

Story for performance #823
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Source: Sabrina Tavernise and James Glanz, 'Guards' shots not provoked, Iraq concludes', *New York Times online*, 21/09/07.

Tags: [animals](#), [food](#), [workplace](#), [child/parent](#)
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She worked the long day and night shifts at the counter of the SALAAM DINER, where trucks still came by from time to time. The Diner stood, like always, alone by the long road and the ONLY CERTIFICATED EATERY FOR 100 KILOMETRES, at least if you believed the rotting billboards that stood out amongst the trees. SALAAM's was located at a place in the forest where the shadows were done very realistic but not put on right, falling away from the trees in bold lines but spilled in different directions, and twitching nervously, constantly jumping. The forest itself was full of camouflaged soldiers, and some freaky-looking almost-formless creatures that did not have names and which smelled of *Just Because* the new fragrance from Akira Kurosawa and Keira Knightley. No one knew why. There was something about the fragrance that appealed to them evidently and they seemed to have a regular supply.

Years before, the diner was busy. There were day-trippers, traders, business parties and SAGA tourists, Serbian guys driving trucks loaded with computer parts and VW Campers full of tanned carefree Australian mercenaries in search of the perfect war. These days though, there was really not so much traffic at all and many times the hardest part of Lisa's job was staying awake. That was something they taught you on Training Day 3: Means of Wakefulness, but that training seemed hard to put into practice when you had to spend 7,200 hours solid on a single unbroken shift in fluorescent light without a single customer.

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At night the forest outside of SALAAM's seemed to be composed more of buildings than trees and you could see lights in some of the buildings in which apparently some people were still living. The branches of the trees were alive with scurrying things.

Round midnight some soldiers came in and Lisa served Strong Beers and listened in to their bullshit dialogues on love and happiness, sports results and Home Sweet Home. Later the soldiers were getting drunk and arguing with one of the creatures that came in for cigarettes, about the difference between Arabic and American Robots. There was something innate in the difference, the soldiers maintained, something to do with the firmware, something deeper than code but the creature was sceptical, shrugging the place where its shoulders should probably have been. At the height of the argument the night outside burst with a sudden stab of sunshine from North, East and West all at the same time making shadows split over the leafy corpse-strewn ground, the landscape of the car-park like a temporary sun-dial for schizophrenics.

After that the argument subsided, and soon enough there was something weird with the audio and the soldiers reluctantly went out to search the forest again and the creature slipped out too, leaving a trail of something that looked like badly pixelated dust.

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What felt like 5,235 hours later another customer came in and Lisa prised herself out of a daydream to serve him. The guy had a fat head and a tattoo of Tetris Bricks on his face as was the fashion in Blackpool then and he ordered Falafel and Fries and she microwaved it home-style with a Jackson Pollock of Ketchup and Mayo on top.

The guy made no conversation but at his request she flipped the TV off Kev Spatula's Head Injury Marathon to a re-run pornographic breakfast TV show called Crack of Dawn hosted by Dawn Wendy Lomax. It seemed strange at first, watching breakfast TV in the middle of the night, but by the time they had reached the weather and the desultory money shots it was all making sense somehow, the guy finishing up his food and Lomax wiping the come out of her eyes.

'You have kids?' The guy said to Lisa.

'No', she said.

'I got three', he said. 'You want to see a picture?'

'Sure', she said.

'Gimme a pen.'

She took the biro from her overalls and passed it over, fingers almost touching his on the counter-top.

'Thanks.' he said.

He took a napkin and started to draw while she watched, looking from the tip of the biro to his fixated expression. When it got too much to bear she looked away, to outside where the distant bombing had made fires in the depths of the forest. Her eyes scanned the empty road for ages and by the time she looked back the picture was done—a barbaric scratching of lines, tears and blobs in the flesh of the napkin through which three stick figure humans could just be discerned; triangles for bodies, stick arms, stick legs and sad tangled hair hung in matted scratches from the grinning circles of their heads.

'All girls', he said, 'I love them. This one Istanbul. This one London, this one dead.'

Lisa guessed that these were not names and resisted the temptation to query on daughter number three, mainly because of what she learned on Training Day Six: The Customer Is Always Right.

'Nice', she said.

'They are what I live for', he answered and he folded the napkin back into his wallet.

Later he wanted to know if there was anywhere he could sleep. She said no, not legally, but if he wanted to park his truck up out back and sleep in it no one would likely notice or care. He thanked her in his language, paid and went out. She heard the truck start and the beeping sound as he backed it to the waste ground out back of SALAAM's.

63,892 hours passed. She cleaned the counter, turned the TV back to the Head Injury Marathon where Spatula was whacking his face repeatedly into a plate glass window, jeered on by the minor-celebrity crowd.

Light flickered in the 'night' outside once more. The shadows moved erratically beyond the Diner, hanging from the trees and the buildings in all directions then shifting then stopping, moving and then, now, not moving again.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tim Etchells.