The Truths We Tell:Reporting on Faith, War and the Fate of Iraq

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I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to be back in Wisconsin. I may have grown up in Oklahoma, but in more ways than not, Wisconsin is home to me.

Walking here down State Street, brought back all the memories of being a young reporter at the Daily Cardinal. All bundled up, ride bike to the nearest kiosk, and make sure we hadn't been beaten on any story by the Badger Herald. Here's an apology to all you Badger Herald alumni, but man, I sure hated that newspaper.

I have to say I credit Wisconsin with two things. One was critical thinking. And nothing has proven more important in my career since then. That ability to question what you're being told, to be suspicious, to never accept things as they're portrayed. I learned that in the classroom, I learned it at the Cardinal, and I learned it with friends, whom I spent hours talking high politics and the lowest gossip at the Black Bear Lounge.

The other thing I credit Wisconsin for – well, I should probably say blame – is the very sickest addiction to the Green Bay Packers. I could easily have written another book if I had channeled all the time I spend reading the Green Bay Press Gazette and Journal Sentinel web sites every morning. It's sick, and now I'm dragging my wife, 9-year-old daughter and 7-month old son to the frozen tundra of Lambeau on Sunday. Pitiful.

In Baghdad, in the earliest days, I managed to hear Packers games on my satellite phone. Now that phone wasn't cheap, a bunch of dollars a minute. And in a few months, my alarmed bureau chief was getting grilled for what amounted to a 20 k phone bill. He came to me. Outrageous, I told him. Then I asked a little more sheepishly, can they tell what computer the phones were attached to. To my relief, they couldn't.

That, of course, is another rule every journalist must uphold. Never tell the truth on your expenses, but that's an entirely different story.

I just got back from Baghdad a few weeks ago, and I was trying to talk to my daughter, in the most cursory of ways, of what I say in the last trip. 122 people had died, in two incidents.

One was a church attack. The other was a string of bombings across the city that told us – contrary to popular perception – the war in Iraq is far from over.

It made no sense what I told her, and she didn't really understand. In the end, what I tried to convey to her were numbers – so many people had died – but what are numbers really other than grounds for debate. In the end, it's about stories and if I've learned one thing in 15 years of being a foreign correspondent, only stories matter.

"THE BEST JOURNALISM IS SOMETIMES ABOUT FOOTNOTES, WHEN WE WRITE SMALL TO SAY SOMETHING BIG."

That brings me to the topic I wanted to talk about today -- Baghdad, the place where I've spent more time than any other the past eight years.

I want to tell a story that spans the conflict in Iraq, from shortly after the invasion in 2003 until this very day, a time when people mistakenly think the war is over. It is a story of unintended consequences, that phrase that perhaps defines the war in Iraq more than any other. It is a story that I think is crucial, too, if we're to understand what wars like this represent.

This story began in a funeral tent set up for condolences eight years ago this March. Recitation of the Koran was playing from a scratchy cassette, and I was there with them, sipping bitter Arabic coffee. I remember an American helicopter rumbling overhead. The men around me hailed from different tribes in a lush town along the Tigris River called Thuluyah, and they had arrived to pay their respects for a beefy 15-year-old with a mop of curly black hair and face still rounded by adolescence. He was one of three people killed a day before in June 2003 in an American raid called Peninsula Strike.

I remember the words of one of the men there. He was a soft spoken judge. He called the boy's death in the American operation an omen. "The future's going to be very dark," he warned me then. "We're seeing each day become worse than the last."
For the judge and the dozens of other mourners and tribal leaders gathered on this sweltering afternoon – and I remember it was hot that day – the boy's death was simply a tragedy. To the rest of Iraq, it was little more than a statistic. By that I mean it was incidental in the killing fields that the country would soon become. The raid itself was a footnote to a war and its aftermath that has dragged on more than seven years.

But the best journalism is sometimes about footnotes, when we write small to say something big. And in time, I'd learn that this boy's death would set into motion an epic chain of events that began once the U.S. military set foot in the town and that still haunt a patch of desert on its forlorn outskirts long after they've gone. The next event in that chain had to do with a tall, husky, 28-year-old who served as an informer for the Americans on that raid. His name was Sabah, and the mourners that day blamed him for the deaths that had brought everyone to these condolences in the tent.

