



Zainab Jawhar

Objects for Deployment

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Some names in this story have been changed  
to protect the identities of their bearers.

This is a story about a dream lost, or at least deferred. Like so many others, it starts with a mistake.



BOOM!

On August 5th, 2004, 24-year old Zainab was at home with her family. It was a customarily hot summer day in Najaf, Iraq.

Days earlier, the Mahdi Army, a Shia paramilitary organization, had broken ceasefire with occupying forces and was engaged in street battle with American troops. The violence was intense. Those caught in between, like Zainab and her family, sought safety indoors. That particular day had been long and stressful with frequent power outages. By eleven o'clock, Zainab was ready for bed. Retiring to her room on the second floor, she laid down to sleep.

It's not clear how much time passed. Perhaps it was only a handful of minutes. Suddenly, she awoke to a burst of pain. Sitting squarely on top of her legs was a shell bomb. Shock and horror. Crushing weight. Loss of consciousness.

An errant U.S. shell had crashed through her bedroom wall and landed on top of her as she slept in bed. It did not detonate. If it had, this would be a different story. There would be nothing left to speak of.

"I experienced a traumatic event during a conflict between U.S. forces and the Mahdi Army in Najaf on August 5th, 2004. when a shell tore into my home and did not explode. At the time, I was sleeping in my bed. It took me from one world to another, altering the course of my life and my future. I awoke in the hospital, unable to move or walk. I opened my eyes and did not know what happened, or if I was dead or alive."











PAIN

Zainab awoke in the hospital as a double amputee. She lost her left leg above the knee, and her right foot below the ankle. The only explanation given to her was that the doctor feared infection, and so he chose amputation.

For the first twenty-five days, there was infection nonetheless. She remained in the hospital and underwent twelve separate surgeries.

Eventually, she was referred to a center for prosthetic limbs. She received two prostheses: a left leg and a right foot. But they were poorly designed and fit uncomfortably. Walking was painful. Months later, Zainab was sent to a similar center in Baghdad where she was fitted for better prostheses than her first pair. But the new ones were heavy. Walking was exhausting.

Mobility quickly became an issue. Without the use of her prostheses, she relied on hand crutches and a wheelchair to move around the house. Neither allowed her to move freely in public, however. The wheelchair was poorly suited to her city's unpaved roads and crumbling infrastructure, and the crutches were inefficient and slow.

Four or five months passed. Confined to her bed, Zainab was unable to move left or right. The family received no government help, or humanitarian aid. No one acknowledged the accident. Zainab felt alone.

"I had twelve surgeries to save my legs, but they barely saved any of my life."

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Sami Rasouli

Date: Tuesday, April 6, 2010 at 11:46 PM

Subject: Zainab...

Hi all,

Attached are Zainab's requested documents and photos. She explained the artificial leg and foot made for her in Iran are cheap, unbalanced and painful. Her left leg-bone lands on the edge of the upper part of her artificial leg, causing her unbearable pain as she indicates in the picture. Her right foot sits unbalanced on one side of her shoe. The person who helped make her prostheses in Iran told her that he himself needed to travel to Germany to get good ones after he lost his legs in a car accident some years ago. She saw in the media that many different types of good prostheses are made in Europe and the States. She is dreaming to have a pair so she can enjoy her life again. She told me, "I learned all people who are involved in making prostheses in the West are specialists: college graduates and mostly medical doctors. This is not the case in the Middle East." Now, she uses crutches when she wears her prostheses because of their poor fit.







THE GENERAL

In early winter 2004, there was a surprise visitor. He was a U.S. Army General and he'd come to acknowledge the mistake. After an internal investigation, the Americans determined that the missile that crushed Zainab's legs was theirs. It had misfired. He was very sorry.

For Zainab, the visit was a sign of hope and an opportunity for help. Standing in her living room was a very powerful man from a very powerful country. This was her chance to get someone important to listen to her. So, she mustered the courage and spoke, "What can you do for me?" He gave her two options: treatment in the United States, or money for treatment in Iraq. Her answer was immediate and resolute: she wanted to go to the United States. The General promised to send her.

