

Chapter 2 Just Imagine: Baghdad March 8, 2003, International Women's Day.

Mohassen and the children are back in Baghdad. The Iraqi family returned from the Jordanian border after being refused entry into a safe country. They had left their home Thursday after the desperate mother decided to escape the impending war.

Just Imagine. Imagine years of determination to stay in your country, despite every hardship, ill health, humiliation, funerals, loneliness. Imagine, your loving husband working far away in The Arab Emirates. He phoned regularly asking Mohassen to join him, to send the girls to him, to visit him if only for a few weeks.

Imagine declaring: "As an Iraqi, I will not be forced from my homeland. This is my country. I love my nation. I will not allow the Americans to take it from us, from my father, from my president, from any Iraqi."

Imagine being economically well off, yet suffering countless, daily deprivations from the hard, hard blockade.

Imagine years of helplessly watching friends die before you, give up before you, depart before you, stricken by cancers, heart failures, miscarriages, diabetes, ulcers.

Imagine--a military invasion days away--calling your dearest friends with whom you stood for 12 years, to say, after all their pleas and good wishes, "Goodbye; Allah Karim".

Imagine leaving your brothers, leaving your neighbors to pray themselves through another war.

Imagine packing up the house, bundling paintings and wardrobe, assembling documents and a few valuables and delivering them along with the children's pet bird to your sister's house.

Imagine telling the children you did not know when they might return and if they could take their exams in Jordan.

Imagine hasty arrangements with your employer to hold your job, and instructions to the neighbor's gardener to guard the house.

Imagine ordering the taxi to the border, leaving your own car at your brother's, locking the gate. Imagine arguing with your weeping children about what they can and cannot take with them to Jordan, about one more goodbye phone call to a school friend. "Please Mamma, please."

Imagine the car, piled with bags and boxes, arriving at the Iraqi border after the six-hour drive across the desert. Then the exit procedures--opening every item of clothing for inspection, filling out papers, answering questions, turning from the eyes of the officials who could not leave. (They nevertheless graciously wished you well.)

Imagine finally, pulling the children, cranky and groggy with sleep, into your taxi. You drive out of the Iraqi customs shed and turn your back on the great arch above the gateway at Treibeel, with its portrait of your ruinous president, his wooden hand held aloft. Your car moves towards the next portal and you exhale deeply. You feel no emotion as the portrait of the little Amerikiyan king comes into view and you come to a halt at the border of Jordan.

Imagine then, a Jordanian customs officer handing back your papers. "Ma fi majal. No chance. You can't enter."

Imagine another three hours, arguing, phoning your husband in The Emirates, weeping, calling friends inside Jordan to find someone, anyone, to give you clearance to cross. No chance. And there is nowhere to sleep. You feel grateful than the taxi driver agrees to return with you.

Imagine another six hour drive through the night, all the way back to Baghdad.

Her sister rushed to her house to welcome her. They wept joyously. Next day Mohaseen finds she is flooded by a sense of relief. She had been telling her husband for years that she would stay, whatever. Tomorrow she will phone him to ask him to join them in Iraq--to spend the war together.

Just imagine our lives.

It is such a beautiful spring day. How could a war possibly be sweeping towards us?

Art galleries on Abu Nawwas Street remain open every evening. Posters in the lobbies announce The Iraq Theater Company will stage "Gilgamesh" in the capital next week and Laila has urged Mohaseen to bring the children and with her two girls, they will see the play together. Before ringing off, Laila reminds her friend about bottled water; supplies are running low and the price has doubled since she left for the border on Thursday. Look for a generator as well, Laila advised, although she warned it was doubtful that she could find one. The women talked about combining households to wait together for the attack. Yes, that was a good idea.

Mohaseen had left for the border on March 7th and 24 hours later found herself back in Baghdad.