I remember children calling him "the masked man." It was the nickname they had given the informer, who had worn a burlap bag over his head during the raid, as he ambled through a crowd and identified suspected insurgents. I heard the children's chants as I sat inside the funeral tent. "Masked man," they shouted. "Your face is the face of the devil!"

Inside the tent, no one would dare say this guy's name, even though everyone knew who he was. They would only tell me the consequences.

"Of course, he'll be killed," one man whispered to me, "but not yet."

"They'll rip him to pieces," another predicted.

Now let me tell you a little about this town of Thuluyah. It was perched on a bend in the Tigris, and one of the prettier locales in Iraq. It had escaped the ravages of the American invasion that April, two months before. A ninety-minute drive north of Baghdad, it was beyond the route of the U.S. military that would occupy Baghdad. Although its men had filled the ranks of the Baath Party, army and intelligence, the town was too small to make most maps. I never did see it on one.

Within weeks, though, it would bear the consequences of the invasion's confusing aftermath. Eleven days after Saddam Hussein fell, one of the first insurgent attacks occurred at the edge of town, along an irrigation canal soon nicknamed the Valley of Death. More followed. And by June, in response, the U.S. military had devised the operation I mentioned earlier, Peninsula Strike. It would represent the first attempt to quell an insurgency that would only grow more intense.

These American soldiers arrived after midnight. Humvees and troop transports barreled down dirt roads past orange groves. F-16, A-10 and AC-130 warplanes were heard but not seen. Soldiers hurried from camouflage boats on the banks of the Tigris, past gardens of okra and patches of purple flowers.
The soldiers shouted in English. The residents of Thuluyah shook their head in frightened incomprehension. "They were yelling and yelling," one inhabitant told me. Many of them raised a white handkerchief, in a universal sign of surrender. Many of them were blindfolded, bound with plastic cuffs and forced to lie on their stomach. One of them told me he was helpless, as he listened to his wife and five children cry nearby.

Next to him was his cousin, Saad Salah Ali, a short and balding guy.
What do you do? a translator barked at him.
"I'm a taxi driver," he replied.
From somewhere near, this guy heard another voice. The Arabic was spoken in the town's dialect. It was familiar, that of a neighbor, someone who lived a few houses away. "Oh, you're a taxi driver," the voice said sarcastically to Ali. It was the informer, Sabah.

Others recognized Sabah, too. Those not blindfolded noticed his yellow sandals and his mutilated right thumb. It had been severed above the joint in an accident.

"That's Sabah! That's Sabah!" one resident remembered shouting.

When it was over, more than two dozen homes had been raided, and 400 people were arrested. Three men were dead, including that 15-year-old I mentioned earlier, killed by two shots that ripped through his abdomen. The Americans soon departed, but they left behind a myriad of grievances in the town. By the time I got there, there was confusion, fear, and most of all, vengeance. No one could do anything about the soldiers. They could do

something about this informer named Sabah.

Now it was pretty common these days, after Saddam's fall, to see a resurgence of tribal authority. It was a brutal frontier justice, which had come to fill this lawless void back in 2003. The boy was a member of the Aani tribe and the informer was a Jabbouri, the town's biggest, and justice would have to be done. Empowered by Saddam's fall, the tribal leaders decided to mete out their notion of it: Either Sabah's family killed Sabah the informer, or they would kill the family, all of them, every single one of them.

The informer's father appealed. At first he denied his son had worked with the Americans. Then he stalled, insisting that he needed permission from the Americans before he did anything. His pleas were met with anger, and the informer's brother told me that the family soon felt besieged. Here was how he put it to me: "We were one house alone in the town. Everyone had lined up against us."

As this was going on, only one man spoke up against the idea of the father having to kill his son. His name was Mullah Nadhim, and I want you to remember his name. He was the son and grandson of a preacher and a preacher himself. And as a religious man, he was sympathetic to the pleas of the informer's brother and father. No one had proven Sabah's guilt, the preacher said. Even worse, he suspected, some of the tribal leaders were trying to cover up their own collaboration with the Americans by making Sabah a scapegoat. He told me that he had agreed to meet Sabah the next day. But, as he put it to me, rather chillingly, "the Kalashnikov was faster than I was."

