

their trust, I had shown them that my bonds needed to be retied. The man next to me had simply laughed and instructed me to “forget about it.” After all, where can you go in the desert?

As we began chatting, this short gray-haired man with a close-cropped beard informed me that his brother was the now-deceased *emir*. “I’m sorry about his death,” I said, to which he replied, “Why be sorry? We celebrate his entry into heaven.”

What was reassuring to me was that, as the brother of the former leader, this man appeared to have filled the immediate leadership void in the group. I was especially relieved to learn that his brother had told him of the decision to set us free. We were also told that we had only to have our identities confirmed—*via* a Google search on the internet—and he would keep the promise of the martyred *emir*. In the meantime, we would remain with the *mujahideen*.

Around 2 P.M., we had stopped near a remote desert house. The nearly 30 fighters had assembled around our car and began to conduct a mass prayer. Zeynep and I were instructed to remain in the car. It was as they were engrossed in their prayer that I spotted the two American helicopters coming out of the south—low and fast and headed straight toward our parked convoy. I cried out in alarm. The *mujahideen* were angry at the interruption, until they, too, spotted the approaching threat. Caught out in the open, they were sitting ducks. Nobody could move; they simply watched the helicopters steadily bear down on us.

At about 800 meters, the gunships inexplicably banked away to the east without so much as a reconnaissance overpass of our mysterious group of vehicles in the middle of the desert. “They always fly the same patrol routes,” explained one of the fighters. “They see nothing.”

Shortly after the helicopters had departed, two additional cars joined us, and the *mujahideen* began hastily transferring the huge stockpiles of explosives and rockets into them. “We are making them into suicide bombs,” said Mubashir, the *emir*’s brother, of the cars being loaded and wired. “These men will head back into Tal Afar and use the vehicles to destroy the American armored vehicles.” A total of four *mujahideen* climbed into the suicide cars, and, as they drove back into the battle, their comrades shouted a final encouragement.

We proceeded on through the des-

ert toward the northern outskirts of Mosul. Along the way, we stopped at several farmhouses where the residents eagerly offered the fighters food and water. When we actually entered the Mosul checkpoint, the Iraqi police appeared to take no notice of the dusty column of cars packed with bearded men armed with Kalashnikovs and RPG’s. A gauntlet of young boys lined the route to cheer our convoy and offer water and cigarettes. Instead of entering the city, however, we headed farther north to a deserted house that was still under construction. We were ordered inside the building, and I realized that the other hostage, a driver for UNICEF, had spent the entire three-hour desert transit in the trunk of one of the cars. He emerged from the vehicle, still blindfolded, covered in dust and sweat, and without his shoes. He was in terrible condition, but he made no sound of complaint as they hurried us into the empty house.

All but one of the cars soon departed, leaving only two armed guards with us, so the possibility of escape crossed my mind. It was the hottest part of the day, and the sentries were exhausted. Although it was open ground, the Mosul highway was clearly visible, about two kilometers away. With all the passing traffic, it would be possible to flag down a ride—if I could only survive the run.

Before I could give much thought to such a plan, another car pulled up at our hideout. Four new *mujahideen* strode into our building and immediately began berating the two guards for being lenient with us. The leader of this group was a short, stocky, little man who strutted about with his ski mask on. He wasted no time in making his thoughts known. “The Turkish girl will live. You two will die,” he said, pointing at me and the UNICEF driver. “I will cut off your heads at dusk, and you will be buried there,” pointing to a freshly dug grave-sized ditch about 20 meters from the house.

Zeynep was removed to another room and we were told to prepare ourselves to die. Although forbidden to talk whenever the guard was distracted, the driver and I took the opportunity to encourage each other. “At least we will not die alone,” he said.

Canadian journalist Scott Taylor is the author, most recently, of Spinning on the Axis of Evil: America’s War Against Iraq. Part Two of this piece will appear in the February 2005 issue.

Letter From Texas

by Wayne Allensworth

Everything Dies



It was one of those winter days in Texas that seem as gray as the surface of the moon and about as hospitable. It’s cool outside, so you wear a jacket. Inside, it’s stuffy. I’m wearing a coat and running the fan at the same time. You can’t quite get comfortable when it’s like that. I park near a marker so I can find the car again in the vast parking area, which looks like one of those car lots you see near the interstates, as big as a county, if not a small principality.

I admit to a horror of hospitals. The antiseptic smells mixed with the distinct aromas of disease, decay, urine, and what I’ve heard called “institutional food” is probably enough to depress anybody, but maybe it’s the memories I have of lingering death, of old people hanging on in spite of themselves, long after they can’t recognize you anymore, that did it. And needles give me the creeps.

I wander the long halls until I find the room and slowly poke my head in, checking to see if Pawps is awake. He is. I ask him how he is, which seems stupid, since I know how he is; you have to ask, anyway. He arches his brows and says he’s not bad, considering. He’s in good spirits, though pale and thinner than in my memories of his robust middle age, golden-tinted skin, wavy hair in the breeze on Galveston Bay. They still have the boat.

It passes through my mind that Poppa used to call him “Happy.”

Through a sheer curtain, I hear the labored breathing of another patient. Later, I wonder who the man was and what kind of story he had to tell.

