IN THE MOSQUE OF IMAM ALI

They wait until a shattering sound comes from speakers in the minarets, the name of God in a hundred rising and falling notes. Its carrier wave is the breaking voice of a young man, one of the Mahdi revolutionaries. When the militiamen hear him, they stand absolutely still with their hands at their side, the differences between the men etched away by the name of God.

SUNGSU CHO

Cho is doing something to a cigarette with his fingers. He's rolling it back and forth until the tobacco falls out onto a sweat damp handkerchief full of black hash. He mixes the tobacco with the stuff we scored in Baghdad and then puts it back in the cigarette like a surgeon. Cho is the acknowledged master of this art and executes his moves with precision with the same fingers that sold vegetables in a market in Seoul.

Cho would go anywhere in the war and if he wanted you to stick around, he would say, "Yeah, you stay here with me, OK." Distracted and tired, he would make you dinner with the kimchi he had flown in from Seoul. I wrote the captions on his photographs because it wasn't easy for him. Cho's father is a retired South Korean military officer, and I always wanted to know what happened that sent Cho to war zones, but it was something his father never got over. I want to weep seeing him there in the car next to his pile of forgotten Nikons.

Up front, Cho's driver Ibrahim is getting upset. From the back seat I can see him twisting around, trying to figure out what will stop Cho from going through with it but Ibrahim is forced to watch the road for speeding traffic, insurgents hunting the roads and American convoys. We are passing Hilla and Babylon, heading north at eighty miles an hour into a highway of bombs and ten-mile traffic jams. Ibrahim is spooked because his passengers are going to get high and fill his car with hash fumes. Ibrahim keeps twisting around in the driver's seat to give us a look, but there's nothing he can do. I can tell he thinks that the trip is another bad luck proposition from the nervous animal sounds coming from his throat. We speed down the road, while Ibrahim swerves away from other cars and twitches the wheel back and forth. "It's total fucking bullshit." Cho says, and lights up just as we cross into the Sunni triangle. He is referring to everything. Thirty miles south of Baghdad, the highway that runs through the towns of Latayfiya and Yusufiya is one of the most violent stretches of road in the country. It is a major artery for religious pilgrims on their way to Najaf and a critical supply route for goods from Kuwait. In a zone from al Haswa to the outskirts of Baghdad, the sons of the Sunni farmers attack U.S. forces and anyone connected to the provisional government. Everyone is a potential target. After the bombs detonate and throw columns of oil-black smoke into the air, the fighters disappear into a network of irrigation canals and palm groves along the Euphrates. American patrols never come close to owning this road. Instead, they roll down it at high speed with their guns up, waiting for the high signaling crack of a Kalashnikov and the blood-starved spirits of the air.

I watch the low dust-colored buildings retreat along the sides of highway, hiding men with rocket launchers and rifles who watch the stream of cars between Baghdad and Shiite central Iraq. We have white rimes of salt under our arms from the sun. It is Friday afternoon, the terminal stages of July and we are going steadily through light that is gold and then red as it falls on the

stands of palms along the Euphrates river. The sun is burning in the west under the empty screen of the sky.

Cho has this handsome Frankenstein face and he takes a drag and lets it out again and car fills up with the smell of dope. We smoke in the back and hide our faces from boys selling soft drinks by the side of the road. Children work as spotters for kidnapping teams. When Ibrahim finally cracks a window, the vapors stream out behind the car in a comet's tail and the purified dread washes out of us. Riding through this dark stretch that spawns hundreds of fear myths, we are outside the war. The hash makes us feel invisible.

A few weeks earlier, during the first clashes between the U.S. military and the Mahdi Army, I found a driver in front of the Hamra hotel who panicked on the way south to Najaf. His name was Hekmat and he finally lost it on the road near Latayfiya. We had stopped at a U.S. roadblock, which is where Hekmat quit and said he couldn't go any farther. He was faking car trouble and said he couldn't get the car to start but he had secretly thrown a switch under the dash to disable the ignition. If I'd found the switch I would have stolen the car. Traffic was backed up for miles because a patrol had found a roadside bomb and the Americans providing security for the sappers were nervous. They were standing in a row behind a coil of razor wire stretched across the asphalt with their weapons up, with rounds in the chambers. An Iraqi man walked forward with his four-year-old son out in front of him until a soldier lowered his M-16. The man wanted to ask when the road would be clear. They didn't know. A young tanker yelled to me, "Hey how's the sushi in California?" He wanted to know how reporters moved around the Mahdi Army areas. I told him about the safe passage letters I carried and how they didn't work all the time, but the soldiers wouldn't let me through because their lieutenant hated reporters and the letters made them suspicious.

