

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Before I left on my trip around the world, which I estimated would last about six months and would take me to more than thirty nations, including two active war zones, there was every indication it would be a fool's errand—or worse. Anti-American violence was flaring up across the globe, and the State Department had issued advisories against traveling to almost half of the cities on my itinerary.

I promised my family I wasn't going anywhere truly dangerous, but that was a flat-out lie; Iraq and Afghanistan were absolutely on my itinerary—and this was back when US troops were waging fierce battles in both countries, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, respectively.

And, as it turned out, I had what was one of the most humiliating, surreal—and, yet, meaningful—encounters of my entire journey while in Baghdad, just seven months after the American-led, allied invasion into Iraq. I was waiting for a military escort to drive me to the airport, which was just a few miles from an old warehouse I'd been staying in with US troops, when I noticed four Iraqis standing and talking about fifteen feet from me.

The Iraqis can be represented by four spotlights on the stage or by four actors in silhouette.

They appeared to be in their midtwenties, and I knew they spoke English because I could overhear parts of their conversation. I really wanted to ask them about their country's history, its culture, and most important: Did they have any wartime letters or emails they'd be willing to share with me?

The whole purpose of my trip was to find *even just one war letter* so powerfully written and filled with raw emotion that it would help those of us who've never experienced these conflicts to better understand those who have.

Ideally, the letter would also bring to life an extraordinary story or aspect of war that had somehow gone overlooked.

After hesitating a bit, I finally walked over, introduced myself, and explained that I was an author and historian traveling the world collecting war letters. I even held up my journal as if it were some sort of proof that I was an actual writer.

Would it be OK, I asked, if I could talk with them?

Narrator
(American)

BEGIN

The four young Iraqis all looked at me, and then each other.

Beat.

Total silence. One of the men, whose name I later found out was Ammar, seemed like he was about to speak up—but decided against it.

One of the four spotlights grows brighter, then dims.

“Please,” I said, “feel free to ask me whatever you want.”

Spotlight brightens.

He thought for a second, smiled, and said (with genuine enthusiasm) “So who are your favorite British authors?”

Beat.

Completely thunderstruck by the question, I just stood there, unable to say anything. The four of them looked at me eagerly, and I began thinking, “Okay, British authors, favorite British authors...”

A few moments passed and—nothing. Not one name came to mind. Beads of sweat were literally dripping down my forehead, as I felt like I was representing the entire US educational system.

This is ridiculous, I thought. You were an *English major* in college for God’s sake. This is one of the few topics you should be able to discuss with some intelligence. Forget *favorites* at this point. Just name *any* British author.

Beat.

And, again, a total blank. The Iraqis, trying to be helpful, very gently, and rather easily, started throwing out suggestions right and left—*(quickly.)* Austen, Brontë, Dickens, Shelley, Wordsworth...

Eventually, I came up with a name all by myself: Shakespeare.

END

Beat.

Although embarrassing, the question did help break the ice, and we went on to have a very open and honest conversation about our two countries, the war, what they had endured living under Saddam Hussein’s regime, and the reason for my visit.

We’d spoken for about twenty minutes when my military escort arrived, and, as I was leaving, Ammar said, “One last thing. I’m just curious. Why are you so interested in *letters*?” I didn’t have time to go into much detail, but I explained that my search had begun years ago for very personal reasons, after a fire had swept through

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Vonnegut's reference to the massive number of people killed at Dresden caused me to think that maybe *this* is what I needed to hone in on—war letters that documented the sheer, staggering size and magnitude of it all.

This section should be done at an increasingly fast pace, and the actors can talk over one another—except when speaking numbers, as these must be heard clearly.

WWII SOVIET SOLDIER. I understand how difficult it is to endure this grief, Mama. But your sorrow, our sorrow, is not the only one. I've seen worse during my travels. In the mines at Shakhty*, we found *4,500 people killed by the German butchers*. There were babies and children, women and old men. Wherever the Fascist monsters go, they leave behind them a river of blood and innocent Soviet dead.

AMERICAN REVOLUTION SOLDIER. The British came to Elizabethtown and at about twelve o'clock at night we attacked. *There was 5,000 of them.*

We kept up a hot fire about four hours and I got a wound in the head, but with the assistance of God, I shall get well.

FEMALE AMERICAN MISSIONARY. It's been one week now since the collapse of Nanking. In case of resistance, there is a bayonet stab or a bullet. Thousands have been butchered in cold blood, some believe it approaches the *10,000 mark*.

FEMALE WWII NURSE. The camp had a large crematorium and they burned the dead and sometimes the live ones. There were huge pits in back filled with ashes and bones. A Polish doctor told me that the ashes in the pits represented *13,000 people*.

INDIAN WWI SOLDIER. The battle is being carried on very bitterly. It looks as if not a single man can remain alive on either side, and the division is finished. Think of it—in taking *fifty* yards of a trench, *50,000* men are killed.

Nerzie

NARRATOR/CARROLL. War's brutality is the secret that even civilized nations keep from themselves, concealing it under layers of verbal camouflage and euphemisms like collateral damage, soft targets, and friendly fire.

Begin

Beat.

