

## *Feeling Scarlet*

By Leah Bott

There I was, standing next to the concrete bunker, smiling for the camera while sweat dripped down my back and came to rest on my DCU belt. I look at that picture and I can still feel the cloying heat even though it's been two months. I toss it on the bed. It's been tough since I've been back. Nothing feels right. I don't feel right. The world I left isn't the world I came back to. This place seems saturated with color, like I'm standing in front of those landscape backdrops photographers use, only the backdrop changes as I walk down the street. I have to go to the grocery store. It is a small chore, but it's the little things that get to me these days. Eric was blown up at a market in Al Amarah. I can't help make the connection as I'm getting dressed. I don't like going to stores anymore. The lights are too bright, the aisles are too narrow and there are too many people crowding around. Invading my personal space. Defiling my cocoon. But I can't think about that now. My mom is downstairs waiting. I realize that I've stopped in the middle of pulling on my jeans, so I finish. I look at the shirts hanging in my closet and realize I'm going to have to buy some new clothes. None of this stuff fits me anymore. It's the right size, but I'm just not comfortable wearing it anymore. Bare arms and a peeking midriff make me feel exposed. Naked. Vulnerable. I don't like feeling vulnerable. Mom comes upstairs to see if I'm ready. I grab the first long-sleeved shirt I can find and yank it over my head pushing my arms through the tubes. Almost ready. It's chilly outside today, or at least it was when I went into the backyard with the dogs to smoke and watch them chasing each other around. I scan the rack for a sweater, but they are all dirty because of my constant need to cover up. I would rather be warm and sweaty

than walk around with my arms showing. I grab my DCU coat at the bottom of the stairs. The only coat I own. It's comforting in a way. It reminds me of the camp. I hated wearing this thing when I was there. Now that I'm back, it's more like a security blanket, only it doesn't protect me from anything. It didn't over there either. The dogs are already outside. Guarding the perimeter while we go out to bring back food.

Mom drives because I can't handle traffic anymore. Even the cars get too close to me. She gives me a funny look and then shakes her head as we are getting in the car. I wasn't paying attention. Did she say something I didn't hear? Mom is worried about me. Hell, I'm worried about myself. I'm not sure why though. I've always been a survivor. Scarlet O'Hara is one of my heroes. Tough, resourceful, willing to do what it takes and whatever she had to stand, the good lord gave her strength to stand. I'm not feeling very Scarlet today though. Maybe I will feel a little more Scarlet tomorrow.

It's not a long drive, and the car feels warm. The sun's rays baking the fabric to just the right temperature if we were lizards sunning ourselves on a rock. I like the heat much more than I used to. It reminds me of how alive I felt. How my whole being reacted to the environment. The fertile crescent. The beginning of civilization. Even my hair and fingernails started growing like crazy.

I grab a cart when we walk in the door. It gives me something to lean on, hide behind, steady my shaking hands. They don't always shake. Just when I'm nervous or uncomfortable. I'm usually both when I'm out of the house. Mrs. McGillicuddy sees us walk in. She's standing in produce. A 100 year old battle-axe surrounded by the freshest tomatoes, cherry's and peaches from around the globe. The thought makes me smile inside, but it doesn't make it to my lips. I'm not holding it in, it just wasn't powerful

enough to make it through the gate. I'm nervous and my mind is darting from this thought to that. I don't see any watermelon or bananas. I remember seeing lots of watermelons and banana stands on street corners. We were supposed to eat lots of bananas for the potassium, but I always preferred raisins anyway.

Mom walks right up to her and the tomatoes, and I follow. They hug hello, then comes the inevitable, "you remember my daughter, Lisa?" Of course she does. Mrs. McGillicuddy eyes my jacket, and says she heard about my trip. Another smile starts inside that doesn't make it out. It sounds like I just returned from a cruise.

"How long were you gone Dear?" she asks.

Mom answers for me. She knows it's hard for me to talk about.

"16 months Hazel. 12 hour days, 7 days a week for 16 months! Can you imagine!"

"I lived on a farm for 30 years. I can imagine that and more." Hazel is not impressed, but the words come with a smile in her eyes, so I know she isn't being mean.