We listened to the sappers detonate the roadside bombs a mile down the highway. The sound is a giant fist hitting a soft pillow. While I was trying to talk to the soldiers at the roadblock, Hekmat turned his car around and headed back to Baghdad. I caught a ride with some workers in a bus going to Iskandariya. The driver, who knew the way around roadblocks, turned off the highway into the patchwork of fields and irrigation canals around the town. A few minutes later, deep in this Euphrates River farmland, I saw a thin kid in a white dishdasha looking through the windshields at the passengers of the cars. The kid had a walkie-talkie he was using to talk to fighters down the road about who was coming through their sector. He wasn't interested in the workers and the beat-up bus and missed the foreigner. It was amazing how close you could get to the edge and still come back, like an amusement park ride or a submarine tour of the bottom of the ocean.

By late July 2004, the uprisings had spread across Iraq, pulling in villages and major cities into open warfare, and the U.S. was calling in air strikes and heavy armor until we had the feeling that the whole thing was going to end in an apocalypse, a great shout of blood and heat. The road south of Baghdad had rolled all the way out until it was the country itself.

While we drive to Baghdad, twenty miles away, Moqtada al Sadr wears a white martyr's shroud and prepares to speak to thousands of his followers in the courtyard of the vast Kufa mosque. It marks the place where Imam Ali, the first Shiite saint, was murdered. Moqtada's father, Mohammed Sadiq al Sadr, gave sermons at this mosque until he was assassinated by security agents working for Saddam. Moqtada is the son of a martyr and the shroud symbolizes his willingness to follow his father into death. On the grounds of the mosque there is no space to move, the courtyard is full of worshippers and perhaps ten thousand men cover the marble stones like a sea. They wait until a shattering sound comes from speakers in the minarets, the name of God in a hundred rising and falling notes. Its carrier wave is the breaking

voice of a young man, one of the Mahdi revolutionaries. When the militiamen hear him, they stand absolutely still with their hands at their side, the differences between the men etched away by the name of God. The muezzin's call holds them outside time until the voice they hear ceases to emanate from the singer, it belongs now to the myriad men in black shirts and sandals who no longer want to live in the corrupt world. The voice kills and resurrects. Hearing the call is like having electrical wires run through your veins. It sounds like heartbreak. They pray and touch their heads to the ground and rise again.

After the call, al Sadr begins to speak. The cleric promises he will never leave his followers, that he is prepared to die for them. "I will never abandon you no matter what, and I am close to you and living the same life as you." Al Sadr in his unrefined Arabic urges them forward into the guns of the Americans with the following chain of associations: I am like Imam Ali, the first martyr of the Shiites, and I am prepared to die. If you follow me, then you must also be prepared for death. In order to be a saint, you must die.

Death is the only way to free yourself from the corruption of the world. "There is no stench in paradise," a fighter told me when I asked what he thought death was like. "Things don't rot like they do here." In the mosque, the crowd of men in their black shirts under the crucible sun stands hypnotized by the savior. It's a hundred and fifteen degrees, and the waves of sound from the public address system are breaking on the high walls of the mosque. Al Sadr tells them that the war against the Americans is going to begin and he wants them to be ready.

The men believe al Sadr is the disappeared twelfth Imam, returning to deliver them from evil and injustice at the end of the world. "He is just like a lion. He is the Lion of God." One Mahdi Army fighter once said to me during one of these faith rallies, his eyes ecstatic. They were all thinking the

exact same thing, it didn't really matter who you asked. Soon, they would hallucinate. In the Kufa mosque, thousands of young men are kneeling in rows behind al Sadr and pray while other identical men standing on the walls of the Kufa mosque scan the dead horizon with rifle scopes. Many of the older fighters rose up against Saddam after the gulf war. When you met them in their homes, the first thing they showed you were the pictures they took in Abu Ghraib.

The ceasefire that has lasted for nearly a month is on the verge of collapse. The war will start in a matter of days now, but we don't know it yet. There's feeling of dread. U.S. forces have demanded that Mahdi Army forces withdraw from Najaf and Kufa, while the Mahdi Army demands that the U.S. withdraw from Iraq. Ayatollah Sistani and the old sheikhs of the surrounding towns said that they want the Mahdi Army to withdraw. Moqtada al Sadr publicly refused, saying he will only follow the directions of the highest religious authorities. It's a strange statement to make. Sistani is the highest Shiite authority and he is being ignored. The present uprising led by Moqtada al Sadr grew out of Shiite congregations all over the country but is fueled by young men who have nothing. Just before the uprisings started, Pro-Mahdi Army imams urged Iraqis to join the movement, to travel to Najaf and take a stand to defend their religion. Thousands obeyed.

