

FALLUJA

GoldType

APRIL 11, 2004

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ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
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The Author

JO WILDING is a 29-year-old activist, writer and trainee lawyer from Bristol, UK. She first went to Iraq in August 2001 with Voices in the Wilderness to break the sanctions as an act of civil disobedience and to get a perspective on what was happening for the purpose of advocacy work in the UK. In November 2002 she forced the UK Customs and Excise to take her to court for breaking the sanctions. It was the first time the legality of the sanctions had been considered directly by a British court.

She returned to Iraq as an independent observer in February 2003 and stayed for the month before the war and the first 11 days of the bombing, before being expelled by the Iraqi foreign ministry as part of a purge of independent foreigners.

Her writing about the situation for ordinary people in Iraq was published around the world: the Guardian online, the New Zealand Herald, Counterpunch (US and internet), Australian radio and in Japan, Korea and Pakistan.

Before going to Iraq, she worked as a mental health advocate for Bristol Mind and in the Immigration Department at Bristol Law Centre, as well as studying part time for a law diploma. She completed the diploma in June 2003 and will start studying for bar qualification in September 2004.

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Trucks, oil tankers, tanks are burning on the highway east to Falluja. A stream of boys and men goes to and from a lorry that's not burnt, stripping it bare. We turn onto the back roads through Abu Ghraib, Nuha and Ahrar singing in Arabic, past the vehicles full of people and a few possessions, heading the other way, past the improvised refreshment posts along the way where boys throw food through the windows into the bus for us and for the people inside still inside Falluja.

The bus is following a car with the nephew of a local sheikh and a guide who has contacts with the Mujahedin and has cleared this with them. The reason I'm on the bus is that a journalist I knew turned up at my door at

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about 11 at night telling me things were desperate in Falluja, he'd been bringing out children with their limbs blown off, the US soldiers were going around telling people to leave by dusk or be killed, but then when people fled with whatever they could carry, they were being stopped at the US military checkpoint on the edge of town and not let out, trapped, watching the sun go down.

He said aid vehicles and the media were being turned away. He said there was some medical aid that needed to go in and there was a better chance of it getting there with foreigners, westerners, to get through the american checkpoints. The rest of the way was secured with the armed groups who control the roads we'd travel on. We'd take in the medical supplies, see what else we could do to help and then use the bus to bring out people who needed to leave.

I'll spare you the whole decision making process, all the questions we all asked ourselves and each other, and you can spare me the accusations of madness, but what it came down to was this: if I don't do it, who will? Either way, we arrive in one piece.

We pile the stuff in the corridor and the boxes are torn open straight-away, the blankets most welcomed. It's not a hospital at all but a clinic, a private doctor's surgery treating people free since air strikes destroyed the

town's main hospital. Another has been improvised in a car garage. There's no anaesthetic. The blood bags are in a drinks fridge and the doctors warm them up under the hot tap in an unhygienic toilet.

Screaming women come in, praying, slapping their chests and faces. Ummy, my mother, one cries. I hold her until Maki, a consultant and acting director of the clinic, brings me to the bed where a child of about ten is lying with a bullet wound to the head. A smaller child is being treated for a similar injury in the next bed. A US sniper hit them and their grandmother as they left their home to flee Falluja.

The lights go out, the fan stops and in the sudden quiet someone holds up the flame of a cigarette lighter for the doctor to carry on operating by. The electricity to the town has been cut off for days and when the generator runs out of petrol they just have to manage till it comes back on. Dave quickly donates his torch. The children are not going to live.

"Come," says Maki and ushers me alone into a room where an old woman has just had an abdominal bullet wound stitched up. Another in her leg is being dressed, the bed under her foot soaked with blood, a white flag still clutched in her hand and the same story: I was leaving my home to go to Baghdad when I was hit by a US sniper. Some of the town is held by US marines, other parts by the local fighters. Their homes are in the US

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controlled area and they are adamant that the snipers were US marines.

Snipers are causing not just carnage but also the paralysis of the ambulance and evacuation services. The biggest hospital after the main one was bombed is in US territory and cut off from the clinic by snipers. The ambulance has been repaired four times after bullet damage. Bodies are lying in the streets because no one can go to collect them without being shot.

