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# Baghdad Burning

... I'll meet you 'round the bend my friend, where hearts can heal and souls can mend...

**Wednesday, April 07, 2004**

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## **Teapots and Kettles...**

Now it seems we are almost literally reliving the first few days of occupation... I woke up to the sound of explosions and gunfire last night and for one terrible moment I thought someone had warped me back a whole year and we would have to relive this last year of our life over and over again...

We haven't sent the kids to school for 3 days. The atmosphere is charged and the day before yesterday, Baghdad was quiet and empty, almost... the calm before the storm. The area of A'adhmiya in Baghdad is seeing street fighting: the resistance and Americans are fighting out in the streets and Al-Sadr city was bombed by the troops. They say that dozens were killed and others wounded. They're bringing them in to hospitals in the center of the city.

Faloojeh has been cut off from the rest of Iraq for the last three days. It's terrible. They've been bombing it constantly and there are dozens dead.

Yesterday they said that the only functioning hospital in the city was hit by the

Americans and there's no where to take the wounded except a meager clinic that can hold up to 10 patients at a time. There are over a hundred wounded and dying and there's nowhere to bury the dead because the Americans control the area surrounding the only graveyard in Falloojeh; the bodies are beginning to decompose in the April heat. The troops won't let anyone out of Falloojeh and they won't let anyone into it either- the people are going to go hungry in a matter of days because most of the fresh produce is brought from outside of the city. We've been trying to call a friend who lives there for three days and we can't contact him.

This is supposed to be 'retaliation' for what happened last week with the American contractors- if they were indeed contractors. Whoever they were, it was gruesome and wrong... I feel for their families. Was I surprised? Hardly. This is an occupation and for those of you naïve enough to actually believe Chalabi and the Bush administration when they said the troops were going to be 'greeted with flowers and candy' then I can only wish that God will, in the future, grant you wisdom.

This is crazy. This is supposed to be punishment for violence but it's only going to result in more bloodshed on both sides... people are outraged everywhere- Sunnis and Shi'a alike. This constant bombing is only going to make things worse for everyone. Why do Americans think that people in Baghdad or the south or north aren't going care what happens in Falloojeh or Ramadi or Nassriyah or Najaf? Would Americans in New York disregard bombing and killing in California?

And now Muqtada Al-Sadr's people are also fighting it out in parts of Baghdad and the south. If the situation weren't so frightening, it would almost be amusing to see Al-Hakeem and Bahr UI Iloom describe Al-Sadr as an 'extremist' and a 'threat'. Muqtada Al-Sadr is no better and no worse than

several extremists we have sitting on the Governing Council. He's just as willing to ingratiate himself to Bremer as Al-Hakeem and Bahr UI Iloom. The only difference is that he wasn't given the opportunity, so now he's a revolutionary. Apparently, someone didn't give Bremer the memo about how when you pander to one extremist, you have to pander to them all. Hearing Abdul Aziz Al-Hakeem and Bahr UI Iloom claim that Al-Sadr is a threat to security and stability brings about visions of the teapot and the kettle...

Then Bremer makes an appearance on tv and says that armed militias will \*not\* be a part of the New Iraq... where has that declaration been the last 12 months while Badir's Brigade has been wreaking havoc all over the country? Why not just solve the problem of Al-Sadr's armed militia by having them join the police force and army, like the Bayshmarga and Badir's Brigade?! Al-Sadr's militia is old news. No one was bothering them while they were terrorizing civilians in the south. They wore badges, carried Klashnikovs and roamed the streets freely... now that they've become a threat to the 'Coalition', they suddenly become 'terrorists' and 'agitators'.

Now there's an arrest warrant with his name on it, although the Minister of Justice was on tv claiming he knew nothing about the arrest warrant, etc. He basically said that he was washing his hands of any move against Muqtada Al-Sadr. Don't get me wrong- I'd love to see Muqtada behind bars, but it will only cause more chaos and rage. It's much too late for that... he has been cultivating support for too long. It's like a contest now between the prominent Shi'a clerics. The people are dissatisfied- especially in the south. The clerics who weren't given due consideration and a position on the Governing Council, are now looking for influence and support through the people. You can either be a good little cleric and get along with Bremer (but have a lot of dissatisfied people \*not\* supporting you) or you can be a firebrand cleric and

rally the masses...

It's like the first few days of occupation again... it's a nightmare and everyone is tense. My cousin and his family are staying with us for a few days because his wife hates to be alone at home with the kids. It's a relief to have them with us. We all sit glued to the television- flipping between Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, CNN, BBC and LBC, trying to figure out what is going on. The foreign news channels are hardly showing anything. They punctuate dazzling reportages on football games and family pets with a couple of minutes worth of footage from Iraq showing the same faces running around in a frenzy of bombing and gunfire and then talk about 'Al-Sadr the firebrand cleric', not mentioning the attacks by the troops in Ramadi, Falloojeh, Nassriyah, Baghdad, Koufa, etc.

Over the last three days, over 150 Iraqis have been killed by troops all over Iraq and it's maddening. At times I feel like a caged animal- there's so much frustration and anger. The only people still raving about 'liberation' are the Iraqis affiliated with the Governing Council and the Puppets, and even they are getting impatient with the mess.

Our foreign minister Hoshyar Zibari was being interviewed by some British journalist yesterday, making excuses for Tony Blair and commending him on the war. At one point someone asked him about the current situation in Iraq. He mumbled something about how there were 'problems' but it wasn't a big deal because Iraq was 'stable'... what Iraq is he living in?

And as I blog this, all the mosques, Sunni and Shi'a alike, are calling for Jihad...

- posted by river @ 3:44 PM

## Sunday, April 04, 2004

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### **Riots, Star Gazing and Cricket Choirs...**

There have been demonstrations by Al-Sadr's followers in Baghdad and Najaf. In Baghdad they are gathered near the Green Zone and the Sheraton hotel by the thousands- a huge angry mob, mostly in black. In Najaf,, they were just outside of the Spanish troops' camp. The demonstration in Najaf was shot at by the soldiers and they say that at least 14 are dead and dozens are wounded... An Iraqi friend in Diwaniya was telling me that they had to evacuate the CPA building in Najaf because it was under attack. He says there's talk of Jihad amongst the Shi'a.

Let me make it very clear right now that I am *\*not\** a supporter of Al-Sadr. I do not like clerics who want to turn Iraq into the next Iran or Saudi Arabia or Kuwait... but it makes me really, really angry to see these demonstrations greeted with bullets and tanks by the troops. Why allow demonstrations if you're going to shoot at the people? The demonstrators were unarmed but angry- Al-Sadr's newspaper was shut down recently by Bremer and Co. and his deputy is said to have been detained by the Spaniards down south (although the Spanish troops are denying it). His followers are outraged, and believe me- he has a healthy number of followers. His father was practically revered by some of the Shi'a and he apparently has inherited their respect.

Today Bremer also announced the fact that we now have an official 'Ministry of Defense'. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on Iraqis- the head of the occupation announcing a "Ministry of Defense". To defend against what? Occupation? Ha, ha... or maybe it's to secure the borders from unwelcome foreigners carrying guns and riding tanks? Or perhaps the Ministry of Defense should be more concerned with the extremists coming in from

neighboring countries and taking over (but no- Bremer deals with them on the Puppet Council)... so many things to do for a Ministry of Defense.

There's also a new 'Mukhaberat' or "National Iraqi Intelligence Organization" (or something to that effect). The irony is that while the name is new and the head is Ali Abd Ul Ameer Allawi (a relative of the Puppet Council President Ayad Allawi), the faces of the new Mukhaberat promise to be some of the same as the old. They've been contacting the old members of the Iraqi Mukhaberat for months and promising them lucrative jobs should they decide to join the new Iraqi intelligence (which, we hope, will be an improvement on American intelligence- I'd hate to have us invade a country on false pretenses).

The weather is quite nice lately (with the exception of dust every once in a while). We spend the electricity-less evenings out in the little garden. We pull out plastic chairs and a little plastic table and sit around gazing at the sky, which is marvelously clear on many nights. E. is thinking of starting a 'count the stars' project. He's going to allot a section of the sky to each member of the family and have them count the number of stars in their designated astral plot. I'm thinking of starting a 'cricket choir' with some very talented six-legged pests located under a dried-out rose bush...