The Well

In the evening, hordes of bats flew down from the tops of the buildings to drink from the Hamra pool. The bats, falling and wheeling through the soft air, nicked the glassy surface of the water and then returned in a single arc to the tops of the buildings where they lived. Every night I watched their trajectories, amazed. The pool was the one place everyone went. It attracted and repelled. It was beautiful when the power went out. When the city

power failed everything went black except the pool radiating its silent blue reactor light.

South African mercenaries ended up there and every time a mortar round went overhead they would take defensive positions in the halls crouching in corners. Some of these men were enormously fat and wore the gregarious faces of Down's Syndrome victims. The older mercenaries had spent serious time in Angola and the rifles in their giant meaty hands were like miniature theater props, useless. They smiled like children. It was surprising that a mortar never hit the pool. I wished for one in a perverse way, anything that would shut down the fucked up conversation.

We heard things all the time. "You know, force is the only thing the Arabs understand." The man goes on, "Well, maybe Saddam was right to run the place with an iron fist. I mean look at these people, look at how they live." The guy laughs, drinks his beer. The Abu Ghraib torture photographs are all over the news in every country in the world. "Now, Ahmed, for god's sake bring some ketchup." The only thing to do was to find a table far from the mercenaries and pray they would get drunk where they were.

When an attack finally came, it wasn't a mortar. It was a car bomb positioned near the hotel checkpoint that missed the Australian ambassador, but killed a ten-year-old cigarette vendor named Ali. When the bomb went off fifty yards from the Duleimi hotel, the hallways filled with dust and the windows were blown into the rooms. When I opened the door, the hallway stretched away in a long cloud. I thought something was wrong with my eyes. On another floor a woman was screaming. We ran outside and, since there was nothing else to do, we watched the car burn. Later that day, a funeral procession for Ali made its way through the Jadriya neighborhood. The boy's house was only a few feet from where he was killed. His family wrapped

the body in white for martyrdom while Ali's mother screamed at Bush for doing this to her son.

Everyone had their theories about the Iraqis. A skinny kid in the First Infantry Division told me that summer, "Hell, if it makes sense, Hajji don't do it. But he's getting pretty smart now. He's turning those PVC tubes you see all around here into launchers. I'm saying you gotta watch Hajji real close." Hajji, the honorific for older men or men who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a term for the enemy.

"You know what Hajji means right?" I asked him.

"Yeah. We like to call 'em Hajjis."

We were on a First Cavalry base in Sadr City, and the soldier pointed at some Iraqi workers milling around the store. "See those guys over there, they are probably spotting for the mortar teams on their cell phones. Shit, here comes another one." There was the cartoon descending whistle, the mortar hit near the command center. We huddled in the doorway of the aid station while shrapnel cut through the air. The guys laughed when more mortars came screaming down near the aid station from across the river, and they looked at me as if to say, See what we go through, buddy?

During evening prayers, we listened to the imams broadcast bloody sermons, howling that the occupier was an enemy of God. A few weeks later, those same soldiers of the 1-5 Cav would be sent down to Najaf, into the vast necropolis with its million tombs, firing rounds at Mahdi Army positions next to the shrine walls. We were only a few hundred feet apart during the siege, on opposite sides of the lines.

I was sitting by the pool in the warm evening air when Cho brought me a beer. He sat down next to me and said, “I have a good contact in Sadr City. Maybe he’s the best one.”

“Sure. I have contacts there too, Cho.”

“Yes, but this one is different.”

“They are all different.”

“No. This guy is a really powerful guy, I call him Little Saddam, as a joke.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s a journalist but he’s more than a journalist. You can meet him if you want, I will arrange it.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

We drank our beers and I forgot about everything and then walked to the Dulaime hotel, the moldering wreck where second-rate Iraqi drivers waited for customers in its threadbare lobby. When kidnappers freed up most of the fourth floor, a wire report called it the “Eerie Dulaime” suggesting that it was cursed. French TV crews came out to investigate. We loved the place. It was a kingdom of stories and near misses. Because the rates were cheap, stringers and freelance photographers filled its rooms. Hamza Dulaime, the sheikh’s son, would give freelancers a deal if he saw long-term prospects. When I was broke, Hamza waited for the money, “Don’t worry about it,” he said to me.