The tribal leaders had decided they would wait no longer, and the next morning, two hours before the call to prayer, Sabah's brother and father led Sabah behind the house, nestled in orchards of fig and almond trees, vineyards and groves of oranges and tangerines. His brother said that he told Sabah not to blame them, that it wasn't their fault. Sabah never resisted. And five shots later, he was dead. When I met the father a few weeks later, he told me words that I still haven't forgotten, all these years later. I don't think I ever could. "Even the prophet Abraham didn't have to kill his son," he told me. His eyes glistened. There was no other choice."

A curse, the preacher I told you about called it, and he denounced it three days later at the mosque. He told me that the killing, in his words, "marked the door to hell."

"The death of a boy at the hands of his father opened the door to killing," he said. "It didn't only open it. It broke it down, and it couldn't be closed again." I remember the preacher nodded at his words. "It's difficult to close that door, and his death made others dare to kill."

I told this story in a book I wrote about Iraq called *Night Draws Near.* And the reaction of some readers was that it illustrated the brutality of Iraq. It was a convenient reading and not an uncommon story – the way we dehumanize another people, make their actions inscrutable, perceive their motivations as driven by hatred, understood their ideology as no more than fanaticism, all as a way to make war on them that much easier. For a generation, the Middle East has been dehumanized – the Arab and Muslim worlds -- and that dehumanization has made war – what's the word – perhaps more palatable.

To be honest, I shuddered at the thought, that the telling of this story fed that narrative. Is that what it really showed, simply brutality? Or, I wondered, was it something deeper, something less perceptible. Sabah's death, to me, was less a story of brutality and more a tale of the repercussions of a country turned upside down, a landscape that could give rise to such a crime. In that reading, I thought it was a metaphor for the devastation of these unintended consequences.

To me, that is the most powerful lesson of our experience in Iraq and its legacy in the Middle East. Unintended consequences. In one narrative, the United States came as a liberator. Almost immediately, it became an occupier. But most important, it served as a catalyst for consequences that most of us never foresaw, forces that have reshaped not only Iraq but the rest of the region. Forces that once took years, even decades to unfold gathered in months there and elsewhere: the lightning export of almost nihilistic ideologies; the remarkable hardening of sectarian and ethnic lines, sometimes orchestrated; a changing notion of identity; and a much more difficult to define sense of malaise, a notion of loss.

The list goes on, in a war that still goes on.

Those same forces soon transformed this town of Thuluyah, too. The town was steeped in tradition, the customs of Bedouins from the desert. No one could ask a favor unless they first spent three days with their host. Lunch for a stranger, any stranger, was requisite. Even a simple visit prompted a glass of water, followed by sweets, coffee, tea, then another glass of water.

After the invasion in 2003, the men meant to uphold these traditions – the tribal leaders – inherited the town. With Saddam and his government gone, there was no one else. But in the months that followed Sabah's death, the tribal leaders soon felt overwhelmed by the dynamics the American invasion had set into motion. In essence, they were Sunnis and Shiites, long oppressed, were now ascendant in Iraq.

The village was left to fend for itself. The country was occupied by the Americans now, and that wasn't going well, either. One of the tribal leaders put it to me this way, "A ball of string, and nobody knew where it started." The preacher I told you all about was even blunter. "A tsunami," he called it.

"TO ME, THAT IS THE MOST POWERFUL LESSON OF OUR EXPERIENCE IN IRAQ AND ITS LEGACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES"

Now, this preacher was a remarkable man, if I can use the adjective without being positive. He was only 25. But he had already led the family's mosque for seven years, and his words assumed more importance as the town turned to religion. This preacher. Mullah Nadhim, saw no end to the occupation. Strife between Sunnis and Shiites was mounting. And, in the preacher's view, the Sunnis in this town needed a militia to defend their interests. "If you lose and cannot get a place in the government, you have something to fight with," he told me back in December 2003. "It creates a balance of power."

About 10 months later, the first cell of al-Qaeda in Iraq came together, an insurgent group that was homegrown but led by foreigners. Only nine people from Thuluyah belonged. This preacher himself was still a member of the Islamic Army. By 2006, two years later, al-Qaeda had grown to 500 people, and by this time, this preacher had joined it. "I couldn't stop myself from being carried away by the wave," he explained to me. The words that followed were both universal and specific. "As one person, you can't be right, and everyone else turns out to be wrong."

