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The phone call Dr Laurentius Love had been dreading for the past four weeks came at eight thirty in the evening. ‘We are going onto Emergency Level One from seven a.m. to-morrow. Notify your people and have them bring whatever they need when they come in.’ The colonel sounded matter of factly, as if he had been rehearsing the statement for weeks which, on reflection, he probably had.

‘Yes, colonel,’ he replied, instinctively holding the receiver away from his lips so the man couldn’t smell the gin on his breath, smiling at his own silliness. ‘So it is all system’s go? The Americans and the Brits are ready to roll?’

‘They have given Saddam twenty four hours starting from tomorrow. The Chief of Staff has put the Armed Forces on full alert in case of a pre-emptive first strike by the Iraqis.’

Yes,’ Laurentius replied, knowing that “first strike” meant the dreaded Scud missiles with their potential biological warheads, only eleven minutes away from where he was sitting sipping his third sundowner of the evening.

‘I’ll get right on it,’ he said and hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, having initiated the cascade call up system they had drawn up and practiced the weeks before, he sat down in his recliner with his drink, let his mind dwell on The Emergency as they had all come to think of it. The cat finished scratching her nails on the sofa and

curled into a ball, lazily licking her paws, while on the TV screen Ally Mc Beal was being her crazy dippy emaciated self. In the street outside, wafting through the sliding doors open to the terrace, came the sounds of nighttime city traffic, bleating horns and screeching brakes and the hubbub of many voices drifting up from the open air diwanis where smoke from the hubbly bubbly pipes swirled and mixed with the excited chatter of men discussing the coming of war. Everyday sounds, comforting sounds in a land he had come to think of as home knowing full well he would never belong, would have to go back to where he came from one day. The tiny city state known to both expat and citizen by the conveniently musical eponym displayed on items as diverse as football jerseys, pre-paid phone cards and indeed army issue ordnance maps: Q8. Well, he said to the cat, it looks like the crazy Texan has decided to go for it, kick arse I believe is the expression.'

The cat glanced up with a feigned look of interest but said nothing. Laurentius got up and went to pack his bag. For weeks as they had gone through the interminable emergency mass casualty drills, the endless bickering meetings where everyone, including the normally demure paediatricians, seemed to have a different view on how an army surgical hospital should function during a chemical or biological weapons attack, he had known this moment would come and had mentally prepared for it. And now that it was here he was somehow uncertain; what does one pack when you will be sleeping on the floor in your office for who knows many weeks, maybe months? No-one allowed home until the level of emergency is stepped down a notch. No booze, no women, no decent TV; nothing.

What about the dirty washing? The colonel had mentioned something about everyone doing their washing by hand, recommending Cold Water Omo like he was in some TV ad. He had prepared his office, of course, got the foam rubber mattress up from stores and stored an eider-

down and a pillow on the corner of his couch. Had stuffed the little bar fridge with cheese and candy bars and two bottles of Charlie Five Belly's homemade gin disguised as ABC drinking water and hidden under a pile of apples in the vegetable tray. And two cases of tonic water as well as, of course, enough long life milk, coffee and sugar to see him through a mini siege.

Still; it could be weeks, perhaps a month before he saw the old flat again. (How long does a war take?) Glancing around his gaze fell on the boxes of green tightly corked bottles of beer in the corner of the bedroom, the fruits of his last bottling exercise a week earlier. Now there was something he was going to miss, his nightly beer in front of the telly as he watched the news. For a moment he considered packing a bottle or two but decided against it as too impractical; what would he do with the empty bottles? What a country, where more grape juice is sold in one litre green glass bottles with sealable corks than in cartons simply so the expats could use and re-use the bottles for making beer and wine. A few hundred thousand expats slaving away in the privacy of their homes with the ongoing task of turning if not water into wine, at least grape juice into the elixir of western life. Thirty six cans of beer to two kilogram of sugar with a spoonful of baker's yeast and bottle ten days later, adding just a touch of sugar to the bottle to keep the fermentation going enough so the beer would have fizz. You bottle too late you have flat beer, you bottle too early you have exploding bottles --- the science of beer making in good old Q8. The thought of his last batch of exploding beer bought a wry smile to his lips. Try and tell that to the folks back home, they'd think you were making it up.

Try and tell them your last batch of red wine (twenty four litres of red grape juice with one and a half kilogram of sugar and a touch of baker's yeast and left standing for two months) was so good a suitably disguised bottle won fourth prize at the Expats Sundowner Wednesday meeting.

And competing against several bottles of the real thing smuggled in by Brits returning from leave.

They'd think you've finally gone crazy, the desert sun and all that.

Cramming the lid of the small suitcase shut he searched his mind for anything he might have overlooked. The cat? Well he had primed the maid for this scenario, a phone call would have her come in daily instead of alternate days and he had stacked up on cat food aplenty. The newspaper? About to run out anyway, the same applied to the cable TV, he'd renew it on his release from what was looming more and more as a prison stretch. Cancel the Jehovah's Witnesses? Now there's a thought, he mused; imagine coming home after a few weeks and finding the porch littered with bearded men sporting knitted caps in sensible shoes and duffel coats clutching back copies of *The Watchtower*.

Seriously now, time to get himself off to bed even if he knew he'd lie awake most of the night thinking of just how Mrs Love's boy, once that bright eyed bushy tailed young man who was going places, could have ended up quite like this. It made for some thought.

He went in earlier than his normal 6.30 the next morning, hadn't been able to sleep and up at 5 there seemed little point at lounging about the flat, catching the mournful gaze of the cat, getting more and more depressed.

Arriving at the hospital's Main Gate he was confronted by the unexpected sight of a line of cars, his first thought that there had been an accident. That was before he caught sight of Nurse Aide Fatima Al Rashiti where she was draped against the outer wall close to the guard hut. She had on a pious black abeya no doubt borrowed for the occasion judging by the fact that it appeared to be at least two sizes too small and totally

not up to the formidable task of keeping under cover the less than subtle charms of the rather well endowed woman. She being of the bend that Laurentius' mother, ever horrified of the dread word "fat," tended to call "cuddly."

In order to ease the black sack over her shoulders in the first place she had to divest herself of certain basic items of supportive underwear including, by Laurentius' expert eye, a girdle. The planned look of studied solemn and indeed pious intent – for effect she had even put in her dentures and was wearing her spectacles although Laurentius from long suffering in Outpatients had reason to believe she was illiterate -- had somehow given way to one of unexpected titillation. Which explained the lewd comments and offers of short term employment emanating from the open windows of the vehicles crawling past on their way to work. She looking, in short, like one would imagine Mae West would appearing de flagrante in a judge's robes filming a remake of Boogie Nights.

The early morning heat had made her rouge run and smudges of eye makeup had spread just enough to give her that Addams Family look. Which probably explained the somewhat bizarre writing on the large sign she held in each outstretched hand. "No Kill People and Childs (sic) of Baghdad!!" read the one and "Bush is Monkey!" on the other, the lettering in what appeared to be red lipstick and tapering off towards the end as space became a premium.

A sudden sharp wail screeched through the air setting teeth on edge. Fatima, the Human Shield, was ululating as she wiggled a few steps. Winnie Mandela would have approved.