

Bingo in Baghdad

By

Jill Lever

Jill Lever
Write2Jill@hotmail.com
0423606494

33b Harcourt Street,
Hawthorn East,
Vic 3123.

First draft May 2007
Draft – Version 3

Cast

- JOHN An Englishman, about 65, educated voice, dapper appearance. Uses a walking cane.
- USCHI An attractive woman aged 45-55, elegantly slim, expensively dressed, with a slight (difficult to place) European accent.
- SIMON Australian journalist, 30s, casually dressed.
- HAMID Young Iraqi man, dressed in waiter's whites.

Location

Baghdad 2007, the holy month of Ramadan. An expatriate club which has seen better days.

(Centre stage is a table and chair set up ready for a bingo caller. JOHN is sitting centre front in one of two comfortable chairs facing the audience and reading a broadsheet newspaper. On a table beside him he has a china teapot, cup and saucer and bingo cards. HAMID enters dressed in the white outfit of a waiter with SIMON following dressed in casual khakis and open necked short sleeved shirt).

HAMID: *(To JOHN)* Mr. John, Mr. Simon here, sir. *(JOHN doesn't hear. HAMID repeats louder).* Mr. Simon from Times. *(No response. SIMON puts his press card on the table and JOHN looks up. HAMID slips away offstage)*

SIMON: Simon Taylor, how are ya?

JOHN: Mr. Taylor ... Correspondent of the London Times? *(He looks doubtful).*

SIMON: That's right. I'll be running the show while Tony takes some leave.

JOHN: Are you ... Australian?

SIMON: Right in one. Just flew in from Sydney.

HAMID: *(Appears behind SIMON with tie and jacket which are wordlessly offered and accepted).* Welcome in Iraq, sir.

SIMON: Thanks, mate.

JOHN: *(Holds out his hand)*. How do you do?

SIMON: I'm good, thanks. *(They shake hands and SIMON also holds his hand out to HAMID who hesitates then shakes it nervously)*.

JOHN: Join me, please. *(Gestures to the other chair)*. Is this your first visit to Iraq?

SIMON: Yeah. I've been working in Asia Pac on a few coups and little wars – Fiji, East Timor, Solomon Islands – thought it was time to step up the action. A mate of mine knew Tony and they got me this gig covering his leave.

JOHN: You speak Arabic?

SIMON: Nope. Supposed to be a translator waiting for me but I get the impression the yanks offered him better pay. He's buggered off anyway.

JOHN: Don't worry, Ateef will find someone to help you out.

SIMON: Who's Ateef?

JOHN: Ateef is our steward. He's been with us for years. A most reliable and resourceful chap. He'll be here any minute. *(HAMID is listening)*.

HAMID: Mr. Ateef late. I start numbers? I know it. *(Bingo caller's voice)* Two big fat ladies. Eighty eight.

JOHN: You just look after the tea, Hamid. Ateef will be here shortly.

(HAMID moves away)

SIMON: Is this the usual crowd?

JOHN: Yes, yes. We get about 15 regulars every Thursday afternoon ... it used to be later but with the curfew and so on ... Once a month there's a bar and more of the embassy people come, foreign contractors and so forth. A younger crowd. A bit of music. It's not like the old

days, of course, but still we soldier on. Our motto is "We never close" ... you know, like the Windmill.

SIMON: The Windmill?

JOHN: The Windmill Theatre (*no response*)... London (*SIMON looks blank*)... during the war.

SIMON: Which war?

JOHN: Never mind.

SIMON: You've been here a while then?

JOHN: Twenty years. I was an oil man. Came for a contract, took another. Stayed on and forgot to leave. Hard for you to imagine but it used to be a very pleasant place. Prosperous ... smart hotels, decent schools, hospitals and so forth. Ruined it, of course.

SIMON: Saddam's mob?

JOHN: I was referring to the sanctions.

SIMON: What about the old dears over there?

