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Anguish in the Ruins of Mutanabi Street

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In Baghdad's Literary District, Mourning Loved Ones and a Once-Unifying Place

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BAGHDAD, March 9 -- On a pile of bricks, someone had left a pink plastic flower, a pair of glasses and a book with crisp, white pages. They glowed in the black debris of Mutanabi Street, which by Friday had become a graveyard of memories. At 9:03 a.m., a man in a rumpled brown suit walked past dark banners mourning the dead. He stopped near the flower and the book, which was opened to a chapter on the virtues of Baghdad.

"There is no God but God," he said, his voice disappearing in the cracking sound of a shovel against debris. He stared at the gutted bookshops, hollowed like skulls by the blast and the flames. He lowered his head, fighting back tears.

Then he turned and walked away.

On Friday morning, Iraqis continued to drift to Mutanabi Street, four days after a car bomb took the lives of at least 26 people and injured dozens more. Some came to hunt for the remains of loved ones. Others came to mourn a street that represented the intellectual soul of a nation known for its love affair with books. For many, the narrow warren of shops had seemed to defy [Iraq's](#) woes.

Mutanabi Street had long been considered "the unifier of Iraq," said Khalid Hussein, a bookseller with cropped hair and thick forearms. Before the bombing, he said, this was "the only place that hadn't been touched by sectarianism."

The evidence was lodged in the dense heaps of twisted metal and the mangled cars. Here, a page from a Bible. There, a page from a Koran. Tattered posters of Imam Ali, Shiite Islam's revered saint, littered the ground near the 8-foot-wide crater left by the bomb. The shop that sold Wahhabi Sunni literature was in ruins.

The day after the attack, blackened body parts covered with cardboard and pink stationery sat near a storefront. A note read: "The remains of Hadi Hassan. Hummus seller." He was a Shiite from Najaf, said those who knew him.

A few inches away, a dusty, charred cellphone lay next to an empty yellow plastic bag and a shard of burned flesh stuck to cloth. A note read: "This is the only remains from this person. Everyone is going back to God."

By Friday, the body parts had vanished. Around Khalid Hussein were fathers and sons, strangers and friends. The smells of smoke and burned paper lingered. Scavengers looked for loot, but nobody paid attention.

"This is his shoe," a man cried out. "I bought it for him."

It was 9:06 a.m. The man was slim, with peppery hair and square, gray-tinted glasses. He clutched a black chunk of flat leather melted by the heat. "I bought it for him."

He kissed the piece of leather, then placed it gently on a warped metal box next to the flower, the eyeglasses and the book.

"Come and see it," he yelled to five men delicately digging through debris. "It is his size." He broke into tears.

"This is your shoe," he yelled, looking toward the pale blue sky. "My son, I bought it for you."

He fell to his knees, sobbing.

The six men, all relatives, were hunting for a teenager's remains. The boy had been shopping for notebooks on Mutanabi Street, named for a 10th-century poet. They had been digging since Wednesday, morning till evening.

They stared blankly at the shoe. No one had the heart to tell the father the truth.

So they kept digging.

"Don't step hard," the father said. "Don't harm him."

At 9:15 a.m., Najah al-Hayawi, short with gray hair and a white mustache, emerged with his son from a building with smoke-covered Grecian pillars. The car bomb had exploded in front of their family's Renaissance bookstore, one of the street's oldest.

"We've been here since 1957," Hayawi lamented.

Hayawi's brother Mohammad, a burly Sunni Arab with twinkling honey-colored eyes, was killed. So was his nephew, the only son of another brother, Nabil. Nabil, miraculously, survived and was being treated in a hospital.

"We haven't told Nabil yet what happened," Hayawi said. "It will be difficult."

He walked away with his son. They passed a black banner with yellow writing. It said that the Hayawi family mourned the loss of Mohammad and his nephew, "who were assassinated by the cowardly bombing at Mutanabi Street."

At 9:23 a.m. the man searching for his son spoke again.

"You'll find him," he said to his relatives. "You will find his ID, his jacket. You'll find them just as you found this," he added, picking up the flattened shoe.

The men nodded and kept digging.

When asked how he knew his son was buried there, he replied: "My heart tells me so."

He wouldn't give his name. When asked his son's name, he answered: "His name is Iraq."

A few minutes later, he broke into tears again.

Iraqis passed him, gingerly stepping through the debris. Across the street from the Hayawis' bookshop, the remains of the Shahbandar Cafe sat silent. For decades, Iraqis had gathered there, waxing about politics and culture over water pipes and sweet tea. Beautiful black-and-white photos of Baghdad had adorned its walls.

At 9:48 a.m. Khalid Hussein was rattling off the names of the dead.

"I am trying to rebuild myself," he said. "We cannot leave Mutanabi Street. Outside of Mutanabi Street, we feel lost."

At 10:04 a.m., a man in a green shirt stood before a shattered shop, screaming for a man named Moean.

"Moean. Answer me back. Moean."

He fell to the ground, crying. A friend helped him up, and slowly they walked up the street, away from the debris where the five men kept digging.

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