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The Way to Bani Walid

On the way to Bani Walid, a burned-out truck hulked in the middle of the road like the fossil of a tar-pit mastodon. It was a Libyan government ammunition carrier, incinerated by a coalition airstrike. The blackened ground glittered with broken glass, shrapnel and unexploded ordnance.

Marwan skidded the car to a stop at the edge of the debris. He got out and tiptoed toward the wreck, looking for a way we could drive around it without hitting a bomblet or a mine. Ricky eased out of the passenger side with his Nikon. "Watch where you step," he told me. "Don't go off the roadside." Ricky didn't have any more battlefield experience than I did, but he fancied himself an authority on the dangers of reporting in a war zone. He'd taken a military-style survival course back home in England.

We'd been thrown together on this assignment more or less at random, Ricky as the photographer and me as the reporter. Our editors at ConflictWire were guessing that the Libyan revolution had reached its endgame and that they'd better get some stories out of it before it was too late. Ricky and I had already gotten good stuff in Tripoli, about rebel militia factions jockeying for power in the newly liberated capital. We bonded over a bottle of Scotch he'd smuggled in with his body armor.

Now we were making our first trip to the Libyan countryside, to one of the towns still held by fighters loyal to Muammar Gaddafi. Marwan, our driver and interpreter, had been to the rebel lines outside Bani Walid a couple of times before, when he was working for a crew from German television. He said it was safe enough, the biggest danger being friendly fire from the rebels themselves. "Everything is fine, until it is not."

I wasn't sure I wanted to leave the car at all. What would I lose if I stepped on something—a couple of toes, a foot, my legs, my balls? I put my foot out like a man stepping onto a tightrope. I followed Marwan on his walk around the wreck, trying to step in his footprints. Most of the scatter was shards of ammunition, jagged bits of brass and steel, but it was disturbing to see how many artillery shells, mines, and cluster bomblets had survived the blast. "Looks like old stuff," Ricky called out. "Some of it has Soviet markings."

Marwan and I peered into the scorched cranium of the truck's cab. Everything that wasn't metal had been burned away. That must have included the guys who'd been in the cab, the driver and a guard or two, because there was no trace of them. Marwan spotted the remains of a pistol under the springs of the seat, the grips blown away when the magazine exploded. He picked it up and knocked the ashes off against the truck's door.

"Hey!" I lurched back, out of his way. "What are you doing, man? We're not supposed to touch anything."

"What? You afraid it will explode? It is already exploded." Even though he'd lived through a few months of revolution, Marwan wasn't an expert on warfare either. He was a chubby 22-year-old grad student in petrochemical engineering whose university shut down when the fighting began. He'd picked up a job as a fixer for foreign reporters because his English was passable and he had a car, a sun-blistered Kia sedan.

"Just be careful, OK?" Part of me envied Marwan's find. It would make a cool souvenir. Not that reporters are supposed to care about souvenirs, but I was a newbie when it came to both foreign reporting and wars. I liked the idea of having some battle artifact that would attract the curiosity of my friends and serve as a prompt for my war stories. Still, I probably couldn't have gotten a thing like that on a plane back to Baltimore. The bomb-sniffing dogs at the airport would piss themselves with excitement. And even if I could get it past security, Carla would hate it. How could I bring something like that into the house? How would I explain it to the kids? Daddy found a dead guy's gun. It's all burned because the guy was cremated by a missile.

Marwan shrugged and tossed the pistol back into the cab. It kicked up a puff of ash, part of which was probably the previous owner. "You're right," he said. "Maybe it's bad luck." There was no way I could grab the pistol now.

Something else glinted through the ash kicked up by the gun. I brushed it off. It was a medallion the size of a quarter, with a twisted mass of chain fused to one edge. The gold plate had melted, leaving just a fragment of Arabic inscription on one side. "What's this? Can you tell what it says?"

Marwan pushed his glasses up on his nose. "I can't read it all, but it's to ask for God to protect." He tossed it back to me. "Probably it was a bad guy, Gaddafi soldier, so God doesn't protect him."