Pawps tells me the doctor will call soon. He’s impatient, uncomfortable. That’s understandable, given the golf-ball-sized tumor in his lung (“They say I got that from in the war, welding in the shipyards,” he tells me) and the fluid that has accumulated there. They’ll draw off the fluid and insert some kind of powder to soak it up as it seeps back into his chest. “They can’t really stop it, you know, just treat it. Maybe I’ll get another year or two, the Good Lord willing.” I just nod at him, telling him I hope He is. “Well,” he says, “it has to end sometime.” Then he

adds, "I don't want to leave Evelyn, you know. This June will be seventy years." At that, she comes in, nearly 90 and as lively and good humored as ever, a woman who went deer hunting every year until the doc told her the recoil of the rifle was bad for an eye he was treating. I can't remember what was wrong with the eye. She was well into her 80's.

A little later, I'm crossing the parking lot, remembering when their dogs died. Pawps had said they didn't want another. Not now.

Everything dies. Did I frown or snarl when I looked out at the congested freeway, remembering the pall of a brownish cloud hanging over this city as I approached it yesterday? The town's so huge and unmanageable now, not unlike a cancerous growth. It's big, crawling with people, some of them still reasonably civilized, some still vaguely American, but dying just the same.

I don't like coming back here.

Two weeks later, I'm at Pawps' bedside again. He doesn't have long now, and he tells me he's ready to go. We sit and talk. He tells me he saw an angel at the foot of his bed a few nights earlier. He tells me about his possessions he wants me to have, which blends into a lament for what used to be. The world has become a strange, even terrifying, place for him. I wonder how lost he must feel in post-America, and think of my great-grandmother, who at first denounced the moon landings as blasphemy, then refused to believe they had really taken place. But I'm not sure I'm any less disoriented than the old people I know.

He's saying something I can't quite understand, so I draw nearer and ask him to repeat it.

"It's our sins," he says. That's what causes our suffering. I nod and stand stiffly by his side.

We brought him home the day before, according to his wishes, and in the room are pictures from decades past, friends, family, and all that has passed before but has never really left us. We recite the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the 23rd Psalm, and he fades off into sleep, looking spare but restful.

Earlier, I had been with my daughter Rachel at the Antique Center of Texas, where my folks have a booth. They're rearranging things, and I help when I can, otherwise staying out of the way. Rachel is dusting.

I wander around the booth, examining the collection. A prayer seat. You

lift the seat up, and underneath there is a pad to kneel on and pray. The chair is marked in ornate cursive "M Terral." Who was he? I imagine him as a prosperous Christian, perhaps in Britain or 19th-century America. Next to the prayer seat is an old-fashioned wooden pie chest from Chick Schreiber's grocery store. That store was still open in the 60's, a butcher's block and wooden floors in a real West End neighborhood. Chick has long been gone. So has the neighborhood. There's an old hand-cranked ice-cream freezer, now polished and gleaming, looking a little like the one we used to use, sweating and fighting the mosquitoes on our front porch, waiting in happy anticipation for the sweet, heavy, creamy stuff. In a corner stands a bookshelf. I leaf through musty volumes with ornate illustrations printed on thick paper, adventures by Robert Louis Stevenson, Howard Pyle, and Anthony Hope. *Treasure Island*, *Robin Hood*, and *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Books to savor, smelling the pages, feeling the texture of the binding, stories you never wanted to end. I examine the mantle clocks, each an example of expert craftsmanship. You still had to be able to tell time, too.

I wander out of the booth, mixing with the groups of people milling about, walking past similar collections, a vast graveyard for America and the broader civilization she once belonged to, the people half-consciously grasping for bits of a thicker, more real reality, not quite understanding what has happened, filling their homes with replicas and symbols of a lost world, sometimes sifting amid the rubble for a longed-for authenticity they can't quite define.

Tear it down, then collect the junk that's left.

I wander outside, a few stray raindrops pelting my cap and denim jacket.

Everything dies. Your dogs, your town, your blood kin, my country. So people isolate themselves, not wanting to step out and put too much into a neighborhood, a village, a city, a family, a craft, a book, or a friendship, because it all dies and won't come back; so live for yourself and don't suffer. That seems to be the unconscious theory, at any rate. But I know that's a deception, that even if this all does pass away forever—and it will—it will have been worth the trip. A friendship is worth the grief that comes with the passing of the friend, and love of place is worth the price of a patriot's suffering at its decline. There are no substitutes for



a real life lived fully, no replicas of home worth having, no fleeting encounter that can pass for love, no virtual reality.

Rachel is looking for me. She grins and says, "Look what Grandma gave me!" It's a tiny, ornate, silver fork and matching spoon. She asks me if I will keep them for her. I fold them up in a napkin, put them in my pocket, and tell Rachel with the big brown eyes, "You won't want to lose these, Honey. You'll never want to lose them."

Wayne Allensworth writes from Keller, Texas.

Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

Stakhanovism in Reverse



Last April, Claude Imbert, editor in chief of the moderately conservative weekly *Le Point*, dared to make an astonishing *mea culpa*. In a minor masterpiece of melancholic irony, he confessed the awful truth that he was a "liberal"—which, in present-day French parlance, means someone who believes in free enterprise as a necessary antidote to socialistic regimentation. Alas, he admitted,

in France liberals are not popular. Here a moderate liberal is called an ultraliberal and stinks of heresy. The Left, wearing its heart on its sleeve, consigns us to the camp of the heartless. Its intellectual phalanx denounces us as lackeys of the MEDEF [the French equiva-