

### Flashback Three

*Our plane had landed at the Baghdad International Airport. The temperature outside was oppressively hot. One by one, we passengers entered the immigration area and noticed its lack of air-conditioning. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I took out my U.S. passport, turned to the page with my Iraqi visa, and got in line. As I approached the desk, I handed my passport to the Iraqi immigration official. He took my documentation, looked at me, looked down at my passport, and something changed in his face. Instead of gesturing for me to pass like he did with other passengers, he said something in Arabic that I did not understand. When I pleaded, "Excuse me, sir, I don't speak Arabic—" He pointed at me and shouted, "You! Out!" Alarmed, I did not know what to do. When I turned my head, two Iraqi officers were coming my way. Within seconds they escorted me out of the line and down toward a dark hall.*

## Ultimate Rejection

“Case dismissed!” the judge exclaimed as he slammed down his gavel.

My client was ecstatic. He had been charged with assault. He was a macho young man with tattoos on both arms. The prosecutor had pictures of the victim, my client’s girlfriend, bleeding heavily from her nose right down to her white blouse.

But we were lucky that day. The prosecutor, a smart smug redhead, had made only a partial disclosure of the police report. My client had the right to the entire copy, which we had asked for several times to no avail. Finally, at this hearing, the no-nonsense judge, who did not like his time wasted, dismissed the case.

Exiting the courthouse that morning and saying good-bye to my client, I felt the pang of something missing hit me again. It had been hitting me on and off for years.

After Kosovo, I had returned to southern California and entered law school. When that was completed, I became a prosecutor and then eventually a civil litigator and criminal defense attorney. Representing clients who had been accused of committing some really heinous crimes, I tried to see the better side of things. I tried to be convinced that I was *helping* the people in my community.

But it wasn’t enough.

I missed working abroad. I missed the excitement of going into a new place, a new culture, and helping to rebuild people’s lives.

By May 2010 I had already moved back to Arlington, Virginia. Looking for a job in overseas development, I saw an ad for a teaching position in Baghdad, Iraq. I could do that, I said to myself.

Saddam Hussein had been tried, convicted, and executed a few years earlier. His reign was no more. There was chaos in Iraq as American and other international entities struggled with the aftermath of war. Each day countless foreign contractors ran around inside Baghdad's International Zone (IZ), also known as the Green Zone, and beyond, implementing various peace-building, reconstruction, and stabilization programs. Little did I know what I was getting into.

Looking closer at the ad, I was amused to find that the address of this potential employer was only two blocks from my apartment. Instead of the usual approach of emailing my resume, I just picked up the phone.

Once the employer was on, I told him who I was and why I was qualified for the job. I also added that I lived two blocks away and would be happy to walk over in person to meet him should he have time. He had time. We met and I got the job.

I was now working for a small company that contracted with the U.S. government to implement programs abroad.

Within days I attended a pre-deployment orientation at the company's office. Here I met the other two employees who were hired for the same program. The three of us, Cathy Seimsen, Alicia Stans, and I, made up the team going to Baghdad. Cathy was a young African American graduate student from Pennsylvania. Though she had long dreadlocks that seemed to weigh down her face, she was lively and energetic. She told us that she had recently returned from the Caribbean where she had gathered data for her dissertation. Alicia, by contrast, was a middle-aged school teacher from Colorado. Though her appearance was neat—her hair dyed brown to hide the gray—and she was well-spoken, there was an artificiality about her manner that cautioned me not to take her words at face value. She smiled at Cathy and me, revealing that this would be her fourth contract in Iraq, having previously been there on other U.S. government-funded programs.

Within minutes of sitting down in the orientation room, I was surprised by a nudge on my arm.

"Do you have a pen and a piece of paper?" Alicia whispered at me. "I didn't bring anything."

I looked at her. Prior to this meeting, all three of us were told to come prepared for a long orientation that would include a number of important details. While I had pen and paper and shared them with her,

I was aghast at how someone could purport to be a professional, ready to go to a war zone, but attend a vital meeting unprepared.

First impressions were hard to erase.

For the next several hours, we were informed of the details to our program. The three of us were to teach business English for three months to Iraqi government employees from the prime minister's office. We were told that these Iraqis spoke the language but needed to brush up on their speaking and writing skills due to frequent contact with the international community.