I waited until Marwan turned away before dropping the thing into my shirt pocket. It felt hypocritical, after I'd fussed about the pistol. Unlike

Marwan, I wasn't worried about bad luck, didn't think it was cursed by the soldier's blazing death, abandoned by God. That only enhanced its value as a war memento. The weight of it against my nipple gave me a covetous thrill.

The faint shadow of tire tracks showed where at least one other vehicle had threaded its way through the wreckage. The tracks swerved in some places to avoid artillery shells that had managed to embed themselves in the pavement without blowing up. It was like a slalom course with lethal penalties for hitting the flags.

A hand grenade, olive-drab and knobby as a toad, lay less than two inches from where the previous vehicle had passed. "Don't like the look of that," Ricky said. "Too close."

"Then we can move it." Marwan picked up a flattened piece of the truck's exhaust pipe, maybe four feet long. He began to creep up on the grenade, as if it might be taken by surprise.

"Don't touch it," I said. Even though I knew nothing about warfare, I was, at thirty-seven, the oldest. Somebody needed to be responsible.

Ricky scratched his beard. "Looks like it's still got the pin in it. Shouldn't go off."

The pipe shook in Marwan's hands as he prodded the thing. After a couple of tries, he managed to shunt it another foot or so away from the tire tracks. He raised the pipe in victory. "Do-it-yourself mine clearing!" Ricky said, and snapped his photo. Heat shimmered off the pavement as we hurried back to Marwan's car, the explosives around us baking in the sun.

As we drove on, Ricky flicked through the pictures he'd taken on the other side of the wreckage. He showed me images of a charred army boot, blown off the road with the rest of the debris. "If you look closely, there's something still in it. Maybe the guy's foot." It would make a chilling detail for my story; the single remaining body part. The photos were good, but I was sorry I hadn't seen the boot with my own eyes. The effect would be more authentic if it came from my own direct observation.

Over glasses of Scotch in Tripoli, Ricky had told me he was taking vacation time from his newspaper to freelance this assignment. He needed dramatic stuff. It was the only way he was ever going to get away from his usual beat in Maidenhead, which seemed to consist of shooting flower shows and dedications of municipal buildings. I was

there because I'd been laid off my job as a reporter for a suburban weekly in Maryland. Luckily—or not—I had a friend who's a producer on ConflictWire. One of their regular freelancers had already been picked for the Libya trip, but he threw his back out, so I got it. It wasn't as if I'd never reported on hard topics. I'd done my share of crime stories, a few murders, car wrecks, and housefires where children died. Reporting like that mostly happens after the fact; the blood already congealed, the ashes cooling. War is different. You're there as the catastrophe unfolds. You're in it.

Over a second Scotch, I confided the real reason I took this job. "Carla says I have dad boobs."

She squeezed my chest one night after we'd gotten the kids to bed. "As long as you're off work, Babe, you might think about hitting the gym. I noticed you're getting a little jiggly up top." She backed off, of course, when she saw how it hurt my feelings. She said it was kind of cute, really, man boobs, dad boobs, but that only made it worse. I went on a diet, and I was already down a couple of pounds by the time I got to Libya.

"It's like saying I'm a girly man." I'd tried to dispel that notion by buying some desert hiking gear from REI, including a sweat-wicking shirt with big front pockets that I hoped would hide my fleshiness.

Ricky belched and raised his glass. "Trial by fire, that's what we both need."

A detachment of rebel fighters guarded the junction where the road forked toward Bani Walid. A gunman waved us off the road next to a stand of thorny trees. About a dozen guys were lazing in the patches of shadow around four Toyota pick-up trucks, all mounted with long-barreled guns in their beds. "Look at that—ZPUs," Ricky said. "Soviet antiaircraft guns." He'd been reading up on the outdated arsenal the Libyans were using to kill each other.

When they found out we were an American and a Brit, the rebels were cordial, offering us looted cigarettes and bottles of Fanta. An older guy who seemed to be in charge said he'd call ahead and see whether he could get us permission to go to the front. It hadn't occurred to us that we might be turned back, especially since we'd just risked explosives to get this far.