The insurgents soon wrapped themselves in the rhetoric of faith and fatherland: They would defend the people's dignity against American occupiers and Shiites doing their bidding. But their real success relied on a tactic borrowed from organized crime: They adhered to no limits in the violence they applied against their opponents and those supposed to be their allies.

In all, more than 200 people were killed as collaborators in the town. Some of them executed with a bullet to the back of the head. Occasionally, their bodies were doused with gasoline and burned. No one could smoke in the streets. Insurgents talked of shutting down schools, which they denounced as an instrument of occupation. They ordered women married to policemen to divorce their husbands. That didn't really matter. By then, most of the police had already resigned. Those who didn't, of course, were killed. One of them was beheaded by the dull end of a shovel.

Not even the tribal leaders, the same ones who ordered the father to kill his son, felt safe. One hired armed men to guard his house. Another sheikh was ambushed, his leg riddled with bullets. He still limps. Grenades were thrown twice at the house of another one, who remembered Thuluyah at the time as a "battlefield." Together, they received pictures of their meetings with Americans in 2003, as both threat and blackmail.

By the beginning of 2007, the insurgents had taken over, and no one was safe.

Much is made of the surge, a word many of you all have probably heard about. It is celebrated as a success of counter-insurgency, how the Bush administration's decision to send more troops, rather than withdraw, saved Iraq from civil war, chaos, anarchy and even genocide. General Petraeus has hitched his career to the idea. President Bush claims it as an example of his self-described steeliness. A phalanx of American diplomats and senior officers cite it as the underpinning of their narrative: that after many years, we finally figured out how to wage these kinds of wars. In other words, how to win.

I always thought that was exaggerated and perhaps not even true. Far more important than the surge was the revolt in Sunni regions like Anbar Province against the insurgents. A powerful Shiite cleric named Muqtada al-Sadr also ordered his men to lay down their arms around this time, and that stopped a lot of fighting, too. As much as strategy, there was a lot of luck in reversing fortunes of the insurgency – few of them our own doing – and that was especially the case in this town, Thuluyah.

In fact, change there began with a blurry picture.

I was always struck by the way men in Thuluyah liked to cling to pictures

like artifacts. These pictures weren't family portraits, though. There was certainly no moment of tranquility. They were gory pictures and they chronicled the trail of blood that insurgents charted during their reign in Thuluyah. Men seemed to cling to them in macabre fascination, shocked at how grotesque the violence grew.

One of these pictures showed the head of a traffic policeman impaled on a metal stake near a bridge. For four days, it stayed there. His family was too afraid to take it down. Soon after, Ibrahim Saleh, a police lieutenant, was kidnapped. It was Ramadan, Islam's most sacred month that once marked a time of truce. After three days of negotiations, his body was returned to his family. His hands were bound with electric wire. There were burns to his legs and genitals. Ibrahim's head was gone.

By this time, it had been three years of fighting since the father had killed his son. For a long time, residents had often tacitly accepted killings of people insurgents deemed collaborators and spies. But the killing of this guy Ibrahim seemed to go too far. He was loved in the town. His family was good. And all of a sudden, the town had enough.

In a matter of weeks, the tide turned against the armed groups. Residents stopped providing militants shelter. They pleaded for police to return to their jobs. Tribal leaders re-exerted themselves. And most importantly, the preacher I've been talking about, Mullah Nadhim, turned against his allies and denounced them from his mosque.

"Al-Qaeda must depart," he declared. He soon emerged as a leader of an American-backed militia of former fighters, helping cripple the group with intelligence that only a convert could provide. A year later, only a dozen or so fighters remained. The rest were vanquished by the U.S. military, police and Mullah Nadhim's men.

After years of fighting, this preacher told me that he had come to realize the insurgency was failing to create a balance of power with Shiites. Nor was it defending the interests of the Sunni community. Even today, he defends al-Qaeda's ideology. "A good project," he once called it to me, as we ate lunch together. But in practice, he said, it had only managed to turn sentiments against him and his notion of jihad. "We eventually entered a dark tunnel with no light at the end," was the way he put it.

He nodded to me, contrite but confident.

"The choice that we had made," he said, "just didn't bear fruit."

