

An Occurrence at Abu Ghraib Prison

by m.c. merrill

Iman

THERE WAS THE power drill and the rope too, but of the three devices the man in the funny glasses had brought into the room, the screw hook frightened Ehab al-Ta'liq the most—serrated threads grooved deep into the steel of its gleaming shank, a curved head perfect for gripping in a closed fist. Would the man use it to impale, gouge, twist, to gut, maim, blind? The man tested the rope, the man changed the bit of the drill, but Ehab's eyes kept returning to the curved metal of the screw hook, a fear primal evoked.

Not until the man in the funny glasses had spun the drill to life and climbed the chair to drill his first pilot hole did Ehab al-Ta'liq realize the three tools—the drill, the rope, the screw hook—together had singular purpose—but what—but what—but what could it be?

The concrete resisted at first but then went to dust as the drill needled its narrow upward path. "I'll need a wider pilot hole," the man said in English, a bite of the lip and a thin smile crossing his face, as he loosened, quarter turn by quarter turn, the drill's chuck.

Ehab al-Ta'liq retreated to the corner of the room.

He now knew what the man had in mind with these terrible devices.

Having widened the pilot hole, the man in the funny glasses then got a firm grip on the screw hook, mounted the table, and thrust the shank of the screw as deep as he could into the concrete. This was followed by an almost ceremonious turning of the screw hook, the eyes of the man in the funny glasses never leaving Ehab al-Ta'liq.

Not even the call to prayer interrupted the man and his work.

The fear of flesh ripped and torn had brought the taste of blood to the back of Ehab's throat, but after watching the man in the funny glasses struggle to balance atop the table and mount the screw hook for over a half hour now, that fear so primal had been dulled by a strange sense of weariness and frustration.

Just get on with it, Ehab wanted to tell the man...

The problem was that the man in the funny glasses was using a screw hook designed to hold in wooden joists rather than in cinder block.

The man seemed to think that because he had the brute strength to screw the hook into the cinder block, the cinder blocks would have the tensile strength to hold weight born upon the hook.

The man evidently didn't understand masonry.

On his first attempt, the man got concrete in his eyes...yet still he persisted. On his next effort, the man nearly tumbled from the flimsy folding table...yet still he persisted. Thrice at it, the man cranked and twisted so hard he had to shake the numbness from his hand...and each time, the man proceeded with an even greater sense of purpose.

The hook would go into the wall, the rope would be strung over the hook, Ehab's hands would be bound behind his back and...

Ehab al-Ta'liq knew quite well that there was a much simpler way than drilling into the concrete to complete the task to come, but he thought better to keep his silence.

The screw hook buried to its last thread, the man in the funny glasses would proclaim, "How about that for government work!"—a turn of words he must have picked up from the Americans. And as he said this, he would give the hook a firm and confident tug, at which point the shank would invariably rip from the concrete, forcing the man to duck and cover as wet chunks of wall crumbled down around him.

American architects and British contractors knew prisons and had designed this one well, back in the 1960s, but an improper mixing of mortar coupled with decades of leaky plumbing—Ehab al-Ta'liq could hear the clanking of

pipes as showers and toilets ran in rooms above and around him—had bled its secret toll, the bitter waters of the river Babylon eating through the cinder block and mortar, slaking and thinning the walls from the inside out. Shock and fear was beginning to exhaust Ehab's mind.

How had he gotten here? Had he been brought to the basement? Americans, he had heard, interrogated in the basement here. If this were the basement though, why was there a window in this room looking out upon the prison yard, teasing him with the notion of escape? Ehab al-Ta'liq could no longer remember where he had been taken. He thought perhaps...he was somewhere upstairs?

"Hey!" The man in the funny glasses kicked Ehab. "You see that?"

The man in the funny glasses had noticed something beneath the torn concrete now—some sort of electrical mounting made from wood.

The man in the funny glasses grinned and pushed the flimsy little folding table beneath that patch of wall and climbed.

The screw hook went into the wood fast and deep.

Next, came the good, hard pull.

"Indeed, indeed!" The man in the funny glasses cried and then proceeded to place more and more weight upon the hook until he had pulled himself straight off of his feet. Delighted with his success, the man made his body taut, and raised his legs like a circus acrobat, higher and higher until he was hanging nearly upside down. That was the precise moment at which the screw hook ripped loose of the wood, sending the man straight through the particle board of the flimsy folding table and down to the unforgiving hardness of the interrogation-room floor—*like a circus clown*, Ehab al' Taliq thought.

Ehab al-Ta'liq couldn't help but gasp a little giggle upon seeing the man wheezing spread eagle there, those big brown glasses spilt crooked across his nose, a fine crack etched across the left lens.

This would be small recompense as far as justice would go tonight.