A few days later we departed Washington, D.C., for Baghdad. It was June 2010. After thirteen hours of sitting on an airplane, we landed in Amman, Jordan, our transit point where we would spend one night. As our taxi drove down a multilane highway to our hotel, I rolled down the window. The red-colored desert, the locals wearing long tunics while walking their camels, and the bluish-colored mountains in the distance all fascinated me. Even the smell in the air was right. It was a pleasant mixture of earth, flowers, and life. I had a good feeling about Amman. It was a place where I could see myself living.

Early the next morning, with our luggage in tow, we headed for Baghdad. The flight to Iraq was only ninety minutes. Soon after a light breakfast on the plane, the pilot announced we were descending into Baghdad International Airport. My adrenaline was pumping.

I looked out the window. In sharp contrast to Prishtina's cold and gray appearance, I saw sunlight, dirt, and dust. It seemed like I was looking into unending stretches of desert. When the plane finally landed and I disembarked, the heat was even more intense than that which I had experienced in Malawi.

Things seemed uneventful as we bumped along in an old beat-up shuttle to a dilapidated airport building. The tarmac had potholes everywhere. Many of the passengers were fanning themselves as there was no air-conditioning inside the shuttle. A few people pulled out their cell phones and made calls in Arabic.

When we entered the airport building, the immigration area was filled with a group of women from Iran. They were covered from head to toe in black. All I could see of them were their eyes. Just looking at them made me sweat.

“It’s hot in here,” I mumbled to Alicia, wiping the sweat off my brow.

It must have been over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the room. I was uncomfortably warm wearing just a t-shirt and slacks. With no fans and no air-conditioning, I could only imagine the perspiration and suffocation these women were enduring.

As I got into the long immigration line, Cathy and Alicia were right behind me. American military and civilians, Europeans, Japanese, South-east Asians, and, of course, Iraqis all stood in it too. Things appeared to be going smoothly.

Then I got up to the immigration desk.

The officer who took my U.S. passport was a serious, unsmiling man who had the classic Iraqi features I saw on CNN: tanned skin, dark eyes, and dark hair, the same coloring as Saddam Hussein.

Then suddenly, without warning, he mumbled something in Arabic. When I inquired further, he shouted.

“You! Out!” he said loudly, pointing at me.

I was aghast.

What did he mean by “out”? There must be some mistake!

I pointed to the Iraqi visa in my passport and told him I was part of an English teaching program. But he shook his head, hollered for his fellow airport officials, and within seconds they were heading my way.

In a flash I was unceremoniously escorted out of the line and into another direction, away from the other passengers. The officials looked very intimidating in their grayish-green uniforms and dark boots, almost like policemen who were here to round me up. With trembling hands, I showed them my Iraqi visa again. They shook their heads. We were heading down a dark, dusty hall. What was this?

“Wait! Wait! Where are we going?” I asked in alarm.

One of the officials yelled at me in Arabic. I had no idea what he was saying. Anxiously, I turned my head and looked behind. Cathy, Alicia, and two male passengers had been rejected too. I saw Cathy desperately trying to explain something to one of the officials who shouted back in Arabic. All four had alarmed looks. They were being escorted down my direction.

I began to grab at any foreigner who passed me. I knew I needed to make a phone call without delay. A Briton passed me and I hung on

to his arm. Quickly, I told him it was an emergency and he handed me his cell phone. With the Iraqi officials frowning, I made a call to our employer in Washington, D.C. There was no answer. Time difference was another enemy.

“Go! Go!” one official barked, forcing me down a hall.

Before I knew it, we were in the baggage area. Under tight supervision, the officials ordered us to retrieve our luggage. We were then shoed down another hall, then up a dusty flight of stairs in a roundabout way to the departure lounge. Our e-tickets were taken from us and ripped up. We were unnerved.

There were no payphones or foreigners around. After what seemed like an hour of standing and waiting desperately for the unknown, we were ushered through security and to a departure gate. Soon I realized we were going to board the same plane on which we had arrived two hours earlier.