I'm often struck by how the war in Iraq was said to have been carried out for the highest of aims – bringing democracy, all this talk of freedom and liberty – and how base and even vulgar it often turned out to be. Loyalties were fickle, alliances were convenient. Partners were courted, then deserted, in a project that, in the end, became a question of stopping the violence, at all costs. That's not a bad thing. So many had died at that point. But to claim success in anything else – say a legitimate government, the creation of just and effective institutions, better lives – would be a lie. And this was a war that had far too many lies – the ones we told others and the ones we told ourselves.

"THIS WAS A WAR THAT HAD FAR TOO MANY LIES -- THE ONES WE TOLD OTHERS AND THE ONES WE TOLD OURSELVES"

Mullah Nadhim, that cleric I talked about, maybe should have known that.

In 2008, this preacher was a man about town, having gone from critic to insurgent to American ally.

Crowds now spilled outside the doors at his family's mosque, in rapt attention at his thunderous sermons. He led the council that oversaw the hundreds of armed men gathered in the American-backed militia fighting the insurgents. He was anything but bashful in suggesting himself as a possible candidate for parliament. The simple mention of his name, Mullah Nadhim, ensured passage through the numerous checkpoints created in the fight against al-Qaeda. Here was the word he used with me in describing those tribal leaders who had ruled Thuluyah soon after the invasion: "Limited."

Then Iraqi security forces arrested him the next year on charges he deemed political. The Americans had once embraced Mullah Nadhim. Now, in the words of a military spokesman, they considered his arrest "a matter for the government of Iraq." In public, the prime minister called for his release. In private, one of his senior aides, with a wry grin, said he had once asked Mullah Nadhim how many people he had killed while a leader of al-Qaeda. Four months would pass before Mullah Nadhim was freed from a prison in Tikrit, near Hussein's former hometown.

Celebratory gunfire greeted him as a 12-vehicle convoy of politicians, officers and tribal leaders, sirens blaring, escorted him home. His enemies joined hundreds of others at his manicured villa to pay their respects.

But even then, it was clear to me that Mullah Nadhim no longer represented the power that he once did.

I remember a soldier's question at the outskirts of town.

"Mullah who?" he asked me.

In his reception room, Mullah Nadhim once displayed a picture of himself with a sniper rifle, surrounded by Iraqi police, insurgents turned American allies and a U.S. soldier, smiling broadly. When I met him after his release, he had put it in a folder and tucked it in a cluttered drawer. Here was what he said of his former allies now: "The Americans have no credibility, none at all. If anyone tries to work with them, I'm going to show them the picture and tell them, 'This is what happens when you deal with the Americans. Don't be deceived by them, don't let them exploit you.'" As for his own alliance with them, he explained, "We had no other choice."

Mullah Nadhim said he no longer had ambitions for parliament. "Politics require the art of lying," he explained to me. He even seemed to acknowledge his own rise and just as precipitous fall. "If we talk about a strongman these days," he admitted, "there is none." "Order," he said to me, " has brought an end to the law of the jungle."
By order, he meant those tribal leaders, the same men who ordered the father to kill his son, and that order "cannot be changed."

I've covered Iraq for eight years now, even longer if you count trips there in 1998 and 2002. It's been a long haul, and I've often asked myself why I keep going back.
I think I asked the question again the other night after I did a program on Wisconsin Public Radio. Caller after caller said we should leave Iraq, that we had spent too much, sacrificed too much to stay any longer. I wanted to argue the contrary, but not in the way most might. I don't know that a longer military presence there, that more money spent in Iraq will make things any better. In the long run, I suspect they probably won't. We've made a mess of it so far. But even if we withdraw, even if we quit spending money, I still think we have an obligation to make a moral reckoning of what we've done. The United States started a war, and we have to recognize its consequences, good and bad. We have to take responsibility for our actions, and I don't think we have yet.

Putting it another way, I think I stay in Iraq because part of me wants to understand what it was all for. There have been so many lies over so many years when it comes to the story there, starting with the whole search for weapons of mass destruction. Saddam never had anything to do with Osama bin Laden, however much argument to the contrary. Al-Qaeda only came to Iraq after we helped bring them there. It is true that Saddam is gone now, and Saddam was one of the world's more sinister dictators. But what price did Iraq have to pay for him to go. Or, more bluntly, again, was it worth it.

I often asked myself that question as I returned to this town time and again.

