

Atonement
by Dexter Filkins

In the early hours one morning last September, Lu Lobello rose from his bed, switched on a light, and stared into the video camera on his computer. It was two-thirty. The light cast a yellow pall on Lobello's unshaven face. Almost every night was like this. Lobello couldn't sleep, couldn't stop thinking about his time in Iraq. Around San Diego, he'd see a baby – in a grocery store, in a parking lot – and the image would come back to him: the blood-soaked Iraqi infant, his mother holding him aloft by one foot. “Why did you shoot us?” the woman demanded over and over. Other times, Lobello would see a Mercedes – a blue or white one, especially – and he'd recall the bullet-riddled sedan in the Baghdad intersection, the dead man alongside it in the street, the elderly woman crying in broken English, “We are the peace people! We are the peace people!” He'd remember that the barrel of his machine gun was hot to the touch.

Once a wild teen-ager in Las Vegas – “I was a crazy bastard!” – Lobello had become, at thirty-one, a tormented veteran. When he came home from Iraq, he bought an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, the weapon most like the one he had in combat, and two pistols, and kept them close at night. “You lay them on the bed, like it's your girlfriend, and go to sleep,” he said. That had helped a little, but then he moved to California, where the gun laws were stricter, and he'd left them behind.

The Marines had shot a terrible number of Iraqis that day – maybe two dozen in all. At times, as Lobello lay awake, he wondered, *Whom had he killed? Who had survived?* He combed the Internet for names, dates, and addresses; he pestered the members of his Marine company for details and consulted a cousin who had travelled in the region. He piled up documents. At last, the clues led him to the Facebook page of a young woman named Nora: maybe, he thought, it was the young woman he'd seen in the back seat of the Mercedes, with the bloody shoulder. And so, at two-thirty that morning, eight years after he had sprayed bullets into cars filled with Iraqi civilians, Lobello turned on his video recorder.

“It's very hard for me to say this, Nora, but we met on April 8th, 2003,” Lobello said. “I was with Fox Company, Second Battalion, Twenty-third Marine Regiment, and our fate crossed that night. I'm not sure if you remember, because it was so long ago now. Almost a decade.”

He turned the camera to show the documents he'd gathered. “I have been trying to learn what happened that day, I think, since that day ended,” he said. For nearly ten minutes, he spoke about his family and his plans for the future. He asked about Nora's mother, whether she was alive. He talked about other Marines. “Lots of the people I was with that day,” he said, “they don't do too good sometimes.” At one point, he started to cry. “I'm so sorry for your loss,” he said, composing himself. “I just think that talking to you guys will help me out so much. I know it seems really selfish. I hope it helps you, too, but really I can't – I can't go on not trying to say hello to you.

“I need to talk to you, if you let me,” Lobello said. “I have so much to say to you. I have so much to say.”

Lobello switched off the camera and attached the video to the Facebook message. He pressed *Send* and went back to bed.

On April 16th, 2003, I was driving a rented SUV through the streets of Baghdad when I spotted a crowd rushing the doors of an Iraqi hospital. Saddam's regime had collapsed a week before, and the Iraqi capital, like most of the country, had disintegrated into bloody anarchy. Baghdad was burning; mobs were swarming government buildings; ordinary Iraqis were robbing and killing one another. I drove up to the hospital, Al Wasati, just as a doctor walked out the front door and fired a Kalashnikov into the air. The crowd backed off, but only a little.

Inside, wailing patients wandered around, clutching ravaged limbs. Doctors were treating wounded people in the hallways. There were no lights, no medicine. In the lobby, a doctor introduced himself as Yasir al-Masawi. "There is a very tragic case here, one that sticks in my mind," he said. "Come, I will show you." I followed him down a hallway, into a ward reeking of old bandages and festering wounds. In a corner, seated on the edge of a bed, was a young woman with blond hair, which was rare in Iraq. Her left shoulder was heavily bandaged; blood and pus had seeped through and dried in a dark-red stain. She was semi-coherent, talking one second, murmuring in a deep voice the next. In a lucid moment, she said that her name was Nora Kachadoorian.

Two women stood next to the bed: her mother, Margaret, and her aunt, Dina. They told me that, as the American forces closed in, the Kachadoorian family was living in eastern Baghdad, in a neighborhood called Baladiyat. As ethnic Armenians and Christians, they had quietly prospered on the fringes of Iraqi society, running a business that sold machinery. They did not welcome the war. "We thought of leaving Baghdad, but where would we go?" Margaret said.

Just down the road from where they lived was a secret-police compound that was one of the invasion's big targets. As the Americans began bombing, the Kachadoorians drove to a relative's house in Zayouna, the next neighborhood over. Then a shell destroyed the relative's house, and the Kachadoorians decided to make a dash back home. There were nine of them, piled into three vehicles: Margaret and her husband, James; their two sons, Nicolas and Edmund; Edmund's wife, Anna, and their infant son, Sam; Nora; Dina; and a young cousin, Freddy. The Kachadoorians drove quickly, even though the explosion had shattered the windshield of one of their cars, a blue Mercedes. They'd heard shooting, but as they turned onto Baladiyat Street, they decided to keep going. "Our home was just around the corner," Margaret said. It seemed too risky to turn back.

