O Saddam!

by Rusty Barnes

Saddam Hussein was a street-side seller of hot nuts near Faneuil Hall. He worked undercover there during the last Gulf War until just after it, as the US slagged the Iraqis. If only they'd known while they video-bombed his underground bunkers and chased his doubles that Saddam spent his mornings selling cashews and pistachios in the Cradle of the Revolution with that magnificent smile. I knew, though, which made me feel not quite superior, but knowledgeable in a way others were not. My place in this hidden history, at least, would be certain. I would be celebrated in no books, but he would be—his porn-pink pistachio fingers fondling obscenely patriotic balloons—celebrated as butcher of Kurds, burner of oil, terrorist-harboring scourge, love of my life.

I was a Historic Boston tour guide, and he and I met clandestinely in the basement showers of the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans. Our throats caught tight in terror, we crawled through the open window and tried not to laugh at the oddness of knowing we were, simply, right now, supposed to be doing just this. Saddam would gently bathe me every other midday, scrubbing me with a Bed Bath and Beyond loofah, bought by me at half price.

I spent my workdays orating lustily for the folks in the back of the crowd, who perspired in the close green shadows of the Public Garden statue memorializing ether. I spoke of things ages past (revolution, Paul Revere, sheep and cows grazing the Common, abolition, and Make Way for Ducklings) and of no concern, while my mind was under the light sprinkle of the showerhead with my one true love, while with one hand I fended off the ass grabs of Drakkar-smelling paunchy men with fanny packs who wanted a vacation delight with the “girl guide,” as most of them called me. I felt badly for those wives, worse for the children, and tired of all their chatter. I made up stories sometimes, how Paul Revere was a closeted

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homosexual, how Peter Faneuil dealt slaves, how the Tea Party was the equivalent of a frat party; I would go off alone with their husbands, just off to the side, maybe behind a sweatshirt-selling vendor, under the pretext of finding Freedom Trail pamphlets, pointing out landmarks. Sometimes I would slip my hand into their shirts and rub their hairy bellies seductively, which was what they wanted, a story to tell the boys back home. I was bored, by them too.

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I took that job for something to do, more or less a hedge should I decide to commit my life to junior proms and football games. It was a grim joke of sorts, that I would spend my time during the summer months catering to smiling and nodding Chinese tourists and their notions of what made America the place to visit. I fit the postcard picture the tourists demanded. The television loved me; the announcers fawned over my blond hair and quiet beauty. I even made the front page of the Boston Globe once. In color, and they had even whitened my teeth. I suspected my behind was smaller too. They had caught me bending over a bed of freesia and some other plant I didn't recognize, showing something to some child. Historic Boston loved people like me, schoolteachers whose tenure depended on community service and an impeccable moral record, the better for forcing that imprimatur on the rich and scornful youth of the Dover-Sherborn School District.

My father had called me a few weeks before summer vacation began, before I met Saddam; I was in the midst of next fall's lesson plans, and he was in the last thrashes of his Sturm-und-Drang marriage to my second stepmom, Rosie. He was a plumber who lived in Exeter, New Hampshire. He belonged to a militia and had given me a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum for my twenty-fifth birthday. It had a 2.1-inch barrel and a concealed hammer, so it wouldn't hang on my clothes or purse when I needed it. I left it in my nightstand next to the Cyclovir, Xanax, Effexor, and MDMA. Also Klonopin. I

wanted no surprises anymore. I wanted always to be prepared.

“It's me, baby. Did you see the Channel Forty-four news?” His voice always took on a somber tone, and I knew his biorhythm was at a low, which meant I might get a visit at any time of the day or night, my poor dad mumbling to himself about the world's woes. I braced myself.

“No, Pop.” The last time he called, I'd had to talk him off the roof, almost literally. Rosie had dumped him drunk on the steps of the Odd Fellows Meeting Hall, and his neighbor, militia captain Mitch Morton, had found him there shivering in his shirtsleeves. Rosie had gone to the casino with her lady friends, she said. Pop had his doubts; I didn't care, though I felt badly for him, and Mitch just puffed his pipe and winked at me before he got into his truck and took off.
I'd had to drive up in the dead of night to keep him calm until Rosie came back. He told me, “Oh, God, Dani. I can't live without that bitch. But I'm through now. By Christ, I swear.” His pledge to leave her was done in by the twenty-six grand she brought back with her.

His voice brought me back. “Another subway assault. You got your little buddy with you?”

