

IRAQ
(BLINDNESS)
 by Mario Fratti
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Characters:

BRIAN, a handsome young man in his early twenties; blind

CATHY, his girlfriend

DAN, brother of Jim, the dead soldier; 20

ANDERSON, Dan's father; 60

Time and Place: 2005. A modest living room in Ohio, during the war in Iraq.

Chairs, a sofa, a table, four photos at the four corners of the room.

BRIAN enters. He is blind; he is guided and helped by CATHY, his girlfriend.

DAN, his friend, looks at him with sadness. He gets up and moves toward him.

DAN: Welcome, Brian.

BRIAN: Dan, I recognize your voice. Where are you? I want to shake your hand.

DAN: Here I am. (*goes to him; shakes his hand; they embrace*)

Hi, Cathy, it has been so long....

CATHY: It has.

BRIAN: I recognized your voice right away. Identical to your brother's. Where is your family?

DAN: Upstairs, I think.

BRIAN: All three?

DAN: Mom and sis are in the bedroom. They seldom come downstairs. For you, maybe...

BRIAN: How are they feeling?

DAN: They cry all day. Nothing stops their tears. How about your Mom?

BRIAN: Ask Cathy.

CATHY: She cries a lot too.

BRIAN: Where is your father?

DAN: Getting us all a beer, I think.

BRIAN: How is he doing? How did he take it?

DAN: Badly but... basically I think he's proud. He still feels like a soldier. One hundred percent American. Proud of war and war heroes.

BRIAN: Your brother was a real hero, I can assure you. That's part of the reason I have come. To tell you about details you are not aware of. We were together for nine months. Inseparable.

DAN: First tell me about you. How are you?

BRIAN: You see me, don't you? Shrapnel cut my optical nerve. I'll never see my beloved Cathy's beautiful face again. (*to Cathy*) Come here, give me your hand.

(*Cathy goes to him; kisses his forehead; he kisses her hand*)

You see? She still loves me. And her face is always here, in my dead pupils. I am **only** happy with people I know. Faces that are always present in my memory. Their smiles, their features, the eyes of my relatives and of my friends. I have the impression of still seeing them. And just think, they will always be young in my memory. There's an advantage even to blindness. Nobody gets old. A silver lining in every cloud—as our Colonel used to say. I'm happy to be here with your family. I remember all of you very well. Where are they? What are they waiting for?

DAN: Dad will be here any moment. Mom and Claudia later, maybe...

BRIAN: Why do you say "Maybe"? Don't they want to see me?

DAN: They don't want to see anybody.

BRIAN: Not even me, your brother's best friend?

DAN: Maybe, let's hope... They promised.

BRIAN: What are they afraid of? Am I so disfigured?

DAN: Oh no, you look just fine. Women, you know. Who understands them? Maybe ...

BRIAN: Maybe what?

DAN: It's just my opinion... Wrong, probably... (*he hesitates*)

BRIAN: Tell me.

DAN: You're alive, here with us... My brother isn't... They are happy for you but ... they're human. They would like to have Jim here. Wounded, yes, but alive. With us.

BRIAN: I understand. After all I just lost my eyesight... (*with irony*) "Just"... Are they still passionate pacifists, like you?

DAN: Even more so, today.

BRIAN: Your father, on the contrary... Jim's death has not changed his opinion...

DAN: No. He is still the ardent patriot, the warrior who believes in sacrifices—

BRIAN: (*interrupting*) —Even his own son's?

DAN: Yes, even his own son's sacrifice. (*A pause*) Tell us, tell us what happened, how it happened.

BRIAN: Let's wait for your father. I want to tell him how Jim and I lived in those places for weeks. Always together.

(*Anderson, the father, enters with glasses of beer.*)

ANDERSON: Welcome back, Brian. Welcome to our house, to Jim's house. You, valiant hero. You and Jim, two wonderful heroes fighting for a noble cause.

(*shakes his hand; they do not embrace*)

I got the beer you like. Here you go. Drink this. (*Hands him a glass of beer; to Cathy*) What about you, Cathy? Do you want a beer?

CATHY: No, thanks. Your wife and daughter, how are they?

ANDERSON: Why don't you go upstairs and see them? Go to them. They don't understand yet, they haven't accepted.

(*Cathy exits to see the two women; the three men raise their glasses*)

Let's toast to the heroes' return!

