

CRACK

BY MYLES MCDONOUGH

“You can head out, Dolores,”

said Doctor Omar Haddad. “I’ll lock up tonight.”

The little bell over the door jingled and the pneumatic hinge hissed as his secretary left the office for the strip mall parking lot. He straightened out the plastic model spine hanging from its thin silver stand. He covered the headrest on the adjusting table with a fresh stretch of white tissue paper. He flicked off the lights, first in the office, then in the waiting room; the fish tank in the corner glowed blue, humming in the coming dark. He passed the leaflet rack and the row of ergonomically sound chairs. Then, Omar pulled open the plate-glass front door and stepped outside.

Back in Baghdad, it would be 3:00 a.m. He would be sound asleep in bed, next to his wife, the window unit blowing cool air over their bodies if the power hadn’t been cut. Here, in Maryland, it was 7:00 p.m., and he was running late. All the other shops in the mini-mall were closed for the night, from the dry cleaner next door to the corner cafe on the other end of the strip. Only a few cars dotted the long, quiet parking lot. He fumbled the key ring from his pocket and held it up out of his shadow, into the fading light, looking for the squarish key that would lock the front door and let him go home. Mahreen was making the lemon chicken tonight; if he hurried, he could

make it home just as she slid it out of the oven, steaming hot, the skin still crackling. He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass door as he turned the key in the lock. He hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and his light face was even paler than usual. This country was taking his hair bit by bit, he was sure of it, exposing another few centimeters of wrinkled forehead every time he caught his reflection.

A car rolled up in front of the laundry. A heavy man in a brown suit levered himself with difficulty from the driver’s side door of a gray Ford Taurus. He struggled toward the office.

Omar groaned. He hated doing this to people. Still, his hours were posted on the website, weren’t they? And wasn’t he already quite generous, keeping the office open till seven? Omar put on his professional face and prepared to tell the man how to make an appointment.

“Thank God, I caught you,” said the big man, waving his hand in a wide arc over his head. He moved somewhere between a brisk walk and a jog.

“I’m sorry,” said Omar, “but the office closes at seven, and ...” He noticed the angle of the man’s head. It was very much out of line, bent to the left and rotated just a bit off center. Omar took in the man’s rolled shoulders and remembered how he had struggled to get out of his car. His eyes were puffy, and the muscles on the sides of his head fluttered as he clenched his teeth. The man’s spine was a wreck. He would be in a lot of pain.

Omar’s stomach growled. He sighed and held open the door.

“Come on in,” he said.

The Americans had dropped leaflets first. They fluttered out of the air over Baghdad, tumbling and dipping on the hot currents. Omar drove the distance from the apartment to Lila’s school in three minutes – not the usual 15 – leaning on the horn the entire way. He scooped his daughter out of her desk and ran back toward the car.

“My crayons!” she cried. “I left my crayons!”

He passed a few of the other parents, each carrying or dragging a confused but happy child out of the building. Teachers leaned out of doors and windows, yelling at them to come back. Children still occupied most of the small desks at this point. The first bombs fell that night; the next morning, the schools were empty.

The patient's name was Frank Harrison. He worked in insurance. Like the vast majority of Omar's clients, Frank spent eight or more hours a day wedged behind a desk, hunched over a keyboard, wreaking havoc on his torso.

"And I'll ask you to take a deep breath in," said Omar. "And out."

He moved his fingertips up and down Frank's back, pressing in gently on vertebrae and ribs. Omar's eyebrows shot upward as he surveyed the extent of the damage. Frank's spine was riddled with subluxations, every other vertebra twisted out of line with its neighbor, clamping down on the delicate nerves leading out of the spinal column. The twisted bones were cutting off communication between his brain and his body. The office drone lifestyle could explain some of the misalignment, but not all of it — certainly not the degree of it. Omar would need to make a full adjustment.

"Listen," said Frank, "I really appreciate you doing this, after hours and all."

"Not at all," said Omar. He thought of warm, liquid chicken fat, gold and glistening as it dripped from the brown tip of a wing. He saw it congealing in the bottom of the pan as precious seconds and heat ticked away. "Tell me about your back."

"It's an old injury," said Frank. "The physical therapist down at the VA clinic can't do a damn thing for me."

"Ah, you're a soldier, then?" said Omar. He pulled up a chart for Frank on the computer.

"First Marine," said Frank, the pride in his voice barely muffled by the headrest. "I was in Baghdad. Saw them pull the statue down."

Omar paused.

"Are you on leave?" he said.

