The Baghdad Eucharist

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Translated by
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He came unto his own, and his own received him not.
The Gospel according to John, 1:11

Living in the Past

1

"You're just living in the past, Uncle!" Maha burst out as she ran from the living room after our argument. Luay, her husband, was upset and he called out after her, his face flushed.

"Hey, Maha, where are you going? Come back! Maha!" But she was already hurtling up the stairs that led to the second floor. He looked downcast as he apologized.

"Forgive her, Uncle. You know how much she loves and respects you." In a voice speckled with shame, he added, "She's a nervous wreck and can't help herself."

Before I could think of anything to say, the sound of her fitful sobbing reached us from the second floor.

"It's all right. It's no big deal. Go calm her down and comfort her," I muttered.

I was sitting on a chair set smack in front of the television and Maha's husband got up from the gray sofa where they had both been seated and came over to me. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I owe you." He turned away and slowly climbed the stairs.

A host and his guest were having a heated discussion on television, and even though I was right up against the screen, their faces were nothing but a blur and I couldn't tell what they were saying, despite their raised voices. All I could hear were the words ringing in my ears, "You're just living in the past, Uncle!"

2

I didn't sleep well that night. I tossed in the dark as Maha's stinging pronouncement played over and over in my head. I kept asking myself whether I really did live in the past, but all I could come up with were further questions. How could someone my age, to some degree or another, *not* live in the past? Being in my seventies, most of my life was behind me and very little of it still lay ahead. She, on the other hand, was in her early twenties and, however gloomy the present may be, she still had her whole future before her. She was kindhearted and meant well but she was only half formed. Just like her past. She too would begin to revisit the past once it had grown a little, and she would dwell on it for hours—even were it to consist of nothing but misery. Her wounds would heal and she would retain only what was best. In any case, for me to stop living in the past, it would have to be dead. And it clearly wasn't—the past was alive and well, in one form or another, and it not only coexisted with the present, but continued to wrangle with it. Perhaps it was just being held captive inside the frames of all the snapshots hanging on the walls of the house, suspended along the mile-long walls of my memory, and lying between the covers of our photo albums? Hadn't she stood before them often enough and asked me to point out different family members and questioned me about what had happened to them, where they were now, how they had died, and when? How often had she asked me to tell her the stories contained within those frames? I had always responded to her questions readily, coloring in the details and following various threads that sometimes led to other photos or to other stories that hadn't been captured by the camera's lens—stories laced with sighs of pleasure or with laughter that were lodged in my memory, and others that were preserved in an archive guarded by my heart.

Was I really escaping the present and seeking refuge in the past, as she alleged? Even if it were true, was there shame in it when the present was no more than a booby-trapped snare full

of car bombs, brutality, and horror? Perhaps the past was like the garden which I so loved and which I tended as if it were my own daughter, just in order to escape the noise and ugliness of the world. My own paradise in the heart of hell, my own 'autonomous region' as I sometimes liked to call it. I would do anything to defend that garden, and the house, because they were all I had left. I really had to forgive her. My youth was not her youth, her time and my time were worlds apart. Her green eyes fluttered open to the ravages of war and sanctions; deprivation, violence, and displacement were the first things she tasted in life. I, on the other hand, had lived in prosperous times, which I still remembered and continued to believe were real.

3

I woke at 6:30, as I had done for many years, without the use of an alarm clock. My bladder, which awakened me several times a night, was all the alarm I needed. I washed my face and shaved in front of the mirror in the bathroom by my bedroom, but didn't break out into one of my favorite songs, as was my habit, because I wanted to recapture the details of my dream. I took my dentures out of their glass of water, opened my mouth, and secured them in place. I had lost my teeth years ago, and I eventually grew used to the dentures, despite having found them uncomfortable for a while. I was proud that I still had a full head of thick, albeit white, hair. Anything but baldness!

In the dream, I *had* gone bald and that alone made it feel more like a nightmare. The house had been the same in every particular, except that it was a museum. Each room had become a hall with cordoned-off chairs and beds, and there were signs everywhere warning visitors not to touch or get too close. I was the docent, and as I recounted the history of each room, I explained who had lived there and where they had gone. Although I heard whispering and giggling, the rooms were empty. I went from hall to hall looking for visitors but there was no one around. Then, I heard a voice that belonged

to a man who was leading a group of visitors down the hallway but he was giving them faulty information about the house. I went toward them and shouted, "This is *my* house, and I am the docent here." But no one heard me or took any notice. I looked in the mirror and saw that I was bald.