(*They drink; Dan looks at him with uneasiness; his brother has not come back.*)

You, you're back, here with us. I can touch you (*touches him; gives him a pat on the back*).

But Jim is with us, too. Look at the photos. (*indicates photos of Jim everywhere in the room*)

(*realizing Brian is blind*) Oh, I'm sorry. That was stupid of me. There are photos of Jim in every corner of the room. In uniform. He looks great in uniform. If only ... (*he hesitates*)

BRIAN: If only what?

ANDERSON: Maybe, if you had been together that day, the same day, maybe one could have helped the other, saved the other.

BRIAN: It happened to me in July.

ANDERSON: Yes, we heard about it in July. A call from Jim. He was sure you would make it. He said it was minor. Just a slight wound...

BRIAN: (*touching his eyes, with irony*) "Slight"...

DAN: Then, at the end of August, what happened? What did they tell you?

BRIAN: When I was in the hospital, they came and told me that Jim had been invited into some house. A trap. Whatever happened, I'm sure he behaved like a hero.

ANDERSON: Me too.

DAN: (*to Brian*) How do you know? You were not with him.

BRIAN: I've seen him on dozens of situations. Courageous, daring, precise. One of our best snipers. They mentioned his accurate shooting in many papers. In one day he killed eleven of them.

ANDERSON: I have the clippings. I wish he could have seen them.

BRIAN: He would have been happy you were proud.

ANDERSON: How did he feel after that? Proud, happy?

BRIAN: It's not so easy. There are times when we destroy a house by mistake, an entire family, and —

ANDERSON: But those eleven were rebels, armed insurgents, weren't they?

BRIAN: They were.

ANDERSON: So Jim must have felt proud, useful.

DAN: (*ironical*) "Useful?"

ANDERSON: (*to Dan, angry*) You will never understand. You peaceniks have never understood the necessity to eliminate the enemy, the ones who threaten our liberty, our democracy.

DAN: (*who does not want to continue on that subject; to Brian*) You, how did you find out about Jim?

BRIAN: Our Colonel who knew we were friends told me. He mentioned that ambush.

ANDERSON: Was it actually an ambush? Did they confirm it?

BRIAN: (*vague*) That's what they told me. Lots of them against three of us.

ANDERSON: I'm sure he wasn't afraid, not even for an instant.

BRIAN: Never. He was never afraid. Not even during the most dangerous missions.

DAN: They were very vague in the telegram we received. What details did they give you?

BRIAN: Not much... I immediately thought of you, felt for you... Even my family, they were all upset by the news...

DAN: But a bit relieved, I imagine, at the thought that you were coming home. Did they tell them about ... *(he hesitates, looking for the right words)* ... your eyes?

BRIAN: No. Only that I was wounded but in good shape.

DAN: They're all happy, aren't they?

BRIAN: Yes, obviously.... They can see me, touch me, love me.

ANDERSON: Tell me about Jim, his good times. You know, when he was at his best.

BRIAN: Sure. I have lots to tell you. We were together for such a long time. We were first in Kuwait which was an easy, boring life. Then in Saudi Arabia. A lot of whiskey, on the sly. They're Puritans, they pretend to hate alcohol.

ANDERSON: Women? Did you have women? In Vietnam, we had whores everywhere. Jim was like me. He wanted it all the time, he needed it *(gesture)*.

BRIAN: It's not easy to find women in those places. You know—the women are veiled and untouchable. Men are jealous and kill the women who betray, who dare to go to bed with someone. I can't even imagine what they would do if they went with an American..

ANDERSON: So, no women? How did you manage? I remember that Jim—

DAN: *(interrupting him)* Let him talk, Dad.

BRIAN: In Riyadh we had a couple of nurses.

ANDERSON: Arabs?

BRIAN: American. Generous women who now and then...

ANDERSON: What's the name of Jim's lady?

BRIAN: Shirley. He spent a lot of time with her. I saw her cry when we left.

ANDERSON: *(to Dan)* You see? You see? A real heartbreaker. Women everywhere. *(to Brian)* What about in Iraq?

BRIAN: Nothing the first three months. It was hell. We destroyed everything. The famous "Republican guards" Saddam was boasting about, we massacred them, we pulverized them.

ANDERSON: And in Baghdad? I've seen photos. A modern city with well-dressed women, western style. Driving cars, riding motorbikes.

BRIAN: That was before we arrived. They're afraid now.

ANDERSON: Of you?