She's talking really loud and I notice that people are staring. I'm getting anxious so I start pushing the cart back and forth in a rocking motion. Mom makes her move. She can tell I don't want to be there anymore. We understand each other in a way we never have before. It's almost like thinking to each other. Mrs. McGillicuddy pats my arm. I try not to flinch.

"You are a very brave young woman." She tells me.

I don't feel very brave. I didn't do anything brave and I'm getting jumpy because a bunch of people in a grocery store are watching. Scarlet would have held her head high and walked in like she owned the place. Those staring people are really giving me the

creeps. Like snipers or suicide bombers. I know what she means though. It's because I didn't have to go. I volunteered, so I made the choice. It's crowded and we are holding up traffic. I smile awkwardly at her and nod. What are you supposed to say to that? I don't trust my voice to say anything. I can feel the tears welling up behind my eyes and pooling behind my lower lids. I manage to shake it off as we move on.

There isn't anyone else we have to stop and talk too, but it doesn't take long for the crowd to get to me. Pink puffy-faced children darting around my legs in produce, shuffling people in front of me-going too slow past the flour, insistent carts behind me-trying to rush me past the peanut butter before I've made up my mind. There is so much to choose. There aren't many places in the world you can have this kind of choice you know.

By the time we make it out of the third aisle, I can feel my heart thumping like automatic weapons fire, repeating bursts of staccato and then slowing and my throat is closing a little. I'm lightheaded. I must be turning grey because mom is giving me a look. We can leave if I want. I look at my list and realize I don't care about anything on it anymore so I shake my head yes. I can't take another 11 aisles of this. We maneuver our cart into a line. Good thing I've got something to hold on to. Mom remembers something she can't make dinner without, so she goes to get it while I hold our place in line. It's so crowded. A woman with 3 pre-teen kids gets in line behind me. The kids are reaching around me for sweets, magazines and flashlights. All wearing colors that are too bright for my eyes and flitting around like confused bumble bees in a garden. Grabbing and clutching. It takes me back to that orphanage I went to. What was the name of that orphanage? The kids were surrounding me, especially the boys, grabbing at

my hair. They had probably never seen a platinum blonde before. There I had a security team to keep them away and a car to sit in when I just needed to get away. Now I just have a cart to hold on to. Colors start to dance in front of my eyes, so I try to see through them. They are opaque. Scarlet would never react this way in a grocery store. My body is tensing. The tempo of my heartbeat is kicking it up another notch. A steady electronica beat. I heard once that if the base is too loud, then you are too weak. What was the name of that orphanage? It was the one we went too with the TV cameras and the state department guy. What was his name? Nice guy. A real person. Started with an A. One of the bee's bumps me from behind, the momentum of my body bumps my cart, which in turn, bumps the man in front of me. Bump. Bump. Bump. It clears my head for a moment. Alec. His name was Alec Lancaster. The man turns around to see which unconscionably rude person just banged his ankles. He's got a vague Vietnam look about him. Thin ruddy face, salt and pepper hair and beard. Lines on his face that suggest he's seen a few things in his life he'd rather not remember, but can't forget. Like Sam. He looks like Sam. Ex-Marine and a fine construction rep. Sam was in Vietnam. He told me one night in a bunker while waiting for the "all clear". I mumble an apology and try to look embarrassed, but I just feel sick. I want to leave, but mom isn't back and I can't seem to move, catted in between this gruff looking man and the brightly colored bee's behind me, so I look away instead. I wait a few moments, then flick my eyes back forward. The line hasn't moved and he's still looking at me. I'm caught. I don't look away though. I'm a survivor. Almost defiant as I meet his gaze. He sees something. Something registers. His face softens for an instant before he turns forward again. Not a condescending smile or an understanding nod, just less harsh.