In their neighborhood, a company of Marines was engaged in a furious gun battle with Iraqi forces in the State Security building. As the Kachadoorians turned into the intersection, the Americans opened fire. Bullets ripped through the cars, and the three drivers – James, Edmund, and Nicolas – were killed. Nora's shoulder was shattered, and Anna and her baby were covered in blood. Nicolas, seated next to Margaret, tumbled out of the car and into the street. "Nicky is dead!" she screamed. She improvised a surrender flag, she told me, by pulling off the baby's white undershirt and waving it above her head.

In Nora's hospital room, an Iraqi doctor showed us an X-ray of her shoulder. On the film was a cluster of dots where shrapnel was lodged. The bone had been splintered, the shoulder dislocated. "She will be crippled, I think," he said. Nora rolled her head and called out, "Mike!" It was the name of an American Navy corpsman who had bandaged her shoulder and shielded her from gunfire. For days, she'd been calling out to him. A second Iraqi doctor appeared, flanked by two orderlies, to change Nora's bandages. The orderlies began to snip the dressings and pull them away from the skin. Nora shrieked. The doctor said he could give her something for the pain, but the wait would be

long. “Please give me an anesthetic,” Nora pleaded, as the orderlies kept tugging. Then she shrieked again, a long, high-pitched scream that frightened everyone. The doctor winced and left the room. Not long afterward, I left, too.

Margaret had described the unit whose members shot them: Fox Company, 2nd Battalion of the 23rd Regiment of the U.S. Marines. A few hours later, I found the men camped in a field near Baladiyat Street. During the war, I sometimes asked American soldiers about dead civilians, and the reaction was almost always defensive, even angry. But these Marines spoke in sombre tones about what had happened. The firefight had been intense – they’d shot five thousand rounds, and seen eleven of their comrades wounded. When the Kachadoorians came barreling through the intersection, the Marines thought they were under attack. They called to the Kachadoorians to stop, and then they opened fire. When they realized what they had done, they ran into the middle of the intersection – with the firefight still going on – to rescue the survivors. “I still have nightmares about that day,” their commander, Staff Sergeant John Liles, said.

I found the medic whom Nora had called for: Mike DiGaetano, a Navy corpsman from Las Vegas. He had asked for a helicopter to take the wounded Iraqis to an American field hospital, and his request was denied – the hospital wasn’t taking Iraqi civilians. The Marines screamed and screamed into the radio, but the answer was no. So they patched up Nora and Anna and the others, and then sent them away. DiGaetano seemed relieved to hear that Nora was alive.

In the days that followed, I saw Margaret at her home in Baladiyat, and visited the graves of James, Nicolas, and Edmund, in the cemetery at St. Gregory’s Armenian Church. Margaret fed me *lahmajun*, a kind of Armenian pizza, and told me she’d majored in English literature at Al Mustansiriya University, in Baghdad. She had read Dickens, Melville, Faulkner, and Hemingway, she said; her favorite book was *A Farewell to Arms*. When Margaret told me that she had a sister-in-law in Canada, I let her use my satellite phone to call. I wrote a story for the *Times*, which ran under the headline “For Family in Iraq, 3 Deaths from a Moment of Confusion.”

After that, I tried to stay in touch with the Kachadoorians, but our connection was lost in the violence that engulfed the country. Whenever I went to Baladiyat, I asked about them, about Nora, the Armenian Christian with the blond hair and the bad shoulder. When I left the country, in late 2006, at the height of the civil war, I made one last try. No one knew a thing.

Then, this past March, I got a Facebook message from Lu Lobello, whom I’d never met: “I have been trying to get a hold of you for 10 years about. Ever since April 8th 2003.” He said that he had been a member of Fox Company. He wanted to talk about the Kachadoorians. “You could ease my PTSD,” he wrote. “Please contact me back. Please.”

As Fox Company neared Baghdad that day, Lance Corporal Lu Lobello was one of its most dedicated members. Lobello, then twenty-two, was a machine gunner in the company’s 3rd Platoon. He wasn’t especially enthusiastic about the American invasion of Iraq, and he wasn’t eager to see combat, but he took pride in his skill as a warrior, and he was determined to acquit himself well. “I was part of something big,” he said.

As a teenager at Durango High School in Las Vegas, Lobello had done just about everything he figured he could get away with. “Drinking, smoking, doing drugs, stealing [stuff], getting in fights,

[messing] around,” he said. “I thought maybe I should get out of there.” The Marines transformed him, giving him discipline and purpose and a sense of loyalty to his fellow-fighters. They gave him a very big weapon, too: an M-249 machine gun, which fired a thousand rounds a minute.

Lobello had joined a reserve company, which meant that he trained and fought largely with people from the area where he lived. Fox Company’s recruits came from Salt Lake City, where many of them were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and from Las Vegas, where they had grown up around casinos and night clubs. They called themselves the Sinners and the Saints. Lobello and his buddies were mobilized after the 9/11 attacks. By the time the invasion of Iraq began, they had been training for a year.

Fox Company had crossed over from Kuwait in a blind rush, following the hasty strategy of the first part of the war. At the edge of Baghdad that day, the Marines decided to leave their Humvees and trucks behind; in the more populated area, their bulky vehicles seemed a burden. They planned to walk to the big intersection just before the secret-police compound and stop there. At first, everything was calm. As they walked into Baladiyat, women offered cookies and flowers, thanking the Marines for getting rid of Saddam. Some of them wore dresses, instead of burkas. Lobello spotted a woman on a balcony holding a string of rosary beads. “We were in a Christian neighborhood,” he said.