In the meantime, the defenders of the checkpoint were happy to pose with their guns and their trucks, so happy that it was nearly impossible for Ricky to get a candid shot. The younger guys looked as if they'd been studying revolutionary chic in some fashion magazine. They crossed their chests with cartridge belts and wore their keffiyehs tied back like Barbary pirates. Marwan, Ricky, and I looked like bulbous-nosed clowns in the mirrors of their sunglasses.

They had other visitors: two guys with the big bellies of prosperous shopkeepers from Tripoli. Sweating in white shirts and pleated slacks, they were taking turns holding an AK-47 and snapping each other's photos in front of the gun trucks. Once Gaddafi and his cronies were on the run, a lot of people wanted to show they were part of the revolution. I didn't see any money change hands, but it was like those concessions in the States, where tourists can dress up as gunslingers or dance-hall girls for sepia-toned photos with an old-timey backdrop.

Ricky was getting all this, from the photogenic rebels to the photo-faking tourists. I began to wonder whether we could use any of it. It all felt staged and manipulated. The interviews I did had the same prefab feeling, as if every would-be fighter had already rehearsed his statement on social media. Bani Walid was about to fall, they said. The rebels were victorious everywhere. Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, was hiding out in Bani Walid, and maybe even the tyrant himself. They'd soon be brought to justice. The rebels' only regret was that they were stuck at this checkpoint, and not in the vanguard that would fight its way into the town. It was hard to tell whether they were mouthing propaganda to keep their own spirits up or because they were under the eyes of their seniors.

I sent Marwan to ask the man in charge when we could go on to the front. The senior rebel didn't have a uniform or insignia, but I'd begun to think of him as "the sergeant." He was talking to the two white-shirted guys. It wasn't clear whether he'd kept his promise to call and ask for permission for us to move on. Ricky hauled out his laptop and began to load his latest photos.

After a few minutes of conversation, Marwan came slumping back to us. "He says we cannot go to Bani Walid today. He says too dangerous now."

"What?" I jumped up. "Can he even do that?"

Marwan looked back over his shoulder and then leaned closer to me. "I think it is those two guys. They don't like it when Ricky took their picture."

"The fat tourists?" Ricky said. "What of it? They just didn't like it that I caught them posing as fighters."

"Not tourists," Marwan said. "Politicals. They are some kind of politicals from Tripoli."

The two men pulled tough-guy faces at us when we walked up to talk to the sergeant. "This is ridiculous," I said. "If you want to have a free country, you've got to let journalists move around freely."

The sergeant shrugged when Marwan translated this. American notions of press freedom meant nothing to him. One of the "politicals" launched into a rant in hard, throaty Arabic. Some of the rebel fighters began to gather around, no longer friendly. They stank of man sweat. "You must have respect," Marwan translated. "He says you must ask permission for photographing. He says you can't go in our country if you are telling lies on us."

There was no way these bozos were going to keep us from getting to the action just because their egos were bruised. I was about to rant back, but Ricky held up the Nikon. "Sorry if I offended," he said. "What do the gentlemen want?"

Marwan asked them, and they grumbled back. "They want you to take out the photos."

Ricky sighed, looked regretfully at his camera, then shrugged. "Very well then, but just the ones of them."

I caught hold of his camera strap. "Come on, Ricky. You don't have to do this. They can't censor you."

"Oh, but they can," he said, pulling away. "And anyway, it's not as important as getting to the front." He made a show of bringing each photo up on the camera screen, giving the men a look, and deleting it. I could see why they wanted the photos erased. They looked like buffoons playing dress-up. The deletions seemed to satisfy them, and they told the sergeant he could let us go on.

By that time, a couple of vans had pulled up to the checkpoint, having maneuvered their way through the explosive litter around the blown-up truck. They were loaded with foreign journalists—a TV crew from Spain and some print reporters, including a guy I knew from

The Economist. He said the latest from Tripoli was that the rebels were going to launch their assault on Bani Walid that afternoon. The sergeant waved them through, and we all convoyed together toward the front.