In a few days, I'll have to go up and wash out the roof or 'sattih'. Last year, we'd sleep on top of the roof on the hot nights without electricity. We lay out thin mattresses on the clean ground and wet some sheets to cover ourselves with. It's not too bad until around 6 a.m. when the sun rises high in the sky and the flies descend upon the sleepers like... well, like flies.

These last couple of weeks have been somewhat depressing for most people. You know how sometimes you look back at the past year and think to

yourself, "What was I doing last year, on this same day?" Well we've been playing that game constantly lately. What was I doing last year, this very moment? I was listening for the sirens, listening for the planes and listening to the bombs fall. Now we just listen for the explosions- it's not the same thing.

I haven't been sleeping very well either. I've been having disturbing dreams lately... Dreams of being stuck under rubble or feeling the earth shudder beneath me as the windows rattle ominously. I know it has to do with the fact that every day we relive a little bit of the war- on television, on the radio, on the internet. I'm seeing some of the images for the very first time because we didn't have electricity last year during the war and it really is painful. It's hard to believe that we lived through so much...

- posted by river @ 9:35 PM

## **Monday, March 29, 2004**

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### **Tales from Abu Ghraib...**

At precisely 5 p.m., yesterday afternoon, my mother suddenly announced that we were going to go visit a friend of hers who had recently had a minor operation. The friend lived two streets away and in Iraqi culture, it is obligatory to visit a sick or healing friend or relative. I tried to get out of the social call with a variety of tired excuses. It was useless- my mother was adamant.

We left the house at around 5:40, with me holding a box of chocolate and arrived at the friend's house less than five minutes later. After the initial greetings and words of sympathy and relief, we all filed into the living room.

The living room was almost dark; the electricity was out and the drapes were open to let in the fading rays of sun. "The electricity should be back at six..." my mother's friend said apologetically, "That's why we haven't lighted the kerosene lamps."

Just as we were settling down, a figure sitting at the other end of the living room rose in a hurry. "Where are you going?!" cried out my mother's friend, Umm Hassen. She then turned to us and made a hasty introduction, "This is M.- she's a friend of the family... she's here to see Abu Hassen..." I peered hard across the darkening room to get a better look at the slight figure, but I couldn't make out her features. I could barely hear her voice as she said, "I really have to be going... it's getting dark..." Umm Hassen shook her head and firmly declared, "No- you're staying. Abu Hassen will drive you home later."

The figure sat down and an awkward silence ensued as Umm Hassen left the living room to bring tea from the kitchen. My mother broke the silence with a question, "Do you live nearby?" She asked the figure. "Not really... I live outside of Baghdad... on the southern edges, but I'm staying with some relatives a few streets away." I listened to the voice carefully and could tell that the girl was young- no more than 20 or 25... probably less.

Just as Umm Hassen walked into the room with the tea tray, the lights in the house flickered back to life and we all murmured a prayer of thanks. As soon as my eyes adjusted to the glaring yellow lights, I turned to get a better look at Umm Hassen's guest. I had been right- she was young. She couldn't have been more than 20. She was wearing a black shawl, thrown carelessly over dark brown hair which was slipping out from under the head cover. She clutched at a black handbag and as the lights came back on, she shrank into herself at the far end of the room.

"Why are you sitting all the way over there?" Scolded Umm Hassen fondly, "Come over here and sit." She nodded towards a large armchair next to our couch. The girl rose and I noticed for the first time just how slight her figure was- the long skirt and shirt hung off of her thin body like they belonged to someone else. She settled stiffly in the big chair and managed to look even smaller and younger.

"How old are you, M. ?" My mother asked kindly. "Nineteen." Came the reply. "And are you studying? Which college are you in?" The girl blushed furiously as she explained that she was studying Arabic literature but postponed the year because... "Because she was detained by the Americans." Umm Hassen finished angrily, shaking her head. "She's here to see Abu Hassen because her mother and three brothers are still in prison."

Abu Hassen is lawyer who has taken on very few cases since the end of the war. He explained once that the current Iraqi legal system was like a jungle with no rules, a hundred lions, and thousands of hyenas. No one was sure which laws were applicable and which weren't; nothing could be done about corrupt judges and police and it was useless taking on criminal cases because if you won, the murderer/thief/looter's family would surely put you in your grave... or the criminal himself could do it personally after he was let out in a few weeks.

This case was an exception. M. was the daughter of a deceased friend and she had come to Abu Hassen because she didn't know anyone else who was willing to get involved.

On a cold night in November, M., her mother, and four brothers had been sleeping when their door suddenly came crashing down during the early

hours of the morning. The scene that followed was one of chaos and confusion... screaming, shouting, cursing, pushing and pulling followed. The family were all gathered into the living room and the four sons- one of them only 15- were dragged away with bags over their heads. The mother and daughter were questioned- who was the man in the picture hanging on the wall? He was M.'s father who had died 6 years ago of a stroke. You're lying, they were told- wasn't he a part of some secret underground resistance cell? M.'s mother was hysterical by then- he was her dead husband and why were they taking away her sons? What had they done? They were supporting the resistance, came the answer through the interpreter.

How were they supporting the resistance, their mother wanted to know? "You are contributing large sums of money to terrorists." The interpreter explained. The troops had received an anonymous tip that M.'s family were giving funds to support attacks on the troops.

It was useless trying to explain that the family didn't have any 'funds'- ever since two of her sons lost their jobs at a factory that had closed down after the war, the family had been living off of the little money they got from a 'kushuk' or little shop that sold cigarettes, biscuits and candy to people in the neighborhood. They barely made enough to cover the cost of food! Nothing mattered. The mother and daughter were also taken away, with bags over their heads.

Umm Hassen had been telling the story up until that moment, M. was only nodding her head in agreement and listening raptly, like it was someone else's story. She continued it from there... M. and her mother were taken to the airport for interrogation. M. remembers being in a room, with a bag over her head and bright lights above. She claimed she could see the shapes of figures through the little holes in the bag. She was made to sit on her knees,

in the interrogation room while her mother was kicked and beaten to the ground.

M.'s hands trembled as she held the cup of tea Umm Hassen had given her. Her face was very pale as she said, "I heard my mother begging them to please let me go and not hurt me... she told them she'd do anything- say anything- if they just let me go." After a couple hours of general abuse, the mother and daughter were divided, each one thrown into a separate room for questioning. M. was questioned about everything concerning their family life- who came to visit them, who they were related to and when and under what circumstances her father had died. Hours later, the mother and daughter were taken to the infamous Abu Ghraib prison- home to thousands of criminals and innocents alike.

In Abu Ghraib, they were separated and M. suspected that her mother was taken to another prison outside of Baghdad. A couple of terrible months later- after witnessing several beatings and the rape of a male prisoner by one of the jailors- in mid-January, M. was suddenly set free and taken to her uncle's home where she found her youngest brother waiting for her. Her uncle, through some lawyers and contacts, had managed to extract M. and her 15-year-old brother from two different prisons. M. also learned that her mother was still in Abu Ghraib but they weren't sure about her three brothers.

M. and her uncle later learned that a certain neighbor had made the false accusation against her family. The neighbor's 20-year-old son was still bitter over a fight he had several years ago with one of M.'s brothers. All he had to do was contact a certain translator who worked for the troops and give M.'s address. It was that easy.

Abu Hassen was contacted by M. and her uncle because he was an old

family friend and was willing to do the work free of charge. They have been trying to get her brothers and mother out ever since. I was enraged- why don't they contact the press? Why don't they contact the Red Cross?! What were they waiting for?! She shook her head sadly and said that they \*had\* contacted the Red Cross but they were just one case in thousands upon thousands- it would take forever to get to them. As for the press- was I crazy? How could she contact the press and risk the wrath of the American authorities while her mother and brothers were still imprisoned?! There were prisoners who had already gotten up to 15 years of prison for 'acting against the coalition'... she couldn't risk that. They would just have to be patient and do a lot of praying.

By the end of her tale, M. was crying silently and my mother and Umm Hassen were hastily wiping away tears. All I could do was repeat, "I'm so sorry... I'm really sorry..." and a lot of other useless words. She shook her head and waved away my words of sympathy, "It's ok- really- I'm one of the lucky ones... all they did was beat me."