As the first Marines of Fox Company neared the intersection, Corporal David Vidania, the radio operator, fell backward, shot in the head. There was a volley of bullets, and a rocket-propelled grenade exploded in the street. Lobello and the rest of the 3rd Platoon were a couple of streets behind and ran to catch up. When they arrived, an orange-and-white taxi sat just ahead, riddled with holes and smoking. Five roads met at the intersection, and bullets were coming from all around: from the street, from the secret-police compound, even from a mosque. Marines were getting hit, and the company commander’s radio had failed. Lobello entered an abandoned building and ran up the stairs to the second floor. At the top, he found a Marine walking around in circles and screaming: “We killed a baby, Lobello! We [---]ing killed a baby!”

At the time, Lobello and other Marines recalled, the rules of engagement, which governed when they could fire, didn’t offer much guidance about distinguishing civilians from enemy fighters. The basic rule was to spare civilians when possible, but above all to protect yourself. The way the taxi had sped across the intersection – the way it kept coming, even after the driver had been shot – led some of the Marines to conclude that members of the Iraqi militia known as Fedayeen Saddam were hijacking vehicles and using them to ram the Americans’ lines. There had already been a couple of suicide attacks on American positions, and the men began to think that they were next. “We decided we had to take out any car that came into the intersection,” Lobello told me. He looked out the window, set up his gun, and started shooting back at the Iraqis. He saw a red Volkswagen Passat, shot through and smoldering. A Red Crescent ambulance darted across the intersection toward Fox Company’s position, and the men opened fire. “We were lighting everything up,” he said.

Lobello spotted a line of cars coming into the intersection a hundred yards away: a blue Mercedes sedan, a white Mercedes, a white pickup. He leveled his gun, looked down the sight. The gunfire from the Iraqi positions, Lobello recalled, was relentless. Some Marines below were calling to the cars to stop, but their voices were drowned out by the shooting. No one gave an order to fire,

at least not one that any of the Marines could recall later. Lobello aimed at the lead car and squeezed the trigger. "I was firing at the same thing everyone else was," he said.

The bullets poured into the blue Mercedes, and the driver-side door swung open. Nicolas Kachadoorian rolled into the street. His brother, James, jumped out of the white pickup and was shot dead. Then the front passenger door of the Mercedes opened. A woman leaped out. She was waving her hands and shouting, "We are the peace people!"

A second woman emerged from the Mercedes, bleeding from the scalp, holding up a crimson baby. Lobello stopped firing, but the Iraqis kept on. A group of Marines ran into the intersection. Lobello remembered seeing a third woman in the blue Mercedes, struggling to get out of the back seat. She was bleeding from the shoulder.

Most of Fox Company returned from Iraq in May of 2003. The firefight on Baladiyah Street was the most intense combat the men saw there. They had been deployed a long time – more than seventeen months – and their commanders were eager to get them back to real life. Less than a week after leaving Iraq, they were with their families. They didn't get any lectures about the challenges of reintegrating into civilian life, nothing about post-traumatic stress disorder. "They wanted us off the clock so bad," one of the Marines said.

At first, Lobello didn't think much about what he had done in Iraq, but soon he started to slip. In less than a year, he tested positive for marijuana and was demoted a rank. He tried to go straight, and mostly did, but he was embittered by his demotion, and began to quarrel with his commanding officers. "My rank was my life," he said.

In 2006, Lobello tested positive for painkillers and was stripped of the command of his squad. He snapped: he denounced his commanders, walked off his base in Las Vegas, and never went back. "I completely broke down," he said. The Marines took the opportunity to get rid of him, handing him a discharge that was "other than honorable."

Lobello is reluctant to blame his experiences in Iraq for his departure from the Marines, or for his drug use. "I was a wild guy before I joined the Marines, and I was still a wild guy when I was with them," he said. But others traced his problems to Baladiyah Street. "Lobello was a good marine," Liles, now a gunnery sergeant, said. "The trouble he got into was completely and utterly due to post-traumatic stress. It's not a normal thing for a human being to take a rifle and kill another human being."

After Lobello left the Marines, he enrolled in the University of Nevada Las Vegas, and worked off anxiety by boxing at a gym outside the city. In December of 2009, he was called to substitute for an instructor there, and he got in the ring with a woman in the class: Margaret Gryczon, a tall thirty-three-year-old brunette. She was impressed by him – "He's very good at boxing," she told me – and they started dating. Within a year, they had married, taken a honeymoon trip to visit Margaret's family in Poland, and moved to San Diego. Lobello told Margaret early on that he'd been in Iraq. "He told me something happened," she said. "He kind of told me it was something I would have to deal with. He would share bits and pieces with me."

Lobello told me, “She doesn’t understand – how could she? No one who hasn’t been in a war can understand what it’s like. For men, it’s like childbirth. We have no idea.”

From the moment he returned from Iraq, Lobello found that he couldn’t sleep, and he became more aggressive and erratic. Over time, he got worse. Margaret told me, “He loses it pretty bad. He punches walls, breaks things.” She said that she didn’t feel at risk, though: “He is such a loving and caring and compassionate person. I know the pain he suffers.” One time, Lobello ran into the parking lot of his apartment building in his underwear, clutching his AR-15, preparing to shoot a man he believed had been following him. A few months later, he was detained by the police inside a veterans’ clinic: he’d lain down on the floor and refused to leave until a doctor examined him. He was given a diagnosis of severe post-traumatic stress disorder. The Marines gave him a disability payment of a thousand dollars a month, and he started receiving treatment, mostly in the form of antidepressants. “I was a functioning [----]ing crazy person,” he said.