This generosity, a willingness to discuss matters, is an Arab trait. It saved us. There were four filmmakers, a few writers, a gang of photographers. We left our doors open, friends stopped by with news, resistance contacts dropped by for coffee. In the hotel, we were all spied upon and cajoled, given incredible information. At night, when the resistance was gone and the work was done, we got high and watched images of burning cars on the BBC. We turned the sound off, replaced it with Led Zeppelin.

I took the elevator to the third floor to room twenty-five. It had windows that looked out over Jadriya Street, a pink linoleum dance floor, sharkskin-green furniture, a balcony from which one could possibly escape. From the street-facing windows I watched Apaches hunt for mortar teams down in the palm groves. These men would fire volleys of mortars at the Green Zone and disappear. At six in the morning, the dull thumps of bombs going off under American patrols woke us up.

Fatah al Sheikh

At nine the next morning, I met Cho and we drove to the edge of Sadr City to meet his special contact, Fatah al Sheikh. When we arrived at his office in a small Internet cafe. Fatah, hoarse and barrel-chested, was on the phone arranging something. He talked about how he had just come back from Iran, showing us a photo album of snapshots taken with various officials. Fatah standing in front of an automated printing press. Fatah staring at the camera in front of a fountain. Fatah talking to a mullah. This man promotes himself, I thought. He gets around. Our first meeting lasted half an hour and I learned nothing, but he learned a few things about us. While he was out of the room, his lieutenants asked me what country I was from, the name of the paper I worked for, going over and over the same questions. “Do you have another job besides journalist?” a man named Basim wanted to know. I said no and explained that I was from Ireland. A lie. I didn’t know who they were.

Fatah was interested in talking. When I asked him to give an interview on tape, the sight of the black Panasonic video camera excited him so that he went on for a full hour about his persecution at the hands of Saddam. As he spoke, he spooled out his history in a cheerful way, with no inflection, no pause for thought. Fatah sounded upbeat when he described being tortured by Saddam. Where were the signs of shame and trauma? Nowhere. Fatah seemed to be an intelligent and optimistic man whose phone rang every few minutes. He also made sure we knew that he had access to fighters in the Mahdi Army, not just the political leaders. I let him become my primary contact in Sadr City. I introduced him to colleagues, invited him back to the hotel for lunch.

A few days later, I stopped by the internet cafe to give Fatah a copy of his videotaped interview. Just before I left, possibly to return the favor, Fatah went to his computer and said he had something interesting to show me. Fatah printed out a document that had an official Mahdi Army seal at the top. It was an official mobilization order for the followers of Moqtada al Sadr. It said that the truce would end in twenty-four hours. Fatah gave me a copy and smiled. It was August 4, 2004. I took the document to a reporter at the BBC, who ran with it in their broadcast that evening. By the following day, the truce that had held for a month had collapsed and there were major battles raging in Najaf and Sadr City. The siege had begun.

A week into the Shiite uprising, I was on the way to Fatah's office when I got a telephone call from a friend who said that Cho had been kidnapped in Sadr City. The only person we knew who had enough leverage to get him out was Fatah. When I arrived at the Internet cafe, Cho was already sitting in the back room, badly beaten, his face bleeding and his clothes torn. His attackers had destroyed his Nikons and robbed him of everything else.

"What happened?"

Cho shook his head. "I can't tell you here."

Four attackers had fired at him while he was trapped in his car, then they pulled him out and pistol-whipped him. The men said they were going to kill him. After Cho left the cafe, I stayed because Fatah asked me to talk to him about what had happened. Around seven o'clock, just as it was getting dark, a white station wagon pulled up with the men who attacked Cho. I was not allowed to go to the window when Fatah went out to greet them. Fatah had been the one who arranged the attack.

There are several reasons why he would benefit from that act of violence. He was a brutal and cunning man, who used fear to gather information using secret police methods. I learned later that he was not above outright murder. Fatah's methodology was simple, if he found a weakness and exploited it, then he would lean on the compromised person to provide information about his friends. It was the signature style of a Baath party intelligence agent, a member of the mukhabarat. Blackmail and carefully made threats were his instruments. A day after the attack on Cho, I met Fatah at a restaurant near his office and was interrogated. Precision and thoroughness in the questioning made it seem like a professional job.

"You are from which country? Tell me again."

"Ireland."

Pause.

"I heard that you are an American. Maybe you have dual nationality?"

Pause.

"Who said that?"

"The sheikh said it. He says that I do not know enough about you, that I am spending time with a man who is not truthful, and this was very embarrassing for me."

"Which sheikh?"

"You were acting suspiciously in Najaf and there was an investigation."

"That's ridiculous."

Fatah was angry. "I need to see your passport immediately."

"I don't have it with me."

"No?"