I combed my hair and thanked my lucky stars I still had all of it. I opened my eyes wide and peered into my face in the mirror, raising my thick gray eyebrows slowly and crunching together the wrinkles time had etched onto my brow. I stepped back from the mirror, and dried my face and forehead one last time.

On my way from the bathroom to the kitchen to make tea, I stopped in front of the hallway calendar, just as I had done for years. Even after I had retired and there was no longer any business to attend to or any appointments to keep, I never gave up the habit. I'd stop in the hallway and signal the beginning of a new day by crossing out the previous one on the calendar. I would do this using a pencil that hung by a thread from the nail that held the calendar in place. I looked at the current month's photograph of an empty bench with a few yellowed leaves scattered on the paving stones in front of it; a fall wind had blown the leaves down from a nearby tree, whose trunk alone was visible. Below the photograph, only one day remained, the last day of the month of October 2010, which was a Sunday. "Hinna's passing," I had written into the small square.

Truth be told, I needed no reminder of the day my sister had left us, on a morning like this one seven years ago. I'd been to the church earlier this month to ask the priest to offer a prayer for the repose of her soul on the anniversary of her death, and had agreed to pay an extra tithe. The special service wouldn't be held at the sanctuary where my sister had gone for decades in the convent that had become her second home. Since the convent had closed its doors to worshippers for security reasons, the service would be held at what was popularly known as Umm al-Taq, the Church of Our Lady

of Deliverance. It was the church Maha and her husband attended on Sundays because he was a Syriac Catholic. Hinna would not mind that the service was being held there rather than at the Chaldean church, "our church" as she called it. The differences between the two were insignificant: both were Eastern Catholic denominations and the liturgy was almost identical, except for a few words here and there. In the end, the prayers were all addressed to the same God, regardless of language or denomination, and that's what counted.

It had been seven years since that fateful morning. How fast they had gone by! Had she lived to witness them, Hinna would have been incredulous. Not only had they been worse than anything that had come before, they even rivaled the last seven months of Hinna's life, the months that followed the outbreak of the 2003 war.

Hinna always got up before I did and made tea for both of us. Her breakfast was very simple: a piece of bread with a little white or yellow cheese, a spoonful of the apricot or fig jam which she loved and made herself, and two istikans of tea. She would sit the teapot on top of the kettle with the flame of the burner turned all the way down, so that the tea would still be hot when I woke up and was ready to drink it. Then, she would walk to church. Her gait had worsened over the years, she moved slowly and only with the help of a cane. She wouldn't hear of me getting up early to give her a ride nor would she listen when I suggested that she could go to church just on Sundays instead of every day. She was extremely hard-headed, especially when it came to her religious observances.

When I went into the kitchen that morning, I saw that Hinna had not made the tea. The teapot lay upturned on the dish drainer by the sink, just as it had been the previous night after we'd had our evening tea. I assumed she wasn't feeling well, so I filled the kettle, placed it on the right-hand burner, and lit a match under it. I put two generous tablespoons of tea leaves in the teapot, moistened them with a few drops of

water, covered the pot and placed it on top of the kettle, and waited for the water to boil before pouring it over the leaves.

I left the kitchen and went down to the end of the hallway toward her room, right by the door that led to the backyard. Her door was shut. I rapped three times, calling her name. "Hinna! Hinna! Hinna, dear . . . ."

No answer. I turned the doorknob gently and opened the door as quietly as I could. She was still in bed. The morning sun streamed through between the gaps of the drawn curtains and from either side. I stepped inside the room, which I rarely entered, and pressed on the light switch to the right of the door. Nothing happened. I remembered her telling me the day before that the bulb had burned out and needed replacing, and although I'd told her that I'd take care of it, I hadn't; I berated myself for having put off fetching the ladder from the storeroom, but my knee would hurt whenever I climbed up to change a bulb. What with all the power outages and trying to save on using the electric generator, I had rationalized that we would just use candles at night. Putting off such things was never a good idea.

I called out once more, "Hinna, what's wrong? Get up! Come on, Hinna!"

I went toward the window on the right, and pushed open the curtains. The sun flooded into the middle of the room. I shielded my eyes from the glare, turned around, and went toward the bed. She was lying on her left side, with the quilt drawn up over her shoulders. Approaching the edge of the bed, I looked at her intently. Her eyes were closed and a few strands of her silvery hair lay matted by her face on the pillow. Her hands, with the rosary wrapped around them, were clasped together at the bottom of the pillow to the right of her face; the rosary never left her and the rhythmical clicking of its tiny red beads accompanied all her prayers and invocations. She must have kissed it before falling asleep because the small silver cross at its tip was still resting on her lips.