Some said we were mad to come to Iraq; quite a few said we were completely insane to come to Falluja and now there are people telling me that getting in the back of the pick up to go past the snipers and get sick and injured people is the craziest thing they've ever seen. I know, though, that if we don't, no one will.

He's holding a white flag with a red crescent on; I don't know his name. The men we pass wave us on when the driver explains where we're going. The silence is ferocious in the no man's land between the pick up at the edge of the Mujahedin territory, which has just gone from our sight around the last corner and the marines' line beyond the next wall; no birds, no music, no indication that anyone is still living until a gate opens opposite and a woman comes out, points.

We edge along to the hole in the wall where we can see the car, spent mortar shells around it. The feet are visible, crossed, in the gutter. I think

he's dead already. The snipers are visible too, two of them on the corner of the building. As yet I think they can't see us so we need to let them know we're there.

"Hello," I bellow at the top of my voice. "Can you hear me?" They must. They're about 30 metres from us, maybe less, and it's so still you could hear the flies buzzing at fifty paces. I repeat myself a few times, still without reply, so decide to explain myself a bit more.

"We are a medical team. We want to remove this wounded man. Is it OK for us to come out and get him? Can you give us a signal that it's OK?"

I'm sure they can hear me but they're still not responding. Maybe they didn't understand it all, so I say the same again. Dave yells too in his US accent. I yell again. Finally I think I hear a shout back. Not sure, I call again.

"Hello."

"Yeah."

"Can we come out and get him?"

"Yeah," Slowly, our hands up, we go out. The black cloud that rises to greet us carries with it a hot, sour smell. Solidified, his legs are heavy. I leave them to Rana and Dave, our guide lifting under his hips. The Kalashnikov is attached by sticky blood to his hair and hand and we don't want it with us so I put my foot on it as I pick up his shoulders and his blood falls out

through the hole in his back. We heave him into the pick up as best we can and try to outrun the flies.

I suppose he was wearing flip flops because he's barefoot now, no more than 20 years old, in imitation Nike pants and a blue and black striped football shirt with a big 28 on the back. As the orderlies form the clinic pull the young fighter off the pick up, yellow fluid pours from his mouth and they flip him over, face up, the way into the clinic clearing in front of them, straight up the ramp into the makeshift morgue.

We wash the blood off our hands and get in the ambulance. There are people trapped in the other hospital who need to go to Baghdad. Siren screaming, lights flashing, we huddle on the floor of the ambulance, passports and ID cards held out the windows. We pack it with people, one with his chest taped together and a drip, one on a stretcher, legs jerking violently so I have to hold them down as we wheel him out, lifting him over steps.

The hospital is better able to treat them than the clinic but hasn't got enough of anything to sort them out properly and the only way to get them to Baghdad on our bus, which means they have to go to the clinic. We're crammed on the floor of the ambulance in case it's shot at. Nisareen, a woman doctor about my age, can't stop a few tears once we're out.

The doctor rushes out to meet me: “Can you go to fetch a lady, she is pregnant and she is delivering the baby too soon?”

Azzam is driving, Ahmed in the middle directing him and me by the window, the visible foreigner, the passport. Something scatters across my hand, simultaneous with the crashing of a bullet through the ambulance, some plastic part dislodged, flying through the window.

We stop, turn off the siren, keep the blue light flashing, wait, eyes on the silhouettes of men in US marine uniforms on the corners of the buildings. Several shots come. We duck, get as low as possible and I can see tiny red lights whipping past the window, past my head. Some, it’s hard to tell, are hitting the ambulance I start singing. What else do you do when someone’s shooting at you? A tyre bursts with an enormous noise and a jerk of the vehicle.

I’m outraged. We’re trying to get to a woman who’s giving birth without any medical attention, without electricity, in a city under siege, in a clearly marked ambulance, and you’re shooting at us. How dare you?

How dare you?

Azzam grabs the gear stick and gets the ambulance into reverse, another tyre bursting as we go over the ridge in the centre of the road, the shots still coming as we flee around the corner. I carry on singing. The wheels are

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scraping, burst rubber burning on the road.