- posted by river @ [11:35 PM](#)

## **Saturday, March 27, 2004**

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### **Raed in the Middle...**

Raed of [Where is Raed?](#) has started his own blog! You can check out Raed's independent views at [Raed in the Middle...](#)

- posted by river @ [3:08 PM](#)

## Sistanistan...

The telephone wasn't working these last few days. It will do that every once in a while- disappear coyly. We pick up the receiver and instead of a dial tone, hear nothing but a strange sort of silence laced with static. It almost drove me crazy because I couldn't connect to the internet. I spent the days hovering anxiously around the telephone, picking it up every few minutes and calling out "Allooo? Allooooooo?" E. asked around and learned that the lines in the whole area were down.

I was in Karrada yesterday- a popular area in central Baghdad. It's a mercantile district where you can find everything from butchers to ice cream shops. The stores are close together and it's the ideal area to go looking for something you're not sure you'll find. You'll find it in Karrada- whether it's a gold bracelet or fuzzy slippers or the complete, unabridged collection of the late Al-Hakeem's religious lectures on CD.

My uncle is planning a trip to Jordan so we had to buy him some luggage. I had been looking forward to the shopping trip for at least 4 days which is how long it takes to get the routine familial permission these days. First, I have to make a declaration of intent; I have to tell the parents that I intend to go out and purchase something. Then, I have to specify the area where I intend to make the purchase, after which comes locating a free male relative with some extra time on his hands to join me in the adventure. The final step is setting the date and time and getting the final household authorization.

For those of you wondering, YES, it annoys me beyond anything that, at my age, I have to get parental permission to leave the house. It's a trend that started after the war and doesn't look like it's going to abate any time soon. I comfort myself with the thought that it's not specific to my household or even

my gender- all parents seem to be doing it lately... where are you going? To do what? Who is going with you? What time will you be back? Is it absolutely necessary?

If E. and I are half an hour late, we can come home expecting to see one of the parents standing outside, in the driveway, pacing anxiously and peering out into the street every once in a while. I can't really blame them- with all the abductions, explosions and detentions. On the other hand, if one of the parents are late, E. and I also end up in the driveway, squinting into the night and mumbling about people who never phone to say they're going to be late.

Karrada was quite crowded with people coming and going. Women, of course, were a startling minority. Karrada used to be full of women- mothers, daughters and wives sometimes alone and sometimes dragging along a weary male. As we got out of the car, my confidence and enthusiasm began to wane. I was one of the few women on the street not wearing a hijab, or head-cover. One, two, three women passed by with the hijab covering their hair... the fourth one had gone a step further and was wearing an abbaya or black cloak... I tugged gently at the sleeves of my shirt which were cuffed almost to my elbows. They slid down once more to my wrists and I was suddenly grateful that I had decided to wear a long denim skirt.

We walked the few meters to the display of suitcases on the sidewalk. The suitcases were mostly new but some were used and a little faded around the edges. I wondered if they had been hijacked from some unfortunate Iraqi who had come from abroad. E. and my cousin stood haggling with the suitcase man. He was showing them a Korean knockoff of Samsonite and swearing it was the original. For those who have never shopped in Iraq- nothing costs as much as the first price they give you. If the man says 10,000 Iraqi Dinars, you can instantly challenge him with, "I'll buy it for 7,000" and be quite confident

that he'll give in the end with some minor grumbling.

I studied the streets and surrounding shops while I waited. The street was crowded with cars- mostly old ones. Few people dare to drive around in decent vehicles. The traffic flow kept stopping every few minutes and a choir of honking and swearing would instantly start up. Heads would pop out of car windows and eyes would strain to see what could possibly be keeping the long line of cars in front.

There were some strange-looking people in the street- heads covered in turbans, black and white... women shrouded from top to bottom in black cloth... men with long beards and abayas. I was getting quite a few critical stares- why wasn't this girl wearing a hijab? The rational person in me was asking the same question- *why aren't you wearing one? Is it too much to ask for you to throw something on top of your head when you leave the house? Everyone else is doing it... most of the women you know are just flinging on a head-cover to avoid those disapproving glares and harsh words. Ever since the war, even some Christian women have been pressured into hiding their hair- especially in the south.* And on and on went the rational voice... The stubborn voice- the one that blogs- tried to drown out common sense with, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah... we won't be pressured..."

I focused my attention on the shops around me, staring hard at the displays in the windows. Many of the windows showed posters of the Imam Hussein, Al-Sadr, one or more of the Hakeems and there were so many pictures of Sistani both outside and inside of shops that I decided the area should change its name from Karrada to 'Sistanistan'.

After almost 10 minutes of selecting and bartering, E. and my cousin had decided on one large black suitcase and a smaller one. E. counted out the

money patiently as the suitcase man swore he was being robbed by selling the suitcases for such a meager sum. My cousin went to open the trunk of the car and I helped the suitcase man wrap the luggage in a large plastic bag.

Before we got into the car to go home, E. asked me if there was anything else I wanted to get- did I want to see the shops? A part of me \*did\* want to take a more thorough look around, but another part of me was both physically and mentally exhausted with the rare outing. I just wanted to get back to the safety of our home where I didn't have to feel like some sort of strange outcast.

This time of year is the closest we get to spring. April promises to be hot and sticky... I used to constantly yearn to be outside- not just on the roof or in the garden- but on a street or sidewalk with people coming and going around me. That need hits me less and less of late...

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- posted by river @ [2:54 PM](#)

## Saturday, March 20, 2004

### **The War on Terror...**

I'm feeling irritable and angry today. It's exactly a year since the war on Iraq began and it seems to be weighing heavily on everyone.

Last year, on this day, the war started during the early hours of the morning. I wasn't asleep... I hadn't slept since Bush's ultimatum a couple of days before. It wasn't because I was scared but because I didn't want to be asleep when the bombs started falling. The tears started falling with the first few thuds. I'm not very prone to tears, but that moment, a year ago today, I felt such sorrow

at the sound of those bombs. It was a familiar feeling because it wasn't, after all, the first time America was bombing us. It didn't seem fair that it was such a familiar feeling.

I felt horrible that Baghdad was being reduced to rubble. With every explosion, I knew that some vital part of it was going up in flames. It was terrible and I don't think I'd wish it on my worst enemy. That was the beginning of the 'liberation'... a liberation from sovereignty, a certain sort of peace, a certain measure of dignity. We've been liberated from our jobs, and our streets and the sanctity of our homes... some of us have even been liberated from the members of our family and friends.

A year later and our electricity is intermittent, at best, there constantly seems to be a fuel shortage and the streets aren't safe. When we walk down those streets, on rare occasions, the faces are haggard and creased with concern... concern over family members under detention, homes raided by Americans, hungry mouths to feed, and family members to keep safe from abduction, rape and death.

And where are we now, a year from the war? Sure- we own satellite dishes and the more prosperous own mobile phones... but where are we \*really\*? Where are the majority?

We're trying to fight against the extremism that seems to be upon us like a black wave; we're wondering, on an hourly basis, how long it will take for some semblance of normality to creep back into our lives; we're hoping and praying against civil war...

We're watching with disbelief as American troops roam the streets of our towns and cities and break violently into our homes... we're watching with anger as the completely useless Puppet Council sits giving out fat contracts

to foreigners and getting richer by the day- the same people who cared so little for their country, that they begged Bush and his cronies to wage a war that cost thousands of lives and is certain to cost thousands more.

We're watching sardonically as an Iranian cleric in the south turns a once secular country into America's worst nightmare- a carbon copy of Iran. We're watching as the lies unravel slowly in front of the world- the WMD farce and the Al-Qaeda mockery.

And where are we now? Well, our governmental facilities have been burned to the ground by a combination of 'liberators' and 'Free Iraqi Fighters'; 50% of the working population is jobless and hungry; summer is looming close and our electrical situation is a joke; the streets are dirty and overflowing with sewage; our jails are fuller than ever with thousands of innocent people; we've seen more explosions, tanks, fighter planes and troops in the last year than almost a decade of war with Iran brought; our homes are being raided and our cars are stopped in the streets for inspections... journalists are being killed 'accidentally' and the seeds of a civil war are being sown by those who find it most useful; the hospitals overflow with patients but are short on just about everything else- medical supplies, medicine and doctors; and all the while, the oil is flowing.