I leaned down and shook her shoulder, gently repeating her name, "Hinna, Hinna."

She didn't stir. Her shoulder felt rigid and there was a waxy pallor to the crisscross of wrinkles that mapped her face. "Hinna, Hinna dear," I repeated quietly.

I tried to take her pulse but her clasped hands were entwined in the rosary. My heart sank. She was cold to the touch, and I knew instantly that she would never wake up. I wrapped my fingers around her wrist with the tip of my index against her vein, but the pulsing beat of life was silent.

That night, life gathered its last vestiges and vacated Hinna's body, leaving it to death's undivided attention. The good Lord had granted the wish she had often expressed over the years, at particularly painful or trying times. "Dear God," she would exclaim, "take me to You, and relieve me!" She always wished others a long life but for herself she sought only its curtailment. "No more, Lord. Let me be done!" she would say.

I sat on the edge of the bed. I wanted to embrace her one last time, but just stroked her silvery hair with my left hand. I hardly ever touched or kissed her, maybe once or twice a year on the occasion of a holiday. The last time I remembered stroking her hair was when I was still a child. We had lost our mother, and despite Hinna's tender age, it was to her that fell the task of caring for my younger brothers and me. She was only fifteen when she had to give up her dream of entering the convent, and she devoted the rest of her life to ensuring we were comfortable and had enough to eat. Whatever time was left after discharging her duties she spent in religious devotion, either at home or at church. I released her rigid hand to wipe away the tears that had begun to run down my cheeks. I kissed her cold forehead and said, "Rest in peace, Hinna." I said it out loud, as if she could hear me.

A picture of the Virgin Mary hung above the bed. The holy mother appeared full of grace, holding the fruit of her womb against her robes of blue. A shaft of celestial light

pierced the sky above and angels circled around her, wings aflutter. Despite the beatitude of her features, there was a sad cast to the eyes looking down on my sister and me.

The tears flowed as I prayed for Hinna's soul. I intoned, "Our Father who art in heaven," just as she had done for me over the course of an entire lifetime. And I followed that with, "Hail Mary, full of grace. Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

4

I let go of the pencil. Here was the past coming back to remind me of Hinna, as if I could've forgotten her in the first place. I went toward her room, which I had decided to keep exactly as it had been when she was alive. Except for her clothes, which I had asked one of my nieces to collect from the small closet following the condolence period, the room remained unchanged. Hinna's clothes had gone to the church for distribution to the poor.

I opened the door and stepped inside. The room was cold and dark as a tomb. I turned on the light, the switch was to the right of the door, but it didn't dispel the darkness. Then I remembered that we had no power, and in any case, I had never replaced that burned-out lightbulb. I didn't see the point after Hinna's own light was gone from the room, even when the women attending her came to wash her body, comb her hair, and clothe her in a manner befitting her final journey to the grave. I told the women from the neighborhood and our remaining female relatives in Baghdad that there was sufficient daylight for their purpose and I asked them to keep the room lit with candles throughout the night. I was sure that Maha had closed the curtains the last time she'd cleaned the room because I always left them open. The first time she cleaned Hinna's room, she'd said, "It's like a shrine, Uncle—you can feel her spirit is still there."

I went to the window and drew open the curtains as I had done exactly seven years earlier. A gray dove perching on the far side of the brick ledge flew off toward the neighbors' house. The sun poured in, blanketing part of the floor and two-thirds of the bed, which was covered by a white sheet that Maha had placed over the eiderdown. I took three steps toward the window closest to the bed and drew open those curtains too. Morning enveloped the room. I turned around and stood by the bed, looking at the picture of the Virgin Mary above it. To the left was a photo of my brother, Jamil, who fled Iraq in 1969 after his friend was condemned to death on charges of being a Freemason. Even though Jamil wasn't a Mason, his Lebanese wife feared he would suffer a similar fate and they moved to Lebanon. They had three children, and there were five grandchildren so far. They lived in an area of Beirut called Sinn al-Fil to start with but after their house was destroyed during the civil war, they moved to Bikfaya, close to her parents. He was still in his prime in that photograph. Even though she denied it, Hinna loved him best of all, more than me and all our other siblings. The rest of the room was given over to icons and statuettes and other small votive figurines of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, which Hinna collected. Some of them she had brought back from her last trip with the church to Rome in 1989, after the ban on foreign travel was lifted. I would sometimes needle her and say that her room was a miniature church, but for the lack of incense and an altar.