"No. I don't carry it with me because of thieves."

"You can tell me if you are an American, because I am a sophisticated man."

"I am an American."

Fatah smiled, he was genuinely happy. He hated Americans. That was something I knew.

"You must tell me everything."

"That's all there is to tell, Fatah."

"You look sick. Are you afraid of something?"

"No."

"If you are afraid of something, and you run, then I know you are guilty."

Fatah held a cup of water and poured it out in a smear across the table. Dead light came off the surface. "You see? the problem is finished between us. That is how we finish things in Iraq."

It is possible that he had Cho beaten to coerce me into giving him information about our friends and colleagues. This Fatah incident is central to how we got to the Shrine in Najaf during the siege. We went to Najaf because staying in Baghdad seemed like a bad idea. I was running from him.

How did Fatah know so much about us? A few of us at the Dulaime had intelligence files under the previous government. Thorne Anderson, a photojournalist, and a close friend I'd met in Afghanistan, was deported by the mukhabarat, during the early days of the of the invasion. His partner, Kael Alford, also a photojournalist, was one of the few westerners allowed to stay. Government minders and intelligence people had watched both of them closely because Thorne and Kael were also Americans. They had covered Balkan wars, lived in impoverished Eastern European countries, were fans of literature. We listened to the same weird music and lived in the Dulaime hotel. Thorne played Daniel Johnston songs on a ruined guitar by the pool.

After the first session in the restaurant across from the Internet cafe, Fatah took me over to the Habaibna restaurant for the second phase of his interrogation.

"Now, tell me, who is the woman you were talking to at the Hamra pool a few days ago?"

"Which woman?"

"The pretty one, the blonde one." Fatah was talking about Kael.

"I don't know who you mean."

"I know that you know her, she smiled at you. Remember? I saw you."

"I still don't know who you're talking about, Fatah. I'm sorry."

"Her husband, you know him?"

"No. I don't know them."

"Where are they from? Which country? Who do they work for?"

"I don't know who you are talking about, they are not my friends, Fatah."

"I think they are your friends, she smiled at you, the pretty one at the pool. I saw her."

"Maybe she smiled, Fatah, I say hello to everyone."

"You know her but you will not say." Fatah laughs. His lieutenants are watching me.

"That is not the case. I just don't know her."

"If you are afraid you can leave now. But if you are very afraid, then there is certainly some problem, and then I cannot save you."

"I am not afraid."

Fatah smiles, because he knows fear when he sees it.

"Should we eat?" He calls the waiter over.

When I left Sadr City that night, we drove out through a maze of roadblocks formed by lines of burning fuel. Mahdi Army fighters were out pouring gasoline on the ground and setting it ablaze. When the asphalt melted, they dug shallow trenches and filled them with artillery shells. All the bombs were being laid at night. Fighters would wait for a U.S. patrol to drive down the road, then detonate the roadside bomb from a nearby market stall or house. On the way out of Sadr city, I noticed that Mahdi Army checkpoints had appeared at every major street and intersection. We were stopped and questioned by nervous fighters, all of them looking for spies. The Mahdi Army was sowing Sadr City with explosives.

Back at the Dulaime, I spoke to Thorne and Kael about the Fatah interrogation and his involvement in the attack on Cho, as news of the Shiite uprising poured out of the television. Cho, recovering from the pistol-whipping, made plans to leave the country after talking to the South Korean embassy officials. The innocent period in Baghdad was over, and I found that I couldn't easily

write or work. I quickly suspected everyone of spying on us, especially drivers and translators. I stopped talking to Iraqis.

Meanwhile, Najaf was besieged by U.S. forces and the few western reporters who had found a way of getting into the old city didn't stick around. I drifted around the hotel in Baghdad, falling into a deep depression, which lasted nearly two weeks. I felt locked out of Najaf where I had good contacts among the senior leadership of the Mahdi Army. All the time spent in the Shiite holy city seemed wasted, and I'd missed the chance to get inside when the door was still open. I became a prisoner of the Dulaime, paralyzed and bitter.

To the Shrine

After August 5, 2004, U.S. forces closed in on the old city of Najaf, but it was not a lightning attack. Elements of the First Cavalry Division sealed off major roads to the necropolis on the north side of town and began pushing south toward the Shrine of Imam Ali. Marine units moved in from the south and sealed off Medina Street. Apache attack helicopters began launching attacks from the floodplain in the west called the Najaf Sea. At the very start of the siege, residents of Najaf heard loudspeaker announcements telling them to leave the city, which sparked an exodus to the outlying suburbs. Within hours, most of the city was empty except for Mahdi Army soldiers and clerics loyal to Moqtada al Sadr. U.S. forces formed an unbroken ring outside the old city with the Shrine at its center. Young men loyal to Moqtada al Sadr poured into Najaf to reinforce the fighters. They had little equipment except their faith in God.