“Always. I'm working for the Park Service, Pop.” As I held the phone on my shoulder, I leafed through a grade book, and there at the back was little Jimmy King's paper discussing the causes of the Civil War. I wondered where it had gotten to.

He sighed. “I taught you better than that. It's bad enough that you work for a public school.”

“It's all about the dollar, Pop. I need the extra money.” I also found the love letters Jimmy had been passing to his ladylove, Sapphire. Why had I kept them?

“I can give you a few. You should move up here. Barter them teacher skills. Learn to sew, by God. No more of this Zionist occupation government.” He spent all his money on munitions, on weapons he could pay someone to convert to full auto for the coming apocalypse. He'd gone full gamut since I'd been born, from refusing to pay anyone for anything he couldn't learn to do himself—learning to repair transmissions and raise rabbits for his eventual move to Alaska, and to safely stockpile trinitrotoluene and blasting caps in sealed fifty-five-gallon drums for the inevitable “mud-people takeover,” as he and Mitch referred to it.

“I'm fine, Pop. Really.”

“Okay. Clip me the news, would you? And send it up.” Pop didn't believe anything until he saw it himself. He watched the weather and the news on three different televisions set to different channels and asked me to send him print sources afterward. I'd stopped asking questions. It was more than mistrust for him; it was absolute inability to believe in any wound he had not thrust his own fingers into. The problem now was that the whole carcass had been bled nearly dry, and my father believed he and Mitch were the bandages that would stop the flow.

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Saddam caught my eye the first time I passed by the Red Auerbach statue near Faneuil Hall. He was on his way back to his cart from wherever he'd found a parking spot in the midst of disemboweled downtown Boston, his white apron dark at the front and that dark, curly hair springing forth from under the black beret. That toothy smile and thick mustache. I didn't see how people weren't recognizing him for who he was. I left my tour group in the Disney Store and followed him across the street and up the stairs, where protesters—some of them my rich-kid students, I'm sure, in town on

a lark with their Phish T-shirts and their mothers' Lexuses—lined up with placards and cigarettes and tried to look serious as their mates set up a mic and a PA.

His cart was immaculate, the bottles of water arranged just so, his grill clean, umbrella new. He handed balloons to every child, inflated from the CO2 tank. Pretty girls and women, too. I could not keep my eyes off him, nor could I understand why people didn't see what I saw. Here he was! No wonder he couldn't be found. No wonder all the TV generals looked so serious, no wonder the president seemed so intent. No wonder.

I took to watching him from afar. Police bought packets of almonds, and he nodded at them, always a smile, always something said aside that caused a laugh. I thought about walking up to City Hall, telling someone, anyone, but who would believe such a ridiculous story? When it rained and the tourists went to hide at the aquarium and in restaurants and under the awnings of the awful Duck Tour, failing to notice the sublime irony of the military machine used for tourist profit, I stood, wet and miserable, under the shadow of the massive granite bank on School Street, smoking, even though I wasn't supposed to in uniform, waiting for my shift relief to show up. He came up then and spoke.

“Your beauty is to me like those Nicene barks of yore.” His English almost accentless, but phrased just oddly enough for mystery.

“Excuse me?” I cursed myself. I hadn't prepared for this today. Other days I planned for lovers and chance meetings. Not now. Especially ones who sounded like poets.

“You are beautiful, and I would like for you to coffee with me.” Those bruised eyes, heavy with sorrow and knowledge and beauty. Who could resist? Then my cell phone beeped, and I excused myself and turned away slightly.

“It's near time, Dani,” the voice said.

“Pop?” I said. Saddam thrust his hands into his pockets and stepped away. His chest hair curled from his shirt neck.

“I've got some Cipro if you need it. It's time, Dani, it's past goddamn time.” I could hear the fever pitch in his voice rising. “Come up here. You can bunker down with Rosie and me. We can't let them take this country away from us, this president and his Middle Eastern monkey business. You just know it's oil and the small man getting stomped, by now you must see, honey.”

“God, Pop. Not now. I'm busy.”

“You're working in this downpour?” His interminable weather-channel watching again.

“I'm about to have coffee. With a man.” I smiled at Saddam, whose face brightened. He gestured toward the Starbucks and tilted his head quizzically, and I fell instantly, madly into a completely cliché love.

“Oh. Hope he's a good guy. Have fun. Call me when you get home.”

