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## Going Home To Understand War

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"IT SMELLS LIKE GASOLINE ..." SAYS KRISTIE ALSHAIBI, THE WIFE OF DIRECTOR USAMA ALSHAIBI AND PRODUCER and majority camera operator of his new film, "Nice Bombs," as she, her husband, and her in-laws drive under cover of darkness across the Jordanian border en route to Baghdad. The American invasion of Iraq began while Mr. and Mrs. Alshaibi were honeymooning in Amsterdam. Like many Americans, as the war continued Mr. Alshaibi "had a feeling that what I read and saw," back home in America, "did not give me the full story and I wanted to go see for myself."

But the documentary journey that is "Nice Bombs," undertaken in late 2003, is as much a homecoming as a fact-finding mission. Though married to an American and a recently naturalized American citizen himself, Mr. Alshaibi was born in Baghdad to a family of Muslim scholars whose roots in the region stretch back more than 500 years.

Saddam Hussein's government sponsored Mr. Alshaibi's father's Ph.D. studies abroad in America. But when his family returned to Iraq in the late 1970s, the refusal of Mr. Alshaibi's father to join the Baath party eventually forced them all back to America.

With his parents divorced and remarried — his Palestinian-Arab mother in Iowa City, Iowa, and his Iraqi father in Jordan — "I felt," Mr. Alshaibi says, "as if I stood somewhere in between." Indeed, when he turned 21, the filmmaker was the subject of a tug-of-war between Saddam's draft board and U.S. immigration, until an American judge granted him political asylum.

"Nice Bombs" is a low-fi documentary video diary in which Mr. Alshaibi narrates the film from off camera and addresses the lens directly. Before his citizenship is granted, Mr. Alshaibi's wife asks him why he is taking the oath. "I see it basically as a career move," he responds dryly. Despite his words, and despite what becomes an increasingly maddening and harrowing portrait of disrupted lives and thwarted hopes, Mr. Alshaibi rarely stoops to self-righteousness or partisan unction. For 76 flickering mini-cam minutes, "Nice Bombs" retains an honest, passionate, and surprisingly droll tone.

Upon arriving in Baghdad, Mr. Alshaibi, his wife, his father, and his two young stepbrothers are affectionately welcomed in a barrage of cheek kisses by the aunts, uncles, and cousins they have not seen in decades. The filmmaker's rusty Arabic requires that his relatives speak what English they can, and even when their syntax fails, they are an eloquent lot. Poring over family photos, Mr. Alshaibi's uncle points with obvious pride to a cousin who became a dentist and ticks off the family lineage at the breakfast table from memory.

Like his father, cousin Tareef is a marvelously canny communicator (the film's title refers to his reassuring description of Coalition Forces explosions), and his guided driving tours of Bagdad provide some of the film's highlights. One does not have to look far for ironies in times of war, and Mr. Alshaibi's cousin and camera

capture many.

A spectacular desert sunset pointed out by Tareef is only visible through a bullet-riddled street sign. When Mr. Alshaibi and his wife enter their host's guestroom on their first night, they find an assault rifle lying next to the bed. Sporadic nighttime gunfire could be from "some weddings going on," Mr. Alshaibi nervously speculates to the camera, or "possibly other things." Over tea with a nephew sleeping in his lap, Mr. Alshaibi's uncle shrugs amiably and reminds his guests that this is "not a good time" for a visit. "Come back in three or four years," he tells them with an unfortunate lack of prescience, "when things are getting better."

The film's family-level view of the epicenter of far-removed though impassioned political generalities is bracing. Its coda, during which Tareef describes the worsening conditions in Bagdad in a phone conversation taped in 2005, is heartbreaking. Were he to attempt the same film project he did in 2003, Tareef tells his cousin, "you will be kidnapped and I will be killed." As depicted in "Nice Bombs," Bagdad circa 2003 is no picnic, but just a few years later, the city has devolved further into violence, strife, finger pointing, and gun pointing than even a jaundiced native could have predicted. "I was always thinking about the future," Tareef says, "but now I don't see it."

Near the end, Mr. Alshaibi comes to a rather ambiguous conclusion: "People ask me what Iraqis think as if Iraq was one person with a single unchanging opinion." Loaded with candid conversations and opinions about the hot-button issues of war, terrorism, and Islamic extremism, "Nice Bombs," offers many different Iraqi and American points of view and portrays a time and place of nightmarish complexity. But by focusing on his family, Mr. Alshaibi grounds his film in the hopes and fears that everyone shares. Good, bad, and in between, "Nice Bombs" gives a strong sense of what a handful of Iraqis feel.

*Through July 22 (155 E. 3rd St., between avenues A and B, 212-591-0434).*