The same day, still 12 days before the invasion (begun March 19, 2003), but we could not know that, I traveled to Mosul. I wanted to revisit the hospital there but also to escape tensions building in Baghdad, mainly among newly arrived foreigners. Some foreign supporters of Iraq called "human shields" vowed to stand in solidarity with the country during the attack; members of pitiful international delegations came to urge the government to capitulate or negotiate; other newcomers were a mix of journalists arriving to cover the biggest story of their careers, and expatriate Iraqis desperate to somehow help their families. It was

harder each day to know who was what they claimed to be and what news was trustworthy. The one thing all of us knew for certain was that a massive attack was imminent.

At some level there must have been panic in every corner of Iraq, including Mosul. But I did not feel as nervous there as I did in the capital, bombarded by rumors, milling among nervous journalists, consulting officials who were themselves preparing to bolt at any moment.

Upon arriving in Mosul, I phoned WBAI, the radio station in New York to which I was dispatching reports. A colleague called me back eager for a story: "Tomorrow is International Women's Day." She dearly wanted a radio report on how women in Iraq were coping. "Do they know women around the world were demonstrating against the war in solidarity with Iraqi women?"

The question angered me. One did not need to ask Iraqi women or girls, or any Iraqi how they felt. Because not long before, on February 15th, on satellite television from inside Iraq, all of us viewed the drama which some Europeans considered their finest moment— mass demonstrations in hundreds of cities worldwide--a historic expression of solidarity with Iraq's people. It would remain for many inhabitants of developed nations, their proud moment. People of conscience, members of peace-loving, humane democracies said "No War!" to their governments' imperial design. For us, locked inside Iraq, the worldwide protests were simply another foreign news story. Those displays did not impress the people of Iraq; they arrived 12 years late, too late. And when they calculated the numbers, Iraqis saw how the fifteen million demonstrators amounted to barely 0.2% of those western populations. Any proclamations on March 8th were bound to pass without interest inside Iraq.

March 8th was a Friday. Yom al-Jumaa, day of gathering, is for Muslim prayer and rest. I could feel the palpable bond of solidarity deep within the people around me. It was as solid as it was sad. Today was a time for husbands and wives, children and mothers, sisters and brothers. Yes, a day of commonality. An apocalypse was about to open on them. I expect not one Iraqi did not silently admit by this time that an attack was inevitable. Everyone remembered the 1991 bombings; this would surely be worse.

Could anyone comprehend the magnitude of the coming assault and what might follow? I heard no analyses and I myself was in no mood to ask questions about the war stampeding into us, women and men alike. I asked no one if they were Sunni or otherwise.

It was a glorious spring day, a day for a picnic at the man-made lake above the great river Tigris that pushed through Mosul city. A day for the family to drive onto the hills around Nimrud, a day for children to run on the still unexcavated mounds of the city which our ancestors had built 5,000 year ago, a city that so symbolized Iraq's presence in civilization. How could a war be closing around us? How could thousands of tanks be lined up along three

borders ready to mow over us? How could many thousands of planes loaded with missiles and bombs be waiting for orders to attack?

Night rains nourished the gardens on the banks of the blue Tigris and soaked the wide, open hills of sprouting green wheat. Miles and miles of rolling green fields. Familiar. Serene. Spectacular.

Everything appeared so tender, so vulnerable. Here and there, we glimpse apricot blossoms, delicate and white, peering from walled yards in the old neighborhoods of the city. Would they survive better than we might?

By noon the city was half empty. Cars and vans filled with families and friends and set out towards the green hills on all sides, beyond the city. Whether we are Christian, Muslim, Turkman, Kurd, Arab, or Sunni, our mothers spread similar plastic sheets over soft, sprouting wheat, and then anchor them with bowls of cucumber and fruit. On nearby hillocks, fathers and sons pray. Car doors and trunks are flung open to catch the clean, spring air. Brothers and sisters stretch out, looking into the blue sky. Families do not wander far from their mothers.