"I wish," said Frank. "Honorable discharge. IED threw me into a brick wall." He chuckled. "Kicked my ass with a bomb made out of a flip phone and an old plastic juice bottle."

Omar bit the inside of his cheek. Americans were often surprised, and occasionally alarmed, to learn that people from his country could, in fact, be white. And knew how to shave. Omar fell into this category. Frank was not the first American, or even the first patient, to mistake Omar for one of his own, and to offer unsolicited confidences about "those people" and what they did "over there." These days, Omar no longer bothered to correct them; he certainly wasn't going to waste more time on Frank than he'd already lost.

MEET WINNING AUTHOR MYLES MCDONOUGH

as well as this year's runners-up on page 68.

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Lila had no fear of the bombs. She did not cover her ears and whimper at loud noises. She waited for Omar and Mahreen to get groggy in the early hours of the morning, when they loosened the tight grip which kept her pinned on the couch between their quivering bodies. Omar woke from a half-sleep to find her escaped from the protective circle of her parents' arms, standing by the window, watching the red glow of a city in flames. She did not flinch at the chatter of gunfire. She did not duck at the rumble of the bombs, the growl from deep in a dragon's throat. She put her tiny hand up to the windowpane. She felt the glass shake.

An explosion near the apartment startled Mahreen awake. She grabbed Lila's wrist and yanked her back to the relative safety of the couch, yelling about flying shards of glass. The following morning, Lila lay on her stomach and drew big blooming rows of round orange flowers, bright against the background she shaded in black.

After a couple of weeks, the children in the apartment complex had managed to negotiate a half-hour of outdoor playtime in the afternoons, strictly in front of the building, under the eye of at least two parents. Omar shared his shift with Ali from the apartment upstairs.

"Committing suicide against the gates of Baghdad," said Ali, leaning over in his folding chair. "You heard the man. Sure, they can fly overhead, but they aren't getting into the city anytime soon."

Omar didn't have the heart to tell Ali that the Information Minister's most poetic announcements were often his least informative. He watched Lila sitting on the curb,

apart from the other kids. They played a tight game of tag in the hand-swept portion of street in front of their building. Lila sat cross-legged, crayons lined up neatly by her side, a piece of scrap wood from the burnt-out shop across the street serving as an easel. She bent over her work, biting her lip with baby teeth just beginning to come loose. Her orange crayon was a nub.

Omar heard the Republican Guard troops before he saw them. They were around the corner of the intersection to his left. Broken fragments of window glass popped beneath their tires and their boots. Men were yelling.

Ali heard them. He whistled through his teeth – Omar had never learned how – and the children in the street ran toward the front door. Lila remained on the curb. She was frantically scribbling the final details on her rendition of the blasted sedan lying on its side across the street.

“It’s time to go inside, Lila,” said Omar.

“But Daddy,” she said, still drawing, “I’m not d–”

She was drowned out by the belch of an engine to Omar’s right. He turned in time to see the long barrel of a tank poke its way out into the intersection. The treads kicked up the white dust of pulverized building material as the rest followed. Several men, guns in hand, kept pace on foot. The one closest to Omar bore a tattoo of an eagle on the side of his neck, in black ink. On his arm was an American flag.

Omar grabbed Lila by the arm and pulled. She cried out, grabbing at her box of crayons. He dragged her to the building as Ali waved them on, holding the front door open and staring at the Americans in disbelief. In the street, the Republican Guard yelled at the Americans. The Americans yelled back. Lila twisted in his hand.

“Daddy!” she said. “My orange!” She held up the open box of crayons for him to see; they rattled around in the cardboard, one stick missing out of the 12.

“Later,” he said, yanking his daughter another step. “We need to get inside. Now.”

“Daddy!” she said, squirming even more. Of course she would choose to make a scene *now*. The shouting grew louder, more demanding. Omar saw raised guns, reflected in the pointed fragments of the broken shop windows. He heard the grinding of gears as the tank swiveled its turret.

Lila slipped her sweaty hand from his grip just as they lurched over the threshold into the lobby.

“Lila!” yelled Omar – for a moment, above all else, angry at his little girl for disobeying him. She ran out into the street, long hair flying back from her face. The nearest American dropped to one knee, raised his weapon, and took aim down the street.

Omar saw him pull the trigger.

One evening, years before Lila was born, Mahreen and Omar had taken a walk in Zawra Park. They sat on the grass together, and watched the clouds turn to pink, and talked about the future. They visited the big cats in

the zoo. They were walking home when a man ripped Mahreen’s purse from her hands.