Most of the press was holed up in a hotel outside the U.S. cordon, too far away to see anything but flashes of light from the pitched battle in the cemetery. We watched BBC broadcasts that were little more than a rehash of what U.S. military commanders were saying. What was happening at the

center of the Mahdi Army movement, inside the universe of the shrine was hidden from view. No information was leaving the old city.

When Shiite Muslims enter the Shrine, they kiss the doorjambs of the great wooden gates to greet Imam Ali, whose spirit they believe resides there. Pilgrims speak to him as if he were alive. The shrine is thought to have healing powers and the old, the sick, the mad take shelter within its grounds. I had been there a number of times. In the spring, a friend named Abu Hussein invited me to the tomb. We walked through the gates across a great expanse of polished marble, which reflected the sun, to a smaller building, covered in gold plates. We took off our shoes and walked inside to an antechamber of green marble, whose walls and vaulted ceilings were tiled with thousands of mirrors. Men prayed, edged closer to the tomb. Imam Ali is entombed behind a silver screen, behind glass, in darkness. Pilgrims circle the tomb, running their hands over the silver, while pausing to kiss it and utter prayers. A twelve-year-old boy who was mentally ill, chanted verses from the Koran while the Pilgrims assented, prayed with him, kissed the tomb every few steps. This place is one of the most revered places on earth. Inside the tomb you feel surrounded by a collective consciousness that is dreaming of the past. Your image is reflected in ten thousand mirrored tiles that adorn the marble interior of the building. A few hundred feet away, more than a million people lie buried.

On August 16, Thorne Anderson knocked on the door of room twenty-five. We were restless and sick of being holed up in the hotel. Thorne closed the door behind him and said, “What do you want to do?”

“I think we should go to Najaf.”

“How are we going to get in, if we get close enough?”

"There's a safe passage letter from Sheikh Ahmed Sheibani I've been showing around."

Thorne thought about it and said he wanted to go. We decided to leave the next morning.

We didn't tell anyone about our plans to try to cross the siege lines. Other friends dropped by and asked what we were going to do but we kept it an absolute secret. Kael Alford was already in Najaf, moving around the front lines near the old city but she was unable to enter because her group was drawing fire. In the morning, we hired a translator named Basim and a driver to take us to Najaf and they were not happy about the trip. Basim said, "Phillip, I really think we should tell Fatah where we're going."

"No fucking way." I said. Fatah had threatened the translator, demanding reports on us.

"I think we are all going to die," Basim said in his strange high-pitched voice.

"Stop panicking, Basim."

We drove through the southern suburbs of Baghdad, past the black smoke plume of the Doura power station. When Basim finally spoke again, he said, "Phillip, Iraq is like a universe without a god. There are no laws, the result is complete chaos."

In Kufa, a few kilometers from Najaf, a fighter motioned with his Kalashnikov for us to get out of the car. A cleric took us to the mosque, gave us water, and invited us to lunch. They treated us well, and we stuck around in a commander's office for the rest of the afternoon, thinking we might be able

to find out about an underground railroad to the shrine, starting at the mosque in Kufa. The commander watched us. We waited in his office for four hours, begged for his help. He said he was sorry, but he couldn't help us. Thorne sat on the floor and made conversation with the commander. We dozed until a fighter came running in to show us a captured American anti-tank weapon. The missile had been fired, but he was proud, he wanted to show us the empty casing. We admired it. Then the fighter showed us his Strela anti-aircraft missile launcher with the missile still in it. He'd come from the old city.

A stream of men arrived with donated food supplies that the commander received graciously and entered into a giant ledger before locking them away. I remember that an old man walked in and told us that he had come from the old city. This was the first break. A few minutes later, an assistant to the Mahdi Army commander of the Kufa mosque offered to take us across the lines. The assistant's name was Talib. He was a thin serious man in his late-thirties, a laborer who had fought against Saddam in the nineties, he seemed honest and straightforward.

Late in the afternoon, as the sun was going down, we took Talib, our Mahdi guide, with us and drove toward Najaf, winding our way through the dust-choked southern suburbs, only stopping when Bradleys were too close or tanks appeared around corners. At the edge of the city, we got out of the car and listened to the deafening explosions coming from town. Pressure waves hit us in the chest. It was impossible to go forward because of the fighting on the routes into the city. Basim and the driver were panicking, and we slowly retraced our route out of town. Talib told us to stay in a hotel in Kufa run by his friends and said we'd try again the next morning. Talib would come for us at seven, when the bombing was less intense. It was like waiting for a break in the weather. "Don't go outside, don't let anyone see you," he said as we unpacked the gear. A few minutes later, Basim and our driver told us

they were driving back to Baghdad without us, “You will die, one hundred percent. If you go in, you won’t come out.”