As we boarded the same beat-up bus from the gate to the plane, I pulled at another man’s arm. He allowed me to use his cell phone. I quickly called the security officers who were supposed to pick us up at this airport, who told me they helplessly watched behind a glass wall as we were escorted away from the baggage area. Sadly, we were inaccessible to them. The phone call had so much static that the security officer at the other end, who sounded American, was screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Tell the Iraqis to let you—in!” he yelled.

“We’ve already told them!” I shouted desperately. “They’ve rejected us! They’re throwing us out!”

“What?” the security officer shouted back. “I—I can barely hear you!”

Being an experienced traveler, I had more phone numbers on me. The next call I made was to the duty officer at the U.S. Embassy in Amman since it was quite clear that we were going back to Jordan. I called and told the officer, an American woman, what had happened and that we needed assistance although, still shaken, I wasn’t able to articulate what kind.

“When you arrive in Amman get yourself to an ATM and then call your employer,” she said, sounding annoyed, as though I was bothering her on a Saturday morning.

“Can’t you do anything?” I asked desperately. “The three of us are Americans citizens and we need help getting into Iraq. We’re here to teach English.”

“No, I can’t,” she said unsympathetically.

And with a don’t-bother-me tone, she hung up.

I looked at Cathy and Alicia. It was apparent they had caught on to my conversations. The three of us were visibly shaken.

With phone calls eliciting no relief we, the rejects, climbed the steps back onto the Royal Jordanian plane. The minute we entered, the stewardess recognized us and gasped. I nodded my head in gloom. I asked her if this denial of entry was common. She said it happened sometimes.

“I’m sorry,” she said, handing me a glass of water.

I sipped it and closed my eyes. I had no idea what was going to happen to us. Of all the dangerous places I had ever been to, I had never been this afraid. I wondered what would happen once we reached Amman. Would there be more trouble at the airport? Had the Iraqis communicated something negative to the Jordanians about us? *Who* could help us?

During the flight, Alicia, Cathy, and I tried to form a plan. It was obvious we needed to reach our employer and find a place to stay. But for how long? Would we try to reenter Baghdad? Our first day of class was fast approaching. What if we did not enter Iraq on time?

As these anxious thoughts flashed through my mind, we landed in Amman. When we came before the Jordanian immigration officials, we could not help but relate what happened. We were shaken up and could not stop talking about it.

“*You* are welcomed in *my* country,” an official said, looking at me sympathetically as he stamped my passport and let me pass.

I was never more grateful to hear those words.

When the three of us entered the arrival area, there was a man holding a sign, “Mr. Jade Wu.” I whispered to Alicia and Cathy that this must be for us. We approached him and he said that he was here to drive us back to the Holiday Inn Amman, the hotel we had stayed at earlier. Either our employer had gotten my phone message or the helpless security officers waiting to pick us up in Baghdad had been in contact with him.

An hour later, upon entering my room, I collapsed into bed. I could not believe what had just occurred that morning. *I was rejected by a sovereign nation.* Wasn't I there to *help* Iraq? Why did *it* not want me?

I had never known such rejection before. Even repudiation by a previous boyfriend did not come close.

That evening, after a long three-way conference call with our employer in D.C. and his office in Baghdad, we received new Iraqi visas and roundtrip plane tickets. We were to fly back to Baghdad early the next morning—as if nothing happened.

Early the next morning, we flew back to Baghdad International Airport. The sight was familiar, but the feeling was different. Instead of excitement, we were tense. When we entered the immigration area, we were all on edge. As I turned my head I saw the same Iraqi official who had rejected us the previous day. He was sitting by the door in his grayish-green uniform and dark boots, watching as the passengers walked pass. When he saw the three of us, he signaled for us to approach him. There was no smile. I did not know what was happening, but it was clear this was not standard procedure.

“Come here,” he commanded, leading the way.

We were led to a desk off to the side. After waiting for some time, we were told to present our new Iraqi visas. Upon showing them, we were told these were no good. There was some mumbling between the immigration officers in Arabic that we did not understand. Our U.S. passports were then taken and we were unceremoniously led again to the baggage area.