Salah

THEIR FIRST MEETING had come two nights earlier under false pretense, and within the hour, Ehab al-Ta'liq found himself arrested, blindfolded, transported, well fed, and inspected by a medic who thoroughly examined his genitalia and by a dental hygienist who thoroughly examined his teeth. He had been fed again, bathed, deloused, dressed in a medical gown, fed again, given a number, photographed, given another shower, fed, stripped of his medical gown by a very large but friendly American named Davis, who offered him chewing gum in exchange for his troubles, and finally deposited in this very room just after evening prayers.

Ehab al-Ta'liq didn't recognize the man in the funny glasses at the beginning of this their second encounter.

Only until the man spoke in that strange dialect did Ehab al-Ta'liq begin to intuit the secret story of his arrest.

"The Americans call me 'the man in the funny glasses,'" the man in the funny glasses told him.

"You aren't wearing glasses," Ehab al-Ta'liq tried as a matter of politeness.

They began their talk, sitting across from each other at that flimsy folding table about an hour before the ordeal with screw hook.

"They will not let me wear my contact lenses when I am on duty." At which point a pair of U.S. Military Issue glasses were revealed. "These were given to me when I came to work for the Americans."

When the man put on the glasses, his eyes bulged double their size, an effect not entirely unlike two robin's eggs being neatly cracked and spilt upon a hot griddle. The man's nose on the other hand, a testament to generations of august breeding, seemed to disappear almost entirely, only its narrow tip bumping up somewhere beneath the bridge. "Yes, they make me appear as Woodsy the Owl," the man said. "If the Americans were clever, they would call me such."

Ehab al-Ta'liq was curious. "You do not wish for these glasses; they force you to wear these glasses; these glasses are of their design: yet they mock *you*?"

"Among themselves, they call them B-C-D's."

"BCD's?" Ehab al-Ta'liq asked.

"Birth Control Devices."

The man in the funny glasses placed the glasses on the table.

"My name is Kazem Khayyám." There was no humor to be found in the man's voice. "You may call me the man in the funny glasses."

"Kazem Khayyám? Then you are Persian?"

"My mother was Persian," the man said.

"My mother was American," Ehab al-Ta'liq replied.

"Whereas I was born in Manitoba, Canada," said the man in the funny glasses. "My father was a Canadian contractor, eh? He left my mother when I was four. We returned to Iran after the Revolution..."

"My father was Lebanese, as was my mother..."

"Yet you claim to be American by birthright, Ehab al-Ta'liq?"

"I carry citizenship papers from both Lebanon and the United States. I was born in the United States as my parents traveled."

"If you are an American citizen, why do you attempt to sabotage American efforts in Iraq?"

"You said the medical supplies would—"

The man interrupted Ehab al-Ta'liq, his voice still soft and even as ever. "I said nothing of medical supplies—you did. Distorting the truth will not help you in this matter, my friend..."

In addition to the drill, the rope, and the screw hook, a Bible sat between the two men.

"You've requested a Bible from the Americans? King James Version?" the man asked Ehab al-Ta'liq. "You are a Christian? An infidel..."

"I am Assyrian."

"Assyrian?" the man said. "So you come to carve out a nation for your people?"

"I only wish to go home."

"To America?" the man asked.

"To my wife and child in Lebanon."

The man in the funny glasses went on to ask Ehab al-Ta'liq about contacts and convoys, about passage across the Syrian border, about how many other insurgents had infiltrated the International Red Cross. As he asked these questions, the man paged casually through the Bible the Americans had given Ehab al-Ta'liq, until finally coming upon a passage that interested him. "The blueness of a wound cleanses away evil: so do stripes, the inward parts of the belly."

"*Proverbs 20:30*," Ehab al-Ta'liq was quick to answer. "A favorite of my father's. You are the reason I am here, Kazem Khayyám!" The hint of indignation in Ehab's voice turned venomous. "You know that I have no answers to the questions you ask! You know I am no terrorist! You know I am no spy! You know I am only here to help!"

The man folded shut the Bible. "Words hurt, my dear friend." The man took hold of the screw hook. "But silence kills."

That was about an hour and a half ago, an hour before prayers.

Presently, the man was spread upon the floor beneath the broken table, stolen of breath, the screw hook still in hand.

The man in the funny glasses came to his feet, still calm as ever, lifted Ehab al-Ta'liq by the throat, and stood him against the wall.

At this point, Ehab al-Ta'liq was convinced the man was going to put the screw hook through his throat.

Instead, the man made Ehab al-Ta'liq climb the folding chair, and in that same steady voice he commanded, "Turn away from the window—put your arms through the bars."

The man in the funny glasses saw the flash of fear in Ehab al-Ta'liq's eyes. "You understand what's coming then?" he said with a roll of his creaking left shoulder. "But how couldn't you? You were a pharmacist in Lebanon, yes? So you *know*. You know what is to come..."