Omar chased the man, tackled him onto the sidewalk. He grabbed two of his fingers and yanked backward till they snapped in his fist. He would have done more had Mahreen not grabbed the back of his jacket and pulled him off. The thief ran away, clutching his hand to his chest.

Whenever Omar was having a bad day, he liked to remember the sound those fingers made. It always made him feel better.

He had Frank lie on his stomach. The man’s back was tangled in unyielding knots, like a pile of old, rotting fishnet. Omar turned on the Activator and applied its buzzing tip to the worst spots, grinding in with the massager when they refused to give. Frank groaned into the headrest as Omar worked the more difficult knots. When he’d pulverized the muscles into a workable slackness, he had Frank sit up.

“Okay, Mr. Harrison, I’m just going to put this here,” he said, crossing Frank’s left arm across the man’s chest. “And we’re going to lean back, breathing out ...”

Omar wrapped his arms around Frank and guided him down onto the table. When Frank was lying flat, Omar shifted his body weight, squashing Frank’s torso beneath his own: a loud *crack*, and a sigh from Frank, and the first part of the adjustment was done.

“Pretty bād?” asked Frank, as Omar arranged his arms to repeat the process.

“Nothing that can’t be fixed, Mr. Harrison. And breathe out ...”

Crack.

“That’s good,” said Frank. “Guess I got lucky. I’ve still got my legs, you know?”

“Breathe out,” said Omar.

Crack.

“Sounds rough.”

“No kidding,” said Frank. “Those first days, fighting the army, that wasn’t so bad. I mean, you expect to get shot at. You get trained for that.”

Crack.

“Later, though, after we took the city, when it all started going to hell ...” He looked at Omar, who pretended to busy himself with a vertebra. “It was the people, Doc. Out in the streets. All those baggy clothes – they’d hide a bomb anywhere, put it on anybody.” He paused. “Saw some shit you wouldn’t believe.”

“Try me,” said Omar.

Frank started, his monologue interrupted.

“Aw, come on, Doc, you wouldn’t want to hear about any of that.”

“Whatever makes you comfortable, Mr. Harrison. Breathe out.”

Omar checked the clock

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on the wall. The hands, made to look like the arms of a well-aligned skeleton, indicated 7:40. He could still get home before Mahreen sealed the chicken in Tupperware for the night.

"All right, Mr. Harrison," said Omar. "Go ahead and loosen your tie for me." He'd be done once he adjusted Frank's neck. Omar stood in his place behind Frank's head, watching him bite his lip. The man squirmed a bit on the adjusting table. Omar picked up his head in both hands as Frank opened his mouth.

"Okay. What you've got to understand ..." said Frank.

"Try to relax, Mr. Harrison," said Omar, gently rolling Frank's head in his palms.

"Oh, right. Sorry," he said. He took a deep breath in and let it out. Omar felt the neck tense as Frank set his jaw.

"You couldn't trust any of them," he said. "And I stand by that. I mean, how could you? They'd send out a woman with a basket over her arm, some vegetables on top to make it look like she'd just been to the market. Or God forbid, some kid is standing on the sidewalk, and her backpack looks a little heavy, and she runs out into the street and you've got maybe three seconds to make a call and — ACK! Damn, Doc!" Omar's thumb was digging hard into Frank's *dokko*, the acupressure point just behind his earlobe.

"Sorry, Mr. Harrison," said Omar. "My finger slipped." As Frank settled back down onto the table, Omar casually lifted aside his loosened collar with the backs of his fingers.

There was no eagle tattoo on the side of his neck.

"Anyway," said Frank, "what I mean is, some days, it was them or us. And you do what you gotta do."

No tattoo. Frank was not his man.

But really, Omar thought, feeling Frank's pulse beneath his thumbs, he might as well be.

Four years after they left Baghdad and crossed an ocean, Mahreen came downstairs one night to find Omar staring at the picture of Lila hanging in the front hall. She sat in a swing at the very top of its long arc. She smiled up at the sky. A much younger Omar stood behind her, ready to push again. He smiled up at his daughter.

"She would have been 10 today," said Omar. He didn't turn from the picture. Mahreen stood with him until his fists relaxed back into hands.

