over, but because there is nothing else to do but sleep, this is where you stay. The next team takes up positions in another spot, eating the good parts of their MREs and tossing the remainder to the kids below. You smoke hookah until the sun goes down, Marwan heads back to his apartment, and eventually you drift in and out of a fitful sleep on a poncho liner underneath the stars for a couple hours before waking up to drink water and rinse the dust off your face and out of your mouth and eyes again. Some of the guys are sleeping in the trucks still, but you and your team will sleep on the roof because it’s both easier and minimally more comfortable, at least at night when it’s about thirty degrees cooler.

This is a strange place for a prison, you decide: behind a government complex and smack in the middle of a residential

street. You suppose Saddam Hussein had them everywhere, so probably people just forgot they were there. Until the invasion when he gave the order to empty the prisons and release all the prisoners, and the inevitable chaos that followed such a directive when criminals, psychopaths, dissidents, and whoever else were now back out in the street. You wonder what condition these prisoners were in. Did they just stagger out, the ones that could, blink into the sunlight and fall back down onto their knees into the sand in despair? Did they dash from their cells and out the prison gate into the apartment complexes and beg passersby for a bite to eat, some money for a taxi, or a cellphone to call their loved ones? Did they just run outside and murder the cellmate they hated, or track down the guy sleeping with their wife and kill him amidst the chaos of the American invasion or join in on the citywide looting sprees with their countrymen? You wonder these things for a while, smoking cigarettes on occasion to pass the time.

You stare at the now vacant Ministry of Information building, hulking, towering above the prison yard. What kind of government information ministry has an onsite prison? You think it would be like if the Voice of America office in Washington D.C. had its own prison behind it for anyone accused of crimes against it. Voice of America dissenters all locked up and forced to listen to Armed Forces Radio deejays and shitty Brittany Spears pop music on a loop twenty-four hours a day. The horrors, you think. What if, though? What a weird fucking place, you answer your own question. That's the only answer.

You think about "Baghdad Bob," Saddam Hussein's comically misinformed Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, who spent the last days of the war broadcasting that the American infidels were committing suicide outside the city gates while American tanks rolled down Baghdad's streets. What'd Bob do in

his off time? Stroll casually through the backyard prison kicking at the cell doors of prisoners and late-for-work newscasters, calling them imperialist dogs and commies and stopping occasionally to administer the usual electric shock or to rip off a fingernail or two? Where's old Bob now? Where is that crazy fucker?

What's Baghdad Bob going to do with himself now that there's no war to rattle on about? You picture him hosting Iraqi Jeopardy in his retirement, some sultry Iraqi swimsuit model flipping clues on the game board. "Weapons of Mass Destruction for \$200," he announces to the audience, his signature black beret still plastered to his head.

You wonder if Baghdad Bob had a fancy office, all gold and gaudy and plastic-treed, with ornate massive chairs like at Uday's palace where the platoon first was camped out. You think maybe you'd like to go look for that office, kick your boots up on his desk, take a picture with his favorite beret on or something. Maybe tomorrow.

"Where you wanna go?" asked your buddy Jay from home, another sergeant who's come up the ranks just a couple years before you.

"I'm just going to go to see what kind of cool shit's left behind that the Marines didn't get," you tell him. "You know, like flags and uniforms and bayonets and shit. Stuff to send home."

"Yeah, let's do it then."

And so the two of you go in the morning. You stack your rifles in the overwatch lean-to—bringing pistols only; you want to be light and unencumbered—and tell the specialist on watch you'll be back in a bit.

This is how soldiers die, you decide. Boredom, the age-old killer. Boredom and curiosity and kleptomania combined. You're still going to go in, though.

When you step inside the exterior door to what must have been the basement loading dock, all you first see is what looks to be an abandoned storage room, desks and furniture tipped over, papers scattered everywhere, nothing too exciting. Because it is dark and there are few windows on this floor, the two of you alternate using your high-powered Surefire flashlights as you sweep the corners of the room, peering into the shadows, stepping gingerly over spilled boxes of binders, files, gas masks, breathing canisters for gasmasks, and piles of other stuff you can't quite make out.