But we've learned a lot. We've learned that terrorism isn't actually the act of creating terror. It isn't the act of killing innocent people and frightening others... no, you see, that's called a 'liberation'. It doesn't matter what you burn or who you kill- if you wear khaki, ride a tank or Apache or fighter plane and drop missiles and bombs, then you're not a terrorist- you're a liberator.

The war on terror is a joke... Madrid was proof of that last week... Iraq is proof of that everyday.

I hope someone feels safer, because we certainly don't.

- posted by river @ 11:02 PM

## Friday, March 19, 2004

### **Explosions...**

The explosion two days ago was a colossal one. Our area isn't very close to the area that got bombed, but we heard it loud and clear. It was one of several explosions during this last week... but it was the biggest. The moment it happened, E. and I started trying to guess where the noise was coming from. It has become a sort of morbid game.

Al-Jazeera almost instantly began covering the explosion and we found out that E. was right- it was in Karada (I get the direction wrong 90% of the time and E. chauvinistically assures me that a warped sense of direction is quite common to most females). A hotel in the middle of a residential area was bombed and the stories vary in a strange sort of way. People in the area claim they heard the hissing of a rocket and then an explosion. Others say that it was an instant explosion. One news network is claiming that 32 bodies have been taken out of the rubble... another mentioned 17 and the Iraqi police are saying that only 6 were found. Reports on the nationalities of the deceased also vary- the Iraqi police are claiming all the residents of the hotel were Iraqi and the Americans are saying that there were some Americans and Brits among the dead. Who to believe?

Last Saturday and Sunday there were demonstrations in Baghdad. Students weren't allowed into Baghdad University because the university guards

(ironically appointed by the Americans) wouldn't let anyone in. They are part of Sistani's gang and since Sistani's followers have diligently been objecting the TAL document signed by the Puppet Council, the guards decided that college would be closed for a couple of days. The students had to watch the dean of the engineering college beg to be let in, and refused.

I found out about the demonstrations because I was supposed to have a job interview on Saturday and my potential employers called me postponing it until further notice because their guards- avid Sistani fans- had decided to take the day off to join the demonstration objecting the TAL. Sistani's followers would not be out protesting the transitional law document if they didn't have explicit directions from him- so

Mustansiriyah University (another major university in Baghdad) is full of student protests because the dean of the college of science requested that after the arba'een (40th day after the death of Imam Al-Hussein), the students take down the black flags and pictures of Al-Sadr and Sistani. The more conservative Shi'a students immediately took offence and decided that they wouldn't attend classes until the dean was fired. In retaliation, Sunni students decided they would organize a \*protest\* to the strike organized by the Shi'a students...

We also heard that one of the assistant deans of the college of engineering in Baghdad University was assassinated recently. It's terrible news and the subject has been on my mind a lot lately. I don't know why no one focuses on this topic in the news. It's like Iraq is suffering from intellectual hemorrhaging. Professors and scientists are being assassinated right and left- decent intelligent people who are necessary for the future of Iraq. Other scientists are being detained by the Americans and questioned about- of all things- Al-Qaeda.

The stories they tell after being let go are incredible. Most of the scientists are college professors and have dedicated their lives to teaching and research. Many are detained only because they specialize in a certain field, like heredity, for example. One man who was recently let go told about the ridiculous interrogation that lasted 3 days and involved CIA and military police. They showed him picture after picture of his family, confiscated from the family home during a raid, and kept pointing at his two teenage sons and their friends and asking, "Aren't they a part of Al-Qaeda?!"

And it doesn't stop with the scientists. Doctors are also being assassinated by some mysterious group. It started during the summer and has been continuing since then. Iraq has some of the finest doctors in the region. Since June, we've heard of at least 15 who were killed in cold blood. The stories are similar- a car pulls up to the clinic or office, a group of men in black step down and the doctor is gunned down- sometimes in front of the patients and sometimes all alone, after hours. One doctor was shot brutally in his house, in front of his family. There was a rumor that Badir's Brigade (the SCIRI militia led by Al-Hakeem) had a list out of 72 doctors that had to be killed for one reason or another. They include Sunni, Shi'a and Christian doctors.

Scientists, professors and doctors who aren't detained or assassinated all seem to be looking for a way out. It seems like everyone you talk to is keeping their eyes open for a job opportunity outside of the country. It depresses me. When I hear someone talking about how they intend to leave to Dubai or Lebanon or London, I want to beg them to stay... a part of me wants to scream, "But we need you here! You belong here!" Another more rational part of me knows that some of them have no options. Many have lost their jobs and don't know how to feed their families. Others just can't stand the constant worrying about their children or spouse. Many of the female

doctors and scientists want to leave because it's no longer safe for women to work like before. For some, the option is becoming a housewife or leaving abroad to look for the security to work.

Whatever the reason, the brains are slowly seeping out of Iraq. It's no longer a place for learning or studying or working... it's a place for wealthy contractors looking to get wealthier, extremists, thieves (of all ranks and origins) and troops...

- posted by river @ [10:22 AM](#)

## **Friday, March 12, 2004**

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### **Spring...**

Discussions around the dinner table mainly focus on the Transitional Law these days. I asked a friend to print out the whole thing for me and have been looking it over these last two days. I watched only a part of the ceremony because the electricity went out in the middle of it and I didn't bother watching a recap of it later on.

The words look good on paper- as words often do. Some parts of it sound hauntingly like our last constitution. The discussions about the Transitional Law all focus on the legitimacy of this document. Basically, an occupying power brought in a group of exiles, declared Iraq 'liberated', declared the constitution we've been using since the monarchy annulled and set up a group of puppets as a Governing Council. Can these laws be considered legitimate?

Furthermore, just how sincere are these puppets about this new Transitional

Law? For example, there's a lovely clause that reads, "No one may be unlawfully arrested or detained, and no one may be detained by reason of political or religious beliefs." Will the American troops discontinue the raids and arbitrary detentions (which are still quite common) come June 30? Or is the Transitional Law binding only to Iraqis?

One example of an arbitrary detention we heard about the other day was of a man who was arrested in Tikrit. They raided his home and gathered the 25-year-old man, two brothers and an elderly uncle. They got the usual treatment: a bag on the head, and hands behind their backs. They were taken to a place outside of Tikrit and thrown into a barn-like area with bags on their heads- still tied up. For 3 days, they were kicked and cursed by the troops. In between the kicking and cursing, a hefty soldier would scream questions at them and an interpreter would translate, "Are you part of Al-Qaeda?! Do you know Osama bin Laden?!" On the third day, one of the young men struck up a deal with who he gathered was their 'head'- the man who gave all the orders. They agreed that one of the soldiers would accompany the man back to the city and wait while he came up with \$300/ detainee. The rest of the men would be freed a couple of days later.

And it worked. Two days later, his three relatives came walking home after being dropped off on the side of the road. Basically, they paid a ransom for their freedom. Just one of the many stories about life in the 'New Iraq'- no wonder Chalabi was so jubilant while signing the Transitional Law document. The country is currently like an unguarded bank- especially for those who bear arms.

The general attitude towards the document is a certain weariness. Iraqis are weary of everything 'transitional' and 'temporary'. I guess, after almost a year of instability and strife, we just crave something more definite and substantial.

Spring is in the air- and that means dust storms and a mellow sun for Iraqis. We're enjoying the weather because by the end of April, summer will be in full swing and the heat will come in almost palpable waves. The mornings are slightly cool and by noon we've shed the jackets. We no longer need the 'sopas' or kerosene heaters at home- which is a relief to E. who has been designated the job of filling them up and making sure the kerosene tank in the yard is always full (the kerosene man has become a dear friend).

These last few days have brought back memories of the same dates, last year. What were we doing in early March? We were preparing for the war... digging wells, taping up windows, stocking up on candles, matches, kerosene, rice, flour, bandages, and medicine... and what are we doing now? Using them.

- posted by river @ 11:02 PM

## **Saturday, March 06, 2004**

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### **Sistani and the Green Zone...**

Today was a mess. It feels like half of Baghdad was off-limits. We were trying to get from one end to the other to visit a relative and my cousin kept having to take an alternate route. There's a huge section cut off to accomodate the "Green Zone" which seems to be expanding. We joke sometimes saying that they're just going to put a huge wall around Baghdad, kick out the inhabitants and call it the "Green City". It is incredibly annoying to know that parts of your city are inaccessible in order to accomodate an occupation army.