But as quickly as the promise was made, it began to crack. Two weeks after his first visit, the General returned to the house and told Zainab that taking her to the U.S. would be impossible. It was far too costly. America couldn't afford it. Zainab was confused. She thought America was the richest country on earth.

Instead, he offered her a one-time payment of \$2,000 for "loss of life productivity" and immediate treatment at Balad Air Force Base, north of Baghdad. She had another infection at that point, and it needed attention. So, she went. Shortly thereafter, the General disappeared. His post within the Army had changed and he was sent home for reassignment. Zainab never saw him again. He was replaced with another general, but no further attempts were made to fulfill the initial promise.

By February 2005, treatment at Balad had concluded, but little had changed. Without proper artificial limbs, she remained completely handicapped and homebound. The confinement was choking, and so was the shame. In a society built on honor, where one's value is measured by the ability to financially contribute, Zainab felt worthless. Her professional dreams and hard-won college degree didn't matter anymore. She felt shame at how quickly she'd become her family's burden.

To make matters worse, no further intervention in or assistance with her care would be offered by the United States military. Once again, Zainab felt alone.

"But the treacherous arrow of time has struck the fruit of the tree of life at the height of its ripening; scattering it amongst the conflicts of which we gained nothing but pain, and that cannot be compensated with a price for those injured and disabled like myself."





SUFFERING

So far, this story has been filled with facts: hot summer night, shell bomb in the bedroom, double amputation, instant disability, American apology, lackluster reparation... But, there's another element here that we have not talked about. This shell didn't just change Zainab's life, it interrupted it, and at a very pivotal point. Before the accident, she was a young, learned, ambitious woman with plans and goals and dreams for the future. Just months before, she graduated from the University of Kufa with a bachelor's degree in education. Teaching was her greatest passion, the way she could contribute to her country's reconstruction.

Being disabled in Iraq is different than being disabled in the United States. Life there is more physically limited and emotionally limiting. Social stigmas are strong, access to services is nonexistent and the use of a wheelchair is a predetermined, professional death sentence. After her surgeries, Zainab went to the local teachers' placement center for the job interview she'd anticipated since before the accident. The moment they saw her seated in her chair, they refused to assign her. She was told that her dream of becoming a teacher was over.

The accident had officially taken everything from her: independence, health, dignity, and now, the future. She felt an enormous separation from other people: the normal, healthy ones, and her. In a country where tragedy is commonplace and hundreds of people die gruesomely everyday, the handicapped are easily forgotten. Disability is its own kind of death. Thus began five long years of suffering, the majority of which Zainab spent isolated at home.

A heavy depression set in. The last hope was lost.

Her resentment grew. And so did her guilt. She was the last of her siblings to live at home, dependent on her aging parents. In time, Zainab's father grew older and sicker. He suffered a stroke and was unable to work. Already a family of limited means, suddenly, they were extremely so. Zainab wondered how different things could be if she were able to earn an income. She longed to feel productive rather than burdensome.

"I appeal to the capable to extend [to] me a helping hand and change the course of my life, God willing. What I ask is not impossible: don't forget me. I am in the peak of my life, yet I have tasted [its] bitterness too much. I need good artificial limbs to live as a good citizen. Despite the dreadful incident, I still have so much internal potential that is not yet invested. I request that you not allow this to pass unnoticed. My sincere thanks and gratitude."

## THE VISIT



In the beginning of 2010, Zainab still found herself stuck in a fate she did not plan and could not change. Like so many of Iraq's wounded and maimed, she was forced to accept her injuries because, simply, there was no alternative.

Until Sami came.