There was a flower I would see when I did return. It was called the mirabilis jalapa. Near the town's elegant villas, with well-kept lawns and vineyards, the lovely, fuchsia blossoms of the mirabilis jalapa sometimes grow wild. They are known as the four o'clock flower, and they are renowned for their ability to stay underground, lost to any garden for so long that they are eventually forgotten, only to sprout again when conditions change. On those days I returned after Mullah Nadhim's fall, they were blossoming near a house of one of the tribal leaders.

"These six years are like a rain cloud that arrives in summer," he told me. He spoke slowly, with a quiet sense of authority that comes with the expectation of being obeyed. "It comes, and just as quickly, it's gone."

Here was how another tribal leader put it. "Right now, praise God, we have the first word again in Thuluyah," he told me. "Right now, anyone who has a problem comes to the sheikh to seek a solution."

In other words, 2010 felt a lot like 2003, my first visit there, when these same tribal leaders presided over a Biblical execution.

A footnote to the war, as incidental as it was forgettable, that first American military operation back in 2003 wrecked and remade Thuluyah. Hundreds were killed, farms turned to desert and unrequited vengeance prevails. "Thuluyah's suffering was part of Iraq's suffering," lamented Mullah Nadhim, the cleric. Seven years later, though, Thuluyah is what it was when Saddam fell, the chain of events the Americans unleashed bringing it back to where it started. As the Americans leave, the men I met there gathered for lunch at a friend's house. They had the same question I did: What was it all for?

The war never had to happen, one of them told me. It was all a needless waste. "Everything has its price, but as a town," he said, "we paid a very high price."

I spent much of last year there, and two of the pieces were part of the entry that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2010. The story fascinated but I always thought there was something more to it. I find myself still haunted by the death of that informer all those years ago. Not because of what he did. But because of what his father was forced to do. And how the smallest of interventions unleashed such seismic events. I think it's told me something perhaps more important, too. The war is not over. It will not end for a long time. As a former ambassador once put it to me, we're only in the first act of a play that will last many acts, and we'll be dealing with its repercussions for a long, long time.

Especially these days, there's a sense of the linear in American about Iraq – we invaded the country, we occupied it, we defeated the insurgency and now we're leaving. One thing I can tell you from living there is that there's nothing linear about it.

And again I return to this town of Thuluyah, where there is a story often told about the unforgiving ways of the desert. In one telling of the tale, a Bedouin's father was killed, inciting a vendetta. Forty years had passed, and the Bedouin had yet to exact his revenge. Why, this Bedouin was asked. Laisa baad, he replied. "Not yet."

Not so long ago, I went back to the house of the father who was forced to kill his son. All these years later, the father was understandably still bitter and he recalled the execution with anger. "What happened has happened," he said. His eyes were steely, his body taut. "I don't want to turn back the pages of the past," he said. The father was never rude openly. But his anger smoldered, enough to understand that I wasn't welcome.

His son, Salah, intervened and apologized.

"Forgive my father," he said. "He is very angry at the past."

The son walked with me to the road outside. His hands shook, and his body trembled. Unshaven, he nervously smoked cigarettes. He blurted out words, in the kind of testimony of someone who has yet to be heard. "He is my brother," he said, "from my flesh, from my blood. None of it had to happen."

After Sabah's death, his father and his brother, both of whom fired the shots that killed Sabah, fled the town. While they were gone, the father's mother died, buried without them. They would not return to Thuluyah for three years. "This was the injustice of Thuluyah and its tribal leaders," the brother told me. "Go to the main street and ask anyone, and he will tell you that an injustice was committed."

The cemetery where Sabah is buried next to his grandmother lies down a road outside town, past irrigation canals and olive trees coated with dust. It is washed of color. There is no shade to give respite from the sun. Save for wind and sound of distant cars, it is quiet, which I thought made it feel even more vulnerable. "I have grief and that grief will stay until the last minute of my life," his brother told me, as we wandered around it. Only three broken bricks scarred white by bird droppings marked his brother's grave. Scrub brush, bearing thorns, grows nearby. "We still haven't put the tombstone," he said softly. "We haven't had time."

It was the last time I would visit this town, a place called Thuluyah, a footnote of the war. And I remembered my last image was of this informer's brother standing with his hands clasped tightly behind his back. One of them was balled in a fist.

Not yet, I thought, as I looked at him. It's still early.

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