"This is pretty fucking stupid, man," you whisper to Jay who grins and whispers back, "So, fucking go back out, then," nodding in the direction you just came. But you don't. And you know neither of you will. The two of you are going to the top of this thing, and you both know it, stupid or not. And so, you sweep left to right, right to left, Surefire flashlights in your left hands and Beretta 9mm pistols in your right, wrists and backs of your hands together in the traditional police "ice pick" grip, and the two of you move slowly shoulder to shoulder, back to back, toe to heel, trying not to make a sound.

There are definitely people still in there, though. Or close by. You can hear other voices somewhere else around the building, muffled, but human nonetheless. Considering the population of displaced persons now living in the prison cells next store, you wonder if there are displaced persons doing the same thing you are, looking for cool shit to steal, or maybe food.

Yeah, you think if they're displaced persons, then they're

probably looking for things they can live off of, food and water, things to sell maybe.

Unless they're Fedayeen hiding out still, or wounded Ba'ath Party Ministry officials biding their time, waiting for the right moment to escape. You feel the hair tingle on the back of your neck and the muscles in your forearms tighten and the flexor tendon connecting that muscle to your trigger finger twitch. If someone comes around that corner screaming "Allāhu akbar!" you'll be prepared to double-tap that motherfucker and hope for the best. You flick the safety off the Beretta and look at that little reassuring orange dot that says it's ready to do its job, and you hope that this is one of the days when it doesn't jam.

Jay does the same and you say "Shhh..." with your pistol barrel to your lips instead of an index finger, but it comes out as more of a nervous "Shhh..." giggle and he suppresses his own nervous laugh.

"We're fucking assholes," you say under your breath.

"Yeah we are," he smirks.

It occurs to you briefly that any one of the boxes or drawers or corrugated metal filing cabinets that you've just kicked open might have exploded in your faces, and you might be nothing more than a pink mist clinging to the thick morning air right now if you kicked the wrong box, and then you see it and any thoughts of tactical awareness evaporate the second you glimpse that red, white, green, and black fabric wedged between the box of photographs and flipped over desks.

You will have no thought whatsoever that those photos of men women and children are most likely of prisoners who have been tortured or killed while you're hurriedly pushing aside the only evidence of their existence with the hopes that you will get your greedy little dirty mitts on the discarded colors that represent their homeland.

But you don't give a shit about that. You want your souvenir. You kick that box of Iraqi humanity right the fuck out of your way, and you pull that Iraq flag out from under all that shit and hold it up. "Jackpot. Look at this thing," you say and it's intact other than the line of successive holes singed around the edges where it appears that a Marine or some other fucker went full auto with a small caliber rifle.

"Damn, son," Jay shakes his head, "Fucking jackpot."

"Don't worry, man," you say, "We'll get another one." And so, the two of you clear all twelve floors left to right, right to left, ceiling to floor, floor to ceiling—looking not for enemy fighters, or hidden caches of weapons and evidence of the Saddam Hussein's regime of tyranny, but because you are looking for garbage quality mementos like flags and unit insignia and bayonets that the Republican Guard has discarded to send home to your colleagues in suburban Connecticut.

When you get to the top, the sun is blinding, the blue skies are clear, there are only a few burning buildings in the distance, and the effect is surreal. You have a butt pack full of Iraqi flags, Republican guard insignia, and other Iraq military paraphernalia in your U.S. Navy-issued Kevlar vest under your Connecticut National Guard-issued flack vest and you're not dead.