The men run for a stretcher as we arrive and I shake my head. They spot the new bullet holes and run to see if we're OK. Is there any other way to get to her, I want to know. La, maaku tariq. There is no other way. They say we did the right thing. They say they've fixed the ambulance four times already and they'll fix it again but the radiator's gone and the wheels are buckled and she's still at home in the dark giving birth alone. I let her down.

We can't go out again. For one thing there's no ambulance and besides it's dark now and that means our foreign faces can't protect the people who go out with us or the people we pick up. Maki is the acting director of the place. He says he hated Saddam but now he hates the Americans more.

We take off the blue gowns as the sky starts exploding somewhere beyond the building opposite. Minutes later a car roars up to the clinic. I can hear him screaming before I can see that there's no skin left on his body. He's burnt from head to foot. For sure there's nothing they can do. He'll die of dehydration within a few days.

Another man is pulled from the car onto a stretcher. Cluster bombs, they say, although it's not clear whether they mean one or both of them. We set

off walking to Mr Yasser's house, waiting at each corner for someone to check the street before we cross. A ball of fire falls from a plane, splits into smaller balls of bright white lights. I think they're cluster bombs, because cluster bombs are in the front of my mind, but they vanish, just magnesium flares, incredibly bright but short-lived, giving a flash picture of the town from above.

Yasser asks us all to introduce ourselves. I tell him I'm training to be a lawyer. One of the other men asks whether I know about international law. They want to know about the law on war crimes, what a war crime is. I tell them I know some of the Geneva Conventions, that I'll bring some information next time I come and we can get someone to explain it in Arabic.

We bring up the matter of Nayoko. This group of fighters has nothing to do with the ones who are holding the Japanese hostages, but while they're thanking us for what we did this evening, we talk about the things Nayoko did for the street kids, how much they loved her. They can't promise anything but that they'll try and find out where she is and try to persuade the group to let her and the others go. I don't suppose it will make any difference. They're busy fighting a war in Falluja. They're unconnected with the other group. But it can't hurt to try. The planes are above us

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all night so that as I doze I

forget I'm not on a long distance flight, the constant bass note of an unmanned reconnaissance drone overlaid with the frantic thrash of jets and the dull beat of helicopters and interrupted by the explosions. In the morning I make balloon dogs, giraffes and elephants for the little one, Abdullah, Aboudi, who's clearly distressed by the noise of the aircraft and explosions. I blow bubbles which he follows with his eyes. Finally, finally, I score a smile. The twins, thirteen years old, laugh too, one of them an ambulance driver, both said to be handy with a Kalashnikov.

The doctors look haggard in the morning. None has slept more than a couple of hours a night for a week. One as had only eight hours of sleep in the last seven days, missing the funerals of his brother and aunt because he was needed at the hospital.

"The dead we cannot help," Jassim said. "I must worry about the injured."

We go again, Dave, Rana and me, this time in a pick up. There are some sick people close to the marines' line who need evacuating. No one dares come out of their house because the marines are on top of the buildings shooting at anything that moves. Saad fetches us a white flag and tells us not to worry, he's checked and secured the road, no Mujahedin will fire at

us, that peace is upon us, this eleven year old child, his face covered with a keffiyeh, but for is bright brown eyes, his AK47 almost as tall as he is.

We shout again to the soldiers, hold up the flag with a red crescent sprayed onto it. Two come down from the building, cover this side and Rana mutters, “Allahu akbar. Please nobody take a shot at them.” We jump down and tell them we need to get some sick people from the houses and they want Rana to go and bring out the family from the house whose roof they’re on. Thirteen women and children are still inside, in one room, without food and water for the last 24 hours.

“We’re going to be going through soon clearing the houses,” the senior one says. “What does that mean, clearing the houses?”

“Going into every one searching for weapons.” He’s checking his watch, can’t tell me what will start when, of course, but there’s going to be air strikes in support. “If you’re going to do tis you gotta do it soon.”

First we go down the street we were sent to. There’s a man, face down, in a white dishdasha, a small round red stain on his back. We run to him. Again the flies ave got there first. Dave is at his shoulders, I’m by his knees and as we reach to roll him onto the stretcher Dave’s hand goes through his chest, through the cavity left by the bullet that entered so neatly through his back and blew his heart out.