The man in the funny glasses was right. Ehab al-Ta'liq did know about Palestinian hanging. In fact, he had studied the technique for a report he wrote in graduate school, which began something like:

The prevalence of the Strappado, or Palestinian hanging as it is called in many parts of the Middle East, as a means of torture rests, perhaps, in its simplicity. For its successful administration, all that is needed is the binding or ligature of both wrists behind the subject's back and a rearward and/or an upward suspension via cord from a leverage point, this most preferably located above the subject's shoulders or head.

The man in the funny glasses had betrayed his inexperience at torture by wasting so much time trying to mount that screw hook, when the bars of the window or door would have served as that necessary leverage point just as effectively. In fact, as the man in the funny glasses worked that last half hour on mounting the screw hook into the cinder blocks, Ehab al-Ta'liq took careful steps not to glance toward either the cell door or the window for fear

he would betray this secret knowledge—so simple, just hang me from the prison bars.

The fall to the floor must have served, however, as an epiphany of sorts for the man...and so there Ehab al-Ta'liq found himself, twisting and bending his torso to get his arms through the bars of the window, and when that didn't work, raising his arms over his head and behind him, one arm going through the bars at a time, as he prayed a silent prayer that the American Davis who had given him the chewing gum would return and see what was happening.

The man snatched up the rope and turned to find Ehab giving one of the window bars a surreptitious, probing tug. "I told you to turn away from the window," he shouted and came at Ehab, driving the shank of the screw hook against Ehab's balls.

Ehab lied. "I do not understand your request."

"It is very simple—you must first bend forward!" The man forced Ehab's head down. "And then you must stretch your arms backwards as high as you can."

Ehab al-Ta'liq raised his arms behind his back as high as he could, but the bottom of the prison window sat some six and a half feet off the floor, quite high for even a tall man standing atop a folding chair.

"I cannot," Ehab al-Ta'liq said. "I lack the strength."

The man in the funny glasses climbed the chair with Ehab, pinched Ehab's wrists together, and wrenched Ehab's arms upwards to bring them through the bars of the window. "You see how easy that was?" the man said.

"Can't breathe," Ehab al-Ta'liq tried to tell the man.

"Then how are you able to speak?" the man asked.

The man realized at that point he had left the rope lying on the floor.

"Please! Do not allow those arms to slip from that window!" The man stepped off the chair. "Understand—" He wagged the screw hook to drive

home his point. “—if you do not do as I tell you, I will be forced to tell my commander you were trying to escape.”

The pain was like nothing Ehab al-Ta’liq had ever felt—bone twisting against ligament and muscle, his airway slowly closing as fright consumed him.

The man unfurled the rope and climbed back upon the chair with Ehab al-Ta’liq. “Do you understand the reason the Americans allow the use of Palestinian hanging as an interrogation technique, my dear friend?” The man knotted the rope around Ehab’s wrists and then searched Ehab’s pained eyes. “Despite the agony it is causing you right now, it will leave no visible mark. You will suffer, but nobody will ever know...and nobody will ever believe.”

Ehab al-Ta’liq kicked with all his might and knocked the man in the funny glasses off the chair. “Help, somebody, please!” he tried to scream, but the man was quick to silence him with a swift backhand to the chin.

It must be noted that it was not the intent of the man to do permanent harm to Ehab al-Ta’liq at this point, but he had forgotten that he still wielded the screw hook. On impact, its curved grip met Ehab’s jaw, cracking two molars loose from their fillings and sending the jagged pieces swimming to the pool of blood rising in the back of Ehab’s throat. At the same time, as Ehab’s head went sideways, his ear caught the screw’s serrated shank and out from the other side came three white ribbons of exposed cartilage.

“Please,” Ehab wept. “For my wife and my baby! Please, I beg.”

The man dropped the bloody screw hook and just stood there, his face expressionless, and now Ehab al-Ta’liq understood why. The chair was teetering dangerously and about to go out from underneath his feet.

Ehab tried to regain his balance by repositioning his left foot, his big toe searching the curved steel of the seat pan, pressing gently to find the balance point upon which he could place his weight to fold the chair back to the floor and just as the—nope!

The chair folded underneath him and shot sideways. The man dove to catch Ehab, but the air was like quicksand around him. Muscle, ligament, and

nerve twisted and came apart like frayed rope deep inside Ehab's shoulders as all of Ehab's fifty-three and a half kilograms slammed to a stop inches from the floor. The man found himself prostrate at Ehab's dangling feet. The two of them shared a horrified look, but there was nothing more either of them could do. Ehab's shoulders popped loose from their sockets, bone slid past flesh, and Ehab's toes slowly sank to the ground.

Ehab drew in what breath he could in an attempt to scream, but the man was quick to silence him this time with a dirty handkerchief.

This was a difficult situation for the man, indeed.

Blood soaked up through the handkerchief stuffed in al-Ta'liq's mouth and all that remained of one of his ears was three white flaps of gristle. What would the man in the funny glasses do now?