“Basim, aren’t you a little panicked?” I asked.

“Absolutely not.”

Thorne told him to take it easy, but there was no talking to him. Basim was convinced of his own death.

By eight o’clock that night we were stranded in Kufa without a driver or a translator. We ate a meal of shawarma sandwiches and stayed away from the windows.

On the roof of the Kufa hotel, Thorne put in a satellite call to Mitch Prothero, another journalist at the Dulaime, and told him we were stuck. Mitch said he would send a translator down for us and to expect him in the morning. We expected nothing. At six- thirty, Yassir opened the door of our room and found us after we’d stayed up all night listening to gunfire outside the hotel. Yassir was ready to go.

We took a cab to the edge of Najaf, retracing the route of the previous day. In the dusty suburbs of the city we got out to walk three miles to the shrine. Yassir, calm and steady, walked right next to us. We thought there wouldn’t be much fighting in the early morning but there was a great deal of it. Tympanum sounds. Tearing noises that went beyond mere machinery. It was the sound of a battle between heaven and hell. I tasted copper in my mouth as we walked. Clouds of dust rose over the warren of houses in the old city. We heard fifty-caliber machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and hellfire missiles fired from attack helicopters. We made our way slowly

toward the American lines at Medina Street, following a trickle of old men and women. We walked north, talking to passing Najafis who warned us away from snipers. One middle-aged man offered us water and sanctuary. Men stood outside their houses with their sons listening to the war. A crowd followed us and then disappeared. We continued. Talib told us that if the Iraqi police caught us going into Najaf, they would shoot us. They were worse than the Mahdi Army he said.

At one empty intersection, another man in Bedouin robes said we could cross Medina Street, explaining that he had just crossed the U.S. cordon without any problems. When we arrived at the open boulevard, at a hole between two Bradleys, we held our hands up over our heads in surrender and stepped into the street. It was a weightless feeling.

A block deeper in, the city was ruins. Scorched shards of buildings faced streets filled with burned cars and fallen electrical cables. We had entered a no-man's-land between the two opposing forces. Talib left us when we came across a second Bradley and turned back toward the suburbs. A few minutes later, some Mahdi children replaced him, leading us deeper into the city. We followed the boys through a burned market, which smelled like death, bordered by the ruined Tho al Fikar Hotel. The boys laughed and ran ahead of us, shouting, "Which channel, which channel?"

When the Mahdi boys yelled into the ruins, yells came back from empty windows in the buildings where the fighters were hiding. A head would appear wearing a green band of the Mahdi Army. Fighters waved to us. We waved to them so they wouldn't shoot us. We came upon a small group of Mahdi Army fighters who offered to help us go to the shrine. I told their commander about wanting to speak to Sheikh Ahmed Sheibani, an advisor to Moqtada al Sadr, and they agreed to send someone with us. Past the hotel we arrived at the boundary of the old city, a wide, open boulevard we would

have to cross. When we were halfway to the other side, walking with our hands up, a sniper opened fire on us. Thorne was caught in the middle of the street and had to take cover out in the open, I ran behind a column and listened to the rounds slam into the concrete a few inches away. By the time we were out of the sniper's line of fire, we'd crossed into the old city, inside Mahdi lines. I gave the old letter of safe passage, written by Sheikh Ahmed, to a young man and he told us to come with him. The shrine's dome glowed in the sun, five hundred yards away. Rows of young men covered in ammunition belts, holding rifles and heavy weapons, hid in the shade of the long street. They shouted and called to us as we passed them. Ammunition and rockets were carefully stacked near their feet. We were at the Shrine a few minutes later and, like devoted Shiites, when we crossed the threshold, we touched the great carved wooden doors.

