

## Chapter 19 Empty Playgrounds

Between 1991 and 2003, in the course of my visits to pediatric hospitals and ill equipped schools to rundown neighborhoods, and even when walking through the streets of Baghdad or Basra, I saw a lot of sick, unhappy and idle children.

I saw little corpses, newly cold, held limply by their weeping mothers, or carried in a grandfather's arms towards a car, taken for washing before burial. I saw newborn infants with badly deformed bodies who would soon die. I saw underweight babies lying in small cots, a row of them, waiting for a free incubator. I saw a boy who'd been bitten all over his head by a hungry dog, one of many such cases. I saw a handless girl who'd picked up a cluster bomb left by the bombardiers in 1991. I saw the remains of a boy who'd stepped on a land mine. I saw a skinny girl burned when a makeshift stove overturned, her sores turning from first to third degree because she was too wasted to restore her body tissue. Then there were the hairless children sitting on their cots in the cancer wards, hollow-faced and waiting.

Somehow, none of those sights troubled me as much as a place without children at all-- a playground. Those meeting places had become empty over the years that children's lives were turned in different directions. Not one, but many playgrounds sat empty. All across Iraq. Playgrounds and parks are meant especially for children to run and screech, slide and scamper. So their abandonment is poignant.

As soon as the war began, playgrounds emptied. As far as I know, none had been bombed. They were not smashed by missiles or riddled with bullets. They were simply vacant. I Know I Saw Them Here Before

Once brightly painted wooden and plastic frames had faded in the hot desert glare of the sanctions. In the countryside, the city, towns, outside schools, in the middle of parks, along a roadside, the washed out childrenless grills and slides and swings waited, disembodied.

They are ghostly places because only when gazing into them, one remembers the sounds and images that once filled them... and needs to fill them.

I may not have seen this park or that playground before. Yet, now, witnessing that emptiness, I hear the sounds each held, the dust surface where feet had skipped, the squeals caught in the lift of swings. In 1989, when I was moving through the besieged occupied Palestinian territories, I noted this same emptiness. War emptied playgrounds there too. They were the first victims. The yards that the parents of Ramallah, Hebron and Jalazone had set aside for the young to run free, were overgrown with weeds, their gates barricaded. I do not know if the Israeli occupiers locked them, or if local Palestinians closed them down, knowing

that those exposed places had become part of the battlefield. They were unsafe for anyone, especially old folks and children dilly-dallying, vulnerable, absorbed in their joy.

(Only after the Oslo Accord, following withdrawal of the occupying troops, did they reopen, brightly painted and well guarded. Flowering shrubs were planted new. The openings I saw turned out to be just an interlude; the gates there closed.. until the search for justice was really won.)

Some Iraqi schoolyards of course continued to be used during school hours when children gathered there for their sports period or at lunch break. But they fields looked dusty and cheerless to a passerby. Like the schools themselves, the yards were neglected. Weeds grew across the fields, and if there was any equipment, even soccer nets, they were damaged or altogether missing. It was an achievement if a school managed to have a soccer ball for the children. For years, if I saw children along a roadside they were hauling carts of battered rusty propane tanks, or sitting at a rickety stand selling sweet colored water, cigarettes, or tea.

#### Idle In The Hot Sun

Playgrounds are not high on a journalist's agenda reporting on Iraq. But I had passed them, noisy, crowded and brightly painted in those two years before the embargo war. I had not forgotten the sounds of life there. After the war, my eye caught a particular playground on a hillock in clear view from the route I was traveling. On the main road out of Baghdad, heading towards Kerbala and Najaf cities, I passed a small hill on my news-finding excursions southward. I remember it well because the crest of the hill was leveled, fenced and made into a playground, with tall trees all around it.