"With you officiating, no doubt!" she'd retort.

She even had a replica of the small glass filled with holy water that worshippers dipped their forefinger in before crossing themselves and stepping inside the church. The glass stood on a little shelf under the light switch to the right of the door. About half a meter below sat the old Singer treadle sewing machine that she labored on as a seamstress for years until the rest of us began to earn our livings. She'd insisted on keeping it even though it no longer worked and she hadn't used it in

decades. The machine's table was another space on which to place small statuary. A wooden wardrobe stood in the corner closest to the Singer and, alongside it, was a dressing table with a large mirror. Except for the medium-sized hairbrush with a tuft of white hair still in it, and a few combs, there was nothing relating to Hinna's physical appearance on the dressing table. It was entirely given over to her spiritual pursuits—a stack of prayer books, which accompanied her throughout her life, and an assortment of small pictures distributed by the church. The size of a greeting card, or slightly smaller, some depicted the Virgin Mary alone, while others were of the Madonna and child, St. Joseph, Mary Magdalene, or other saints. There were also photos marking her loved ones' religious milestones—the christenings and First Communions of nephews and nieces—which she placed among the pictures of saints for their protective powers.

A small wooden coffer in the middle of the dressing table, which I knew she had bought in Italy, contained an assortment of rosaries, and her 'live' gold cross. She wore it around her neck, convinced that it contained a miniscule fragment of the original cross. To the left of the dressing table was a wall covered with photographs of religious potentates: one of a smiling Pope John Paul II in his white papal gowns; below that, a picture of Patriarch Boulos Sheikho II, the head of the world Chaldean congregation, whom she had placed beneath the Roman pontiff even though they were ranked equally; and further down, was Sheikho's successor, whose photo was inscribed with the words, "His Eminence Raphael I Bidawid, Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon."

Underneath the pictures of the pope and the patriarchs, there was a smaller photo of her in a heavy black coat standing in front of the Holy See. She was forever recalling her pilgrimage to the Vatican. She liked Rome very much but always bemoaned the fate of Jerusalem, which she had visited in 1966. Whenever the subject of Palestine came up in

discussions or on television, she would say, "And when will Jerusalem be ours again so we can go to the Holy Sepulcher?"

In addition to countless mementos and pictures, Hinna had come back from Jerusalem bearing two crucifixes. A small one that was tattooed on the underside of her forearm, along with 1966, the year she made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. That little crucifix went with her to the grave where she rests. The larger one, made of olive wood, still hung on the wall facing the bed, alone and unadorned.

I opened a window to let in some fresh air and decided to leave it open in spite of the cold. As I left the room and closed the door, it occurred to me that Hinna's spirit might be pining for her room and come by for a visit. I would close the window at dusk before heading to the church.

5

As I made the tea, I remembered the heat of my argument with Maha. While she had clearly crossed the limits of mutual respect by the tone she used in her aggressive disparagement of my views, I didn't want her to feel anything but ease at being here, especially as these were the last few months before she and her husband were due to leave the country. Despite my love of solitude and the reclusiveness to which I was accustomed, their presence had restored vitality and a sweet feeling to the vast, stiff-jointed house. Maha and her husband had taken on so many of the burdens associated with running a household: Luay was always ready to offer a helping hand and Maha's cooking was truly excellent. It wasn't comparable to Hinna's of course, but I relished everything she made—I had grown so tired of sandwiches and salads and my limited repertoire of simple dishes.

I sat at the kitchen table sipping my tea and thinking about the best way to ease the tense atmosphere and the bitter taste left by the previous night's argument. I chuckled to myself when it hit me that even from the gloom of their prisons, the Baathists

could still cause trouble. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry about the fact that this was the second time that Tariq Aziz had provoked family friction. The first time was in the late 1980s when Hinna and I had had a similarly heated argument after she'd told me that she'd seen Aziz's wife crying in church on Sunday. She attended regularly, my sister said, and she cried throughout the service. It was no doubt because she knew what her husband was up to, I had retorted. To which she objected virulently by saying that he was a God-fearing man who had nothing to do with what the rest of the government was up to. He made generous donations to the church, and had footed the bill for the magnificent new chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. I could see for myself, she chided, if only I would deign to set foot in church. His contributions did not absolve him of responsibility for his history and his actions, I told her, adding that they were paltry in light of the brutal treatment being meted out. And, anyhow, why didn't *he* go to church to pray and do penance for his sins, I asked? I told her that this was a confirmation of the widely circulated rumor that he had converted to Islam, along with Michel Aflaq.