Without the Marines, Lobello found himself cut off from the main source of his identity. “The Marine Corps is like a church, and I felt excommunicated,” he told me. His buddies who stayed in appeared far better adjusted than those who got out – not because of the counselling or medical services they were offered but because the other Marines could understand what they had been through. “You’re only as crazy as the people around you,” Lobello said. Like the police or the FBI, the Marine Corps represented its own moral universe, an institution that gave you license to kill and absolved you of your sins. Without it, Lobello had to figure things out on his own.

A few weeks after he left, Lobello began searching the Web for stories about what his unit had done in Iraq. He imagined that he’d find a newspaper or magazine article memorializing Fox Company’s deeds. Despite all that had gone wrong, he was proud of the time he had spent in Iraq, proud of his role in helping to remove Saddam. Instead, on the Web one night, he found the story I had written about the Kachadoorians. He was aghast: here were the dead and the survivors, with faces and names. “What was so weird was that the story wasn’t about us,” Lobello said. “It was about them – the Iraqis. It just kind of hit me: *Oh, my God, these are the people we killed.*”

Lobello wondered about the Kachadoorians. What had become of them? What would they think of him, or of the other men in his unit? Lobello’s father died when he was eight, and he imagined that he could feel at least some of Nora’s pain. As time went on, he began to harbor deeper suspicions about the war. How was it that he and his buddies, all good and patriotic young men, had been thrust into a situation where they were almost certain to kill innocent people? He felt guilty, and also powerless.

One night, lying in bed, Lobello decided there was something he could do. He and his buddies may have killed a bunch of innocent Iraqis, but now that he had the name of one of the families, he could find them. “I thought it would do them as much good as it would do me,” he said.

Lobello set up a Web site called *Finding the Kachadoorians*. He established a group page on Facebook, so that former members of Fox Company could recall the details of the day. The project made him feel part of something larger than himself again. “Finding the Kachadoorians wasn’t just simply about physically finding them,” he said. “It allowed me to give meaning to this experience that all of us had shared and none of us understood.”

By the summer of 2011, he had found some significant clues. Among them was a story in the *Los Angeles Daily News* that quoted a relative of the Kachadoorians, who was living in Glendale, California. As it happened, Lobello had graduated from college and was headed to law school in San Diego, a few hours' drive away. A cousin of his turned up a Facebook page of a woman named Nora Nicola. The last name was different – but it was similar to Nicolas, one of the Kachadoorians who was killed. She was the right age. And Nora Nicola was a Facebook friend of the relative who had been quoted in the *Daily News*. Though it was only a guess, Lobello said, “I figured it was her.”

For weeks, Lobello tried to compose a letter to Nora, but he couldn't find the words. Finally, one night, unable to sleep, he decided to make the video instead. A week later, an answer came back. Lobello was terrified: maybe the message would be withering, a condemnation. He waited for his wife to come home from work, and he also asked a grade-school friend and fellow veteran, Richard Shehane, to come over. They opened the message together. “hi lu,” the note said, “me & my mother we both forgive you, we know we will see them in the kingdom of Jesus.” Then Nora quoted a passage from the Bible: “Do not marvel at this, because the hour is coming in which all those who are in their memorial tombs will hear his voice and come out.”

Lobello ran to the bathroom and wept with relief. “He was so excited – I can't even explain the excitement,” his wife said. But the feeling lasted only a moment. “It didn't lighten the load,” he said. There was something that troubled him about Nora's note. She had left off the second part of the Bible verse, the part that consigned “those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”

Lobello still didn't know where the Kachadoorians lived, and he was afraid to ask. He thought about driving to Glendale to look. The city had the largest population of Armenians in the United States; if she was living there, he could ask an Armenian priest to make the introduction. But he was worried that an unannounced visit would upset the family. “I wanted to be respectful, so I wasn't going to just knock on their door,” Lobello said. “I thought there was the possibility that they would not welcome my visit.” Instead, he decided to get in touch with me and ask if I would arrange a meeting.

In July, I flew to Los Angeles and drove down the coast to La Jolla, where Lobello lived, in a densely packed apartment complex called Verano, just off Interstate 5. I recognized the man in the video: a square-faced marine with intelligent, searching eyes framed by big glasses. He and Margaret had laid out sandwiches and fruit and set up a video camera to record our conversation.

Lobello might have said “I'm sorry” in the video, but it quickly became clear that his views of his culpability were tangled. “I want to apologize, but not for my actions,” he told me, between cigarettes. Under the circumstances – in a gun battle, in an urban area, fighting an unseen enemy – he and his fellow Marines had done the only thing they could have done. “Our number-one priority is to make sure – you go see your friend's mom before you ship out, and she looks at you and says, ‘Don't let my son die.’ You always care about the people you know the most.” While he acknowledged that he had helped kill the Kachadoorian men, he did not acknowledge that he had done anything wrong: “It's not an apology for my actions. I just want to show them that I recognize the sacrifice that they put up. They gave up far more in that couple of hours than any one of us did. Whether or not one of

the Marines got shot that day, none of us lost our father, none of us lost our two brothers. We just decimated the whole male population of their family.”

Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who has advised the military on psychological trauma, told me that some of the most severely affected soldiers suffer “moral injury.” “It occurs when you’ve done something in the moment that you were told by your superiors that you had to do, and believed, truthfully and honorably, that you had to do, but which nonetheless violated your own ethical commitments,” he said. “It’s bad moral luck. Unfortunately, war is filled with that.” Typical soldiers, Shay told me, do not regard themselves as murderers. “There is a bright line between murder and legitimate killing that means everything to them,” he said. “Any civilian who says that in war there are no rules – that’s bulls[---].” The rules of engagement are central to soldiers’ well-being. “They hate it when they have killed somebody they didn’t need to kill,” he said. “It’s a scar on their soul.”

The marines on Baladiyat appear to have followed the rules they were given. But at one point Lobello suggested that the rules were far too loose. “What bothers me is that, by the time we got set up and consolidated, the understanding was: if they drive down the street, that’s it – it doesn’t matter, just [----]ing shoot them,” Lobello said. “But we didn’t have one single suicide bomber. And these guys that were running at our position – were they? Were they really? Or did we just shoot them while they were driving toward us?”

Lobello had only the vaguest idea how many Iraqis they had killed and wounded; he could remember only the frenzy of it, the terrifying thrill, the streams of bullets going in. “A lot of times, I think what happened was, somebody would realize, [----], *dude, we’re not shooting the right people*. But it was like the beast was already going. You can’t say *Hold on, stop, wait* – no way. No way. You can say, ‘Cease fire. Cease [----]ing fire!’ Well...all right, man, but let me get off a couple more rounds...You can’t [stop]. You’re in it.”

Lobello might not have felt that he needed to apologize, but he was haunted by what had happened, traumatized, maybe even ruined. He wanted to know that the survivors understood why he had done what he had, even if it was not entirely defensible. And he wanted them to know that he felt their suffering in his own. Lobello did not quite say it, but when I left his apartment I felt that what he was really looking for was absolution.

Driving into Glendale off Interstate 5, I started seeing signs, at restaurants and shops, in Armenian script. I turned on Glenoaks Boulevard, and it seemed like a picture of the immigrant’s California dream: a wide boulevard lined with small apartment houses with big lawns and tall, thin palms. When I pulled up to the Kachadoorians’ house, the front door was open. Two small children were playing in the yard, and Nora and Margaret stood in the doorway.

Nora was just as I remembered her, with her blond hair and her husky voice, except that now she spoke a little English. She was wearing a tank top, and her shoulder, but for a few scars, had healed completely. “No problems!” she said. Margaret seemed much older, her face lined and sad, but she was as gregarious as before. “Of course I remember you,” she told me. The Kachadoorians lived on the bottom floor of a two-story stucco building, downstairs from another Armenian family. Nora was married to a man named Asaad Salim. The children were theirs; Asaad sat on the stoop and watched them.

The Kachadoorians' journey to Glendale had been marked by disasters and miracles, the first of which was Asaad. He'd been a cameraman for Reuters at the time of the American invasion. The day that the Kachadoorians were shot, an American tank on the other side of Baghdad had fired at the Palestine Hotel. The tank crew apparently believed they were shooting at enemy soldiers, but instead they killed two cameramen working for Western news agencies and wounded three Reuters employees. Asaad, who had been on a lower floor, took one of the wounded, a British technician, to Al Wasati hospital. After the doctors operated on Nora, they brought her to a bed in the technician's ward, where Asaad was visiting. By then, her wounds had become infected, and she moaned and cried. "It broke my heart listening to her – I couldn't take it," Asaad said. He found a nurse, gave her some money, and told her to find some painkillers and antibiotics. Asaad and Nora started to talk. A year and a half later, they were married.

The two of them, along with Margaret, stayed in Baghdad until 2006. By then, the rest of the Kachadoorian family, like many of Iraq's Christians, had scattered, moving to the United States, the U.K., Canada. Asaad continued to work for Reuters, until, one day, he received an e-mail from someone in the Badr Brigade, the Shiite militia, threatening to kill him if he continued. It was the height of the civil war, and death squads were roaming Baghdad. Asaad took Nora and Joseph, the couple's newborn son, to Damascus, and eventually Margaret joined them.

For three years, the family lived among the hundreds of thousands of other Iraqi refugees, waiting for a Western country to take them in. Then, in 2009, Asaad and Nora gave staff members at the United Nations a copy of the article I had written about the Kachadoorians, six years before. (Nora's aunt in Canada had mailed it to them.) "Before that, we had no proof that our family had been killed by the Americans," Nora said. Now their application moved immediately. In November, 2009, Margaret, Nora, Asaad, and their two sons – the second, Sam, was born in Syria – arrived in San Diego. Within a couple of months, the five of them were sharing the apartment on Glenoaks Boulevard.

Asaad began working as the manager for a valet-parking service, living the reduced life of the immigrant who comes to America in middle age. Margaret took antidepressants, and she spent a couple of nights a week with a Jehovah's Witnesses prayer group at the local Kingdom Hall. When I visited, her memory was flawless. Every time I asked a tricky question, she smiled and said, "You asked me that in Baghdad."

Nora brought out a tray of tea and *lahmajun*, the same Armenian dish that Margaret had served me nine years before. A framed photo of the Kachadoorian men – Nicolas, James, and Edmund – stood on a table next to the couch. "Every day when I put my head on my pillow, I remember this sight," Margaret said, "how my eldest son, Nicky, fell in the street."