Who would believe him that this was all a terrible accident?

The man had a choice to make—save his enemy or save himself.

The man retrieved Ehab al-Ta'liq's Bible. "Listen closely, my dear friend. You attacked me and attempted to escape. To this I will swear even upon my life!" The man raised the Bible high above his head. "My name is Kazem Khayyám. There is One God and Muhhamad is his Prophet." Upon that proclamation, the man brought the Bible crashing down upon his own uplifted nose, smashing it sideways, breaking it in at least two places. But that was not enough for the man. "The Americans dropped bombs on your wife and child, Ehab al-Ta'liq"—the man worked up the rage once more and sent the Bible smashing into his own right eye—"and *your* son died just as *my* son died! His body! Torn! Until there was Nothing LEFT!!!" A deep, narrow gash spread across the man's brow. "Your wife ran as the first of the bombs struck down, abandoning your child to the flame!" With the palm of his other hand, the man kneaded the flesh of his forehead to open the gash deeper. "The building fell around her, however, and the flames, like sins of the flesh caught up to her, and she was burned, burnt so badly you wouldn't recognize her!" Through the blood, frenzy and delight shone in the man's eyes. "Mossad found her crawling like an animal across the market square, her flesh charred ugly by flame." The man in the funny glasses dropped the Bible and picked up the power drill. "Believe me when I tell you this, Ehab

al-Ta'liq. Believe me when I tell you it did not go well for her. Know that she is already in Hell waiting for you!”

Ehab had gone to Disneyland in California when he was a child and had gotten sick after riding Space Mountain. A princess found him hidden behind a garbage barrel and took him to a nurse's station. There, as they awaited his parents, she gave him 7-Up, sipping from the straw first, so she might gain his trust. When his parents finally came, she offered him a pair of Mickey Mouse ears that she promised would protect him from any other harm, and then she kissed his cheek. Her lips were moist and her breath smelled of peppermint.

She was his first love and by her he measured all other women.

Another ligament in Ehab's shoulder twisted loose from the bone.

“Before your wife died and went to Hell, they did such things to her as I could not tell you, Ehab al-Ta'liq!” The man took the drill in his left hand and pressed the tip of the bit into the soft of his right shoulder. “It was not a good death, Ehab al-Ta'liq!”

The man squeezed and the drill came to life, piercing a quick path until hitting the bone of his own shoulder.

The man laughed a pained scream and forced his shoulder deeper into the slipping, chipping, struggling drill. His body shook violently, and with a jerk of his wrist, the bit of the drill curved an ugly, ragged path out the back of his shoulder blade.

“We have both sinned, Ehab al-Ta'liq...” The man yanked the bit back through his shoulder, let the drill fall to the floor, and then collapsed hard into Ehab's thighs.

This was enough to force the last of the air from Ehab's lungs, enough to pull Ehab's arms long and ragged until all that remained was skin swimming around bone.

“And so we both pay for our sins in blood,” the man whispered, his voice growing distant, the tides rolling away from the shores, Ehab's heartbeat slowing, slowing, slowing and...

Zakat

THOUGH IT WAS compulsory for a year and though his father had been a Lebanese Army intelligence officer trained in the United States, Ehab al-Ta'liq had never served as a soldier himself. Asthmatic under the lightest strain, Ehab al-Ta'liq couldn't pass the physical standards test required of all new recruits. His father had taken Ehab's medical waiver as a failure on Ehab's part, and Ehab took his father's disappointment hard, but vowed someday he would make him proud.

Ehab would get this chance not long after U.S. Forces invaded Iraq. At this time, Ehab al-Ta'liq's pharmacy business in northern Lebanon had been thriving, despite (and perhaps maybe even because of) growing tensions on the southern border and continuing tensions with Syria. His father's disdain coupled with a nagging feeling of somehow profiteering while others suffered led Ehab al-Ta'liq to take a drastic step, one that he knew could mean his life.

When the call for international humanitarian aid went out, against his wife's wishes and at the pain of missing out on much of his son's early development, Ehab volunteered to join the International Red Cross taskforce stationed in Baghdad.

The story of Ehab al-Ta'liq's capture begins with the illegal diversion of humanitarian supplies from orphanages and hospitals to militia groups who were working in collusion with the interim government—the so-called death squads. Ehab al-Ta'liq bore witness to convoys of medical supplies disappearing en-route to their proper destinations, bore witness to suitcases full of American dollars changing hands in shady back alleys, bore witness to children suffering, hungry and sick, because they were of so little value to those who held power.

Still, Ehab al-Ta'liq felt there was nothing he could do.

But then one evening while Ehab al-Ta'liq was enjoying a smoke outside his tent, a young man in a gray business suit approached him and asked for a drink of water. The young man, whose strange dialect he couldn't quite identify, told him of the devastation in a neighborhood just west of their

position. The young man told him how the women and children of this neighborhood needed medical supplies promised months ago.