I'd remarked "what a delightful place for a park, on the ridge, full with trees, and away from the road". It's been abandoned, like the others. I peer at the remnants of a history with its little people: slides, and tunnels, swings and sandboxes, benches and tables, all assembled during those years when government funds poured into recreation, art and education. Iraqi boys and girls, five, seven, eight and ten from the neighborhood dashed there every day. Older brothers and sisters gathered in a corner to gossip or examine someone's find, possibly a magazine, or a piece of jewelry, while grandparents sat apart together watching their little ones. They preferred soft grass to the cement benches that were provided for them. Lemon trees and shrubs lined the paths and tall palm trees stood like sentinels over the gleeful innocents. Clumps of willow trees offered shade to the old folks seated beneath them. A guard was always present, not far away, watching, bemused by the children or absorbed in his weeding around a flowerbed. He was on the lookout for lads with soccer balls who, if they had their way, would commandeer any flat field.

Similar to playgrounds worldwide, these parks were built of plastic and fiberglass tubing--winding, sliding, laddering, in and out, up and down--set among shade trees and benches. Some had colorful sculptures situated among the trees, others statues of animal characters resembling Disney cartoon dogs, ducks and mice. They stood firm, anchored confidently while children clambered on and off their comforting, smooth shoulders. Today, the slides and tunnels are still visible, but the fence is broken, and inside the skeleton-like toys, they lay cracked and bleached. The municipal guard never came back after the war. No one knows where he went. The trees are leafless; they are no more than stumps protruding a few feet only from the ground. Long ago, they were attacked with saws and axes and carted off for firework by families too poor to repair their electric stove or unable to buy propane from the market.

On every visit south, every year, every time I passed that hillock I swallowed hard, seeing it so forsaken. I've never seen a child in it in six years. Or a family. Not a sound utters from that place. It's as much a graveyard as a cemetery is.

Where have the children gone? Surely not all dead, or stricken?

No. It's just that things are different now. The playground represented something that no longer exists, something pushed under by the war. Noel and his family left for Sweden and Farah was sent to live with her aunt in another country. Alia is gone, died from lack of medicine; Samira, although barely eight, is working with her mother in the market. Alaa sells newspapers on the road with her brother and Hanan is too sick to go out at all.

Some of the children who once stretched their muscles and bruised their elbows in these parks must have been rushed into adulthood as soon as the war came, pressed into grownup responsibilities vacated by the dead and wounded.

They go to work now. You can see them in the streets from early morning, with their fathers, pushing a cart, or you find them alone on a curb hawking small things. Many are shoeshine boys who set up their platforms along the pavements where there are people passing who can afford a restaurant meal. If you met these lads in the street, would you say, "Boys, why don't you go to the park to play?" If you dared to question them, they would likely look at you, puzzled, or openly hostile; "If you really cared lady, you might lift the sanctions". Many children are too busy to play, or too weary when the day is over and they wander homeward counting their takings as they go. Some youngsters hand over their earnings to mother to help her buy food. Other girls and boys have no home to return to. Either they have been put out and must make their way as best they can. Or they have run away. A few are orphans, so they tell us. Girls are sometimes lured into prostitution, and some of the boys become thieves working for others, or managing themselves.

"Street children" were unknown in Iraq until the sanctions arrived. The government was embarrassed and dumbfounded by these waifs and didn't know what to do at first. They became so numerous they could not be ignored. By 1998, they were a menace with their thievery and gang fights. So municipalities finally began to build shelters for them where they could sleep in safety and have a few hours of schooling a day.<sup>1</sup>

So you will understand how thrilled I am when traveling through neighborhoods in Baghdad and I pause to relish the sight of a group of boys who have found a ball and made teams to hit it back and forth in the dusty street. I don't care if they have proper shoes, or if the streets are dangerous. Although I am disturbed that their sisters cannot join them. Traveling outside Baghdad, I am similarly enchanted to watch naked lads splashing in an irrigation canal that runs alongside the road. They yell happily as they leapt from the riverbank onto one another in the water. They have no lifeguard. Again, I chaff, seeing no sisters thrashing in the water with them.

The boys' glee is irrepressible and I envy them splashing about in the canal. This was the everlasting Tigris nourishing its young.

Postscript, 2004. "They stole our playground," said an eight-year old resident of Sadr City, Baghdad. He pointed at six American tanks parked in a soccer field near his home. Those were the U.S. occupation forces preparing to confront the growing Iraqi resistance to their presence. The same spring of 2004, another soccer field was commandeered. In Fallujah. A playground was annexed to serve as a graveyard for the city's martyrs.

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[From combined news reports]

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