"Oh, really? So why don't you go to church and atone for *your* sins?" she protested indignantly.

"Because I don't have any. At least not ones that cause people any harm."

"What are you saying? That simply not harming people is enough? What about your religious duties?"

I went to church only on special occasions and on holidays. Over the decades, Hinna had given up hope that I would do as enjoined by the Ten Commandments and observe the day of the Lord, and she took advantage of every opportunity to remind me that I was a renegade. I couldn't plead or convince her, albeit in jest, that she was my churchgoing proxy.

"You're praying enough for seven people by going to church every day," I would tell her, "so why not pick another six on whose behalf you could consider yourself to have prayed?"

Whenever I spoke like that, she'd look at me sideways, shake her head, and just clam up.

And now, two decades on, Tariq Aziz, along with several others, had been sentenced to death for his role in executions, purges, and forced displacements. This had happened five days earlier and the airwaves and newspaper columns were full of loud and fierce arguments about the merits of the judgment, given the man's frailty and advanced age and his self-proclaimed innocence. Aziz denied any involvement in the massacres of Kurds and Shiites, and claimed he was a diplomat whose sole responsibility was the conduct of foreign affairs.

The first time I had an argument with Maha and Luay, it hadn't led to a confrontation. She had derided the trial as a mockery of justice—instead of busying themselves with sentencing innocent old men to death, she'd said, they should be giving redress to ordinary people for all the problems they faced. Luay had asked for my opinion, and I'd said that besides the procedural flaws, the courts involved were unconstitutional since they had been set up under the occupation; it would've been better to wait and not act so hastily, I added. Even Saddam shouldn't have been executed, but been left to rot in prison for the rest of his days, I told him. And Tariq Aziz *was* complicit insofar as he knew what the Baathists were up to.

"But aren't they sentencing him to death because he's a Christian?" Maha had shot back, her tone petulant.

"My dear, it's more complicated than who's a Christian and who's a Muslim. The issue is a political one, it has to do with powerful interests, not with religion," I'd replied. Maha hadn't said anything more, but she'd clearly indicated that she didn't like what she'd heard when she slapped her own cheek and covered her mouth as if to suggest that she'd had to stop herself from speaking.

Yesterday, however, she had shown no such restraint. We had revisited the subject after hearing a new development in the story, as we were having tea. The announcer

had said that President Jalal Talabani had issued a statement announcing that he would not approve the death sentence and that he respected Tariq Aziz as a Christian. The Vatican had stepped in and was trying to intervene to have him released, added the announcer.

"But isn't it the exact same Dawa Party people who carried out the grenade attack and tried to assassinate him in Mustansiriya in 1979 that are trying to kill him now because he's a Christian?" Maha responded, shaking her head. "Aren't they terrorists too? Is it him or them who should be condemned to death? Under the pretext of the rule of law, these terrorists can now sit in judgment of a public figure of his stature!"

"What rule of law, my dear? They're of a piece, all of them, just criminals and thieves! The 'rule of straw' is what they should call it, not the rule of law."

Then we heard the voice of Tariq Aziz's son in conversation with the announcer over the phone. He said the death sentence was politically motivated and he called for the intervention of the international community to free his father who was innocent and in poor health.

Listening to him, I remembered Aziz's haughty demeanor during press conferences when he'd blow on a Cuban cigar in emulation of his master and leader; I recalled too how he had once threatened a British journalist with death. However, I didn't say anything in order to keep the peace; it was enough, I thought, that the man would spend the rest of his days in jail. But Maha had escalated the argument.

"If he were one of *them* they'd never have handed down a death sentence, but the blood of Christians is cheap!" she exclaimed.

I answered her calmly, "And what about those that were condemned to death before him? Weren't they Muslims? He's the first, and the only, Christian to get a death sentence."

"Don't you see how they're killing us everywhere, without due process, or a word of protest? Churches are being

torched, we’re being killed right, left, and center, and we are slowly but surely being driven out.”

“Maha dear, it’s not only churches. Far more mosques have been burned to the ground, and Muslims have perished in the tens of thousands.”

“May they go on killing each other ‘til kingdom come, and leave us alone! What have we done to them?”

“It’s not a matter of guilt or innocence. It’s about the state, don’t you see? Minorities can only be protected if there is a strong state. We have neither parties nor militias—or much else to show for ourselves.”