Another section was cut off because there was some sort of crisis unfolding

in or around the Ministry of Health. We later learned that former employees- some fired before the war and others fired during the occupation- had invaded the ministry and were trying to break into the minister's office. They were demanding work and some channels even mentioned a hostage situation. All we know is that there was a huge, angry mob outside of the ministry and tanks, cars and angry soldiers facing them. They say almost 1,300 employees working with the Ministry of Health have been fired since the end of the war. This includes doctors, nurses, hospital guards, etc.

Today the Iraqi Puppet Council was attempting to sign the Basic Law document which is sort of a prelude to a permanent constitution. I want to read it and see what it's about. They had everything set up in an elegant conference room- chrome and gray chairs with name tags on them, expensive pens ready for the GC members, a podium, a bunch of little kids ready to sing and a little orchestra to play music. They didn't sign the long-awaited document. Some of the Shi'a members of the council refused to sign it because, apparently, there had been disagreements to the presidency, women's rights, federalism and, generally, the constitution- should they ever decide to draft one.

Al-Sistani appears to be running the show, along with Bremer. I don't know why they don't just set up an office for him in the Green Zone- it would make things much easier for the GC members. They wouldn't have to keep running down to Karbala to beg for his approval. It's unbelievable. Sistani is a respectable cleric. He has millions of followers both inside and outside of Iraq... but when you get down to it, he is Iranian. How is it that an Iranian cleric is moulding the future of Iraq?

His opinion is important in many ways- but he seems to have some sort of invisible veto within the Council. All he has to do is murmur disapproval in the

ears of one of his followers and it is immediate dissent with his followers. It is so frustrating. How is Iraq going to be secular and, well, \*Iraqi\* if we have a cleric of Iranian origin making conditions and rules?!

You can read more about the constitutional mess over at [Juan Cole](#) and [Back to Iraq](#).

- posted by river @ 11:53 PM

## Wednesday, March 03, 2004

### **Ashoura Tragedy...**

The explosions in Karbala and Kadhimiya were horrible. We heard the ones in Kadhimiya from a distance. There were a couple of dull thuds and we didn't know what it was. We found out later on the news and everyone has been horrified ever since. It's so hard to believe this has happened. The shots on Al-Arabia and the other channels were terrible- body parts everywhere- people burning alive... who could do this? We've all been asking each other that... who would have anything to gain from this?

Fingers are being pointed everywhere. Everyone has been afraid that this will be the metaphorical straw that breaks the camels back- except it's not a straw... it's more like an iron anchor that is just too heavy to carry. Fortunately, the reactions have been sane, yet sorrowful. Sunnis and Shi'a are sticking together... more now than ever before. It's like this catastrophe somehow made everyone realize that there are outside forces trying to drive us all apart and cause unrest or 'fitna'. People are refusing to believe that this was done by Iraqis. It's impossible. It's inexcusable and there is nothing that can justify it.

We were extremely worried because we have some relatives who make the annual trip to Karbala every year. They live in an area with no working telephones so E. and my cousin had to go over there and check things out for themselves. We found out that they had decided against going this year because the situation was so unstable. I'm worried now about [Salam](#)- he wrote on his blog that he was going to Karbala this year with his family. I hope he's ok.

I guess we've all been expecting some sort of attack or riots or something... this tragedy was still unexpected. You sometimes think that you've seen all the violence there is- every single type- and there is nothing that will shock you anymore. This was a shock, and a painful one too. Today was an official day of mourning over the victims who died in Karbala and Kadhimiya. The mosques have been offering prayers for the victims and the mosque sheikhs have been condemning the bombings.

Before Ashoura, there was a lot of talk about civil war. We talk about it like it concerns a different set of people, in another country. I guess that is because none of us can believe that anyone we know could be capable of senseless violence. After this massacre, and after seeing the reactions of Sunnis and Shi'a alike, my faith in the sense and strength of Iraqis has been reaffirmed. It has been like a large family- with many serious differences- reuniting after a terrible tragedy to comfort eachother and support one another.

- posted by river @ [10:10 PM](#)

## Sunday, February 29, 2004

### **Ashoura...**

The tension in the air is almost electric. Everyone feels it. It is the beginning of the Islamic year or Muharam, the first month of the Hijri year. This time of the Hijri year is important because of certain historical events that occurred hundreds of years ago. The Prophet Mohammed's remaining family were killed, and some captured, in Karbala, in south-east Iraq. It's a long, sad and involved story.

The Prophet Mohammed's grandchildren, their children, wives and entourage all came to Iraq because they were encouraged by the people in the region to receive the leadership of the Islamic nation, or Khilafah. Before they could get to Karbala- more near the area of Kouffa- they were surrounded by Yazeed's army. Yazeed was a distant relative of the Prophet and wanted to become the Khalifa- or leader of the Islamic world. Yazeed was also believed he had a right to be the Khalifah because his father, Ma'awiya, had claimed his right as Khalifah in opposition to the Imam Ali- the Prophet's cousin and also his son-in-law.

The Khilafah (or caliph-hood) was not hereditary. The Prophet Mohammed, upon his deathbed, ordered that the Khilafah would always be through general agreement of the 'Sahhaba' who were a group of select respected, devout and influential people in Mecca. Three Khalifas after the Prophet's death, when the third Khalifah Othman bin Affan was killed, the problems began.

Anyway, after the Prophet's family were trapped in Kouffa, they were systematically killed and some taken as prisoner during the first ten days of Muharam. On the tenth day, Imam Al-Hussein, the Prophet's grandson was killed in the most gruesome way during a battle in Kouffa. He was beheaded and his head was taken to Yazeed.

The people of Kouffa and Karbala have always felt guilty for not helping Al-Hussein and his family and followers- for sending for them and then abandoning them when Yazeed's army attacked. This guilt is 'remembered' every year by doing certain things- like cooking huge pots of steaming porridge for the poor and making special foods for neighbors and family. Sunnis and Shi'a alike do this, usually. My mother makes 'harrisa', the porridge, for the whole family every year- it's the best part of Muharam.

Sometimes people have a 'qirraya' at their house. This is often a women's affair. Women from all over the neighborhood gather at one of the houses and they send for a specialized group of women who sort of sing out the story of the 'Maqal' or the killing of Imam Al-Hussein and his family. I attended one of these qirrayas a few years ago and it was emotional and charged. The qirrayas often end in tears because the story of the 'Maqal' is so terrible, that it is difficult to stay dry-eyed when hearing about it.

This year, another ritual has been added to the ones mentioned above- the 'Latmiya'. This is done strictly by Shi'a- and not all Shi'a. Many moderate Shi'a frown upon the process of beating oneself with chains because the sight of it is just so... terrible. E. and I watched from the rooftop a couple of days ago as a procession of about 50 black-clad men passed down the main road. It was frightening. They had beards, wore head-to-toe black, with the exception of a green bandanna or piece of cloth tied around the wrist and they held up green and black flags and banners and pictures of Imam Al-Hussein on a green background. They were beating their chests to a certain beat and chanting something incoherent. These processions were banned before and, quite frankly, I wish they could be confined to certain areas now. The sight of so much violence (even if it is towards oneself) is just a little bit unnerving.

On tv, we saw much bigger Latmias in the south- especially Karbala where Imam Al-Hussein is buried. The men hold chains and beat their backs with them, sometimes to the point where their clothes tear and their bodies are bloodied. I don't like the ritual. It doesn't feel sacred or religious and many Muslims consider it a wrong, since it is considered 'haram', or a sin, to disfigure the body. This year, Karbala is going to be especially crowded because, in addition to Iraqis, there are going to be thousands and thousands of Iranians who have somehow gotten into Iraq.

Ashoura, or the tenth day of Muharam, is in a couple of days and everyone is really worried about what might happen on this day. Dozens of buildings all over Baghdad are shrouded in black cloth. It is a depressing and sobering sight. E. was in Baghdad University a few days ago and he says that someone draped black cloth all over the buildings there and even over the department balconies. There were even signs offering 'Latmiya' lessons and some of the more religiously bent Shi'a have given orders to the department cafeterias that there will be no music allowed and the only stuff they can play are taped 'qirrayas'.