It's a beautiful day in Baghdad, you think. "Good morning Baghdad!" you scream into the wind doing your best Robin Williams in Vietnam impression. Jay laughs and points to an abandoned anti-aircraft gun emplacement at one of the corners of the rooftop, and the two of you gleefully climb into the gunners' seats completely forgetting to check the thing for booby traps. You get up to set the timer on the camera that you brought with you and the two of you take celebratory photos sitting in Baghdad Bob's anti-aircraft gun on the top of his wrecked and looted and bombed-out office building. Just a couple of buck sergeants hanging out on the roof like

fucking tourists.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here, man,” Jay says, and so the two of you descend the twelve stories in a much less guarded fashion than you climbed it.

Years later when you are home again and you have dragged that same Iraqi military shit around since that day in the Ministry of Information building well over a decade ago, you will wonder why you still have it. Why you still schlep it from place to place, apartment to apartment, state to state, and country to country so many years later. You will want to know what it means, what value it has, this box of war tokens still smelling of smoke and dust and fear and stupidity a decade and a half later.

But you won’t know why you hold onto it, of all things. The footlocker that holds those things that you took so long ago is the only thing that you would never part with of all your earthly possessions. You think that these are the things that should be buried with you when you finally go. That this should be the rule: whatever remains of any war ought to be buried with whoever has been a part of it. That maybe this is your final penance, to be buried with your stolen Iraq War paraphernalia. Your dinars and your insignia and your bayonets and your flags. Bury it with you, and you with it; and bury the war, and forget you and it and your part in stealing it. Forget your part in a dirty war.

New Essay by Patrick Mondaca: The Hideous Hypocrisy of Himmelstoss

“At the head of the column trots the fat sergeant-major. It is queer that almost all of the regular sergeant-majors are fat. Himmelstoss follows him, thirsting for vengeance. His boots gleam in the sun...Then he steams off with Himmelstoss in his wake.”

Himmelstoss, as anyone who is familiar with *All Quiet on the Western Front* knows, is the sadistic corporal who bullies with less power. The fat sergeant major, whose girth underscores his lavish and immoderate lust for comfort while the rank-and-file tighten their belts in the trenches, is happy to be the weight behind Himmelstoss's threats. As the protagonist (Paul Bäumer) recounts, he and the other soldiers immediately disregard both Himmelstoss and the fat sergeant-major, continuing on no worse for the wear.



ANT. HILLENBRAND
SCHWABMÜNCHEN &
Filiale BOBINGEN.

Not every human is a Himmelstoss, and this photo almost certainly does not represent one. But those that are make life miserable for everyone else.

We've all had a Himmelstoss in our lives at least once. They're school principals and executive vice presidents and postal deliverymen and yes, sergeants-major. Some are fat. One should not dwell on men like these for any more time than is necessary.

I encountered one during my time at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, coming home from Iraq.

"Where is your beret, Sergeant?" the Medical Corps sergeant major, who had halted me on my way to an appointment, said. "And why are you wearing a desert patrol cap with a woodland uniform?" Thinking it obvious, I respectfully informed the sergeant major that my beret was still in a metal box somewhere in the desert. "Put that cigarette out, sergeant, and stand at parade rest when you speak to me. And don't you dare throw that cigarette butt in my grass," the sergeant major said. His posture was threatening, though I sensed behind it the existential terror of a man without serious occupation.

What else is one to do in such a situation but put one's cigarette out on the pavement, then collect and squeeze it carefully in one's clenched fist? His wet eyes pleaded with me for a minor transgression. He ached to thrust himself upon me further, so that we might enter the kind of seedy relationships this type of flaccid fleshbag seems to require for satisfaction. At that moment, I was tempted to give in, but thought better of it.

"Roger, sergeant," I said instead.

But that wasn't the end of it.

“What’s your name? What unit are you with? Who’s your C-0? Take that flag off your right shoulder, you’re not in theater anymore,” he said, his voice picking up speed and certainty as he warmed to the subject. “Desert boots, that’s a no-go. Are you wearing a *field jacket liner*? Ohhhhh heeeeeaaayl naw,” he said, his voice rising almost to a full-throated shout.