Maha was obdurate. Or maybe she just didn’t want to abandon the argument on my terms.

“It’s not as if it’s just here, in Iraq. Look at Egypt. There’s a strong state there—and they’re still killing Christians and burning down churches! They’re going to keep at it until we all leave, just like they did with the Jews. Why did the Jews leave? Who made them go?”

“My dear, what happened with the Jews is entirely different, and it’s complicated. Israel had come into the picture, and the Jews were stripped of their nationality with the collusion of the old regime. After that, it just became one huge tangled mess.”

Luay had said nothing until now, but not because he had no feelings about the subject.

“It’s not just us, Uncle,” he said, breaking his silence. “What about the poor Mandaeans and the Yazidis up north? Look at what happened to them. The Muslims aren’t going to leave anyone be.”

“It’s a religion which was spread by the sword. What do you expect?” Maha chimed in.

“And can you tell me how the Christian faith was spread?” I asked her. “By making nice and whispering sweet nothings into people’s ears? If it weren’t for that Roman emperor—his name escapes me right now—who converted, Christianity wouldn’t have spread at the pace it did. Wasn’t it the practice

of conquering Christian armies to behead people for no other reason than their refusal to convert? And how about the Crusades and the conquest of the Americas which, with the blessing of the church, involved the slaughter of an estimated twenty million people?"

"Well, I don't know about those details, Uncle. And that was all in the past. Our problems are right now, in the present. The Muslims want to get rid of us, quite simply, so that the country can become theirs alone."

"What do you mean 'theirs'? The country belongs to everybody, and if it's anyone's, it's ours, before anyone else, all the way back to the time of the Chaldeans and from there on down to the Abbasids, the Ottomans, and the creation of the modern nation-state. The evidence is there, in all of our museums. We've been here from the very beginning. If it isn't our country, I'd like to know whose it is!"

She sighed, and sounded pained as she answered. "I guess that's where we'll end up, in museums. It may have been our country once, Uncle, a long time ago, in the past. But that's all over. Today, we are all infidels and second-class citizens."

"Infidels, shminfidels! As soon as things settle down, life will be good again. It's just a matter of time. Things are far better now than they were three or four years ago."

"How so, Uncle? What is it that's going to be better after all the killing, the slaughter, and displacement?"

"Maha, my dear, many countries and peoples have gone through far worse, and then things have settled down. That's the cycle of history."

"Please, Uncle, what are you saying? Go outside and see how they're treating people in the streets, and at their jobs, and then come and tell me that it'll all go back to normal. It won't!"

She was red-hot with anger and waved her right hand in the air for emphasis, and although her husband placed his left hand on her arm to get her to tone it down, she carried right on.

"I'd like to know when you think our situation was perfectly stable. When was it that there was no discrimination or racism?"

"With all due respect, dear you're still very young. What's going on now is out of the ordinary. In the old days . . . ."

"Uncle, I know nothing about the old days! Nor do I want to know. All I want is to live with dignity and be treated like a human being!"

"Yes, that is your right. But history . . . ."

She interrupted me again. "What history, for God's sake! You're just living in the past, Uncle!"

6

She was still in bed and hadn't got up yet to get ready for school. I remembered how it was the Gulf War in 1991 that had brought us together, Maha and me. And now, after another war, or rather the devastation and calamities resulting from it, she and her husband had ended up living under the same roof with me. I would never have imagined such a thing. But, honestly, could anyone have ever imagined any of the things that have occurred in recent decades?

During the bombing of Baghdad in 1991, I had wanted to stay in the house, but Hinna was so terrified by the sound of the bombs that she insisted we should go to the shelter where we had relatives. The air force command base was close to where we lived and as she kept repeating to people afterward, the shelling was "right over our heads." When we had argued about going to the shelter, I'd said to her, "If we are meant to die, does it make any difference where we are?"

"In that case," she replied, "let's go and die with our family, then. Surely, that's better than dying alone?"

"What do you think this is? A party?" I told her. "I want to die in my own home."

It wasn't a proper bomb shelter but the basement of the Amira supermarket, which belonged to a relative in the district

of Karrada Kharij. Still, it was large enough to accommodate the owner's relatives as well as a few other families who lived close by and had decided to stay put. Many people had left the capital for the provinces a day or two earlier to escape the bombing that had just begun.