When the talk turned to Lu Lobello, Margaret wondered if she had met him that day. After the Kachadoorians were shot, the Marines carried the women from the street. Then they dropped off Nora, Margaret, and Sam, the baby, at the home of an Iraqi family nearby. Holding the baby, Margaret approached one of the Marines, she remembered: "I said to him, 'Why did you kill my husband and my two sons? We are Christian people. We read the Bible. We do not do anything.' And his eyes just make to the ground."

It seemed possible that they would refuse to talk to Lobello. After he sent the video, he followed up with a Facebook friend request, and Nora accepted it, but a few days later she deleted him. “I think he want to kill me and kill my mother,” Nora said, with a small laugh. “He want to kill the rest of the family.” One of Lobello’s buddies had jokingly asked him the same thing: “What are you going to do when you meet them? Finish them off?”

But when I asked the Kachadoorians if they would see Lobello, they did not hesitate. “If he is asking for forgiveness, then we will give him forgiveness,” Margaret said. “God ordered us to forgive. He forgives us, so we must forgive others. Even people who killed our dears.”

“I want him to come,” Nora said.

As I rose to leave, Asaad pulled me aside. “They need this,” he said. “They cry all the time. Every night.” His face hardened. “But me, as an Iraqi? If someone do that to my family” – he made a pistol with his fingers – “I would kill him.”

The Marines in Fox Company had wounds of their own. When I called Kenneth Toone, a former lance corporal, he started sobbing the moment I mentioned the Kachadoorians, and he cried for several minutes. “I’m haunted,” Toone said. “I am so glad we found them. I think a lot of us want to see them and say we are sorry. We don’t get that chance. There was a different mind-set back there: we deal with it when we come back. But wait a second: what were we doing over there? They gave us this power to shoot anyone we wanted and face no consequences. Well, you have to live with yourself. It destroyed me. I’m a wreck.”

When Toone went to Iraq, he was nineteen, a member in good standing of the Mormon Church. He was one of the Marines who fired into the intersection, and he broke his spine carrying a wounded comrade to safety. When Toone got home, he married his girlfriend, who was seventeen and still in high school. (“Kind of a Utah thing,” he said.) They had two children. Right away, he started having nightmares and flashbacks. Military doctors declared him a hundred per cent disabled, and gave him a medical retirement. They also prescribed the painkiller Oxycontin, and Toone found that it helped soothe the ache in his back and keep the memories at bay. He became addicted, and then he left the Church. Three years ago, his wife took the children and walked out. “She told me I wasn’t the same anymore. I wasn’t. It wasn’t fair to her,” he said. “There’s something about killing.”

According to Toone and others, half the men of Fox Company face severe psychological problems. Some are divorced; some are addicts; some are homeless; many are unemployed. The best known of Toone’s disintegrating friends is Lance Corporal Walter Smith, who also shot people in Baghdad that day. Like Toone, Smith left the Church after he came back from Iraq, and turned to alcohol and drugs. One night in 2006, he drowned the mother of his two children in a bathtub. He received a sentence of one to fifteen years.

Toone was trying to get his life back together. He had completed a treatment program to get off Oxycontin, and when we spoke he was packing for a drive to Sheridan, Wyoming, to begin a six-week in-patient program for soldiers with severe psychological trauma. But he had not found a way back to the Mormon faith. “I don’t believe any of it anymore,” he said. “We are atheists now, several of us, because of what happened. I can’t deal with the thought. Basically, it was – I think we

murdered those people. We murdered them. I don't understand God – whatever, if there is a God. You don't understand how terrible it really is.”

It is difficult to know exactly what happened on April 8th, 2003. But as I talked to the Kachadoorians and Lobello, and half a dozen other members of Fox Company, it became clear that things were far worse than anyone had acknowledged at first. As Toone told me, “Very many people were killed and hurt that day who were innocent.” DiGaetano, the Navy corpsman, said that he treated twenty wounded Iraqis, and none were evacuated to receive treatment. Like the Kachadoorians, they were patched up and sent into the streets.

The Marines' accounts were irregular, unprocessed, conflicting. They agreed mainly that the fight had been confusing and chaotic. Their greatest fear was that the cars coming into the intersection were filled with Iraqi soldiers. Nelson Wong, a lance corporal, told me, “We were just hearing all these things. People jacking cars. There was no way to validate anything – IEDs or suicide bombers or people stealing taxis.” The entire company, facing its first real battle, was on edge. “Especially after Vidania” – the radio operator – “was shot, we were very angry and very pissed off,” Toone said. The men's recollections of the shooting are a reel of hideous images: a dead teenage boy splayed out in the back seat of a car; the mother with a mangled arm holding up a baby who was red with blood.

When I asked Bruno Moya, a lance corporal, whether the rules of engagement had been adequate, he said, “Rules of engagement? I don't think I've ever thought about that.” He went on, “We got a couple of briefs. They were brief. Generally, we were told that the enemy had no uniforms. Anyone could be hostile.” He thought of the killings every day, and, like Lobello, he seemed to be wrestling with questions of culpability. “Of course our force was excessive – but that is how we are trained,” he said. “We use maximum force. We didn't train for civilians coming out of houses.”

Nick Lopez, a first sergeant who was manning a casualty-collection point near the intersection, remembered that the Marines fired at a series of cars, one after another. “There was a car driving right at us,” he said. “Two adult males, father and son – we killed them.” During the firefight, Lopez said, Fox Company had an unexpected visitor, Brigadier General John Kelly, the deputy commander of the 1st Marine Division. Lopez remembered Kelly yelling at the top of his lungs, nearly hysterical with anger. “You're shooting civilians,” he said. But they didn't stop. “We see another car, a four-door American sedan, and it drove right through the wire at us,” Lopez said. “Everyone was thinking, *This is part of the attack*. We lit the car up. I put in twenty rounds.”