The young man showed Ehab al-Ta'liq a picture of his infant son and Ehab al-Ta'liq showed the young man a picture of his own wife and child. The young man asked Ehab al-Ta'liq for a smoke to go with his water and the two talked at greater length about the evils of war. Finally, Ehab al-Ta'liq found himself asking, "What if the young men of your neighborhood knew the supply routes and times of our midnight convoys?"

The young man in the gray suit asked for another glass of water and the two spoke at even greater length. Finally, the young man told Ehab al-Ta'liq that it was time for him to return home. The young man asked for a cigarette for the road and Ehab al-Ta'liq was more than happy to give him the rest of his pack.

With that, Ehab al-Ta'liq made his way to bed, satisfied that he had done the dispossessed of Iraq a great service.

Once out of sight, the young man in the gray suit tossed Ehab's pack of cigarettes into a fire barrel, for he was not by nature a smoker, and with the pack discarded, the man continued in the direction he'd come—north toward the Green Zone—putting on a set of United States Military Issue glasses, the kind with thick lenses that made the young man's eyes especially large and even thicker rims that swallowed his august little face.

Sawm

EHAB AL-TA'LIQ HUNG limp from the bars of the prison cell, creating the appearance of a man crucified dead, and though he could still be counted among the living, Ehab al-Ta'liq would not bear witness to those next moments, for he had been knocked into momentary oblivion. But from the blackness he would emerge to new life, the ties that bound him gone loose, the walls of the prison shook open, time and space crumbling around him.

And as he fell into this new world, Ehab al-Ta'liq managed with the greatest effort to open his eyes, and as he did, he found the torture chamber rising up, up, and away from him, one story, two stories, three....

Indeed, it was just as Ehab had prayed those last moments when his shoulders went free from their sockets, when that last breath escaped his lungs. While the walls of the prison looked intact, they were crumbling from within, the mortar gone to sand, slaked cinder stacked and ready to crumble as easily as a baby's building blocks—divine intervention, like when Paul and Silas sang and the very foundations of the prison shook.

The fall was only forty feet, but it seemed to take another lifetime to reach ground, cinder blocks crumbling and falling with him, the bars of the windows spearing past him, going like javelins deep into the rocky soil of the prison yard.

His shoulders hit first, and with a crushing slap, down followed his legs. Three more prison bars spiked into the earth, one near his hip, one between his legs, one just inches from his ear, which made five in all that could have and perhaps should have run him through.

His heart thundered and his mind raced.

He was alive, sprawled naked upon the rocky earth—his lungs on fire with cool desert air, his arms knocked back into his shoulder sockets on impact.

He was alive! In fact, he had never felt more alive!

The man in the funny glasses looked down from the gaping hole where the window had been, a halo of yellow light surrounding him, and he seemed to be shouting something, but no sound came from his mouth...or maybe there was sound, but Ehab al-Ta'liq could not hear. Perhaps all Ehab al-Ta'liq could hear were the sounds rising from deep within his body, sounds he had never heard before, belly-deep breaths howling like wind across water, a reawakening in his arms, blood surging down through his shoulders, down through his biceps and triceps, nerves firing as muscle went ablaze with fresh blood, up through his swelling forearms, and into his shriveled, deadened hands....

Ehab was alive. He could breathe. He could feel. His father would be proud!

It was only when Ehab al-Ta'liq saw the three sentries running across the adjacent outer wall that he understood the shouts he could not hear. As the sentries came, search lamps stole shadow from the pale night, hot, white ovals swinging big as they danced across the cellblock wall.

To be captured, to be tortured, to fall three stories, only to wind up safe and sound within a short sprint of the front gates. What a disservice to divine fate if he were gunned down now! But there was nothing he could do at the moment. It was as if he were in a dream. He commanded his legs to move, his arms to move, but they would not respond.

The spotlights reached him, bright, brighter, until he was blinded by the combined force of the three. And then from the pounding silence of his body coming back to life, he heard the voice of the man in the funny glasses—"Fire at will!"

All three sentries brought their rifles to their shoulders at once, taking slow, careful aim, none ready to take the first shot, and through the blinding light of the search lamps Ehab al-Ta'liq was able to see that one of those sentries was his friend Davis.

"Shoot to kill!" cried the man in the funny glasses, more desperate than commanding this time. "Shoot to kill, I said!"

There was of course reason to take pause—a gaping hole in the third floor of the building, a naked Arab sprawled amid the rubble just below, another

man, so covered in blood he was unrecognizable, shouting at them in a distinctly Canadian accent.

“Why won’t you fire?!” The man shouted in Arabic this time, a slip of language which resulted in the most befuddled of the three sentries—the leader evidently—going for his two-way radio.

“No, no, no, wait,” the man shouted, slipping into Arabic again.

Davis and the other sentry answered by putting the man in the funny glasses directly in their rifle sights.