JOHN: Ah, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. Father Anglo-Indian, mother Egyptian. Educated at Cheltenham Ladies' College and consider themselves quite English but don't have the passport of course. I call them the vestal virgins.
(*USCHI enters and walks up behind JOHN's chair as he is speaking*).

USCHI: What are you saying about virgins you old goat?

JOHN: Uschi! Oh I was just telling Mr. Taylor here, about the virgins that wait in heaven to welcome Islamic martyrs.

USCHI: And does Mr. Taylor require an education about virgins?

SIMON: About many things. I'm the new boy in town. Simon.
(*He holds out his hand and USCHI takes it and holds it a little longer than necessary*).

USCHI: I thought perhaps you were trying out a new bingo call. *(Shouts like a bingo caller)* Welcoming virgins, tw-wen-ty-four”.

HAMID: *(Appears with a tray with teapot and cups)*. Shayy, Miss. Uschi? Sir?

USCHI: Tea, Simon?

SIMON: Is there nothing stronger?

JOHN: Yes, but it’s Ramadan.

USCHI: Oh, give the man a drink. What difference does it make? He’s not a Muslim.

JOHN: Ateef’s got the keys and anyway, I don’t think it’s fair on Hamid. Bad enough that he has to serve us tea while he’s fasting.

USCHI: No, he loves it! Makes him feel the strength of his conviction. Hamid, darling! *(Asks for the tea)* Ay-i shayy, minfadlak. *(HAMID puts down the tray – as he turns away she gets a flask out of her handbag, pours generously into the teapot then pours two cups and hands one to SIMON)*. Chin chin. *(Pause)* Where’s Ateef? Not like him to be late. His pretty little wife will be in the kitchen waiting for him. What’s her name, by the way, do you know?

JOHN: No, I don’t ... and I don’t think she should make a habit of hanging around here when he’s working.

USCHI: *(Pretends to be shocked)* I know – standards dropping – wouldn’t have been allowed in my day. *(Beat)* What harm is she doing – sitting in there like a little mouse? Anyway, she helps Hamid with the washing up.

(Sound effect – like a distant explosion. SIMON jumps to his feet, USCHI notices but looks unconcerned, JOHN doesn’t react) .

SIMON: What the hell was that?

JOHN: What?

USCHI: It’s nothing. You’ll get used to it. Goes on all day.

JOHN: I didn’t hear anything.

USCHI: Just popping over to say hello to the sisters – they'll be dying of curiosity about you. *(She walks away)*.

(SIMON sits down again with JOHN)

SIMON: She seems quite a character. What's the accent?

JOHN: From Dresden, she says – got out of there somehow during the cold war years. Quite a chequered past one imagines. She's living with a member of the Iraqi cabinet at the moment – if you take a look outside there will be a Mercedes with tinted windows and several burly bodyguards.

SIMON: And before the cabinet minister?

JOHN: Best not to ask too many questions, old man. She's no politician – just a survivor like the rest of us. Let him without sin throw the first stone, eh?

SIMON: She's still a good looking woman.

JOHN: Look at the dear sisters trying to patronise her. Do you know, she sends Ateef to the market for them every week and, when he delivers, they pretend not to notice the price hasn't gone up in ten years. Uschi gives him the difference. They've hardly two pennies to rub together.

(USCHI returns).

SIMON: John tells me you're well connected. Perhaps you can help me navigate the local scene – get me a few introductions.

USCHI: I might ... but only if I decide you're amusing.

SIMON: I suppose you speak Arabic?

USCHI: Arabic, German, English, enough Spanish and Italian and, French - but of course everyone speaks French – and a tiny bit of Russian. *(She waves and blows a kiss)*. That's Bertie Gilbert. Perhaps you should write a story about him.

SIMON: And he is ...?