A rear door opened, and a teenage boy fell into the street. “All I remember is this kid rolling out. Bright-red blood, lying in the road. These two corpsmen ran out to get him, they jump up and clamp his two arteries that are bleeding. There is a woman. She's screaming, and she's got this black eye makeup. Crying in Arabic, both hands out. She's pointing at her son, pointing at me. I can't communicate with her.” Another woman, perhaps eighteen years old, was slumped over, dead, in the center seat. A third was on the ground behind the car, cradled by young Marines. “She's shot up so bad, the whole side of her body peeled away, still alive. What do I do?” Lopez said. “I lost my marriage over this. Wonderful lady. You are not the same person when you come back.”

I asked John Liles if his men had used too much force. Couldn't they have just shot the engines of the cars? “That's not a fair question,” he said. “Thousands and thousands of rounds are

being shot; Marines are getting shot; there are vehicles literally coming at us. We had to shoot the vehicles. We thought we were going to die.”

Liles acknowledged the harm that he and his men had done to the Kachadoorians: “We killed their family. What do you say to someone like that?” But he told me that his conscience was clear – the Marines didn’t know who was in the oncoming cars, so they had to assume that they were hostile. “I don’t have a problem with what we did that day,” he said. “I am not going to cry about what happened. That’s what we need for closure. It’s best to leave it.”

And yet many of the Marines said that memories of the killing dogged them. When I told Toone that Nora was married and had kids, and was living in the United States, he said, “That’s really good to know. I remember that girl was shot. You think about that stuff, and you don’t know that they’re OK. I’m so glad. I’m so glad. You don’t humanize things over there, but you do when you get back here. You realize what you did. You just destroyed so many things. They were just innocent families that day. The cars were piled up like in a junkyard.”

Lobello, though, was alone in trying to find his victims. “Lu is just, like, really friendly,” Wong said. “The things we do affect him more. I don’t want to say I don’t care. Lu connects to things more emotionally. Generally, he’s more sensitive. He just dwells on it.”

Lobello and I arrived at the Kachadoorians’ home on a Saturday morning in July. When the front door opened, Asaad came out first, with Nora and Margaret behind him. Lobello embraced them and tried to say something, then began to sob. “Don’t cry,” Margaret said, and patted him on the back. They led us in, and we sat in a small, unadorned living room, Lobello on a couch against a wall, Nora and Asaad at a table by the window. Margaret walked heavily to another couch and settled into the cushions. On a table across from her sat the framed photograph of the dead Kachadoorian men.

“It’s been almost ten years,” Lobello said. “I just wanted to know how you were doing. You have kids. Two boys? What are their names?”

“Joseph and Sam,” Asaad said.

“My dad’s name is Joseph,” Lobello said.

“It’s an old name from the Bible,” Margaret said. “You read the Bible?”

“I used to,” Lobello said. “A lot more than I do now. Maybe I should start again.”

As they talked, the conversation kept stalling, with everyone quiet for minutes at a time. Asaad sat impatiently, tapping his foot, answering for Nora. She sat in silence, but it was easy to see that she was as haunted as the others. Later, in an interview with a female Iraqi translator, she told her story with a sad exactitude, explaining that she had even refused to have a wedding party. “I didn’t have any brothers,” she said.

The Kachadoorians had always put faith before war. Nora’s father, James, refused to pick up a gun when he was pressed into serving in Saddam’s Army; he was imprisoned twice for being a Jehovah’s Witness. The same stubborn belief compelled Nora and Margaret to absolve Lobello; Corinthians says that, when someone has caused pain, “forgive and comfort him, or he may be

overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” Yet excessive sorrow had overwhelmed the Kachadoorians, too, and Margaret seemed determined to make sure that Lobello didn’t forget it.

“You saw us,” Margaret said, from her place on the couch. “You are better now?”

“I want to make sure you guys have everything you need,” Lobello said. “If there is anything I can do, I am here for you.” He cleared his throat.

“You are crying,” Margaret said. “You know, I cannot cry. My eyes have no tears left.”

Nora stood and left the room, and I could hear her weeping in the kitchen. When she returned, she carried a tray with cakes, Iraqi candy, and glasses for tea. She set the tray between Margaret and Lobello, who were looking at each other.

“You said you are suffering,” Margaret said.

“I never sleep,” Lobello said.

“I, too, not sleep, every day, you know? Yesterday it was four o’clock, I not sleep. I take the Bible and go to the kitchen and began to read,” Margaret said. “I have the same, this depression, you know. I think this is because you are sensitive. We are sensitive person.”

“There is not a day or a week that goes by that I don’t think about what we went through,” Lobello said. He seemed to be posing a kind of equivalence between him and his victims. If this was self-serving, there was also an undeniable truth to it: of all the people in the world, no one else could better understand what had happened.

“When you were in Iraq, and they said the Americans were maybe going to invade, did you guys want us to?” Lobello asked. “Is it worth it? Is it worth your family?”

“Where is the freedom?” Margaret said. “It’s worse over there now. More worse.”