Instead of going for coffee, I led Saddam down the alley and crawled in through the basement window of the shelter, pulling loose the rusted iron grate and slipping in. I'd seen homeless men do this, late at night as I walked to the subway, and had kept it in mind for just such an occasion, though I didn't think I'd ever find it in the waves of tourists who wanted to know how to get to Quincy Market. The weather was good, the risk was low—who would miss the girl guide for an hour or so?—and as Pop would tell me, the anthrax spores would stay close to the ground.

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Almost every time this is how it went: I would hang my Smokey the Bear hat and my green-and-tan uniform on the broken towel rack and turn the water on. I would be slippery and lathered, staring up out of the shower at the clouded windows and the feet of passers-by and their children's strollers. He would come in and gently uncross my arms from my breasts and scrub me. First my back, my legs, his fingers magical conduits, easing the cramped calves and tensed spine. Then he would turn me around. I kept my head down. Saddam, the raven-haired messenger of Allah, in my mind, touching me. He would scrub my breasts and nipples and throat until I was raw and red, every inch a live nerve waiting for his touch.

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As it—I was never sure what it ought to be called—progressed, my supervisor suspected us and I began to notice jokes, lewd comments from the other tour guides. I walked by Saddam at every opportunity and watched as he doled out bags of steaming cashews and Mylar balloons. He smiled always but rarely looked directly at me, though strangely enough, I felt as if he stared, and was somehow honored by that. He knew about my discomfort in my ankle-high socks and hiking boots, sprung at the instep by walking the concrete and asphalt all day. He knew how my legs trembled after even a half day in the heat, and I would sit down near him on my breaks, and an icy bottle of Poland Springs would appear nearby, a brush against my shoulder, a feathery kiss on the back of my neck when no one was looking.

When we talked, it was about the weather, or poetry. He showed me where Poe had been born, where Robert Lowell's family had lived, which way the Muslim faced to pray and when. He explained it all, all those things troubling me, and the world—Palestine, Israel, gassing the Kurds—and all I could think about was what my father

would say if he could hear these explanations. He would wonder where the US was involved, always looking to put the blame on our government, big government, Zionist occupation government.

I asked Saddam about my friend Butchy, who had driven a tank over there and died, not in combat or from friendly fire like that football player, but ignominiously, of sunstroke, his blood boiling in 120-degree heat. Saddam looked down, twitched his shoulder once, and began to tell me about the clouds of black smoke in formation over the Gulf the first time around, how he had sat there all those years ago in an observation tower watching that money burn away. He had only planned to take over Kuwaiti satellite television stations, he said. He said the world would have seen the true Saddam if he had; the loving, kind, and benevolent Saddam, Allah's chosen. And he cried great, salty tears into his dark mustache. My sad Saddam. And my heart broke—for him, for Butchy, for the president, for all of them foundering through what they thought was right.

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I brought him back to my apartment in Framingham once in late summer, when the heat lay heavily over the turnpike and the fading light left shadows and murmurs even in my car. I remember I had left the car double-parked in front of the Store 24 near the commuter rail. I had chilled champagne the night before, cleaned the fridge out, and set sprays of baby's breath and roses on the divan table. I had pulled all the contents of my bedside drawer out, just in case, trying to decide what to hide, which information would be most damaging. I considered hiding the Cyclovir but bought condoms instead.

When we had walked up the three flights, I held him back with one hand as I opened the door and flipped on the air conditioner. Then I saw my father sitting on the divan, twisting a rose between his

hardened fingers. His eyes were wet, shoulders heaving.

“Hi, baby,” he said with a sniff. Then he saw Saddam and his eyes widened, and I could see myself and Saddam in his eyes, Saddam resplendent in his cashew-smelling apron, his burn-calloused hand holding mine, his other hand on my back. “Good Christ,” my father said.

“Pop.” I stood frozen.

“I am pleased to meet you. Dani has told me so much.” Saddam walked up and held out his hand. Pop just stared at it, then turned to me.

“What have you done?” Pop stared at Saddam, then me, as if he would cry, and then he did, a great bawling, unmanly cry. “Rosie left me.” Pop collapsed in my arms, nearly knocking me over in his grief as I tried to hold him up.