The city seemed almost empty. The streets were quiet. Where the roadway follows the bank, above the river, a promenade waits for strollers who will arrive in the early evening. Soda vendors pass the day here, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, a few yards from their battered, rusty coolers with their meager clutch of 7UP and Pepsi drinks. Some have set out clusters of 2, 3, or 4 chairs on the pavement for their customers, mainly families without a car. After they depart, the vendors will stay on, hoping for a sale to the young couples who come here after dark to gaze into the river.

"Allah ala ayyamak, ya Dejli. Allah ala ayyamak."¹ A phrase common in Mosul where this waterway is an intimate partner in peoples' history and modern day fate.

The ruins at Nimrud site some 15 miles beyond Mosul always attract visitors on Friday, although Ahmed, the guard and guide, is on duty every day. He leads young sightseers to a small platform and invites them to peer into the beautifully engineered, ancient brick well. It is as smooth and perfectly circular as if made by a 21st century lathe. He urges each child to touch the walls along the corridor and to glide their young Iraqi fingers over the 5,600-year-old carvings that tell histories, praise kings, document and analyze their ancestors discoveries.

Yah, Iraq. How we love Iraq.

Those incisions of cuneiform words on granite-like panels are so fine, and their edges are so keen, it seems they may have been drilled only yesterday by a computerized machine. They are surely too precise to have been scored by any modern hand. Ahmed apologizes for the scaffolding around the main gate of the Nimrud ruins. "Restoration was restarted only two years ago", he explains. "For ten years, because of the embargo, things were neglected. When

the repairs are complete, the museum will be as glorious as it was in the past", he says, his voice trailing off; then he concludes "Allah karim"--God is Merciful. We repeat "Allah karim". In reality, no one knows what the future holds.

What is more vulnerable? I ask myself this as I watch these families at play and while we drive through the countryside, between the fields, and back to Mosul's streets.

I notice a pickup truck heaped with cardboard boxes. Some have spit open, their contents tumbling out, and the three soldiers sprawled over the load try to hold it together. The spilled cargo, I see now, are military boots--black soldiers' shoes--supplies for the army that will defend the land.

Among the shops is a furniture store on the main road into the city. Twenty or so white plastic picnic chairs are stacked on the pavement, ready for sale. Closer to our residence, a nine year old girl with heavy eyeglasses is turning into her home. She is wearing a very bright, probably new, yellow jogging suit.

Which will break first when the strike comes? The glass windows of the university campus? Or the new graduate, Maher Feisel who defended his MA thesis in French Literature yesterday, the same boy who at the age of eleven (that would have been during the 1991 Gulf War) dreamed in French stories?

What will be crushed first? Palestine or Iraq?

Who will surrender first? The man polishing his new, orange Nissan taxi? Those soldiers digging shelters in fields of young wheat?

Who will wear those black soldiers' boots? Who will buy the white plastic chairs? And how long can Ahmed guard Nimrud?

Following thousands of other families into the city, we return to Bushra's house. I suspect most families automatically switched on their TV sets or radios to hear the evening news that evening. The U.N. Security Council had been in session today, debating "the question of Iraq". Some of us gather to watch and listen. We hear the distinguished men in charge of weapons inspection for Iraq request more time. No vote is taken. They agree to schedule another meeting.

Because discussing international deliberations over Iraq has become a daily habit here, a few women and men talk about the latest phase of what they call "the U.N. stage show". Regardless of our cynicism, nothing quells the terror we feel in our hearts under our spring Iraqi sky.

Before he left his sister's house, when there was a moment of silence in the room, Mustafa casually offered: "I have completed my military service, I fought in two wars, first against Iran and after that in the Gulf War. I am not a young man; and I am sick. But I will be

ready to defend my nation; and so shall my father. My son too", he added, smiling as he put his hand on the back of his boy's head and led him into the reddening Iraqi evening.

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Author's note: An earlier version of this chapter appeared under the title "March 8, 2003 International Women's Day in Iraq," published in Shattering stereotypes: Muslim women speak out (Fawzia Afzal-Khan, editor), Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2005.