Inside the Walls

The Shrine of Imam Ali is at the center of the old city, a few hundred feet south of the largest cemetery in the world. Its walls, laid out in a perfect square, are a deep red brick and they are at least fifty feet high. The outer walls are plain, but inside the gates, there is a sea of white marble which reflects the sun. The inner walls are covered in blue tiles that evoke the infinite forms of God. In the center of the courtyard, there is the tomb covered in gold tiles. Caretakers continually wash the marble flagstones with water to keep them clean. When we arrived after crossing through the burned no-man's land, the steps of the south-facing gate were smeared with blood from wounded fighters. The caretakers were busy because blood must not spill on the grounds of a mosque. They did not have much time to rest. Young Mahdi fighters running down Rasul Street were being blown to pieces by armored units across Medina Street. Fighters loaded up wounded and dead Mahdi volunteers in wooden carts and ran them up to the south gates to a makeshift infirmary in the mosque. The doctors let us in. We watched

one fighter carry a dead comrade to the infirmary, a severed forearm in a cigarette box, a stump of a leg jutting from his black dishdasha. The fighter, mad with grief, screamed at the doctor to save his friend, but the body was already the color of ashes. I watched the doctor pretend to take a pulse from the corpse to calm the fighter down. There was blood running on the marble floor as the fighters brought in another wounded militiaman who made the victory sign with both hands as they treated him.

Sheikh Ahmed Sheibani, the Mahdi cleric and spokesman, wasn't in when we arrived, so the fighters gave us water and allowed us to wait in the Sheikh's office. We could hear the First Cavalry fighting in the cemetery and there was a fierce battle between armored units, aircraft, and the militiamen hiding in underground tombs. With each passing hour, the Mahdi Army was losing ground, their men facing unbelievable American weapons with no hesitation. Most of the men who went into the cemetery to fight the Americans didn't come back. An Apache gunner named Joe Bruhl told me about the battle and said, "We'd fly over, and I'd punch off a missile at one of their mortar teams, killing all of them. Then I'd see other guys run in and pick up the weapons the first guys dropped and start firing at me. I didn't know whether to call them crazy or tip my hat. I must have killed dozens of them a day."

Bruhl asked me why they did it, although as a devout Christian, he could have easily answered his own question. It was the Mahdi Army's war at the end of the world.

Moqtada al Sadr, the lion, was not anywhere to be found. I looked, watched for bodyguards and other signs that the man was nearby, but there was nothing. We would have known if he was in the Shrine. Moqtada was hidden away somewhere, a kind of secret weapon who would never risk being martyred. After all his promises of sacrifice and bravery, he let the other young men walk into the blades of the killing machine for him.

Dead fighters were carried in a slow circuit around the tomb by their comrades. Wrapped in white martyr bags, the young men carried their friends and chanted, “There is no god, but God.” Because the cemetery was a battleground, the bodies were taken to the Islamic court where they rotted in the basement. These processions happened every few minutes. The cycle was simple: fighters ran down Rasul Street, fought the Americans, were wounded or killed, then were hauled back to the shrine in the blood-stained wooden cart. The same scene repeated over and over again.

We spoke to another cleric, Sayeed Hosam al Husseini, and finally made contact with Sheikh Ahmed Sheibani when he returned from the main conference room. Men were now pouring through the gates of the mosque. As night came on with no pause in the bombing, there were close to two thousand people taking shelter inside the massive walls. Men ate on mats in small clusters according to which group they fought with, while the clerics sat with the commanders of the cells and planned the offensive. After evening prayers when the stars came out, they stretched out to sleep. Thorne slept in the Sheikh’s office, while I found a place on a mat next to a group of fighters. All through the night, rounds passed over the walls making weird zinging sounds.

As the Mahdi forces fell back toward the shrine walls, some of the men taking shelter in the mosque started to crack. There was nowhere to go. Marine snipers picked off men dashing across the street to the gates for shelter. Shards of metal slammed into the minarets while the shockwaves sent a rain of stunned birds down from the eaves. The courtyard of the mosque had become a hurricane’s eye of machines and flying lead.

The fighting slowed down when the militiamen came in for evening prayers. As night fell, the clerics would illuminate the gold dome turning it into a beacon above the dark city. The lights would stay on until the generator ran

out of fuel. During one of these blackouts, on August 18, a thin young man began screaming, making a sound halfway between ecstasy and terror. The lights had just gone out and the young man pointed to one of the archways in the second storey of the western wall. At first we thought that Moqtada was going to address the thousands of men in the shrine from a balcony. Yassir translated for the young man, who told us, “I just saw a vision of the Mahdi. He appeared there!”

“No, it was Imam Ali.” Another said.

The crowd came and collected around the visionary. Dozens of other Mahdi Army fighters claimed to have seen the same image, a flickering saint in an alcove.

“What does it mean when the Mahdi returns?” I asked the fighter.

“It means he will come to deliver us from injustice and destroy our enemies with incredible weapons. America will be finished.”

After some time, the crowd quieted down, but long after that I saw them looking at the balcony for another sign, anything that would have saved them. ■