The terrain went from dry farmland to semidesert, dotted with brush as tough as scouring pads. Fine dust muted all the colors to tones of gray and tan. Rebel gun trucks occasionally came hurtling by in the opposite direction. The sun glare from their windshields flashed white shadows onto my retinas.

As the photographer, Ricky got to sit in front, while I stretched out as well as I could in the back. "Too bad you had to delete those shots," I said. "They were good."

"No problem. I'd already backed them up on my computer, so they're not lost."

Carla says I overthink every situation. I went from fuming at being censored to feeling guilty about deceiving the politicals. Not that we'd be able to use those photos in any story we filed, anyway. Our editors wanted stark war coverage, not quirky side stories.

We caught up with the main rebel column at a roadside stop that included a small store, a set of gas pumps and a cinder-block building that was being used as a field hospital. I counted nine gun trucks and a few passenger cars, maybe sixty fighters in all. A couple of TV crews were already there, taking turns interviewing a young fighter who sat smoking on a mud-brick wall. His forearm was bandaged and cradled in a camouflage-patterned sling. "Sniper," he told us, when it was our turn to ask him. Marwan translated. "He says they are shooting from the police station in town. He was trying to make a mortar on them, but he got shot."

I found a rebel spokesman who told us the fighters were only waiting for word from commanders down the road. I tried to picture what the attack might look like, revisiting images from old war movies: men bellowing as they stumbled forward over shot-riddled ground, bayonets drawn. Or maybe the war trucks would charge like cavalry, fender to fender, into the valley of death. Were we supposed to follow in the Kia? Marwan's windshield already had a crack across the driver's side. I imagined it imploding in our faces.

Marwan went to see if the store had any bottled water. Every now and then, someone would fire a rifle into the air. One guy liked to fire his AK one-handed, rattling off clip after clip into the cloudless sky. No one in authority made any effort to stop him.

One of the young fighters came up to me as I stood by Marwan's car. "*New York Times*?"

"No." I handed him a business card. "We're on the internet. You can check out our website."

He wore a fraying camouflage T-shirt, plastic sandals, and gray track pants with dirt ground into one knee. His weapon looked like an oboe with a pistol grip. "Very good," he said. "I am going to work for IT, as soon as the war is over." His name was Fathi. He insisted he was eighteen, but his faint shadow of a mustache said sixteen at the most.

"No way!" I tried to sound as genial as I could. Here was someone I might build my story around, but I needed to be able to believe him. "Show me your papers, if you're eighteen." He gave a sideways tilt of the head and claimed not to have them on him.

Fathi said he was just out of high school in Tripoli and wanted to study computers "in USA." He seemed hopeful that I might know how to get him the necessary visa and scholarship money. I told him I thought he might have a good chance, coming from the struggle in Libya. It would be a nice touch, a young striver hoping to make his way to America. "Yes," he said, "I am democracy fighter."

Ricky came over with his camera. Fathi brandished the weapon as an invitation to take his photo. Ricky framed him against the desert hillside and clicked a couple of shots. "Grenade launcher, eh?"

"Yeah," I put in, "only it doesn't look too fierce without the grenade." I couldn't resist. "Didn't they give you any ammo?"

Fathi patted the barrel. "Rocket-propelled grenade. RPG. They are giving it to me when we come to Bani Walid."

"Have you ever fired that thing?" I asked.

The kid raised the tube to his shoulder. "It is very easy," he said evasively. "This can kill even a tank." He looked disappointed that Ricky didn't take any more photos, and he seemed eager to reengage our attention. "Do you know what is at Bani Walid?"

"We heard there are a lot of Gaddafi soldiers," I said, "and we heard they know how to fight. You think it'll be dangerous, going in there?"