My mind was whirling a thousand miles per minute. We were in a worse situation than we were in yesterday. Our passports had been taken. Seeing the security detail waiting to pick us up behind the secure glass wall again, I felt completely helpless and frustrated. They were inaccessible. They could see us, but they could not do anything. As I grabbed my luggage, I wanted to scream! We were denied entry *again!* Our passports were taken!

But they could not hear us.

This time, as we boarded our Royal Jordanian deportation flight back to Amman, we were escorted by four Iraqi men. We were not told what



their roles were, but one of them must have had our passports because we would not have been allowed to board without documentation.

All three of us were immensely ill at ease throughout the flight. Alicia, especially, was visibly shaking.

“No, no, not again,” she mumbled, shaking her head.

Leaning forward with her head faced down on her lap, she looked like she was going to have a meltdown. I asked her if anything like this had happened on her previous flights into Iraq. She shook her head. I began to weigh my options. I wondered how much it was going to cost to get out of this mess, if we would be able to exit the Amman airport with minimal hassle, and if our teaching jobs would ever come to fruition. As these dark thoughts passed through my mind, I could hear my colleagues talking loudly and nervously. I gestured at them to lower their voices. I didn't want them to say anything that pointed to fault or responsibility. We did not know who was listening and what would be done with our statements.

Arriving in Amman *again*, we were emotionally and physically exhausted. But at this airport a new surprise awaited me. The previous day, when we were rejected by Iraq, the cost of our return flights to Amman was simply taken out from our original roundtrip e-tickets. That was why our employer had to buy another set of roundtrip tickets for us to fly back to Iraq.

This time, prior to reaching the immigration counter, we were led to the Royal Jordanian Airline desk. A balding clerk, speaking limited English, checked all three of our new e-tickets, making sure this return flight from Baghdad to Amman was properly accounted for. Alicia and Cathy were handed back their U.S. passports, which apparently the Iraqis had given to Royal Jordanian. Then he looked at me. Something appeared wrong with my e-ticket.

“You owe \$509.00 dollars, please,” the clerk said matter-of-factly.

I was aghast.

“This is my e-ticket number and here is the confirmation code. You can take this return flight out of my round trip,” I said desperately pointing at the numbers.

The clerk shook his head.

For some reason, he either did not know how to read my e-ticket or the numbers were confused. I had to be escorted to a nearby bookshop

inside the airport to buy a phone card so that I could call my employer to sort this out.

I was so anxious over the string of events I felt faint. Not only was my job not being realized but I was about to be out five hundred plus dollars! This was ridiculous.

Wasn't I here to *help* Iraq?

For the next hour, due to phone static and time difference, I tried to call my employer in D.C., his office in Baghdad, and the ticket agent in the U.S. who issued this e-ticket. The only one who picked up was the ticket agent. I told her what had happened and she read me my e-ticket number. I jotted this down and handed it to the Royal Jordanian clerk. He verified it and finally handed me my passport.

I almost collapsed.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I glanced at my e-ticket again when we were waiting for our luggage. The ticket number this agent gave me was exactly the same number on the ticket itself, the one I handed to the clerk originally.

Had there really been something wrong with my ticket or was the clerk in need of new glasses?

Back at the Holiday Inn Amman, the three of us felt ill. Fortunately, our employer had again booked us rooms and we collapsed into our beds. Psychologically shaken and emotionally exhausted, I fell asleep that afternoon and did not wake up until 9:00 a.m. the next day. Golden sunlight streamed through the window and a breeze fluttered the curtains. All was quiet as I sat up and wondered what to do next.

The last two days were not dreams. They were real-life nightmares.

Following a conference call that afternoon with our employer, Alicia, Cathy, and I sat in the business center of the Holiday Inn staring at the floor. We were still in shock. Alicia was very emotional. She broke down sobbing, saying she needed this job.

"You don't understand, I need the money," she wailed. "I haven't worked in a while."

I said we all did. Yet I was less trusting than my two colleagues. I did not want to attempt a third entry into Iraq and fail again. It wasn't just the denial of entry I was afraid of but the fact that the Iraqi officials could detain us. I had visions of rotting for days in a rat-infested cell without anyone knowing.