BRIAN: Of us and of their men. Religious morality is prevailing now. We were surprised to find out that it was a secular society. Now religious fanaticism rules. Women are in trouble.

DAN: What do you mean?

BRIAN: The Iraqis are worse off now. They'll murder each other for twenty years. Poor people, especially the women.

ANDERSON: So, no Iraqi women in your beds? Not even one?

BRIAN: Not even one.

ANDERSON: How can they resist when they see you strutting around, handsome and bold? Armed like war gods! Real, tough males, irresistible!

BRIAN: I'm sure some would like to. There are thousands of widows who are maybe dreaming about us but they are afraid. If they dared they would be stoned to death.

ANDERSON: So, our poor Jim had to live without for months?

DAN: *(reproaching his father)* Dad...

ANDERSON: *(to Dan)* You shut up. You never understood our biological needs and women's desires. They love us, they need us. *(to Brian)* So, in Baghdad, no chance to... *(gesture)*

BRIAN: *(hesitant)* In Baghdad... This is a delicate story. We have ... there was one ... *(he hesitates)*

ANDERSON: Go on, tell us. What's the name of my son's last lover?

BRIAN: It's off limits, it's forbidden to pursue, to sleep with our colleagues. But Jim, with his eternal radiant smile...

ANDERSON: *(to Dan)* You see? You see? A handsome son, a fascinating God! He always got what he wanted.

(to Brian) So, he scored, didn't he? What's the name of that big Amazon in uniform?

BRIAN: I cannot, we cannot mention names. It's absolutely forbidden. Military code.

ANDERSON: Military discipline, I understand. Tell us about your raids, your incursions. Every day?

BRIAN: Almost every night. We used to prefer nights. We could see them with our night-vision goggles. They couldn't see us. They were easy targets.

ANDERSON: During the day, where would you meet the Iraqis? Coffee houses, restaurants? How did you circulate among them? Do they applaud you, smile at you?

BRIAN: Some kids smile at us and say: "—please, chocolate, thank you." The only words they know. The adults, all men—they keep women at home—they look at us with hatred and suspicion. They make obscene gestures, they spit and stamp on it, symbolically. Then they look at us straight in the eye. There is no law and order any more. We are the hated enemy.

ANDERSON: What did Jim say when he felt that hatred? He was always cordial and friendly. Did you try to talk to them? Did you try to make friends?

BRIAN: Oh no! It was absolutely forbidden to go toward them, among them.

ANDERSON: No attempts at real communication, friendship? Chocolate, food, flags, dollars?

BRIAN: No. Jim was upset by that. Like all of us. It's not pleasant to see destruction and death. That day when he had those eleven precise, lucky hits... (*he hesitates*)

DAN: That day?

BRIAN: We went to that village, later, to find out who those men were, if they had accomplices, family... We saw a little girl crying desperately over a corpse... Jim wanted to talk to her, to comfort her. We had to stop him, hold him back. They would have killed him if he had approached the girl. He left all his rations at the entrance of the village, on a low wall, everything he had on him. Even a flashlight—which is absolutely forbidden. We pretended we didn't notice and took him away. One of us—Gonzalez— was crying like a baby.

ANDERSON: A Puerto Rican?

BRIAN: Yes.

ANDERSON: They are not good soldiers. A real soldier does not cry. Have you ever seen Jim cry?

DAN: (*intervening*) I saw Jim cry. When he left mother and Claudia. Desperate hugs, many tears.

ANDERSON: That's normal when a mother cries. It's human. Jim was such a good son. Have you seen other Puerto Ricans cry?

BRIAN: Puerto Ricans, Blacks, Whites. All races. Especially when we were too quick on the trigger and realized we had hit some civilians.

ANDERSON: It happens in war, unfortunately. Did you speak often about our President?

BRIAN: Almost never. It was taboo.

DAN: But when you did, I'm sure you weren't complimentary. He's responsible for the whole mess.

ANDERSON: (*angry*) Don't offend the memory of your brother who sacrificed himself for the President, our country, all of us. He is the best President we ever had. He is proving to the whole world that we are "Number One", the best. We have proven that we can conquer and liberate any country in a few days. Our military power is immense, unlimited.

(*Cathy comes back and kisses Brian on his forehead; a silence*)

CATHY: (*to Brian*) They would like to see you, give you a hug.

BRIAN: Of course. (*gets up*) I'll see them with pleasure. (*correcting himself*) I'll **feel** their warmth.

