



The Old Man

By Jim O'Ferrell

Even though we were conducting operations in a high-risk area in the southeastern part of the city, I found myself with the opportunity to relax for a few minutes during today's mission. Moving to a fairly secure spot near a gun truck, I sat back against the front bumper and allowed the stress to flow from my mind and body—to just dump it out—to recharge. We were on high ground near the Tigris River; a concrete walled compound nearby, and the distant horizon framed by city buildings. The breeze was gentle, peaceful, the sun soothing, warm. I could hear fronds from the surrounding tall date palm trees rubbing each other in the air current. Atop a domed Mosque about a click in the distance, Islamic prayer songs played into the sky, the wailing a cappella voice creating a perfect mood for the moment. Random gunshots could be heard somewhere to the north—distant.

I took notice of someone approaching. A young Iraqi man pushed a wheel chair toward me. In the seat was an old man dressed in black robes of thin linen—barefoot. Black clothes and black banners are an Islamic symbol of Martyrdom. I imperceptibly checked my Colt's safety with my thumb. Suicide bombers were becoming more common in our sector, their vests laden with fragmentation grenades hidden under robes. The old man motioned for the boy to push closer to me with a gesture of his right hand. I looked the elder man in the eye, then the boy. I looked for details—wires, irregularities showing through their clothing. Neither appeared to be armed. No one spoke as the boy positioned the old man's wheel chair two feet to my front. I remained casually half sitting on the Humvee bumper, my hand on the carbine's pistol grip.



“Hello, Soldier,” said the old man.

“Marhaba,” I replied, a common greeting in Arabic.

His face was weathered, leathery, with gray stubbled whiskers. Both hands gripped his wheel chair arms; his feet dirty and turned slightly inward on the chair's foot rests. He appeared crippled. Possibly mid-60s, thin, but not underfed. The young man, maybe 20, was fairly well dressed with new black leather shoes and a trim scattered young man's beard. He said nothing. The elder looked at the rank chevron on the front of my IBA vest.

“You are a Sergeant Major?” he asked, his dialect not very thick. He knew English.

“No, Sir. I'm a Sergeant First Class.”

"Ahh..." he paused and looked past me at the activity taking place, "...is something going on here today?" he inquired.

"I don't know, Sir. I'm just taking a break," my non-answer. He nodded silently. The subject was off limits. He reached into a small black leather pouch at his waist—his hand trembling. I followed his motion with my eyes. His arthritic hand withdrew a pack of cigarettes and he presented one to me.

"I saw you over here and wanted to come talk with you," he said.

"That's fine, Sir."

"Smoke with me?" he asked. His tone cordial. I took a cigarette from his fingers.

"Shuk-raan," I said, "thank you." He held his lighter upward and flicked it to a flame. Leaning forward, I lit the end, then settled back to the bumper. He lit himself one and drew the smoke in deeply.

"I have been here for four months. I work at the restaurant up on the corner." He gestured up the street. "I am from Ramadi."

"What brought you here to Baghdad?" I asked.

"My friend owns the restaurant. He let me come here to live and work. My home is gone." His voice trailed off. He looked me in the eyes and leaned slightly forward.

"I gave information to the Americans about the bad guys." His voice quiet, expression saddened. "I worked with your army for a long time."

I said nothing. A long moment of silence followed. I glanced at the boy. He stood obediently behind the wheelchair.

"The bad guys found out about me...they killed my wife...they pushed into my home and killed my wife."

"I'm sorry about your wife, Sir," I said. His eyes were teary as his memory drifted back to her.

"They shot me in my feet," he pointed to his crippled feet, "and right here." He pointed to his left side and shifted his weight slightly in the seat attempting to get more comfortable. "That was four months ago and now I am here."

I didn't know what to say. I felt sad for the old man. He took another drag from his cigarette. He sighed deeply and cleared his throat.

"Thank you!" he said. "Thank you for coming here...for helping us." A tear traced down his cheek.

I removed my Gargoyle sunglasses and looked him in the eye.

"You're welcome, Sir." I answered, man to man. We both looked off in the direction of the prayer song—its melody drifting over the hilltop. After a serene wordless moment I took the last pull from my cigarette and crushed the butt under my boot.

“I have to go, Soldier,” he said, “thank you for smoking with me.”

“Thank you for the cigarette, Sir.” I smiled and he smiled back. He voiced something in Arabic and the boy turned the wheel chair around. I watched them as they headed back up the street...to the restaurant...to the old man's new home.