Confusion—this was the opportunity Ehab al-Ta’liq needed. He moved a finger, a thumb, his strength gaining, and finally he had hold of the prison bar that had struck down right next to his head—and having hold of the prison bar meant leverage, a chance to pull himself onto his belly, a chance to pull himself to his feet.

Seeing that Ehab al-Ta’liq was conscious and moving, the man in the funny glasses went to work as well, struggling with that one uninjured arm to free a slab of cinder block from the crumbled wall.

“Put down the cinder block!” Davis shouted.

“Don’t you see?” the man cried. He had the cinder block between his knees, ready to launch it down at Ehab al-Ta’liq. “The prisoner attempts to escape!”

“Release the cinder block!” Davis ordered again.

Instead, the man rocked back on his heels and let the cinder block fly. This was answered with a warning shot, sent into the heap of rubble at the man’s feet.

The man in the funny glasses scurried back, a confused look on his face, but it was too late, the cinder block was sailing down fast, straight at Ehab al-Ta’liq’s head. Ehab pulled with all his might to bring himself to his feet, but—no good—his body was dead weight, firmly planted to the ground.

“You are crushed,” Ehab’s eyes told him, but what his eyes couldn’t see was the length of that prison bar speared into the earth next to him tilting into his periphery under his own grip.

The cinder block struck solidly down upon the very top of the prison bar and came to a startlingly sudden stop. The prison bar skinned the palm of his hand as it thumped deeper into the earth.

Ehab went dead still, the cinder block balancing up there like a spinning plate atop the end of a juggler’s dancing stick, but only for a moment, for that cinder block began swaying left and right, rocking and rolling, teetering—*must try to*—Ehab forced an open palm against the prison bar and pushed with all his might—the cinder block pitched a lazy roll away from him...and to his never-ending surprise, plopped harmlessly into the dirt at the other side of his head. He was safe, but only for a moment, because the man in the funny glasses was already working to loosen a second cinder block from the wall.

“Do not attempt to drop another cinder block on the detainee!” Davis shouted, but still the man persisted, and so Davis fired, clipping the man in the thigh.

“Cease fire, cease fire!” the one with the radio ordered. “It’s the one on the ground that’s making the escape. The other is ours!”

“Why is he trying to kill him then?” David argued.

“We have our orders!”

(which really meant *ours is not to reason why!*)

The man in the funny glasses limped up to the opening, that second cinder block slung through his uninjured arm now. “Release the cinder block and step back from the opening!”

“He’s one of ours...”

“That doesn’t mean he gets to murder a—”

The sentries were shouting over each other now.

“He is an Arabic translator—we do not have authorization to fire at him—”

Ehab gripped the prison bar with even greater might and will.

“The one on the ground is the prisoner—if he moves we have—”

“Do not drop that—”

“—orders to take him—”

“—cinder block!”

“—down!”

The man in the funny glasses leaned out from the opening and sent the cinder block whistling to the earth. *Jesus, give me strength*, Ehab al-Ta’liq begged and at that moment his nerves fired and his arm went taut, and with the buckling gyrations of a Hangover Pete Push Puppet, he went from spill upon the earth to squarely upon his feet, which was a good thing, for at that same moment the second cinder block scraped past him and smashed into the first.

“Okay, he’s on his feet—take him down!” the one with the radio ordered.

With that, a volley of bullets crashed into the wall around Ehab al-Ta’liq. He ducked, he dodged, he danced...and he heard a dull thump far above.

The sentries stopped firing, and all eyes went up to the yellow light of the smashed wall, and there the man in the funny glasses was rocking awkwardly on one leg, a third cinder block slung over his elbow.

The man’s injured leg was cocked straight out in front of him, as if he were goose stepping, while his upper-body, counterbalanced by the weight of the cinder block, was going into a slow dervish twirl.

When the man’s backside finally came into view, his problem became evident to Ehab and the sentries—his brain and the back half of his skull were very much gone.

Davis lowered his smoking rifle and the one with the radio said to him rather flatly, “Nice going, Layton Davis—you just shot the wrong man. How the hell are you going to explain this one?”

The man in the funny glasses came fully about and tipped forward, his injured goose-stepping leg going down and meeting nothing but the smoky, blue air of the prison yard. The added weight of the cinder block still in his arms did well to speed his three-story descent.

“What about the other one?” the third sentry asked. “He *is* a witness.”

To the outside observer, the scene might have appeared comical—a naked Arab being chased by the glow of prison spotlights, a hail of bullets raining down around him, a siren blaring as more and more bleary-eyed American guards poured out of the surrounding buildings.

The outer walls and fences of the prison were at least three stories high at their lowest point, which meant Ehab al-Ta’liq—naked, barefoot, and unarmed—really had nowhere to run, but run he did and run he would until either the bullets caught up to him or he thought of a better plan.