The electrical situation is almost stable at around 10 hours of electricity a day at this point. Everything is a little bit frightening right now and I can't help but wish we could remain without electricity during the day and have it as soon as it gets dark. There have been a string of assassinations these last couple of weeks and some of them are just inexplicable... doctors, teachers, professors, religious figures... Baghdad is quite depressing and all this black cloth isn't helping any.

- posted by river @ 2:19 AM

Wednesday, February 25, 2004

## **Angry Arabs and American Media...**

We were all watching Al-Itijah Al-Mu'akis or "The Opposite Direction" on Al-Jazeera. It was pretty good today. We had just cleared the dinner table and were settling down to watch some film when E. turned the channel to Al-Jazeera expecting a news brief. I instantly recognized the man in the lemon yellow shirt with his longish curly hair pulled back in a ponytail- Asa'ad Abu Khalil. I remembered him from an interview he did on Al-Arabiya or Al-Jazeera- I can't remember which- immediately after the war, slamming Radio Sawa. Tonight, "The Opposite Direction" was hosting Asa'ad Abu Khalil, better known as [The Angry Arab](#), and Ibraheim Al-Ariss, a writer for Al-Hayat newspaper which is based in Lebanon but is funded by some rich Saudi.

The subject was American propaganda in Arab media. [Asa'ad Abu Khalil](#) was brilliant. He discussed the effects of American propaganda on current Arab media and the way the current American government was pressuring certain Arab publications and networks into a pro-America stance. Unfortunately, his argument was way above Al-Ariss's head. Al-Ariss apparently thinks that pro-American propoganda is nothing less than a front-page headline saying, "WE LOVE AMERICA!!!"

Asa'ad Abu Khalil was discussing the more subtle changes taking place in some newspapers- the change in terminology, the fact that some newspapers have stopped covering the news and taken to translating articles directly from New York Times or some other American news outlet. He almost gave Ibraheim Al-Iriss, a reddish, portly man, an apoplectic fit. Poor Ibraheim fell short of pounding the table with his fists and throwing crumpled papers at Abu Khalil, who kept admirably cool. In other words, Asa'ad Abu Khalil ibarid

il gallub.

*(Iraqi phrase alert: ibarid il gallub, translated to 'cools the heart' is basically used to refer to something or someone who eases the mind- and heart- by saying or doing something satisfactory)*

I get really tired of the emails deriding Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya for their news coverage, telling me they're too biased towards Arabs, etc. Why is it ok for CNN to be completely biased towards Americans and BBC to be biased towards the British but Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have to objective and unprejudiced and, preferably, pander to American public opinion? They are Arab news networks- they SHOULD be biased towards Arabs. I agree that there is quite a bit of anti-America propaganda in some Arabic media, but there is an equal, if not more potent, amount of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim propaganda in American media. The annoying thing is that your average Arab knows much more about American culture and history than the average American knows about Arabs and Islam.

I wish everyone could see Al-Hurra- the new 'unbiased' news network started by the Pentagon and currently being broadcast all over the Arab world. It is the visual equivalent of Sawa- the American radio station which was previously the Voice of America. The news and reports are so completely biased, they only lack George Bush and Condi Rice as anchors. We watch the reports and news briefs and snicker... it is far from subtle. Interestingly enough, Asa'ad Abu Khalil said that Sawa and Al-Hurra are banned inside of America due to some sort of law that doesn't allow the broadcast of blatant political propaganda or something to that effect. I'd love to know more about that.

A channel like Al-Hurra may be able to convince Egyptians, for example, that

everything is going great inside of Iraq, but how are you supposed to convince Iraqis of that? Just because they broadcast it hourly, it doesn't make it true. I sometimes wonder how Americans would feel if the Saudi government, for example, suddenly decided to start broadcasting an English channel with Islamic propoganda to Americans.

Important note to those of you who are going to email me: The last few days, I have received at least 3 emails saying, "I read your blog and don't agree with what you say but we have a famous saying in America- I don't agree with what you say but I'll die for your right to say it." Just a note- it's not your famous American saying, it is French and it is Voltaire's famous saying:"I do not agree with a word you say, but I will fight to the death for your right to say it."

- posted by river @ [1:23 AM](#)

## Friday, February 20, 2004

### **Dumb and Dumber...**

Ok, I just read this article in the New York Times and I had to share. Actually, someone sent it to me and they seem highly satisfied with it. The title is: [Arabs in U.S. Raising Money to Back Bush](#) and it is written by a Leslie Wayne who, apparently, knows very little about geography. I just love when articles like this find their way into the New York Times.

The article basically states that a substantial sum of the money supporting Bush's presidential campaign is coming from affluent Arab-Americans who support the war on Iraq. The fun part about the article is that it goes on and

on about "Arab"-Americans- not Muslim-Americans or even Asian-Americans but specifies Arab-Americans giving you the impression that the article is going to be about people who were originally from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon... you know- an Arab country where the national language is Arabic and the people are generally known as Arabs.

The article is dumb, but apparently the author thinks that the readers are even dumber. Of the 5 prominent "Arabs" the author gives as examples in the article (supporters of Bush), two are Iranian and the third is a Pakistani! Now this is highly amusing to an Arab because Pakistanis aren't Arabs and while Iran is our neighbor, Iranians are, generally speaking, not Arabs and I'm sure you can confirm that with Iranian bloggers...

One of the Iranian contributors is a Mr. Mori Hosseini who claims to know all about the region because he was born in Iran and lived there before moving to the US at the tender, prepubescent age of 13. He must be Iran's Chalabi- keep an eye on him. I predict he'll either be given contracts to build homes in Iraq or suddenly have important information on Iranian WMD he has been hiding since the age of 13.

I just wish all those prominent Arabs who supported the war- you know, the ones living in Washington and London who attend State dinners and parties at the White House holding silk handkerchiefs in one hand (to wipe away the tears for the 'homeland') and cocktails in the other hand- would pack their Louis Vuitton bags, and bring all that money they are contributing to that war-hungry imbecile in the White House to Iraq or Iran or wherever they wish the spread of democracy and help 'reconstruct' and 'develop' their own countries. One wonders with that \$200,000 how many homes Mr.Hosseini could have rebuilt in Bam, for example... but then again, if they don't bomb Iran into the

pre-industrial era, how will Mr.Hosseini get all those huge contracts in the future?

- posted by river @ 1:08 AM

## Sunday, February 15, 2004

### **Dedicated to the Memory of L.A.S.**

So Happy Valentine's Day... although it's the 15th. It still feels like the 14th here because I'm not asleep... it's the extension of yesterday.

Do you know what yesterday marked? It marked the 13th anniversary of the Amiriyah Shelter massacre- February 13, 1991. Can you really call it an 'anniversary'? Anniversary brings to mind such happy things and yet is there any other word? Please send it along if you know it.

February 12, 1991, marked one of the days of the small Eid or 'Eid Al-Fitr'. Of course it also marked one of the heaviest days of bombing during the Gulf War. No one was in the mood for celebration. Most families remained at home because there wasn't even gasoline to travel from one area to the next. The more fortunate areas had bomb shelters and people from all over the neighborhood would get together inside of the shelter during the bombing. That year, they also got together inside of the shelters to celebrate Eid Al-Fitr with their neighbors and friends.

Iraqis don't go to shelters for safety reasons so much as for social reasons. It's a great place to be during a bombing. There's water, electricity and a feeling of serenity and safety that is provided as much by the solid structure as by the congregation of smiling friends and family. Being with a large group

of people helps make things easier during war- it's like courage and stamina travel from one person to the next and increase exponentially with the number of people collected.

So the families in the Amiriyah area decided they'd join up in the shelter to have a nice Eid dinner and then the men and boys over the age of 15 would leave to give the women and children some privacy. Little did they know, leaving them behind, that it would be the last time they would see the wife/ daughter/son/fiancé/sister/infant...

I can imagine the scene after the men left at around midnight- women sat around, pouring out steaming istikans of tea, passing out Eid kilaycha and chocolate. Kids would run around the shelter shrieking and laughing like they owned the huge playground under the earth. Teenage girls would sit around gossiping about guys or clothes or music or the latest rumor about Sara or Lina or Fatima. The smells would mingle- tea, baked goods, rice... comfortable smells that made one imagine, for a few seconds, that they were actually at home.

