

# The Darker Side of Dawn

*By Michael Groetsch*

It is 5:00 a.m. and I cautiously walk the streets of Baghdad. A crescent moon looms in the northern sky. In the far distance, a fireball gives off a bright orange glow as muffled explosions penetrate morning's silence. I am horrified to see a hooded body dangling from a steel girder. The pulsating sound of a military helicopter announces its approach. The scene is more surreal than I had imagined.

Although I have been forewarned that insurgents easily conceal themselves within pre-dawn shadows, my mission cannot be delayed. After much government red tape, I arrived in Iraq yesterday. I came here to find my son Gene. He is a United States Marine and has been reported missing in action. My wife and I are distraught. We can no longer sleep. I must find him before it's too late.

In a desperate effort to locate my son, I quickly walk the war-torn streets. A torched and mangled car sits near the entrance of an ancient mosque. I notice a charred corpse resting near the car's twisted metal. Although I have viewed such scenes on the evening news, I am not prepared for what I see. Video clips never fully disclose the reality of war.

Without warning, a group of hooded insurgents bolt from the far side of the temple. They hurl firebombs into a white stone building while shooting automatic weapons into its façade. I quickly fall to the street's mud hardened ground. The insurgents retreat as quickly as they emerged. Within seconds, silence returns and I rush into a building that has been partially reduced to rubble. I conceal myself within its remaining walls. My breathing becomes labored as my heart pounds against my chest. It is too dangerous to travel in darkness. I must wait until sunrise.

As I sit and wait for morning, images of Gene's childhood pass through my mind with lightening speed. My wife and I smile in jubilation as the judge signs his adoption papers when he's three. I see him as a young boy being baptized in St. Benilde's Church. He flinches as the priest pours water across his naked brow. I smile as Gene dances with his first- grade class at his school fair. My family sits and applauds as his high school principal awards him a diploma.

Suddenly, I hear heavy gunfire within yards of where I hide. An explosion shatters a nearby wall. I can no longer wait for daylight. Delaying my search is not an option. If I am to find my son, I must do it now.

I scurry through the pre-dawn darkness. My eyes scan the landscape in hopes that I might find Gene walking the embattled streets. I look to my right and see the silhouette of a man dressed in military fatigues. At first I believe it is Gene. I discover that he is a Marine, but he looks nothing like my son.

It is nearly sunrise. I enter an open courtyard. People dressed in cloaks and scarves mingle with heavily armed American soldiers. I approach a young soldier who appears to be in his teens. His deeply set eyes and distant expression reveal that he has witnessed horrors. I describe Gene and ask if he may have seen him. He shakes his head but tells me that there is a MASH unit near the far side of the rectangular courtyard. He escorts me to the site. A car bomb explodes nearby. We quickly leave the danger of open spaces and use walls to shield us as we rush to our destination.

While the medical unit appears to be just another bombed-out building, it serves as a haven for soldiers injured in combat. As the young soldier and I enter, personnel frantically treat men and women who lie on gurneys. While some appear superficially wounded, others scream in pain. A soldier to my left is missing a leg. Another is missing both arms. Those on the gurneys

appear to be the lucky ones. Scattered near the walls of the makeshift hospital are body bags that contain the remains of soldiers who no longer require assistance.

We approach a nurse who seems to be taking a break from the nightmarish task of treating wounded and dying soldiers. I tell her that I am looking for my son. I explain that he is a United States Marine and was reported missing in action the day before Thanksgiving. I tell her that Gene is our life and that I can't return home until he is found.

With apprehension and empathetic eyes, the nurse directs me to a fresh group of body bags whose contents are new arrivals. She offers to open the bags so that I might view the soldiers inside. The thought of finding Gene this way terrifies me. The thought of never finding Gene terrifies me more.

The nurse seems apologetic as she approaches and opens the body bags. Each is numbered with a date of arrival and gender stenciled across its front. One by one, she unzips and then closes the light green colored bags as I hold my breath and glance inside.

As we approach body bag six, its rigid silhouette seems too familiar. I immediately try to dismiss my instinct as fatigue. I have been without sleep for over 24- hours and know how sleeplessness can weigh on the mind. Before I can address my apprehension, however, the nurse opens the bag and the finality of the moment overwhelms me. It is Gene. He is my third son. My mind's eye again replays the past. I see him being baptized. I watch as he dances at his school fair. I applaud him at his graduation. He is the son I have always protected.

What will I tell my family? What will I tell my wife? What will I tell his friends? I touch Gene's forehead and rub my fingers across his face and lips. It appears as if he is sleeping. He seems to be at peace. What am I going to do? How will we go on? The trauma of seeing my son in a body bag makes me nauseated and weak. I become light-headed and feel faint. The voice of

the nurse, as she tries to comfort me, seems muffled and distant. My legs give out and I fall to the cold stone floor.

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The morning sun peers through the soft white curtains in our bedroom. The sound of someone walking down our staircase awakens me. It is Gene. I am not in Baghdad. He is not dead. As he does each day, he is preparing for work. My cheeks are wet with tears. As I gather my thoughts, I realize that I've been crying in my sleep. I've had a bad dream.

I never share such nightmares with my wife. I don't want to upset her with such dark dreams. In an effort to conceal my distress, I quickly rise from bed and shower. How can I grieve for a son who is safe at home? After all, he is not in Iraq. How can I grieve over something that has not taken place? Perhaps my dream has made me more aware of the possibilities. The rush of water across my head and shoulders does not dismiss my pain. I cry silently before I leave the shower.

As I sit and eat breakfast, I read the newspaper that someone left on the kitchen table. I scan the first section in hopes of being reassured that the war in Iraq is not as horrific as I fear. The headlines and photographs disagree. Bold print lists 2,000 American soldiers dead since the onset of the war. The picture of a young military amputee, no older than Gene, stares grimly from the pages. Another photograph shows a body bag being placed into a military helicopter. Secondary headlines reveal an endless series of suicide bombings, deadly ambushes, and hostages reduced to headless corpses.

Although the sound of my wife telling Gene goodbye before he leaves for work is soothing, the reality of my sleepless night becomes apparent. Thousands of families across America live my nightmare. They are terrified by the fear of loss. They anguish over their inability to protect their sons and daughters from a monster that stalks them. The less fortunate grieve as their children are shipped in body bags and caskets that bear the ultimate markings of war.

I get dressed and kiss my wife before I leave for the office. As I drive away in a light rain, I notice a green military cargo plane flying towards nearby Belle Chasse Air Force Base. I can only wonder its content. I detour briefly so that I may pass my son's job site. His car sits in the driveway. For the moment, I am reassured.