"Yes. Some will be kill." Fathi pulled the empty weapon across his

chest. "Maybe me too." He flashed an odd expression, the beginning of a smile, countered by a worry crease between his thick eyebrows. It was as if the real possibility of death had momentarily caught up with him. Ricky saw that expression and clicked another photo. It was like a treat for a performing animal. Say something true, or at least interesting, and we'll take your picture. I think Fathi imagined that if he said something really interesting, we might put him on our website and help him get to America. "Do you know what is at Bani Walid also?" he persisted.

"What?" All we'd heard was that it was a farming town and not too prosperous, but that the people were fervent supporters of Gaddafi.

"Colonel is there." Fathi paused, as if waiting for another photo, but Ricky held off. "If I see him, I will kill him with this." He raised the launcher again, but its empty barrel lacked conviction. "But do you know why he is there? It is all Colonel Gaddafi's gold and money in his convoy, so he can run away. Gold in so big pieces"—he mimicked the shape of a gold bar—"so heavy it has to go in trucks."

We'd heard this tale already, in Tripoli. Gaddafi and his sons were reportedly planning to drive across the desert to the safety of a well-bribed sanctuary in Niger. They were said to have billions in cash and gold, ready for one desperate push with the help of their Bedouin allies.

Fathi hoisted the tube to his shoulder and aimed it at the horizon. "If I see this gold truck, I will shoot it." Ricky gazed idly at the screen on the back of his camera, but he didn't offer to take another photo. Fathi looked desperate. He seemed to realize there was no way he was going to be credible without a warhead on his launcher. "I can find the rocket for this—RPG. You will see it." He hurried off toward the trucks at the head of the rebel column.

Marwan came back with a bottle of some sticky lemon drink and a sack of pistachios. We ate, drank, and smoked while we waited for something to happen. Ricky drifted away to talk with a Sky TV producer named Fiona. She looked trim, professional, and overheated in her blue armored vest. She had more experience than we did, having covered the Arab Spring in Cairo. The Sky team was staying at our hotel in Tripoli, and we'd met Fiona in the coffee shop. She was nice and chatty with me, probably because I have dad boobs and am so obviously married that I'm not a potential nuisance to pretty young journalists. She was less encouraging to Ricky, who was single and yearning for an adventurous girlfriend.

Fathi came back with a grenade mounted on his launcher. He twirled around with it, sweeping 360 degrees with the cone-tipped projectile. Ricky and Fiona ducked. I was too startled and too slow to get out of the way. "Jesus, man!" I said. "Don't point it! Get your finger away from the trigger before you kill somebody!" Some nearby rebels looked over and laughed. One of them yelled something at Fathi in Arabic.

Fathi looked embarrassed but defiant. "It is no worry," he said. "It is safety on."

Ricky came over, drawn by Fathi's rapt expression and maybe showing off for Fiona as well. He stalked around the kid in a wide arc, leading him with the Nikon. Fathi turned with him, swiveling the rocket point like the needle of a compass. The boy's eyes were ecstatic; he was a dervish, whirling and weaponized.

We hardly noticed when the first rebel vehicle started up. Fighters shouted at their comrades and gunmen vaulted into the backs of their trucks. They were so chaotically parked that it took some time to form up the column. If the defenders of Bani Walid had chosen that moment to mount a counterattack, they could've wiped us all out. Eventually, the fighters got themselves sorted and the reporters fell into line behind them. We followed the gun trucks in a dusty line, winding through hills that lay like folds in a blanket. All the drivers were tailgating, and every few hundred yards, there'd be an abrupt jolt as everyone slammed on their brakes. I was beginning to feel carsick when the road opened out into a wider valley. The column stopped. We still couldn't see anything over the stony, khaki-colored ridge ahead of us, but Marwan told us that this time, Bani Walid really was on the other side.

The rebel spokesman and an older man moved among the gun trucks, directing some of them into a flat area next to the road. The drivers spread out, stirring up long plumes of dust. They kept their vehicles facing away from the ridge, so the guns in the truck beds had an open field of fire in the direction of the town. Gunners spraddled into the molded metal seats behind their weapons. Other fighters fed belts of ammunition into the magazines. Some of them hesitated, seeming unsure of how to lock the belts in place. No one could actually see the target, but I imagined that there must be scouts or spotters somewhere. The guys who seemed most in charge were muttering into their walkie-talkies. I saw Fathi walking by the edge of the road, his eye pressed to the viewfinder of his RPG, which was pointed at the ridge.