As we pondered why the Iraqi government denied us entry, Cathy, the calmest of us all, made a surprising announcement. She said that she was going on a date that evening. She had met a man in one of the hotel's bars and he asked her out. I could not believe that after what had happened she could focus on a date. I guess people do respond to crisis in different ways. My only concern was that she proceed carefully. After all the three of us had been through in the last forty-eight hours, we could not deal with another mishap.

It was agreed we would fly back to Iraq in a few days after our employer obtained new airline tickets and visas for us. Until then we were to relax. It was time to recover, sunbathe, and swim.

The Holiday Inn had a nice size swimming pool. The next day I wanted to give it a try. Yet I noticed that there were no women at the pool in bikinis and the only swimwear I had brought was a two-piece. Not wanting to offend and risk even more trouble, I called down to the concierge and asked whether I could wear mine to the pool.

"I—I'm not sure. Can you hold please?" the concierge asked.

He put me on hold and went to get his supervisor. While holding, I wondered how serious this issue was. From what I had seen around town, Amman was a nice combination of East and West. It had some familiar fast food restaurants, such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, but also kept its Middle Eastern flavor. The city had open-air bazaars, mosques, malls, and big-name banks. Most women wore head scarves and long dresses. Surely with this mix of East and West, the hotel would allow me to wear my two-piece bathing suit to its pool?

Finally, after waiting for several minutes, a supervisor came on the phone.

"Madame, you can go swimming. No problem," the supervisor said confidently, not answering my question.

At this point I was so fed up waiting that I thanked the man and went swimming. No one gave me any trouble. After all, I had asked.

The day came for us to attempt a third entry into Iraq. I knew that if this trip was unsuccessful, we would be going home.

When our plane finally landed at Baghdad International Airport, I took a deep breath. I peeked out the window. The same tarmac, beat-up

bus, and dilapidated airport building were all there. Their reappearance mocked me.

As the aircraft doors opened and we descended the stairs, an unexpected minivan drove up. An Iraqi man hopped out from the driver's seat and asked if we were Jade, Cathy, and Alicia. After verification, he drove us to the doorstep of the airport. We saw the same immigration officers walking around in their familiar grayish-green uniforms and it was difficult not to have our hopes dashed.

We were told to proceed to a nearby desk instead of standing in line. At this desk, the same officer who had rejected us twice before now smiled. *It was the first time I saw his teeth.* He said something in Arabic that sounded welcoming. We were asked to fill out paperwork and pay a small fee for an emergency visa.

Why weren't we allowed this option before?

Relieved that we got through, I could not help but think of all the unnecessary costs of the last several days. My blood pressure rose as I knew what was going to happen. In the industry of peace-building, stabilization, and reconstruction contracts, these expenses were going to be passed back to the U.S. government, as our employer was a government contractor, and eventually on to the American taxpayers.

I was angry.

I couldn't help but wonder. If the Iraqi government had really wanted American skills, knowledge, and materials, why did it not expedite their smooth entry? What was the purpose to have us fly back and forth, wasting time and resources? Moreover, were top people in Washington and American program directors in Iraq working to resolve this? Didn't the U.S. have the bigger muscle since it was providing millions in aid?

Talking to various people in the last several days, it was frustrating to know that we weren't the first to be denied access for no apparent reason.

Retrieving our luggage and following our security detail to the parking lot, we saw three armored vehicles waiting. Interestingly, each of us three was told to ride in a separate vehicle. As I sat down in one and fastened my seatbelt, the driver and an armed guard sitting in the front gave me an orientation. Neither was taking any chances. They wanted me

to know where the valves, switches, and radios were should they become incapacitated. The reality that things could get very nasty began to kick in.

As we drove down a long paved highway toward the IZ, I saw how dry the outskirts of Baghdad were. The sun was high and the stretches of smooth desert seemed never-ending, spotted only here and there with clumps of concrete buildings. There was not even a shrub around. Everywhere I looked it was dust and dirt. Dust was in the air, on the houses, on the roads, and even on the few people walking during the heat of the day alongside the highway.

I was also surprised at how many checkpoints we had to go through to reach the IZ. Each time we came upon one, the Iraqi soldiers manning it would peer into our vehicle, look at us, look at our documentation, and look at me again before allowing us to pass. Surely, I thought, with more checkpoints to go, we were going to run into a glitch somewhere.