- JOHN: A grubby little arms dealer – or was until arms became the easiest thing to buy around here. He’s rather been outclassed.
- USCHI: Poor Bertie!
- JOHN: *(Calls out)* How are you, Shareef? *(chuckles)* You know he had Hepatitis? He got it licking his fingers *(he mimes)* while counting out a bribe.
- SIMON: Why do you call him, Shareef?
- JOHN: Well, some pretty ..
- USCHI: Young.
- JOHN: ...pretty, young local girl saw him flashing his money around and decided food on the table and the chance of a British passport was worth sleeping with a scrawny, gin-soaked scoundrel so started making up to him.
- USCHI: She played a clever game of advance and retreat. Bertie got drawn into declaring his passion ...
- JOHN: And her uncles were there likes bees round a honey pot.
- USCHI: He never said a word! John and I were actually having a nice dinner at the Sheraton, weren’t we darling? I heard a wedding band so I said “Come on let’s go and gawp at the bride” and there she was with too much make up and acres of white satin, a gypsy band and then ... in the middle of it all ... out walks Bertie! Without a word to any of us, he’s been talked into marrying her ...
- JOHN: .. which means he had to convert ...
- USCHI: And get an Islamic name, hence ... Shareef
- JOHN: We didn’t half pull his leg about it that Thursday at the club.
- USCHI: And now the little madam rules the roost and has banned him from drinking.

JOHN: But he keeps a couple of bottles in the flat upstairs with some chaps from Haliburton and every now and then he sneaks off and asks them if he can have a swig.

SIMON: And what about you, John, what's your story? Are you married?

JOHN: I was married. An English girl. We were talking about retiring to Cornwall but then ... she died .. and there didn't seem much point.

SIMON: I'm sorry, mate. Any kids?

JOHN: A step-son. He settled in Toronto. He's asked me to go and live with them there but .. you know, one doesn't want to be in the way.

SIMON: So this is home then? *(They both look at him and say nothing. His phone rings and he gets up and walks away to take the call. HAMID walks up.)*

HAMID: Everyone waiting, Mr John.

JOHN: All right, All right. You can call until Ateef gets here. Don't make a mess of it.

HAMID: *(Gleefully rushes to the table and calls out in sing song voice)* First game. Eyes on cards. Line any ways to win. First number. Key of door, *(everyone calls out the number with him)* twenty one.

(SIMON rushes back and picks up things.)

SIMON: Got to go. There's been a big explosion at a market just outside the green zone. I need to get over there.

USCHI: But you've no idea what you're doing. You'll get yourself killed. Take one of my men ... Tareq, he speaks a bit of English.

(They hear a woman cry out from offstage. HAMID rushes out).

JOHN: What's happening?

(HAMID returns looking stunned. He tells them Ateef was at the market and is dead).

HAMID: Ateef fee-s suk. Huwa ma'at-hu.

USCHI: *(looks horrified)* Oh, my God!

JOHN: What is it? What did he say. Speak up man!

USCHI: Ateef. He was at the market. *(Pause)* They think he's ... they think he ... might have been ... hurt.

JOHN: *(very agitated)* No! Why would he be there? He'd be on his way here. He wouldn't be at the market.

USCHI: I'll take his wife. We'll go and find out. Where does he live?

JOHN: *(Realising how little he knows)* I don't know... I don't know where he lives... I don't know his wife's name.

(He picks up his cane and swings it across the table sending things crashing). Bastards! Write about this! Listen to her! (Waves his arm wildly towards the kitchen).

SIMON: I'm really sorry. I have to go. *(Throws off the tie and jacket).*

USCHI: I'll get her and meet you downstairs.

(They leave by different doors. The crying recedes as ATEEF'S WIFE is taken away and all is silent).

HAMID: *(Approaches JOHN, drying his eyes.)* Mr. John? *(JOHN looks up).* Our motto, sir.

JOHN: What?

HAMID: Our motto, Mr. John. We never close.

(JOHN sits back in chair. Face torn with sadness. Nods. HAMID returns to table and speaks sniffing and wiping his face.)

HAMID: Two little ducks. Twenty two. *(JOHN mouths the words with him)* Quack, quack, quack.

THE END