In the reporters' convoy, some of the more experienced drivers began turning their vans around, facing them back in the direction we'd come, in case there was a need for a quick retreat. Ricky told Marwan he should do the same. I stood by the ditch to guide Marwan in the tight quarters among the shifting vehicles. We were in the middle of a three-point turn when the blast erupted.

It came from the road. The force of it pelted us with grit. The noise was more like a slap than a sound. A trail of smoke snaked up the hillside and crashed in a burst of dust and flame. A few seconds of shock, and then somebody from the rebel side opened fire.

Ricky said later that the shooter was that same idiot who'd been firing his gun into the air. No one gave the order. Spooked by the explosion, he just pointed his AK in the direction of the town and blurted another dozen rounds. After that, most of the guys in the gun trucks opened fire too, with a metallic rattle that echoed off the walls of the valley. They fired at random over the ridge.

Marwan bolted from the Kia, leaving it blocking the road. The three of us bellied into the ditch. Ricky at least had the sense to wear his Kevlar helmet. I'd left mine in the back seat. The shooting was all from the rebel side, the repurposed antiaircraft guns spitting flame and pounding like jackhammers. Through the weeds at the edge of the ditch, we could see the light trucks jerking with the recoil of every shot. Acrid gray smoke drifted over the field and rasped at the backs of our throats. The commanders bawled at their men to hold their fire, and the guns gradually went silent. The last few shots sounded like resentment, the anger of men who've been scared and want to even the score.

Marwan sat up, wheezing, and took a deep drag from a red plastic asthma inhaler. I stood up to see what damage there might be. Some fighters were yelling by the road where the first blast hit, but I couldn't see what they were doing.

The earth thudded behind us. The ground rippled, spitting up a line of dust geysers. "Shit!" Ricky raised his camera, as if he might get a shot of enemy bullets zinging over our heads, then thought better of it. "That's live fire! Get down, man!" He grabbed my pant leg and jerked me back down into the ditch. I came down on the gravel, bashing my elbow and both knees. We lay there with our chins in the dust, tasting grit, staring at shriveled weeds, cigarette butts, faded candy wrappers.

Beyond the edge of the ditch, just out of reach, lay my ball point, my notebook, and that medallion from the ammunition truck, all of it sprung from that roomy pocket on my desert shirt. The medallion lay among the roadside trash. Maybe its message was obliterated, God's protection melted out of it, but I felt a desperate need to snatch it back. I squirmed forward and reached for it, just as the gunfire from our side reached a deafening, panicky crescendo. Ricky shouted something I couldn't hear. "Holy fuck!" I yelled. "Holy shit!" This was the war story they'd tell about me. I wasn't going home. Somebody would have to tell Carla.

Ricky grabbed my shirt and yanked me back.

We stayed in the ditch until the gun trucks in the field began to move around, firing and roiling up so much dust and smoke that we couldn't breathe. We scrambled into the Kia and rolled up the windows, as if that might protect us from anything.

After the gunfire died down, I went looking for the spokesman. I was mad, ready to tell his ass off. Fucking amateur hour! Even I could run a war better than this. The spokesman was beside the road where the first explosion hit. He stood with some fighters around the body. One bare foot with dirty toes, the other with a plastic sandal. The camouflage T-shirt bunched up, baring a scrawny teenaged belly with a thin line of dark hair trailing up to the navel. Dark red seeped into the ruts of the road. Where the head should have been, someone had spread a bloody keffiyeh. Some of the guys standing around looked more embarrassed than sad. Maybe they'd teased him for being such a kid. The anger drained out of me. "We have a martyr killed in battle," the spokesman said.

Later, a couple of fighters told Marwan that Fathi had been trying to line up a shot over the ridge when he stumbled and discharged his RPG. It blew his head off.