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There's no weapon in his hand. Only when we arrive, his sons come out, crying, shouting. He was unarmed, they scream. He was unarmed. He just went out the gate and they shot him. None of them have dared come out since. No one had dared come to get his body, horrified, terrified, forced to violate the traditions of treating the body immediately. They couldn't have known we were coming so it's inconceivable that anyone came out and retrieved a weapon but left the body.

He was unarmed, 55 years old, shot in the back. We cover his face, carry him to the pick up. There's nothing to cover his body with. The sick woman is helped out of the house, the little girls around her hugging cloth bags to their bodies, whispering, "Baba. Baba." Daddy. Shaking, they let us go first, hands up, around the corner, then we usher them to the cab of the pick up, shielding their heads so they can't see him, the cuddly fat man stiff in the back.

The people seem to pour out of the houses now in the hope we can escort them safely out of the line of fire, kids, women, men, anxiously asking us whether they can all go, or only the women and children. We go to ask. The young marine tells us that men of fighting age can't leave. What's fighting age, I want to know. He contemplates. Anything under forty five. No lower limit.

It appals me that all those men would be trapped in a city which is about to be destroyed. Not all of them are fighters, not all are armed. It's going to happen out of the view of the world, out of sight of the media, because most of the media in Falluja is embedded with the marines or turned away at the outskirts. Before we can pass the message on, two explosions scatter the crowd in the side street back into their houses.

Rana's with the marines evacuating the family from the house they're occupying. The pick up isn't back yet. The families are hiding behind their walls. We wait, because there's nothing else we can do. We wait in no man's land. The marines, at least, are watching us through binoculars; maybe the local fighters are too.

I've got a disappearing hanky in my pocket so while I'm sitting like a lemon, nowhere to go, gunfire and explosions aplenty all around, I make the hanky disappear, reappear, disappear. It's always best, I think, to seem completely unthreatening and completely unconcerned, so no one worries about you enough to shoot. We can't wait too long though. Rana's been gone ages. We have to go and get her to hurry. There's a young man in the group. She's talked them into letting him leave too.

A man wants to use his police car to carry some of the people, a couple of elderly ones who can't walk far, the smallest children. It's missing a door.

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Who knows if he was really a police car or the car was reappropriated and just ended up there? It didn't matter if it got more people out faster. They creep from their houses, huddle by the wall, follow us out, their hands up too, and walk up the street clutching babies, bags, each other.

The pick up gets back and we shovel as many onto it as we can as an ambulance arrives from somewhere. A young man waves from the doorway of what's left of a house, his upper body bare, a blood soaked bandage around his arm, probably a fighter but it makes no difference once someone is wounded and unarmed. Getting the dead isn't essential. Like the doctor said, the dead don't need help, but if it's easy enough then we will. Since we're already OK with the soldiers and the ambulance is here, we run down to fetch them in. It's important in Islam to bury the body straightaway.

The ambulance follows us down. The soldiers start shouting in English at us for it to stop, pointing guns. It's moving fast. We're all yelling, signalling for it to stop but it seems to take forever for the driver to hear and see us. It stops. It stops, before they open fire. We haul them onto the stretchers and run, shove them in the back. Rana squeezes in the front with the wounded man and Dave and I crouch in the back beside the bodies. He says he had allergies as a kid and hasn't got much sense of smell. I

wish, retrospectively, for childhood allergies, and stick my head out the window.

The bus is going to leave, taking the injured people back to Baghdad, the man with the burns, one of the women who was shot in the jaw and shoulder by a sniper, several others. Rana says she's staying to help. Dave and I don't hesitate: we're staying too. "If I don't do it, who will?" has become an accidental motto and I'm acutely aware after the last foray how many people, how many women and children, are still in their houses either because they've got nowhere to go, because they're scared to go out of the door or because they've chosen to stay.