* Pronounced: Shock-tee

With every new letter, however, those layers were being peeled back. The most powerful messages weren't even the ones that recorded the *enormity* of war; as critical as these eyewitness testimonies were, and *are*, the endless tallies of body counts and casualties could be potentially numbing, almost too large and abstract. In order to convey war's true nature, the real imperative, it seemed, was to find correspondences that illuminated, in fact, how small—and personal—it is.] **END**

Instead of coming on as a group, the actors should come on one at a time from different parts of the stage and immediately exit after reading his or her letter. To keep the pacing brisk, each actor should take his or her place before the previous actor has read his or her last line.

WWII WAR NURSE VERA LEE. November 24, 1943. Dearest All: I don't know if this will pass the censor, but I'll tell you what happened this past 13th of September.

We tried to land in Italy all day Sunday the 12th but they were too busy fighting to worry about a hundred nurses on a hospital ship. At five a.m. we were awakened by a bomb falling very close to us. At 5:10 we heard a plane and then that awful whistle a bomb makes, and BANG! You'll never know the thousand things that flashed through my mind those few seconds. I thought for sure I was dying. I couldn't see for the terrific smoke in our room but was a mass of motion trying to find my coveralls. When we got on the deck, I'll never forget seeing this one nurse trying to escape through a porthole but was too large to make it. She was screaming terribly because her room was all in flames. One British fellow saw that she could never get out, so he knocked her in the head with his fist and shoved her back in the room. She died. But it was much better than if she had burned to death while conscious.

Beat.

Someday I'll tell you more about it. Vera.

WWI CHAPLAIN WILLIAM MAYSE. My Dear Betty: I received your letter last eve, and after reading it, I went for a ramble over another part of the battlefield on the Western Front and saw still more awful sights than before.

I came across one of our boys, decomposed beyond all recognition.

GUNTER LEOPOLD. I have the most pleasant memories of my stay aboard the *Corry* because it was marked by the chivalrous way of thinking by George, who looked after me day by day, sitting at my bedside and devoting many hours to tell me about America, his family, and his service in the Navy. He never made me conscious of the fact that I had the status of a prisoner of war. I was, as he time and again emphasized, his guest.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Gunter expounded at length about George's fundamental compassion and sense of honor, culminating with a description of Gunter's eventual departure.

GUNTER LEOPOLD. When, lying on a stretcher, I left the *Corry* and its captain, the sailors showered masses of chocolate, chewing gum, and other goodies upon me. And all men on deck saluted to me, the German POW. This generosity symbolizing a spirit of decency of mind was doubtlessly the result of George's splendid example as a commander. To the best of my recollection, I have told the story of George Hoffman a thousand times as that of a knight in shining armor in a heroic epic.
Very affectionately yours, Gunter

NARRATOR/CARROLL. After reading through the letter, I found myself carefully going over it again. It suddenly occurred to me that this wasn't the first time I had heard a story like this one. Reflecting back on my travels, in Dresden, Germany, I learned that after World War II, Dresden and Coventry, the British city that Hitler's Luftwaffe tried to reduce to rubble, had become "Sister Cities," actively working together to promote cross-cultural events and exchanges.

And since 1947, the United States of America has established more than 550 "Sister Cities" with Japan and Germany.

During my trip to the Middle East, I learned that the Kuwaitis were the first to send humanitarian aid to Iraq in March 2003, despite having been invaded by Saddam Hussein's army thirteen years earlier.

And in Sarajevo, my incredible guide Amir, whose father was shot dead by a Serb sniper and who had lost countless friends after the Serbs attacked Bosnia in 1992, had recently become engaged to a Serbian woman.

"How can you not hate these people?" I asked Amir.

NARRATOR
START

“At some point,” he said, “it has to stop. It just—has—to stop.” Perhaps *this* was the extraordinary, overlooked story I was searching for, the one that often goes unnoticed, but—for so many of the writers, as it became increasingly clearer while reading through their correspondences—they believed absolutely *had* to be remembered.

END

This is a critical part of the play, and it is imperative that the actors infuse as much joy or at least sweetness into these letters so that the audience can feel a sense of inspiration after having heard so many depressing and horrifying stories.

WWI BRITISH SOLDIER ALFRED CHATER. (*He is very energetic and upbeat, and he has a thick Cockney accent.*) I think I've seen one of the most extraordinary sights today that anyone has ever seen!!!

NARRATOR/CARROLL. As the First World War raged throughout Europe, a British private named Alfred Chater described to his mother a moment of shared humanity between enemy soldiers that occurred in late December of 1914:

ALFRED CHATER. About ten o'clock this morning I was *peeeeeeeeeeeping* over the parapet, when I saw a German waving his arms, and two of them got out of their trenches and came towards ours. One of our men went out to meet them, and in minutes the ground between the two trenches was swarming with men and officers of both sides, shaking hands and wishing each other a happy Christmas.

The truce has been quite impromptu. We exchanged cigarettes and autographs and some people took photos! I don't know how long it will go on for. We are, at any rate, having *another* truce on New Year's Day, as the Germans want to see how the photographs come out!

NARRATOR/CARROLL. In November 1945, twenty-four-year-old Army Sergeant Richard Leonard wrote the following letter from Japan to a friend back in the States less than three months after the country had surrendered.

US SOLDIER DICK LEONARD. Dear Arlene, Greetings from Kure*. The Japanese are being as polite as they can and treating us like kings, and you just can't hate them for hate's sake. I don't think I've

* Pronounced: KOO-ray