It was true, I was wearing an old M-65 field jacket liner under my uniform top instead of the newer issued winter polypropylene. “Yes, Sergeant Major, I will remove it, Sergeant Major,” I said, standing corrected, quite literally, in the brisk winter air. I had no intention of removing it, and I didn’t. I wore the motherfucker to bed that night. Hell, I’m still wearing that thing, deep in the recesses of the old foot locker that keeps my mementos of such places, stinking of smoke and dust and sweat and bullshit.

Whether you’re still in the military or you’ve transitioned to the corporate world, or are a civilian and have never served, it’s always the same. An FSM lurks, waiting to gig you on some stupid, asinine shit. It’s a threat we all must face, and disregard, with a smile and a nod and a “Yes, Sergeant Major” or “Vice President” or “Foreman”. Because that is all they will ever be—the barking, savage whiff of authority barely missed, one step below or behind the real boss. Forever the bridesmaid, never the bride. And after you realize the measure of their soul, what else do they have left to them but the illusion of power, usually shouted? They’re stuck within this sad, diminished aura, a victim of their penultimate rank. Give them “their grass” for the moment, or “their metrics” at close of business, or “their tie rods” in even rows in the next hour, and then go home. Or travel. Or go to school. Or anything. I have a photo of an Army cargo truck in Baghdad with “Stop the Insanity” scrawled across its passenger door. Sometimes that’s all we can do to remind ourselves who is really in charge and continue our idiosyncratic lives, one graffiti’d door at a time.

I never saw that particular sergeant major again, thankfully. I supposed he moved on to harass other troops about their shoulder patches until the regulation was changed a month later. I would have loved to see his face the morning after the paper came down, applying the patch he'd fought so hard against with resignation, then instructing the soldiers he'd yelled at the day before to get within regs... admitting his own impotence one betrayal at a time. Since then, there have been other FSMs who have thrown their "stripes" around in the various settings in which I have worked. Though, now that I think about it, when has it ever really mattered to anyone but them? We the people remain unimpressed.

In the Vietnam War film *Hamburger Hill*, a couple of troops try and buck up their platoon "Doc" after a casualty chanting, "It don't mean nothing, man, not a thing." And the medic, thus consoled and encouraged, goes on to fight another day. We all have bad days like Doc in the film. That sergeant major I met long ago now might have been having a bad day too. Doc doesn't survive the battle. He succumbs to his wounds after imploring his fellow soldiers to finish taking the hill, so they can have something to be proud of. And they do. They do it for Doc and for each other. Those are the things that matter.



While violence is likely not the answer to fix people who abuse authority, it's unclear what is.

We can choose to fall prey to the insanity of Himmelstoss and the FSM and others like them, or we can take their fear and insecurity in stride, their insistence that only by obeying the rules can one hope to elude destiny. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Bäumer and his mates lay a good old-fashioned beat-down on old Himmelstoss, and it's hard to feel sympathy for him. Like the bloviating sergeant major I encountered, Himmelstoss is a nonfactor. His existence to Bäumer and the men is of no great importance, like whether they live or die. It should be noted that Himmelstoss, when he's himself sent to the front, does eventually perform bravely following a motivational beating by Bäumer in a trench. Yet it remains to be decided whether Himmelstoss was merely a desperate ass-kisser seeking the favor of his lieutenant or acting out of a moral obligation to his fellow soldiers. The men aren't in it for Himmelstoss and the FSM though. They're in it for each other as were the men in *Hamburger Hill*. The regulations may not get changed every time so you can smile at the thought of the senior enlisted man or supervisor or other inflated authority wiping egg off their face. Nor will every Himmelstoss you come across fetch the beating of a lifetime every time they push the wrong troop too far. But don't you sweat it. In the end, they don't mean nothing, man, not a thing. Finish taking the hill, and be proud of it.