Somewhere on the shelf behind the desk was a book detailing the history of hanging as a form of capital punishment. The book was a gift from Ali, who thought himself rather funny for giving such a thing to a chiropractor. Omar remembered reading one particular chapter devoted to the practice of hanging in England. Following an embarrassing series of failed hangings — including no less than three attempts to execute one John "Babbacombe" Lee — the British Home Office had

actually published an instructive manual on the hanging process in 1888. *The Official Table of Drops*, as it was known, called for varying lengths of rope for each execution, dependent on the weight of the convict to be hanged. These lengths were calculated to ensure that the drop would be sufficient to fracture one or more of the vertebrae near the base of the skull, driving fragments of shattered bone into the spinal cord and killing the condemned man "instantly." This prevented the unpleasant kicking and sputtering characteristic of death by suffocation, which would occur if the drop wasn't long enough. Appropriately, a fracture to the second cervical vertebra, better known as the C2, is commonly referred to as a "hangman's fracture."

Such a fracture, or indeed any significant injury to the neck, required a great deal of force. Most often, Omar knew, such injuries were the result of car crashes or accidental falls. The Hollywood portrayal of beefy, gun-toting men sneaking up behind enemy henchmen and snapping their necks like celery sticks was just plain silly. Against a resisting, standing opponent, it would be effectively impossible to generate the force necessary to both snap the neck and drive a broken vertebra through the spinal cord. In such an arrangement, the body would follow the twist, protecting the neck from irreversible damage; meanwhile, the traumatized henchman would scream, drawing out swarms of his heavily armed friends. To get the proper leverage for such a technique, to keep the body still while twisting the neck beyond its normal range of motion, the opponent would have to be lying flat.

He would have to be very relaxed.

What if he screamed?

Well, what of it? Who was around to hear? The little mall was deserted.

They'd find the car. But then, it was parked in front of the laundry, wasn't it? No reason to suspect him over anyone else in the mall. Nothing tying him to Frank.

The patient record — but he could delete it from the computer. He'd wipe the hard drive clean. Hell, he'd buy a brand-new hard drive. A new computer. He would refurbish the whole damn office, "lose" a few months' worth of records in the process. They'd never know.

Lila's class once hosted a career day, where all the parents came by and talked about their jobs. Lila led Omar around by the hand, showing him off to the other students.

"My daddy's a chiropractor," she said. "People's bones get all mixed up, and they hurt. My daddy puts them back."

Omar rolled Frank's head in his hands, loosening up the tendons and ligaments in his neck. Frank exhaled, relaxing into the motion. His eyes lingered on a framed photograph on the far wall; it was the picture of

Lila on the swing, brought over from the house years ago.

"That your little girl?" he said, pointing with a lazy finger.

"It's an old photograph," said Omar. He pressed his fingertips into the muscles, kneading out any lingering tension. He felt the meaty weight of Frank's brain between his hands.

"She looks about my daughter's age," said Frank.

"Tell me about her," said Omar. He placed his palms on either side of Frank's skull. He took a deep, slow breath.

"She's a little ball of crazy," he said. "Runs everywhere, jumps on top of everything. And she sings. Kristi loves to sing."

"Kristi," said Omar.

"Some kid pushed her down on the playground the other day," said Frank. "I wanted to give the little shit a taste of his own medicine. But I helped Kristi up instead." He laughed, loud in the empty office. "She saw the same kid again the next day, and I had to hold *her* back."

Omar stood behind Frank. He glanced at the smile on Frank's lips. He looked at Lila in her swing. He heard her laugh, then remembered the way she shrieked and kicked her legs as she swung high above the playground. Always, she wanted to go higher. Never afraid. He remembered the feeling of her back beneath his hands as he pushed her again and again, harder and harder, up and up and up ...

He held Frank's head in his hands.

"And just breathe out for me, Mr. Harrison," he said. Frank did. Omar twisted his hands. There was a loud crack.

Frank sighed.

"Thanks, Doc," he said.

Omar unlocked the front door and found a Post-it from Mahreen hanging on the fridge; she'd gone over to the neighbors' for her book club. He grabbed a fork from the drawer and took the chicken out of the fridge.

As he chewed, he thought back to that walk in Zawra Park, to the sound of the robber's fingers as they snapped in his hand. He picked the chicken apart with his fork, breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces as he searched his brain for the details. He was surprised to find out that, after all these years, he could barely remember that sound at all.

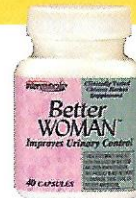
He ate the chicken straight out of the Tupperware. It was cold, but it was still good.

The Post would like to extend special thanks to its staffers who helped with the selection of finalists, as well as to its distinguished panel of guest judges who shared their time and talents this year, including Ed Dwyer, Peter Bloch, Estelle Slon, Holly Miller, Michael Knight, and previous Great American Fiction Contest winners Lucy Bledsoe, Linda Davis, M. West Moss, and Celeste McMaster.