He had been in Abu Ghraib twice before with the Red Cross, so he had some idea of the general layout. The building that held him was for dangerous or valuable prisoners, but the general population was held in one of two low-security tent cities. If he were to slip into one of these tent cities—the idea tumbled at him—there was a possibility of hiding himself among the general population, but how would he get into one those cities unnoticed? Or—came an idealistic little voice—an American chaplain might offer sanctuary...but where-o-where to find a chaplain amid a hail of bullets and at this time of night? There was always Amnesty International, the Red Cross, and the Red Crescent too—but those were all beyond the gates—as was the international media...which meant he would need to escape!

The ricochet of fresh strafing fire derailed Ehab’s train of thought—but the good news was that he felt stronger than ever, as if the strain of his torture had freed him of his asthma.

So faster and faster he ran—the gravel barely touching his naked feet.

He needed a better plan, he needed miraculous intervention once again, but all he got was a dirty, discarded brown towel slithered in the dirt just ahead.

At least you will not die naked came a motherly voice of conciliation, and so he plucked up that dirty towel and snapped it around his waist.

A bullet bit into the asphalt right at his heel.

Ehab's adrenal surged from desperation, from exhilaration. His feet seemed to float from the ground, faster and faster and faster he ran, but there was no escape, and just when all hope seemed lost, the ground went smooth with pavement, the corner of the building suddenly appeared, and around the corner, into the shadows he went...and as his eyes adjusted, he found himself confronted with three long rows of garbage dumpsters.

Hajj

MANY TIMES OVER the years Ehab's father would have to explain to colleagues that Ehab wasn't frail, just wiry—that was the word he used, *wiry*—and each time his father said that word, Ehab would hear the secret shame in his voice.

There was one game, however, at which Ehab al-Ta'liq excelled—hide-and-seek.

The five inches between the dumpsters and the ground should not have been enough for Ehab al-Ta'liq to fit, but he had a particularly thin head and flexible neck, and with most of the air out of his lungs, he did just that...beneath the second dumpster in the third row...and there Ehab waited...and there Ehab found the spade of a broken entrenching tool (to the layman, a small collapsible shovel) to slowly, silently scrape away bits of asphalt to give him more room...and there, after putting forth the greatest of efforts, despite the stench, despite the cold, despite the lack of space, beneath the rotting grime dripped down from six thousand rotten meals, beneath the fly-infested filth of bedpan droppings, beneath the bloody rags and broken syringes, Ehab al-Ta'liq slept like he had never slept.

The Americans did sift through each and every one of the dumpsters, but by the break of day, they had given up their search.

I'll hide—you seek.

He wasn't fastest.

He wasn't the strongest.

But, indeed, he could hide...and before morning, Ehab al-Ta'liq's name was removed from the official records.

Morning prayers were called and soon after, the detainees sifted through the breakfast line—a process that took hours. All the while, Abu Ghraib clanked and grinded through morning headcounts, medical inspections, security

drills, and somewhere along the way, a garbage truck filtered through the main gates.

The garbage man cursed as he picked up the trash left around the dumpsters from last night's search, and slammed down the dumpster lids for effect as he prepared them for their lift, but it wasn't until the front loader started raising that second dumpster in the third row that Ehab al-Ta'liq finally woke.

The forks of the garbage truck grabbed the dumpster, and like a baby mouse uncovered beneath the warmth of its mother, Ehab al-Ta'liq found himself naked and exposed, dizzy from the blood racing back to his pressed flesh, and so it came that there was only one thing he could do if he were to evade capture, and that was to latch onto the dumpster's front left wheel as if it were his mother's teat.

The wheel spun and twisted and Ehab fumbled to keep his grip, slime mold having dripped down through its carriage and made a happy home for itself in the wheel well.

The second call to prayer was sounded...

The forklift went up a few feet and then dropped back down nearly to the ground and there it idled along with the truck. Ehab let loose of the slimy wheel and crept out from under the dumpster, broken entrenching tool in hand, to find the garbage man climbing from the truck and unrolling a mat to begin his prayers.

Giving away intelligence information, if even for purposes conceived as noble, was likely Ehab al-Ta'liq's greatest sin up to this moment. But what he was about to do was wholly self-centered. He was about to hurt an innocent man to save himself. And so as the garbage man went down to his knees and as his forehead met the ground, Ehab al-Ta'liq thumped him at the base of his skull with the spade of the broken entrenching tool.

The garbage man was stout, but Ehab al-Ta'liq still managed to fit into his coveralls. The garbage man was heavy, but Ehab al-Ta'liq still managed to lift him into the dumpster. The garbage man looked nothing like Ehab al-Ta'liq, but most Americans couldn't tell one brown-skinned Arab from another.