Sami Rasouli is an Iraqi-American who left Iraq at the age of 24 to teach abroad. Eventually, he immigrated to the United States, settled in Minneapolis, and opened a successful cafe. In 2003, following the death of his mother, Sami returned to Iraq for the first time in 27 years. He was stunned to find his homeland scarred by violence and destruction after too many years of war and sanctions. Stirred by these observations, Sami promptly quit the restaurant business, and returned to Iraq to work with international human rights groups. He founded the Muslim Peacemaker Teams (MPT), an organization modeled after the Christian Peacemaker Teams that work in Iraq and other war-torn countries to promote non-violent development in post-war transitions. Currently, Sami is the director of MPT, and a well-known figure in the Iraqi-

Sami heard about Zainab from one of her childhood friends who lives in the States. He planned on visiting her during one of his upcoming trips to Najaf, Iraq, Zainab's hometown. Perhaps there was something he could do for her.

In January 2010, the two met, and while he made no promises, Sami told Zainab that he wanted to do what the General could not nearly five years previous: bring her to the United States for treatment and rehabilitation.

Almost immediately, Sami began networking with businessmen and organizations in Minnesota. The most receptive ears belonged to a local non-profit, the Iraqi-American Reconciliation Project (IARP), and Greg Gruman, President and CEO of Winkley Orthopedic Laboratories Incorporated, a prosthetic device company. IARP agreed to sponsor and host Zainab and her mother, assuming all travel and living costs for the duration of their stay. Mr. Gruman offered the design, fabrication and adjustment of several of Winkley Laboratories' bilateral prostheses, as well as physical therapy and rehabilitation by Winkley therapists. The Courage Center of

Minnesota donated physical therapy and the use of its rehabilitation equipment.

By mid-summer 2010, visa paperwork was complete, and Zainab had a scheduled interview with the U.S. Consulate in Baghdad. Suddenly, the previously impossible wasn't anymore. A new door had blown right open, and in walked a reason to feel hopeful again. For Zainab and her family, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. But, this opportunity was no mere coincidence. The long road that led Zainab to Sami was paved with many setbacks and lots of waiting. Along the way, Zainab cultivated an enviable sense of determination and tenacity, beginning with that brave request of the General in 2004. There is a reason why everything happened the way it ultimately did. Zainab's character has a lot to do with it.

Zainab and her mother arrived in Minnesota in mid-September. For six weeks, she worked closely with prosthetists, nurses and physical therapists as they designed, fitted, and adjusted her new artificial limbs. Unlike her previous pairs, these state-of-the-art prosthetics are custom-fit and adjustable according to height

and level of activity, with different attachments to suit different uses.

The rehabilitation process is slow and difficult, however. It requires incredible stamina and physical strength, two things that were quickly lost after her accident. In addition to learning how to walk with two new limbs, Zainab spends many hours regaining what the wheelchair took away: muscle tone, core strength, balance and coordination.

"It was my dream when I came to America to walk completely normal - without crutches or disability. I wanted to be whole again. Who wouldn't want to pursue this? Many other people try, they are just not successful. It took six years for me. Some people sell everything to get treatment. I was just lucky to get noticed after so much time and hard work."

----- Original Message -----

From: Al Nettles

To: Sami Rasouli

Sent: Wednesday, March 31, 2010 7:56 AM

Subject: Zainab

Hi Sami,

We are set up with Winkley Orthopedics to get Zainab new legs. Greg, (Winkley's president) and I talked Friday. He gave me two words of caution that are worth noting: first, since there will be about four weeks of hard work in therapy and more afterwards when she returns home, she and her family must be determined to succeed, and not be "enablers" of her continuing disability. She and they must insist that she works through the months of learning to walk again. He says it is hard and natural when a person has been deprived of personal identity by a totally unjust event like she experienced, but to succeed in retraining she must be able to look ahead. Kind of a tough-love thing. Second, he said that some fittings fail if there are bone chips or new bone growths that have occurred over the years. This is a natural phenomenon of the body's own reaction to injury. However, if there are growths or bone fragments from an earlier

they might have to be removed before fitting her. We do not have a donated surgery lined up and that could mean she come all this way to not get fitted. We don't want her to experience yet another disappointment. So, could she or her doctor send the x-rays from the time of the injury and original surgery, as well as some current ones? (Perhaps Kareem or Al-Janabi could arrange some x-rays.) I'll ask Greg what views he would recommend.