ANDERSON: I'll take him upstairs. (*Anderson helps him; while he's helping him upstairs*) Don't say too much. No details. They are too... too sensitive.

(*Anderson and Brian exit. Dan and Cathy are now alone. A silence.*)

CATHY: (*to Dan*) They are inconsolable. Especially your mother... and they do not understand your father's behavior... Losing a son should upset any normal parent.

DAN: He plays the hero, the tough guy, but I'm sure that when we don't see him, he cries too. One day, I walked in on him; he was kissing one of Jim's photos.

CATHY: I'm happy to hear he's human, like all fathers. Did he ever suggest you should volunteer?

DAN: Yeah, six months ago he mentioned it all the time. He insisted it was my duty. He stopped after Jim's death.

(*Anderson comes back.*)

ANDERSON: What a scene! They covered him with kisses. They are smothering him. That fanatic wife of mine pinned a photo of the Pope on his shirt. Fortunately, he didn't notice.

(*to Cathy*) Get rid of it, at the first chance.

CATHY: No. It is a gift, a blessing.

ANDERSON: You too? You women are all religious fanatics.

(*to Dan*) Especially your mother. She keeps mentioning the Polack.

DAN: Mostly last year, when the Pope tried to stop the war in Iraq.

ANDERSON: (*with contempt*) "Priests". They are always talking peace and then they go to the battlefields to bless the dying. They're only good at preaching and encouraging...

DAN: Encouraging what?

ANDERSON: (*ironical*) Not to fear death because Heaven is waiting for them. All religions promise Paradise.

(*to Cathy, after a silence*)

Brian is strong and courageous. A real warrior. Are you proud of him?

CATHY: (*vague*) I am...

ANDERSON: You are wonderful too. To love him even now that... (*he hesitates*) You can't look into his eyes and he can't admire you.

CATHY: The sentence that struck me most, when he came back, was: —"It's better like this. It's better to be blind. I'll never see the horrors of war again." (*A silence*)

ANDERSON: I know war is terrible... Me too, I saw horrible things in Vietnam... You have some nightmares at the beginning... Then they fade away. But he's got to know that his sacrifice has brought freedom and democracy to that country...

CATHY: He never talks about it.

ANDERSON: Never of what?

CATHY: Politics, democracy, freedom. They are subjects he avoids.

ANDERSON: What does he say about Bush? About the White House's global vision? Of our desire to bring peace and democracy all over the world?

CATHY: He never mentions him.

ANDERSON: Why, in your opinion? Brian was great here. One hundred percent American, a good patriot, happy about his sacrifice for a noble cause.

CATHY: Out of respect, maybe... No one mentions him at home. It is a delicate subject. Even our friends, the ones against the war, never mention him in our house. Respect, fear, caution... They don't want to rub salt in the wound.

ANDERSON: Hypocrites.

CATHY: He's often depressed... He has nightmares, many nightmares.

ANDERSON: They'll disappear. He should get out more often. Talking about his mission in schools, clubs, town hall meetings.

CATHY: He was invited. He refused to go.

ANDERSON: Too soon, maybe... (*he thinks it over*) Does he ever say anything negative?

CATHY: No... He avoids it.

ANDERSON: (*doubtful, to Dan*) Did he look depressed to you?

DAN: Of course he is. No doubt.

ANDERSON: (*reflecting, worried*) I better go upstairs again. I don't want him to depress those two women even more. (*he exits*)

CATHY: (*after a silence, to Dan*) A stupid war; blind and cruel.

DAN: Unnecessary. Shameful.

CATHY: (*after a long pause, hesitating*) I didn't have the courage to tell them the truth...

DAN: (*surprised*) What truth?

CATHY: Brian has always known. He only talks about it with me.

DAN: About what? What does he talk about?

CATHY: (*cautious*) Maybe I can tell you... Only you...

Then you decide if you want to tell your family...

Your mother and sister... And, maybe, your father.

DAN: What are you talking about?

CATHY: There was also something about it in the "New York Times".

DAN: We don't get it here in Ohio. What did they write?

CATHY: (*with caution, hesitating*) ...The news that 29 soldiers, the most sensitive, the most vulnerable (*she hesitates*) ...

DAN: So?

CATHY: ... They committed suicide. (*A silence*)
Jim was one of them. He shot himself.

MUSIC. FREEZE

BLACKOUT

CURTAIN.

Inspired by three articles in the New York Times:
1: Blindness • 2. Sniper • 3. Suicides