The sirens would begin shrieking- the women and children would pause in the midst of eating or scolding, say a brief prayer in their heart and worry about their loved ones above the ground- the men who refused to remain inside of the shelter in order to make room for their wives and kids.

The bombs fell hard and fast at around 4 a.m. The first smart bomb went through the ventilation, through the first floor of the shelter- leaving a gaping hole- and to the bottom 'basement' of the shelter where there were water tanks and propane tanks for heating water and food. The second missile came immediately after and finished off what the first missile missed. The doors of the advanced shelter immediately shut automatically- locking over

400 women and children inside.

It turned from a shelter into an inferno; explosions and fire rose from the lower level up to the level that held the women and children and the water rose with it, boiling and simmering. Those who did not burn to death immediately or die of the impact of the explosions, boiled to death or were steamed in the 900+ ° F heat.

We woke in the morning to see the horrors on the news. We watched as the Iraqi rescue workers walked inside of the shelter and came out crying and screaming- dragging out bodies so charred, they didn't look human. We saw the people in the area- men, women and children- clinging to the fence surrounding the shelter and screaming with terror; calling out name after name... searching for a familiar face in the middle of the horror.

The bodies were laid out one beside the other- all the same size- shrunk with heat and charred beyond recognition. Some were in the fetal position, curled up, as if trying to escape within themselves. Others were stretched out and rigid, like the victims were trying to reach out a hand to save a loved one or reach for safety. Most remained unrecognizable to their families- only the size and fragments of clothing or jewelry indicating the gender and the general age.

Amiriyah itself is an area full of school teachers, college professors, doctors and ordinary employees- a middle-class neighborhood with low houses, friendly people and a growing mercantile population. It was a mélange of Sunnis and Shi'a and Christians- all living together peacefully and happily. After the 13th of February, it became the area everyone avoided. For weeks and weeks the whole area stank of charred flesh and the air was thick and gray with ash. The beige stucco houses were suddenly all covered with black

pieces of cloth scrolled with the names of dead loved ones. "Ali Jabbar mourns the loss of his wife, daughter, and two sons..."; "Muna Rahim mourns the loss of her mother, sisters, brothers and son..."

Within days, the streets were shut with black cloth tents set up by the grief-stricken families to receive mourners from all over Iraq who came to weep and ease some of the shock and horror. And it was horrible. Everyone lost someone- or knew someone who lost several people.

My first visit to the shelter came several years after it was bombed. We were in the neighborhood visiting a friend of my mother. She was a retired schoolteacher who quit after the Amiriyah bombing. She had no thoughts of quitting but after schools resumed in April of 1991, she went on the first day to greet her class of 2nd graders. She walked into the classroom and found only 11 of her 23 students. "I thought they had decided not to come..." I remember her saying to my mother in hushed tones, later that year, "... but when I took attendance, they told me the rest of the children had died in the shelter..." She quit soon after that because she claimed her heart had broken that day and she couldn't look at the children anymore without remembering the tragedy.

I decided to pay my respects to the shelter and the victims. It was October and I asked the retired teacher if the shelter was open (hoping in my heart of hearts she'd say 'no'). She nodded her head and said that it was indeed open- it was always open. I walked the two short blocks to the shelter and found it in the midst of houses- the only separation being a wide street. There were children playing in the street and we stopped one of them who was kicking around a ball. Is there anyone in the shelter? He nodded his head solemnly- yes the shelter was 'maskoon'.

Now the word 'maskoon' can mean two different things in Arabic. It can mean 'lived in' and it can also mean 'haunted'. My imagination immediately carried me away- could the child mean haunted? I'm not one who believes in ghosts and monsters- the worst monsters are people and if you survive war and bombs, ghosts are a piece of cake... yet something inside of me knew that a place where 400 people had lost their lives so terribly- almost simultaneously- had to be 'haunted' somehow by their souls...

We walked inside and the place was dark and cold, even for the warm October weather. The only light filtering in came from the gaping hole in the roof of the shelter where the American missiles had fallen. I wanted to hold my breath- expecting to smell something I didn't want to... but you can only do that for so long. The air didn't smell stale at all; it simply smelled sad- like the winds that passed through this place were sorrowful winds. The far corners of the shelter were so dark, it was almost easy to imagine real people crouching in them.

The walls were covered with pictures. Hundreds of pictures of smiling women and children- toothy grins, large, gazelle eyes and the gummy smiles of babies. Face after face after face stared back at us from the dull gray walls and it felt endless and hopeless. I wondered what had happened to their families, or rather their remaining families after the catastrophe. We knew one man who had lost his mind after losing his wife and children inside of the shelter. I wondered how many others had met the same fate... and I wondered how much life was worth after you lost the people most precious to you.

At the far end of the shelter we heard voices. I strained my ears to listen and we searched them out- there were 4 or 5 Japanese tourists and a small, slight woman who was speaking haltingly in English. She was trying to

explain how the bomb had fallen and how the people had died. She used elaborate hand gestures and the Japanese tourists nodded their heads, clicked away with their cameras and clucked sympathetically.

"Who is she?" I whispered to my mother's friend.

"She takes care of the place..." she replied in a low voice.

"Why don't they bring in someone who can speak fluently- this is frustrating to see..." I whispered back, watching the Japanese men shake hands with the woman before turning to go.

My mother's friend shook her head sadly, "They tried, but she just refuses to leave. She has been taking care of the place since the rescue teams finished cleaning it out... she lost 8 of her children here." I was horrified with that fact as the woman approached us. Her face was stern, yet gentle- like that of a school principal or... like that of a mother of 8 children. She shook hands with us and took us around to see the shelter. This is where we were. This is where the missiles came in... this is where the water rose up to... this is where the people stuck to the walls.

Her voice was strong and solid in Arabic. We didn't know what to answer. She continued to tell us how she had been in the shelter with 8 of her 9 children and how she had left minutes before the missiles hit to get some food and a change of clothes for one of the toddlers. She was in the house when the missiles struck and her first thoughts were, "Thank God the kids are in the shelter..." When she ran back to the shelter from her house across the street, she found it had been struck and the horror had begun. She had watched the corpses dragged out for days and days and refused to believe they were all gone for months after. She hadn't left the shelter since- it had become her home.

She pointed to the vague ghosts of bodies stuck to the concrete on the walls and ground and the worst one to look at was that of a mother, holding a child to her breast, like she was trying to protect it or save it. "That should have been me..." the woman who lost her children said and we didn't know what to answer.

It was then that I knew that the place was indeed 'maskoon' or haunted... since February 13, 1991 it has been haunted by the living who were cursed with their own survival.

**Important Side Note:**For those of you with the audacity to write to me claiming it was a legitimate target because "American officials assumed it was for military purposes" just remember **Protocol 1 of the 1977 Geneva Conventions, Part IV, Section 1, Chapter III, Article 52:** ... 3. *In case of doubt whether an object which is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as a place of worship, a house or other dwelling or a school, is being used to make an effective contribution to military action, it shall be presumed not to be so used.* (Like that would matter to you anyway)

- posted by river @ 4:15 AM

## Friday, February 13, 2004

### **Family Crisis...**

I haven't been blogging for several reasons. The main reason is that since the fourth day of Eid of we've been coping with a family crisis.

Eid started out normal enough, under the circumstances. The first day consisted of explosions, and a few family members and neighbors,

interspersed with bouts electricity. We spent the first two days at home, so thoroughly exhausted with Eid preparations, we didn't enjoy Eid itself very much.

On the fourth day of Eid, one of my uncles absolutely insisted on a family reunion of sorts at his house. His wife had been slaving over the stove all day and anyone who couldn't come had better have a good excuse.

And so we went. We packed ourselves off to his house, across Baghdad, at 4 p.m. and he promised dinner would be served promptly at 7 (which is an obscene hour to eat dinner for Iraqis, but everyone wanted to be home early). The house was crowded with uncles and aunts, grandparents, nieces, nephews, and shrieking children (two of whom I didn't recognize).

Dinner was served at seven. It consisted of 'timen ala quzi' or rice and lamb garnished with sultanas, almonds and all sorts of spices, a Lebanese salad, chicken soup and two different kinds of bread. For a brief 30 minutes, we forgot politics and occupation and sat concentrating on the steaming array of food piled before us. Even the children calmed down enough to enjoy the feast. The local generator was humming in the background and we sat enjoying the food and light and feeling that it really was Eid. After all, we were family and gathered together... what could be more Eid-like than that?