Ehab forced backwards the first of the three gearshifts, and with an echoing thud, the forks slammed the dumpster down. “Wrong way, my dearest friend,” he whispered and then slammed the gearshift forward, and the forks eased the dumpster up, up, up until it swung gently above the hopper. “And now, my dear friend,” he whispered, slowly easing back the second gear, which released the forks, tipping the dumpster and sending the poor garbage man on a gentle ride, along with what was left of yesterday’s three squares, into the hopper.

The guards at the exit gates only gave the garbage man’s identification badge a passing glance and waved Ehab through.

All too easy, so it seemed—but Ehab al-Ta’liq was not about to question strange fate. Two more checkpoints and he was safe upon the Euphrates lowlands, rolling down the expressway toward the Syrian border. With any luck and a change in vehicles along the way, he would be back on the shores of Tripoli by midday tomorrow.

The day passed quickly and the night was glorious, the stars shining especially keen against the darkness of the desert. His arms throbbed, but Ehab was still able to hold steady to the wheel.

He let his mind drift.

His wife was building a small garden on the balcony of their apartment when he left to go help in Iraq. He believed in medicines created in the laboratory. She was fond of medicinal herbs.

They had lost their first child, a daughter, during delivery, so their second child they named Mahmud, which meant praise. He should not have left them. He should not have been haunted by the ghost of his father’s shame. He did so little good in Baghdad.

He looked through his rearview mirror and found the expressway devoid of vehicles. A full moon, made big and red by desert air, was rising behind him instead.

Had his wife and son died as Kazem Khayyám said?

Without them, this would be no miracle—better to die in that cell.

There were no roadblocks here on the desert floor.

There was no need.

The war did not extend this far.

The desert was far too cruel.

He checked the fuel gauge. Half full meant he wouldn't make it to the Syrian border. He would have to change vehicles somehow. He would have to barter for safe passage. He dug around the cubby between the seats and retrieved a half-eaten Snickers candy bar. This he devoured in a single bite.

His body grew slack.

He dug around the seat some more.

A flatbed carrying an American M1 Abrams passed, followed by two Humvee escorts, the turret gunner on the trailing vehicle giving Ehab a friendly wave.

He remembered his two broken molars, the two fillings that had been exposed when the man in the funny glasses had opened up his face with the screw hook, and the nugget and caramel from the candy bar answered by sending an electric shot of pain through his jaw.

Beneath him, he found a cell phone, fully charged. His trembling fingers moved of their own accord across the cell phone keypad, his other hand clenched around the steering wheel, his lips moving in silent prayer.

Six rings later a small child answered.

“Mahmud?” Ehab cried.

“Momma is asleep right now,” the child said. “I can't talk to strangers.”

“Oh, Mahmud, my beautiful, my praise child! Oh, praise God! This is your papa, Mahmud! This is your papa!”

“My papa is away,” the little boy answered.

“I know, I know, but I’m coming home soon, Mahmud!”

A soft voice in the background murmured, “Mahmud, what are you doing? Who is that on the phone?”

“A man—he wants papa.”

The cell phone crackled with static.

“Hello,” she said.

“Mareyah!” He wept for joy at the sound of her voice. “Mareyah!”

“Ehab!” she cried. “Ehab, oh, praise Jesus in heaven! They told me you had been taken! They told me you were dead!”

He felt himself float. The tears no longer stung.

And then...for but an instant, he wondered how he could be holding the cell phone to his ear with one hand, yet at the same time, still keep both hands upon the steering wheel.

“This is strange,” he said.

At the same moment he was pondering this paradox of having three hands, he wondered why he still felt rope binding his wrists, and then he understood...finally, he understood.

This final understanding was what made his arms go soft and the steering wheel go distant. He did not want to accept this fate, but he knew he had no choice. He could no longer hear the crackle of the cell phone. The road in front of him smudged to pinks and whites. The hum of the engine grew soft and gentle. He could no longer taste the chocolate lingering in the back of his mouth—just blood. The moon was gone. The stars were gone. The desert, the sky—all of it was gone.

Suddenly, a growing pressure built in his shoulders and his throat pinched shut.

The elevator stops and he is on the top floor of his condominium building.

Down the long hallway, the farthest door opens and in the white light beyond stands his beautiful wife, Mareyah. His child, his only child, Mahmud, runs to him, a lean and strong little boy, more perfect than a father could ever hope.

Mareyah smiles.

A lock of hair falls from her pink scarf and curls at her cheek.

She is so beautiful.

Mahmud leaps to get into Ehab's arms, but just as Ehab is about to catch the boy, thunder echoes through his body and his arms rock backward with explosive force.

All goes silent—all goes black.

Kazem Khayyám, the Persian with the distinctly Canadian accent, the one who was called by his American counterparts the man in the funny glasses, bends close and listens for a breath but hears none, for there in Abu Ghraib prison on the third floor, room thirty-seven of Cellblock Freedom Ehab al-Ta'liq dangles silently from the bars of the prison window, very much dead.

Salaam