The first time I'd met Maha as a little girl, she was sobbing, just as she had been last night, and I had been quite upset by the sight of the fat tears streaming down her face. I'd seen her before that of course, at various family gatherings, but my first clear memory of her was that gloomy night in the shelter when she sobbed in her mother's lap as American jet fighters pounded Baghdad so hard that the earth shook. Other than her mother, Nawal, I'd been the only person who'd been able calm her.

At one point, Nawal got up and start walking around, cradling Maha in her arms, and trying to lull her to sleep. She approached the doorway by the stairs where I stood holding the small transistor radio that went with me everywhere. Even though all they had been saying for the previous forty-eight hours was, "Allied forces continue their aerial bombardment of targets inside Iraq and Kuwait," I felt the need to listen to the news continuously and I couldn't get a signal inside the basement shelter, so I stood in the stairway near the exit, ducking back in whenever the shelling became too intense.

When I saw Maha with her face buried in her mother's chest, Nawal had remarked, "The poor child, she's frightened to death!" but then she turned to her daughter and said, "Look, who's here! It's Uncle Youssef! Let's say hello to him!" Her green eyes brimming with tears, Maha had looked up at me, as if she hadn't heard a thing her mother had said.

"Hey, what's going on? Why all this crying?" I asked.

She pointed her little hand at the ceiling and said, "That."

Chucking her cheek gently, I asked, "That? What's that?"

"Boom, boom, boom," she answered, her eyes glistening, and then put her thumb back in her mouth.

"No, no," I told her, "It's not 'boom, boom.' It's just raining! It's raining really, really hard. Don't worry, it'll be over soon. All gone!"

Her eyes grew wide as if she were thinking over what I had just said. Then she looked to her mother for confirmation and Nawal reassured her. "It's just the rain, darling. Nothing but rain."

Although fear lingered in her eyes, soon Maha was repeating the words "Rain, rain," after her mother. All through the remaining days we spent in the shelter, she would chant, "Lain, lain!" every time the shelling intensified—as if the four letters were an umbrella that would shield her from the man-made cloudbursts that poured down on Baghdad and other Iraqi cities for weeks on end.

Hinna had brought bags of klaicha, sambusak, and cheese fatayer for us to eat in the shelter. I also stocked up on chocolate whenever the store opened for a few hours in between waves of bombing. Following the invasion of Kuwait, we suddenly got British chocolate bars such as Cadbury's and Flake, which I hadn't seen in years. On the wrapper of a particularly good one, with hazelnuts and raisins, it said "Specially imported to Kuwait," and I realized that it was looted merchandise. The same thing happened two months later when I bought a box of cheese, which said, "Danish aid to the Iraqi people."

The Americans' so-called 'surgical strikes' were nothing of the kind. Contrary to what they claimed on the news, the strikes were 'aami shami' as Hinna said—pell-mell, indiscriminate, and random. They mistakenly hit the nearby Ilwiya post office three times, destroying several buildings before hitting their target. I didn't understand the connection between the Ilwiya post office and their campaign to liberate Kuwait. One of the men in the shelter, who smoked almost nonstop just outside the door, had an answer to everything and informed me it was to cut off communication with the army in Kuwait. I found him annoying and wasn't convinced—it seemed

ridiculous that the Iraqi army was communicating with troops in Kuwait from this post office.

The day after the Ilwiya post office was hit, I decided to venture out and see for myself. As I approached the side streets, I saw hundreds of pieces of paper strewn on the ground and hanging off palm trees everywhere. I stopped to take a look and saw that they were telephone bills and other mundane official paperwork.

A week into our sojourn at the shelter, there wasn't a drop of water left in the tanks on the roof of the building or in the sole toilet that everyone who didn't have a house nearby was using. It grew awkward and uncomfortable, and Hinna finally agreed that it was time to go home. An anti-aircraft gun position had been set up on the roof of the building next door, and it made such an ear-splitting and terrifying noise that there was practically no difference between being home and being at the shelter.

When we got to the house, we had to clean out the fridge and the freezer and throw away the food that had spoiled after the power was cut off at the start of the bombing. Because it was Lent and we couldn't eat meat, Hinna wanted to throw out meat from the freezer that was still good, but I told her we should use it.

"Haram," I said, "don't throw it away. Food is short, everything is closed."

As we argued over what to do, Heaven intervened and our parish priest dropped by for a visit. He was doing the rounds of the neighborhood to check on his parishioners. When Hinna asked him about the meat, he told her that the church had issued a directive postponing Lent due to the state of emergency.

"Excellent, Father! The Good Lord sent you our way!" I exclaimed.