To begin with it's agreed, then Azzam says we have to go. He hasn't got contacts with every armed group, only with some. There are different issues to square with each one. We need to get these people back to Baghdad as quickly as we can. If we're kidnapped or killed it will cause even more problems, so it's better that we just get on the bus and leave and come back with him as soon as possible. It hurts to climb onto the bus when the doctor has just asked us to go and evacuate some more people. I hate the fact that a qualified medic can't travel in the ambulance but I can, just because I look like the sniper's sister or one of his mates, but that's the way it is today and the way it was yesterday and I feel like a traitor for

leaving, but I can't see where I've got a choice. It's a war now and as alien as it is to me to do what I'm told, for once I've got to.

Jassim is scared. He harangues Mohammed constantly, tries to pull him out of the driver's seat while we're moving. The woman with the gunshot wound is on the back seat, the man with the burns in front of her, being fanned with cardboard from the empty boxes, his intravenous drips swinging from the rail along the ceiling of the bus. It's hot. It must be unbearable for him.

Saad comes onto the bus to wish us well for the journey. He shakes Dave's hand and then mine. I hold his in both of mine and tell him "Dir balak," take care, as if I could say anything more stupid to a pre-teen Mujahedin with an AK47 in his other hand, and our eyes meet and stay fixed, his full of fire and fear.

Can't I take him away? Can't I take him somewhere he can be a child? Can't I make him a balloon giraffe and give him some drawing pens and tell him not to forget to brush his teeth? Can't I find the person who put the rifle in the hands of that little boy? Can't I tell someone about what that does to a child? Do I have to leave him here where there are heavily armed men all around him and lots of them are not on his side, however many sides there are in all of this? And of course I do. I do have to leave

him, like child soldiers everywhere.

The way back is tense, the bus almost getting stuck in a dip in the sand, people escaping in anything, even piled on the trailer of a tractor, lines of cars and pick ups and buses ferrying people to the dubious sanctuary of Baghdad, lines of men in vehicles queuing to get back into the city having got their families to safety, either to fight or to help evacuate more people. The driver, Jassim, the father, ignores Azzam and takes a different road so that suddenly we're not following the lead car and we're on a road that's controlled by a different armed group than the ones which know us.

A crowd of men waves guns to stop the bus. Somehow they apparently believe that there are American soldiers on the bus, as if they wouldn't be in tanks or helicopters, and there are men getting out of their cars with shouts of "Sahafa Amreeki," American journalists. The passengers shout out of the windows, "Ana min Falluja," I am from Falluja. Gunmen run onto the bus and see that it's true, there are sick and injured and old people, Iraqis, and then relax, wave us on. We stop in Abu Ghraib and swap seats, foreigners in

the front, Iraqis less visible, headscarves off so we look more western. The American soldiers are so happy to see westerners they don't mind too much about the Iraqis with us, search the men and the bus, leave the

women unsearched because there are no women soldiers to search us. Mohammed keeps asking me if things are going to be OK.

“Al-melaach wiyana, “ I tell him. The angels are with us. He laughs.

And then we're in Baghdad, delivering them to the hospitals, Nuha in tears as they take the burnt man off groaning and whimpering. She puts her arms around me and asks me to be her friend. I make her feel less isolated, she says, less alone.

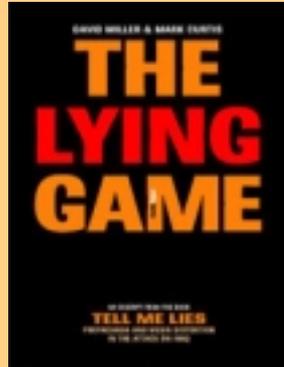
And the satellite news says the cease-fire is holding and George Bush says to the troops on Easter Sunday that, “I know what we're doing in Iraq is right.” Shooting unarmed men in the back outside their family home is right. Shooting grandmothers with white flags is right? Shooting at women and children who are fleeing their homes is right? Firing at ambulances is right?

Well George, I know too now. I know what it looks like when you brutalise people so much that they've nothing left to lose. I know what it looks like when an operation is being done without anaesthetic because the hospitals are destroyed or under sniper fire and the city's under siege and aid isn't getting in properly. I know what it sounds like too. I know what it looks like when tracer bullets are passing your head, even though you're in an ambulance. I know what it looks like when a man's chest is

no longer inside him and what it smells like and I know what it looks like when his wife and children pour out of his house.

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