God—or should it be Allah?—bless Saddam, he helped me carry Pop to the couch, cracked the champagne I'd gotten for us, and talked softly to him in that low, rolling, and throaty tone I loved so much, pretended he had not heard my father, or that he didn't know what he meant, or that he didn't know that my father was actually asking him what he had done. I understood, though.
Saddam talked through the evening and the night, and Pop never looked at him, but kept his head buried in his hands. Saddam touched him on the shoulder, walked him around the room occasionally, took him out on the deck for air, made him drink the fragrant Moroccan coffee I kept for special occasions. I could only stare, and add to the conversation once in a while, ask where Rosie had gone (he didn't know) and what he would do next (he didn't know that, either), and soon I stopped. My father and my lover sat in a room with me, getting along, talking through a crisis. Not so unusual, until I thought about who Saddam was and what he meant

to the world, and then I just didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

Around 4:00 am, as I half dozed in the recliner, Pop and Saddam watched water polo and steeplechase and infomercials and the late-breaking news, plumes of smoke and deadness rising into the dry air in my apartment. They seemed so much alike, two men in the late stages of grief and grief-help, at the flash point where the night becomes successful or not, where the grief-stricken finally laugh at the bitterness escaped, and the grief-helpers just laugh in relief. Saddam just nodded gently, almost asleep, when my father excused himself to go to the bathroom, and for some reason he went to my bathroom rather than the guest half bath. Through my bedroom. Where he saw the condoms, the MDMA, the Xanax. The Cyclovir. The gun.
Pop came out with my pistol in his big hand. I breathed once, slowly. Saddam held up his hands, as if in a ward-off gesture.

“Dani.”

I noticed Saddam's smile leaving as he inched toward the door, sliding almost imperceptibly.

“I loaded it for you.”

“Please stop it, Pop.”

“Always keep the gun loaded.” He smiled at me, eyes still tearing a bit. “I know I taught you better than that, than this.” He raised the gun slowly to bear on Saddam, who bolted toward him faster than I'd believed he could, this peanut salesman—cum—dictator whom I loved, I knew now, beyond my former capacity for love, whatever that had been. My father raised the gun to his head, and Saddam jumped at him, and I watched as the two of them struggled, these titanic forces in my life, and Pop hoisted Saddam into the air with

one arm, but he refused to let go his grip. Finally Saddam stepped back, my pistol in his hand. Pop stood there panting, holding his chest.

“For the love of this woman, your daughter, you should not kill yourself. There are better things to die for.” Saddam looked at me, his eyes full of love, and walked out of my apartment, my gun in his hand. Pop began to clutch at himself harder, eyes staring at me in mute appeal, like a puppy's, and I went out to his car for the nitroglycerin tablets he kept in the glove compartment, and Saddam's battered van was already gone.

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Needless to say, Saddam stopped our rendezvous. Like any good man, he kept me alive through my grief and refusal to understand, sent me pistachios in care of the school at the first part of the new year. I could open them, sniff, and imagine him handing me a balloon or scrubbing my sere spirit into life again. Then I would realize I was in Contemporary Political Issues, 11:30, which students would skip to smoke, and so in a near-empty classroom, I would have to bite my lip to keep from crying.

I left him a note pinned to his umbrella, another tacked under the wipers of his battered Ford, and once I left a more desperate note the way women do sometimes, and I sneaked into the shelter, past two homeless men drinking Scope, and waited in the shower, arms crossed over my breasts until the water turned frigid. So waterlogged and red faced, I crawled out to the alley and back to my job of Historical Importance and Rectitude.

Pop or Rosie—no surprise she came back—call me now, almost daily, to see how I'm doing. I see the old news clips occasionally, Saddam firing his rifle with one hand, legions of Iraqis around him, and cry. I watch the news before I sleep, before I take my pills, at every

possible opportunity. I stayed glued to CNN throughout the fruitless search for WMD, the arguments about weapons and body armor and street warfare and death, and then one day I saw him again on the news, not just word of him, but the solid flesh. Pop called my cell when he saw it.

“A spider hole,” he said. “Huh.” I could hear him sucking on a tooth.

“What do you mean by this, Pop?”

“I guess I would thank him if I could.”

“That's great, Pop. Bye.”

I think about that last night I saw him. They cut his hair and beard, gave him clothes, because they had to, not because they wanted to. My father comes to visit me where I live now in Somerville, and we see what we see: the retrospectives, the awful footage. My father sent me the cell phone footage. He thought somehow it would make me feel a sense of closure. I didn't watch it, and didn't watch it, and didn't watch it. I choose to imagine that the poems Saddam wrote in his cell in Iraq under American auspices were for me. I like to imagine that there is no better thing to die for than love.