But we didn't.

Finally arriving at the IZ, which had high walls and a huge gate, we cleared our last checkpoint and were in.

But what I saw inside was less than ideal. Though Saddam Hussein's Hands of Victory monument was a sight to behold with two huge swords crossed to make an arc for cars to pass under, the paved roads were not well maintained. Armored SUVs, military vehicles, and dusty sedans bumped along after one another. Heaps of garbage and overturned trashcans appeared at almost every intersection. Sickly looking dogs, thin as rails and without owners, scoured the streets looking for food.

When our vehicle made a right turn, I saw another set of high walls topped with barb wire and a guarded entrance, indicating a foreign-operated compound. As we continued down the dusty street, there were more of these. Along the way, situated here and there, were small Iraqi convenience stores, high-rise apartment buildings with faded exteriors, and even a mosque.

It occurred to me then that the area inside the IZ was and still is a part of Baghdad city.

"How big is the IZ?" I asked my driver.

"Oh, about four square miles," he said. "It's big enough to hold a couple of Saddam's palaces, government buildings, a number of foreign compounds, the U.S. Embassy, and these apartment buildings." He pointed to ones we were passing.

Other than a few locals I saw coming in and out of stores, there were no other pedestrians. I commented on the lack of people walking around.

“It’s not safe here,” my driver said. “There have been kidnappings. Foreigners have been forced into cars at gunpoint.”

The guard in the passenger seat nodded.

With our vehicle making a final right turn, we drove into a small compound where we would be living and working for the duration of our contract. TONI compound was a little over an acre. It had a two-story concrete building that contained classrooms, sleeping rooms, and offices, a tiny grass-covered courtyard, and a string of rectangular trailers used as more sleeping rooms. The entire compound housed about forty-five men and five women, most of whom were American subcontractors.

Showing me to my trailer, a seasoned TONI female pulled me aside.

“You should stick close to your room and the office,” she said quietly. “Don’t wander down other walkways. Those rooms are all occupied by men and they haven’t seen their wives in a while.”

Surprised by that comment and still absorbing all that had happened in the last few days, I entered my trailer and set my suitcase down. It was one room with a desk, chair, bed, small closet, and TV. A bathroom with a shower and toilet adjoined. Nothing in the trailer was there for decoration. Everything in it was functional.

Even before I had a chance to change my shirt, comb my hair, or settle down for a few minutes, there was a knock on my door. I was told it was time to meet the Iraqi students I was going to teach.

After a quick staff meeting with Alicia and Cathy where we decided they would teach the large Intermediate class together and I would teach the smaller Intermediate and Advanced classes alone, we were ready to enter our respective classrooms. As we had arrived days behind schedule, the classes had begun. Substitutes, other Americans working in the IZ who had a connection with TONI, had been hired to teach temporarily. That afternoon Alicia, Cathy, and I began by “shadowing” our substitutes. It was an absurd situation.

Other than at the airport, I had had very little contact with Iraqis. When I opened the door to my classroom that afternoon, I saw one group of my students for the first time: ten men and one woman. They were all seated around a huge oblong table with paper, pens, and books in front

of them. The substitute, a plump but pleasant woman named May, was teaching the definite and indefinite articles.

“The door, the table, the keys,” May said, referring to each item.

“Da door, da dable, da keys,” the students repeated with a heavy accent.

The students appeared to be in their thirties or early forties and sported the classic features of Iraqis: dark hair, dark eyes, tanned skin, and stocky build. Almost all of them wore suits and looked very serious, almost formidable. They were government employees from the prime minister’s office, a no-nonsense bunch.

I stepped forward and smiled.

When they saw me their eyes widened in surprise.

Perhaps they had expected a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian to walk through the door. Instead, a dainty Asian American girl, who had just blown into their country with hair uncombed, shirt wrinkled, and a deer-in-the-headlights look, stood right in front of them.

A moment of silence took place as each side sized the other up.

What did *they* think of me?



Figure 17.1. My trailer, TONI compound, Baghdad, 2010



Figure 17.2. TONI compound's walls. View from inside the International Zone, Baghdad, 2010



Figure 17.3. Trash piled inside the International Zone, Baghdad, 2010