The first few days, the bombing went on nonstop, but it soon settled into a regular pattern. The 'American fireworks,'

as Hinna called the air raids that would start in the evening and go on until daybreak.

"What was with them last night? Boom, boom, boom, boom . . . . Isn't it enough already? Haven't they had their fill yet?" she'd ask, every morning.

In those days, Amer, my sister Salima's son, would come over on his bike from their house in al-Amin. Like everything else, gas was in short supply and the phones didn't work, so bicycles were suddenly a prime means of transportation. Salima sent him over to check on us and he relayed her suggestion that we move in with them. Their house was safer since it wasn't located right by the air force command. Naturally, I objected.

"Thanks, dear boy, but your house is no better. The Rashid barracks are right behind your place so it's six of one and half a dozen of another."

Although Hinna tried to convince me, I wouldn't budge. I told her she was free to go if she wished and I offered to drive her there, despite needing to save what gas I had in the tank in case of an emergency. She hemmed and hawed but stayed put because she couldn't bring herself to leave me alone in the house.

We only had water every three days, and we'd fill as many bottles and plastic pitchers as we could. We also filled the tubs in both ground floor bathrooms, and used that water to flush the toilets. To bathe, we'd heat a big cauldron over palm-tree kindling that I would light in the fireplace in the reception lounge.

"They've turned the clocks back a hundred years," Hinna would exclaim, shaking her head. "In the old days, the fireplace was for sitting around and roasting chestnuts."

Following the cease-fire, the regime's slogans and vocabulary changed. No longer were euphemisms like "returning the branch to the tree" and "the mother of all battles" being used; instead, we heard more mundane phrases such as, "the

events of August 2" and, "the allied attack." One day, after the northern and southern uprisings had broken out and I had gone out to get a few things we needed, I noticed that the Secret Police car with tinted windows had disappeared from al-Wathiq Square where it had always sat. According to one of the market vendors in the square who was listening to the radio, there was, "fighting everywhere." For three days in a row, Saddam made no speeches and I heard a report on the radio saying he had lost control of most of the provinces.

He regained the upper hand, of course, after slaughtering thousands of people and throwing them into mass graves.

The first time the power was back after that was in April, on the eve of Saddam's birthday. On his special day, he appeared in a white suit and cut into a birthday cake before a group of children singing and dancing as if nothing had happened. Hinna turned to me. "Can you believe that man carrying on like this? After everything we've been through? Has he no shame? People are dying everywhere, the country is devastated, and he's playing at happy birthday like a little kid! What a disgrace."

7

I needed to withdraw money from the bank and planned to visit my friend Saadoun by the same token. I wouldn't let Maha and her husband pay rent, even though they wanted to. It didn't make much difference to my budget or overall situation—my needs were simple and I had saved much of what my siblings and their children sent our way from time to time. I decided not to take the car as I wasn't going far and had promised myself to heed my doctor's recommendation to walk every day in order to help lower my blood pressure. I returned my tea glass to the sink. I took my blood pressure pill with a little water that I gulped straight from a bottle of mineral water in the fridge without bothering to use a glass. I love cold water, whatever the season.

I went into my room, took off my pajamas, and put on gray trousers and a blue shirt, and wore the comfortable sneakers I used for walking. I looked around my room and in the closet for my navy blue overcoat but couldn't find it. Then I remembered it was hanging in the vestibule. I stepped out of my room, closed the door, and stopped at the stairwell. I pricked up my ears. The door to the second floor was closed and it was completely quiet up there. No matter, I would see Maha before church and we would make up. She was sure to apologize and I would do the same; I realized that I wasn't sufficiently sensitive toward her, especially after what had happened to them in al-Dawra. I crossed the living room and grabbed my coat from the coatrack in the vestibule on the way. I put the coat on, picked up my keys from the wooden table under the rack, and unlocked the three deadbolts. The front door slammed shut as a cold wind blew into my face. I went back to the coatrack to get my black scarf and wrapped it around my neck. I noticed that the door from the vestibule leading to the reception lounge was open. I reached over to shut it and as I did so, glanced at the photographs across the room that hung on the wall next to the wooden bar.

I stepped inside the reception lounge that I no longer used since so few visitors came by and most of our relatives had emigrated. I tripped on the edge of the Kashan rug whose colors I loved, but was able to recover my balance without falling. I went around the coffee table in the center of the room and stood before the archipelago of photographs dotted across the wall. I'd picked them out years ago, and had them nicely framed and hung them at regular intervals from one another. Once again, I recalled the previous night's dream.

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