Lobello turned in his chair and straightened. He had told me that he wasn’t coming to apologize – that, however much carnage he and his fellow Marines had caused in Baghdad that day, they had had no choice. Now, sitting with the Kachadoorians, he seemed to waver. “We thought that any vehicle, you know, was going to try to hurt us,” he said. “I don’t know if it was your vehicle or one before that almost ran over one of our guys. So, once that happened, we just figured – it was just what we ended up doing.”

Margaret wasn’t listening. She was talking about the Marine she had confronted after the shooting in Baghdad. “When I look at him, his eyes go to the ground,” she said.

Lobello persisted. “We just had no idea that there were families out there,” he said. “What we thought at first was, *Why are they driving here?* We didn’t understand.”

Margaret’s eyes were unfocused, somewhere else. The family had been just a few feet from home when the firing started. “Our house,” she said.

Lobello leaned forward, struggling to find words. For nearly a decade, he had grappled with that moment when he looked down the barrel of his M-249 and into the blue Mercedes and pulled the trigger. “We just thought you could hear the guns – that you couldn’t be friendly people,” he said. “It just got so confusing. When we realized what happened, everyone shut down. As soon as we realized, *Look, man, what did we do?*, people started crying.”

Lobello sank into the couch and exhaled. The cakes sat on the tray, untouched. Nora, her back to the window, looked at him and said nothing.

“Now you are comfortable that we gave you forgiveness?” Margaret said.

“I feel very good meeting you,” Lobello said.

“But, you know, forgiveness is something strong – I think not everyone would say, ‘I forgive you,’ ” Margaret said. “We forgive you, but don’t think we forget our dears.”

“Yeah,” Lobello said. His eyes turned to the floor.

“But we want you not to be hurt,” Margaret said. “It’s not your fault. I am right?”

Lobello began to cry. “Asaad, I need a cigarette.” He sounded as though he had come up for air.

“Let’s go,” Asaad said, standing up, and the two men walked together into the front yard.

In the Bible, Numbers 31 prescribes a purifying ritual for soldiers returned from war: a cleanse of fire and water. American culture has no such rituals. Instead, it has legal constructs, like the rules of engagement – printed on cards to fit in your wallet – that allow soldiers like the men in Lobello’s unit to feel that they have merely done what they should. They are absolved even before they come home.

In Iraq, a tribal society, guilt is traditionally expunged by *fasil*, the payment of blood money. A man is killed, the tribes meet, a price is agreed on, and the act is, if not forgotten, then at least set aside. Life goes on. When the war began, the Americans acted without regard for Iraq’s traditions, and in so doing took a tiny insurgency and helped make it enormous – multiplying their enemies by obliging entire families and tribes to take revenge. Eventually, they caught on, and began making payments to the families of those they had wrongly killed. It worked. I saw Iraqis who had sworn eternal hostility put away their anger in an instant.

But, in a war that killed four thousand people on one side and a hundred thousand on the other, neither system – of legal delineation or of paid recompense – can suffice. What Lobello was doing was more personal: he had come before the Kachadoorians, whose sons he had killed, to beg for their forgiveness. Jonathan Shay, the psychiatrist, told me that Lobello was a supplicant, making the only plea he could: “I don’t have money to give you. I am not going to take my life. I can’t give my blood. All I can give you is my anguish.”

Out the window, I saw Asaad and Lobello chatting as they smoked, looking like neighbors. For a moment, the two women sat quietly. I unwrapped a piece of candy. Finally, Nora spoke. “We want to help him,” she said.

“Some people say, ‘No, we must revenge’ – they say, ‘Eye for an eye,’” Margaret said. “We aren’t like those people.”

When the men came back in, they seemed relaxed, almost buoyant. Everyone sat for a while longer, talking about their families. The hard work, it seemed, was done.

At last, Lobello said, “Well, I guess it’s time.”

“I appreciate that you came,” Nora said. “You are like my brother. We are brother and sister.”

Margaret looked exhausted but serene. “You have done as best you can to come here and say I did it,” she said. “I appreciate this.”

“We have more in common, and we understand each other, more than anyone I meet,” Lobello said.

Margaret looked toward the family photograph, and said, “You remind me of my older son, Nicolas” – one of the men who had died on Baladiyat Street. “Even your behavior. Your looking. Everything. Everything. Believe me.”

Lobello nodded, with his hands clasped, seeming relieved.

“Everything is OK now,” Margaret said. “You are welcome to our house. I thank you very much. This is good behavior, you know.”

“Can I have a hug now?” Lobello asked.

Margaret pulled herself up from the couch. Lobello was waiting for her. “All us are not perfect,” Margaret said, and they embraced.

When Lobello got back to San Diego, he told his buddies what he had done. Most of them were happy, he said, and some, like Mike DiGaetano, said that they wanted to go to Glendale, too. Lobello started to make plans – to introduce the Kachadoorians to his wife, even to speak to lawmakers about compensating Iraqis like them. “He was so happy that he met them,” his wife, Margaret, said. “He seemed at peace. I can just see the relief he feels for being forgiven.” He still couldn’t sleep, he said, but the meeting in Glendale had helped ease his anguish, and especially because it had helped the Kachadoorians, too. Asaad sometimes calls him for advice on adapting to American life, Lobello told me. “This is just the beginning,” he said.

A few days after the meeting, he got a Facebook message from Nora. It was written in the same carefree, unpunctuated English as the one she had sent a year before: “when you came i feel so happy & i feel doing grate on my life & with my family, i really changed...& the same time i feel i get a third brother & the third son to my mom...thanks to you for every thing.”

Reading the message, Lobello noticed that Nora had confirmed him as a friend.