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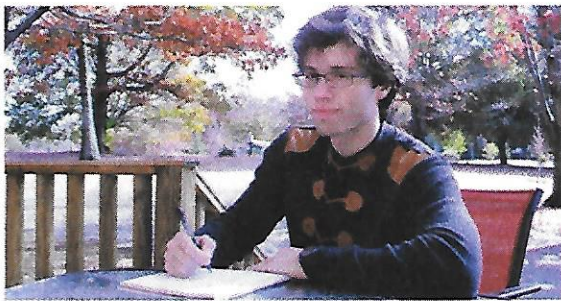
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MEET THE WINNER!

MYLES MCDONOUGH

The email that arrived just as McDonough was exiting a fiction workshop caught him a bit off guard. His story “Crack” had taken first place in the *Post*’s 2017 Great American Fiction Contest, winning him a \$500 prize and publication in the *Post* (page 62). “I’m thrilled and honored, and not entirely sure this is all real,” he says.

In “Crack,” McDonough captures the painful scars that two men – a chiropractor who has recently emigrated from Baghdad and a U.S. veteran who fought in the Iraq War – continue to endure. “It was important to convey the unique wants, needs, and beliefs of both men, wounded by the war in different ways,” says McDonough. “The conflicting nature of their individual traumas heightened the tension, and chiropractic treatment, which requires great trust between patient and practitioner, struck me as an ideal subject.”

Completing his B.A. in English from Harvard University in 2015, McDonough is currently a candidate for an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. “Crack” is his first story published in any medium.

“In its detailing of a chance encounter between an Iraq-born chiropractor and an Iraq War veteran, ‘Crack’ makes it clear that you have to reopen some wounds so they can begin to heal,” noted guest judge and author Michael Knight. “Not only is this story luminously written, not only does it put the reader in a complicated emotional place, but a palpable tension bubbles seething up from within the story’s protagonist from the very first pages. The reader’s experience of living inside that tension as it mounts across the story feels at once dangerous and cathartic and deeply satisfying.”

READ THE BEST! *Post* editors are delighted by the amazing storytelling and fine writing of this year’s entrants. We’ve compiled the best stories – our winner, runners-up, and semifinalists – in an e-book, available on your favorite platforms for \$3.99. Order now at saturdayeveningpost.com/fiction-books.

MEET THE RUNNERS-UP

Each runner-up receives \$100 and publication of his or her work on our website. To read these stories, go to saturdayeveningpost.com/2017-winners. We salute these fine writers and more than 200 others who entered our 2017 contest. —*The Editors*



JOYCE BARBAGALLO

TITLE: “The Awkwards”

STORY LINE: Hector had parlayed a gift for computing into a good yet unsatisfying gig at QVC. But just when he was ready to leave and start a new life, Elaine showed up.

BIO: First story published by a national magazine.

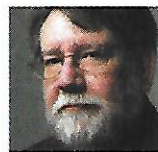


CHRISTINE VENZON

TITLE: “Artist in Residence”

STORY LINE: If Sean’s grades didn’t improve, his mother threatened to banish his fiddle to the closet. Claire came to help, but could a Northerner understand Creole traditions?

BIO: Published fiction in *St. Anthony Messenger*, *Highlights for Children*; 2014 Great American Fiction Contest runner-up.



JAMES REED

TITLE: “Long Past Time”

STORY LINE: With the news of his ex-mother-in-law’s death, a man faces disturbing questions about his failed marriage to a woman who had always seemed a stranger.

BIO: First short story published by a national consumer magazine; stories published in many literary magazines, including *West Branch*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Folio*, and England’s *Stand Magazine*.



MARK FABIANO

TITLE: “Getting Home”

STORY LINE: How could Michael explain to his son that when you do nothing, bad things can happen, but also sometimes, even when you stand up and do all you can, things still can go bad?

BIO: Published short fiction in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Best New Writing*, *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and *The Long Story*, among others. (For more, visit markfabiano.com.)



STEVE YOUNG

TITLE: “Sherry at the Knights of Columbus”

STORY LINE: Sherry’s musical talent had always been her calling card, but would her nerves betray her on the night of the parish’s annual talent contest?

BIO: First short story published by a national consumer magazine; stories published in literary magazines, including *Falling Star Magazine*, *Carve*, and *Emrys*.

COURTESY: MYLES MCDONOUGH, JOYCE BARBAGALLO, CHRISTINE VENZON, ANNA REED, MARK FABIANO, STEVE YOUNG