"He shouldn't have had that fucking thing loaded," Ricky said. He'd taken off his sunglasses and the skin around his eyes was clammy and pale. "We goaded him into it."

"I goaded him," I said, but we looked at each other like accomplices. I'd taunted Fathi about his unloaded weapon. We'd let him know that he needed to stir up some drama if we were going to pay attention, so off he'd marched like a good little democracy fighter, toward the ridge with his rocket bomb on a stick. And the explosion that killed him

triggered the first aimless burst of rebel gunfire, hitting God knows what—or whom—on the other side.

Marwan came up and handed me my pen, my notebook, and last, the medallion, retrieved from the dirt beside the ditch. His glasses were smudged and dusty. I couldn't read his expression.

Another burst of fire hurtled from the far side of the ridge. This time, the spurts of dust hit closer to the gun trucks in the field. "They're adjusting their fire," Ricky said. "They've figured out where we are." The machine-gun rounds were followed by a couple of big explosions that shook the hillside. The rebel spokesman yelled for the reporters to get out, move back down the road. He didn't get any arguments.

We drove back as far as the field hospital and hung out there for a couple of hours, waiting to see if the rebels would try to advance. I started outlining a draft of the story in my notebook, a story with Fathi at the center of it, the kid showing off his weapon in Ricky's photos, the kid dying in a fuck-up that was part of a string of fuck-ups that were more or less guaranteed by the conditions of this little war—one of which was the catalytic presence of a reporter and a photographer whose desire for drama could multiply the possibilities for fucking up and make them immeasurably worse. I kept writing these things and scratching them out, pressing harder and blackening more until the pages were shredded.

Reporters should keep themselves out of the story—one of the first things taught by my school-paper advisor in high school. Good advice to hide behind. Then the story is about an idealistic young man who hopes to prove himself in battle and maybe to win himself a chance to study in the United States. He comes to a tragic end. That same journalism teacher told us not to use the word "tragic" when we only meant "sad," but now the words have become interchangeable and it seems disrespectful to say anything less. It seems disrespectful to a teenage kid to let him believe that a dramatic picture on the internet will make his dreams come true, but maybe everybody thinks that nowadays, from the rebel fashionistas to the fat politicos; the right photo on the right website can make you famous. That's what reporters are for.

Eventually, we got word that the rebels had pulled back and were "holding their positions," a euphemism for "not planning to fuck up

anymore today." The TV trucks headed back to Tripoli, but we stayed. Neither Ricky nor I would say it, but we were waiting for Fathi. I think we imagined we could show him some respect, but his body wasn't brought to the hospital. I suppose there was no need.

It was dusk by the time we left to go back to the city. We'd forgotten that we'd have to make our way back past the blown-up ammunition truck in the dark.

The rebels at the junction had built themselves a campfire. The one man on guard took a glance through the window and waved us on. As far as we could tell, we were the only car on the road.

Even though we thought we knew where the truck was, it loomed out of the dark much faster than we expected. It was only the glitter of broken glass that gave us a warning. The scene looked different, confusing in the beams of Marwan's headlights. Bugs flickered in and out of the funneled light. I opened the car door. "I'll walk ahead and show you where the shells are."

"I'll do it," Ricky said. "I want some night shots anyway." We stepped out onto the dark ground on either side of the car. Each of us took a track, picking our way slowly ahead of the car. Our own shadows in the headlights made it harder to see. I used the flashlight on my cellphone to point out the embedded shells and the little silver-finned bomblets that gleamed like shiny toys. Every few yards, Marwan's tires would crunch over something broken. Ricky and I looked over at each other, too numb to flinch.

When we came even with the cab of the truck, I felt in my shirt pocket for the medallion, the amulet of someone who'd forfeited the protection of God. As if God protected anybody. It wasn't what I needed. What I needed was a true story about the war, about what we did. I ran my thumb over the melted inscription, then threw it back into the dark compartment where its owner had died. It disappeared without a sound.