The bee's are really getting at it now. The one who bumped me was pushed by her brother. Now they are pushing each other and their voices have invaded my space. Their mother doesn't seem to notice them. Buzz Buzz. Busy reading this week's People. Important things, people. Especially the beautiful ones. I can feel the bee bodies and voices surrounding me. I'm crawling out of my skin on the inside, but I'm invisible on the out. I'm not one of the beautiful people. The line starts to move. Vietnam is checking out with his five items. Where is mom? I move around to the side of the cart, still holding on so that I can put our items on the conveyor belt. Just like the conveyor belt at the Basrah International Airport we repaired, only narrower and in better working order. My knees are weak. I'm still feeling sick and lightheaded and I'm working slowly to keep the colors in front of my eyes from turning to black. I say it to myself to stay in the present. One can of soup on the belt. Two cans of soup on the belt. One basket of cherries on the belt. I can't hear the buzzing behind me anymore. I catch a glimpse of Queen Bee as I turn back to the cart. She is no longer reading about the beautiful people. All of her attention is now on me, and she doesn't look happy. What does she want from me? What did I do to her? I'm just putting food on a conveyor belt. I hear a sharp noise behind me, so I turn around, heart beat kicking up another notch. I feel like my feet are in quicksand. There is nothing solid below me and I can't move my legs. I'm hot and sweating and my breath is coming in short bursted gasps. If I start hyperventilating, I'm going to end up on the floor. I really don't want to be on the floor. Scarlet would never be on the floor in a place like this. Where is mom? Now the cashier is looking at me as if he wants something. What could he want? I try to reason it out. He's a cashier, so he wants groceries to scan. Can't he see I'm putting them on the belt? So what if I'm a

little slow. I'm getting panicky now-I've moved beyond the anxiety attack. The blackness moves in from my periphery, oozing into my field of vision-swallowing the colored lights. I try to calm my breath and grab harder onto the cart. I feel myself go limp and the blackness takes over. Then I'm back there again. Driving back from our weekly meeting at the Southern Refining Company. I'm hot and I've just heard the loudest noise in my life. It doesn't compare to a rock concert, jackhammer, or an airplane taking off. So loud, the percussion had its own shock wave. I'm upside down in a European Land Cruiser and the blood is rushing to my head. There is something in front of me, but I can't quite make out what it is. My eyes start to focus and I see that the front of the Land Cruiser is a jangled mess of scrap metal. My brain is still processing. We slowed down to go through a check point. Why weren't we still moving? We never stop at check points. Oh yeah, scrap metal for an engine and wheels are in the air. That's why we aren't moving. Where is that kid I saw walking around the gate house?

I yell for the security team leader. He should know what's going on. "J.D!" I think I'm yelling, but I can't really hear myself. That's when I notice how quiet it is. I can see things going on outside of the vehicle. Things that should be hurting my ears, but they aren't. They barely register. My door opens and someone is pulling me out. I'm not sure if it's a friend or foe, but my brain can't determine how to fight, so it doesn't really matter. They smell familiar though. I look up, or is it down? Whatever. It's Rick. Friend. I look the other way and I see J.D. in the car. Now I know why he didn't answer. It wasn't because I wasn't loud enough. It's because he can't hear anymore either.

Then I'm in a hospital. The doctor tells me I have a broken this and lacerated that, a concussion and that I've lost about 90% of my hearing, but I'll be just fine in time. I hate that part. "Just fine in time."

I become aware of light penetrating through my thoughts. My head hurts and I can feel cold tile beneath me. Mom is looking at me-that worried look again. My eyes are open now, so she knows I'm O.K. for now. I see her waving a bunch of people away and she helps me get to my feet. A store employee, a manager I think, helps her walk me outside and get me to the car. She locks the doors and shuts me inside. She's explaining to him what happened. Her lips move, but I can't hear what she's saying. I'm a Pink Floyd song. Only I don't feel comfortable at all. That one doesn't make me laugh, inside or out. I'm embarrassed and angry and my head hurts.

"I'm sorry I couldn't hear mom." I say when she gets in the car. I'm a little groggy and I'm slurring my words. "What did the cashier want?"

She picks up her shopping list notebook, writes something quickly and hands it to me. Paper or plastic. He wanted to know if I wanted paper or plastic. This time the smile does make it to my lips. Maybe I will feel like Scarlet tomorrow after all.