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## Steve Harvey & Carlos II

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## Steve Harvey & Carlos II

### Abstract

Foot patrols through Baghdad were slow. Nothing but time to think about sniper sightlines and IEDs hidden in the trash. We gridded the streets in our AO and sidestepped sewage-puddling ditches. Three months in, one block became our favorite. There were fewer adobe-like farmhouses, and beyond them lay the rural red-sanded expanse of the desert. The stagnant heat reminded me of running the firebreak roads at Camp Mackall during SFAS Team Week. I had twelve months to go, a full year to imagine a violent death on a repeating loop. I wanted to make it to my twenty-first birthday so I could walk into a liquor store back home in Fort Worth and buy my old man a nice bottle of Scotch, thank him for loving me, for sending me letters every week.

### Cover Page Footnote

"Steve Harvey & Carlos II" was originally published at *Booth*.



# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

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## Steve Harvey & Carlos II

Fiction by Blake Kimzey

**F**oot patrols through Baghdad were slow. Nothing but time to think about sniper sightlines and IEDs hidden in the trash. We gridded the streets in our AO and sidestepped sewage-puddling ditches. Three months in, one block became our favorite. There were fewer adobe-like farmhouses, and beyond them lay the rural red-sanded expanse of the desert. The stagnant heat reminded me of running the firebreak roads at Camp Mackall during SFAS Team Week. I had twelve months to go, a full year to imagine a violent death on a repeating loop. I wanted to make it to my twenty-first birthday so I could walk into a liquor store back home in Fort Worth and buy my old man a nice bottle of Scotch, thank him for loving me, for sending me letters every week.

In our favorite neighborhood lived an Iraqi with a thick black mustache. We called him Steve Harvey. He laughed at everything we said. Steve's neighbors mostly hid behind curtains or darkened their doorways. But Steve was always outside waiting for us, standing beside sunrotten Mazda and Nissan sedans or compact Deer and Grand Tiger Chinese pickup trucks that I'd never heard of. What marked Steve's neighborhood as Shiite were the newer Chevrolet Trailblazers, what we called Monicas, and Toyota Mark II sedans, called Ducks.

Regardless of the danger, Steve welcomed us with his smile. He owned a date orchard that hadn't been leveled by bulldozers to make way for a COP or razed by air support

or Iranian shaped charges. Steve would hold a basket on his hip and offer fruit as we walked by. The first time he did this we asked him in raised voices to put the basket down and step away from it. We had to be sure he wasn't gonna detonate. In the following months, Steve became a fixture on patrol. We took his fruit, but no one ate it. No one wanted to take diarrhea to the portables. Several blocks later we'd toss the dates into ditches or feed them to emaciated goats that hooved the pocked streets sundrunk and dazed.

Steve's son, maybe nine or ten, hadn't yet joined a militia or been claimed by a random and final burst of violence. We called him Carlos II because Specialist Foster said he looked like the Mexican busboy named Carlos he had worked with at Olive Garden in high school, watercolored mustache and all.

We took to Carlos II, his bright face and kind brown eyes. Most kids who ran beside our patrols and convoys were nuisances: unwashed, cadaverous children pawing for candy and chocolate. They were the ones who might detonate. We mostly tossed them our ratfucked MREs. But Carlos II was different; he didn't ask us for anything. Like his father, he gave us the feeling that maybe he wouldn't want to kill us after his balls dropped. So we brought him our care package castoffs and items we got at the MWR. One of our translators, whom we called Billy the Kid for no good reason, told us to be discreet about this, to not show too much favoritism to Carlos II.

But we didn't think much of being kind to Carlos II. He was our buddy. Being kind to him seemed to fit the MO. As part of the surge, commanders gave militia leaders stacks of cash each week for cooperation. With their support we were to be a calming presence, but we still kicked in doors and zip-stripped insurgents and easily made enemies as the months wore on. Our days were uneasy calm before quick engagements. You simply hoped to be whole when the sand settled.

Then we lost Lieutenant Moritz. For some reason his death hit the hardest. He had a little girl on the way, lots of guys did, but he seemed like he would have been the best father in the world. Moritz reminded me of my dad even though he was twenty-six. Took care of us the way he prized the daughter he would never meet. The whole unit moped for the rest of the deployment. There was no getting over Moritz. Two weeks after Mortuary Affairs shipped him to Delaware and then on to Texas, we found ourselves handing out hundreds of soccer balls donated by FC Dallas, the MLS team Moritz had worked for before he joined up. He had sent an email to their PR girl two weeks before he was killed. He asked for a donation, anything they could send. When the soccer balls arrived and we got the okay to hand them out, that was a fucking sad day, rolling those soccer balls out on the same streets where Moritz had lost his heart

after ball bearings from an IED pulped the middle of his chest. For a day or two all those kids were happy, and we couldn't stand it.

After Moritz every day felt like war. If he could die so could you. God hated a favorite, that's what we said. Captain Graham, the chaplain, would see most of us after patrol. All the neighborhoods turned against us. Every plastic bag was an IED. Guys you ate with were getting blown up across the city, including Specialists Davis and Stevens in our unit. We lost Steve Harvey and Carlos II, easy targets of one of their neighbors who burst from a door across the street and released a spray of AK fire before they could take cover. We neutralized the gunman, dropped him before he could advance up range, but by then our only friends in the city were gone.

None of us wanted to see Carlos II and his dad, loose dates outlining their bodies. I was sick of seeing dead kids up close. Back at the MWR we had a small ceremony. We ate sleeves of Fig Newtons because they were the closest we had to dates. We grew mustaches in their honor, and from then on we helped Baghdad get shittier every day. Like the Iraqis, all we wanted was for the war to stop, for all parties to part ways. All we had to do was survive our last few months and wait to cycle home, where the things that kept us alive would be the things we hid from when we got there.

I was carded when I got that bottle of Scotch. I didn't have the words to tell my old man how I felt about him, so I just gave him the brown-bagged bottle. Joy was a requirement for the words I needed.

Dad let me move in with him. Together we'd make sure the couch didn't float away when I got home from the recruitment office at the mall. The television lit our faces at night, but my mind was elsewhere, in Baghdad. I listened for Moritz's riotous laugh. I'd think about his little girl, maybe pigtailed by now. I'd run PT around the FOB with Davis and Stevens. I'd think about colorful sunsets that made the desert sparkle. I'd think of Steve Harvey and Carlos II, and hope wherever they were, whatever afterlife they were given, they'd be there together. That would seem to be enough for anybody.

Blake Kimzey's fiction has been broadcast on NPR and published by *Tin House*, *McSweeney's*, *Green Mountains Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Short Fiction*, *PANK*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Hobart*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Surreal South '13* and *The Best Small Fictions 2015*, among others. *Families Among Us*, a chapbook, was published by Black Lawrence Press fall 2014. He has an MFA from UC-Irvine and recently received an Emerging Writer Grant from The Elizabeth George Foundation.