THE FUTURE

By early November, Zainab had completed dozens of hours of rehabilitation and therapy. Her rewards were taking shape; limbs that fit better and a smoother, steadier gait. But the trip had been far from perfect. In truth, the recovery process was lengthier and more cumbersome than she'd anticipated, and it didn't meet her expectations.

The source of her expectations is not known. Had she made an assumption about the ability of American doctors to change her fate as a double amputee? Had she misinterpreted the General's original promise of "new legs" to mean something that it couldn't? Consider for a moment how the omnipotent and massive military presence of the United States in Iraq shapes local perceptions of what our society is ultimately capable of. We are the country who flies unmanned drone airplanes filled with smart bombs that detect their human targets through body-heat sensors, after all: our technological engineering nears incomprehension. How outrageous is it to think, then, that somewhere in the land of drone airplanes and smart bombs they're putting legs on legless humans?

The reality is that she did not get a set of "new legs," but rather a set of new prostheses which are artificial and, therefore, second best. Even American-made prostheses cannot buy a free pass to her old life. The accident and its handicapping consequences will never be erased. In her country especially, Zainab is another hapless casualty of war. Currently, there is no system that gives value to the tens of thousands of men, women and children who have been injured, maimed and disabled. Though Zainab may now be able to walk the length of a classroom unassisted, she cannot change the home she returns to and the problems that persist there: political instability, a limping economy, and a society that cloisters its handicapped.

One thing Zainab did not expect to get out of her trip to Minnesota was a new professional goal. Lately, she has spoken less about teaching and more about a desire to advocate for other disabled Iraqis. During her stay, she was impressed by many of the things afforded to Americans living with disabilities: handicapped-accessible facilities, special seats on public buses, curb cuts in the sidewalks, legal rights to employment and access to social

both inspired and bothered her to learn that in other places in the world there is life beyond disability.

Zainab carries these new impressions home with her, motivated to act on them. There is much work to be done on behalf of Iraq's disabled population and she wants to be involved in it. Her own future demands that she be. For the first time in six years, Zainab has hope and purpose again: real work awaits. What she has endured, and what she will continue to have to endure as a double amputee in Iraq, is immeasurable. Like her country, she finds herself at a crossroads now, teetering on the cusp of another big change.

Up on her feet. Left in front of right, right swings ahead of left.

"I want to be whole again."













## STEP-BY-STEP: AN ADDENDUM

























For more information on the Muslim Peacemakers Teams, the Iraqi-American Reconciliation Project, the Courage Center of Minnesota, or Winkley Orthopedic Laboratories, please see their websites:

<http://www.mpt-iraq.org/>  
<http://reconciliationproject.org/>  
<http://www.couragecenter.org/>  
<http://www.winkley.com/>

## COLOPHON

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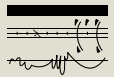
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We made this book for listening. Please accept our invitation. We made this book for deployment. Please pass it along and invite someone else to listen.

Thank you,  
Monica Haller

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This book is a collaboration between Zainab Jawhar and Clare Beer. It would not have been possible without the help of Luke Wilcox and Alex Potter of the Iraqi-American Reconciliation Project. We are grateful to them for bringing Zainab to us, and for advocating so compassionately on behalf of all Iraqis.

Zainab Jawhar was born and raised in Najaf, Iraq. She graduated from the University of Kufa in 2004 with a bachelor's degree in education. Shortly after graduation, she was hit by an errant U.S. shell while sleeping in her bed.

Clare Beer was born and raised in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She graduated from Marquette University in 2008 with a bachelor's degree in Latin American Studies. She is currently the technical writer and copy editor for the Veterans Book Project.

Zainab asked us to write this story on her behalf for two reasons: she is not fluent in English (we are not fluent in Arabic), and currently she is focused on larger matters — namely, learning how to walk with new prosthetic limbs. What does it mean to tell a story on behalf of someone else? The ethics of representation are complex, particularly when they cross the great divides of language and culture. How do we reach across these divides to really see another's perspective? And once we see it, how do we transmit it in a dignified and accurate way? In writing this book, we ask ourselves these questions. Our hope is that it can be an entrance into healing and dialogue for her and us.