After sweet tea and fresh fruit, the family began to disperse. At nine, we sat around with my uncle, his wife, my cousin and her husband and her husband's parents. The children had fallen into a sort of lethargic stupor in front of the television, watching a children's song in Arabic with a bunch of crazy rabbits bouncing about on the screen.

The elders soon began the usual discussion- politics. Politics in Iraq isn't discussed like in any other place. You see, we don't sit around with lit cigars

and cups of tea debating this politician or that one- that's much too tame and boring. That is left for Brits in wood-paneled studies, surrounded by leather-bound books. No. We have to do it the Iraqi way- mobile expressions, erratic hand signals, and an occasional table- pounding to emphasize a particularly salient point.

The younger generation (E., a couple of cousins, and I) instantly backed out of the conversation. Old/new names were suddenly being dragged into the limelight of the dispute and I, personally, was lost at the Iraqi monarchy. They left me behind during the '50s and I got up to help clear the tea cups which were beginning to rattle ominously as the conversation got more heated.

My uncle and his daughter's father-in-law were soon deep into an argument over some conspiracy dealing with the monarchy. I saw a smile hovering on the lips of my cousin as her father-in-law began to light the wrong end of the cigarette. She winked covertly at her husband and he gracefully rose with the words, "Well, dad- should we drop you and mom off at home? It's getting late and I don't want to have to drive back alone... L., the children and I are spending the night here tonight."

And they were off in a matter of minutes. The argument was soon forgotten, adults bundled in coats and cigarettes properly lit. My cousin's husband, A., hustled his parents outside and into his battered old Brazilian-made Volkswagen. We stayed behind to help clear up the mess- which was considerable. Rice was strewn everywhere, little fingers had made little marks up and down the walls, the tables and across the television screen. Ashtrays had to be emptied, cups washed and children undressed and put to bed.

By the time the initial mess was cleared, it was almost 10 pm. Where was A., my cousin's husband? He had left over an hour earlier and his parents' house

was only 15 minutes away. My mother suggested that his parents had maybe insisted he step down for a cup of tea or something else to eat... my cousin, L., shook her head emphatically- he wouldn't do that because he knew she'd worry. His parents didn't have a working telephone and any delay simply meant additional worry. Her brow puckered and I suddenly felt queasy.

We went over the possibilities- perhaps the road to his parents' house was blocked and he had to take an alternate route? Maybe they needed to purchase something on the way home? There *\*must\** be a logical, rational reason. A. was a logical, rational, and- above all- careful man. We were supposed to be on our way home by 10:30. In modern-day Iraq, you just don't stay out longer than that. We couldn't leave my uncle and his family in the mess they were in. We sat around longer.

My father and uncle couldn't take it anymore- they got into our car and went to A.'s parents' house to see what had happened- and drag A. home by his ear if necessary. L. was angry by then, convinced that A. was OK and that he was simply dallying around at his mother's house. I was dubious, but supported the theory because it seemed like the easiest one to accept.

We sat around quietly for 30 minutes while my father and uncle went to look for A. L. was furiously polishing the coffee table and I sat channel-surfing, trying to find something to take my mind off of the possibilities.

Half an hour later, the men came home- trying not to look grim and worried. A.'s parents were safe at home- had, in fact, been home for over an hour. A. dropped them off at the door, watched them walk inside, honked his horn twice and left. L. went paler than she normally is and sat down dully on the couch. She was suddenly sure he was dead. What could have happened? Where had he gone? Someone mentioned a flat tire but L.'s father said that

they hadn't seen his car along the way...

And so we reviewed the possibilities. He had been detained by Americans. His car had been hijacked. He had been abducted. He had been killed. He had a car accident and his beat-up old vehicle was overturned in some ditch... the possibilities were endless and each one was worse than the one before.

Going home was no longer an option. We sat around in the living room with my uncle's family, watching the seconds creep by on the clock and willing A. to walk through the door. E. spent the night pacing the driveway and peering out into the dark, silent street. I joined him outdoors a couple of times and he confessed that he was very worried- any disappearance at this time of night couldn't be good.

We spent the night making conjectures and trying to find logical reasons for A.'s disappearance. In the end, we agreed that if he wasn't back by 10 a.m., we'd go to the police and the family would start a separate search.

At 8 a.m., I was putting the kettle on in preparation for morning tea. The house was silent but no one was asleep. No one had slept all night. E. was still pacing; my father and uncle were closed up in the living room, trying to decide on a course of action and L. was trying not to cry. Suddenly, just as I lit the stove, the phone rang. It never sounded so shrill. I ran to the living room and found that my uncle had already jumped to answer it and was barking, "Elloo?" L. ran into the room and stood wringing her hands nervously.

It was A.'s best friend and business partner, S. He had heard from A. just a few minutes before... he had been abducted and was being held for a ransom of \$15,000. A. and S. are partners and share a small shop in a mercantile neighborhood in Baghdad. They sell everything from Korean

electrical ovens to fluorescent light bulbs and make just enough money to support their respective families. We'd be given 3 days to get the money- a place would be agreed upon where we'd give them the money and they'd release A. later on.

We panicked. The whole house broke down. L. fell to the floor crying and shouting that they'll kill him- she just knew they'd kill him like they were killing others. We tried to calm her down and finally decided to give her a couple of valiums to ease the stress. We sat debating on what to do- go to the police? No way. In some areas, the police were actually working with abductors for a certain amount of money and there was nothing they were willing to do anyway.

We spent the rest of the day rushing to sell gold, collect money and my uncle took a broken L. to the bank to empty the account- they've been saving up to build or buy a house. A.'s parents were soon at my uncle's house and we had a difficult time breaking the news to them. His mother cried and wanted to rush home for her few pieces of gold and his father sat, stunned, chain-smoking and trying to make sense of the situation. S., A.'s friend, came over with money- looking harrowed and tired.

To make a long, terrible story short- we had the money by the middle of the next day. L. had almost lost her wits and the only way the rest of us stayed sane was with the hope that A. would soon be back at home, with us.

The money was handed over on the third day after his abduction. But no A. came back. They told my uncle and S., who had gone with him, that A. would be set free in the next couple of days. My uncle and S. came home almost in tears- like we had sent them on a mission and they had failed us.

I can't even begin to describe the next couple of days. If it was bad before- it suddenly became worse. We hear about abductions ALL THE TIME... but to actually experience it is something else. It's like having a part of you torn away. To think that A. might not come back was more horrible than anything we'd experienced so far. Watching his parents deteriorate from one minute to the next and knowing his wife was dying a little bit inside every hour that passed by was so nerve-wracking that I'd run outside every hour to breathe in some fresh air- not the stale stuff inside of the house contaminated with depression, frustration and fear.

On the fifth day after A.'s abduction, we were all sitting in the living room. There was no electricity and L. had fallen into a valium-induced sort of calm. We suddenly heard a feeble clang of the gate- like someone was knocking, but not very hard. E. jumped up, ran to the door and called out, "Who is it?!" A moment later he ran back- it was A... he had come home.

I won't describe the crying, screaming, shouting, jumping, hobbling (A. was limping) and general chaos that followed A.s entrance. Apparently, his abductors had been watching the house for the last couple of weeks. As soon as A. dropped off his parents, they had followed with two cars and forced him to the side of the road on a secluded street. Four armed men forced him out of the car, put a bag over his head after kicking him around and threw him into a minivan with some more men.

After several hours of abuse and interrogation about his assets (which they seemed to have thought much more than he actually had), they let him make a call to his business partner who was supposed to call his family for the money.

(And if you could have seen him the moment he described this- you'd know

ALL about the tenacity of the Iraqi sense of humor- here was A., with a gash on his head, a bluish bruise on the side of his face, a back bruised with kicks and punches, feet bleeding after walking over one kilometer barefoot and he was cracking jokes: "They actually only wanted \$5,000," he said at one point, "but I was outraged- told them I was worth ATLEAST \$20,000 – five is just an insult to my personal worth... we agreed on \$15,000 in the end...")

They had kept him in slum on the outskirts of Baghdad where police and troops don't dare set up camp. He was transferred from one hovel to the next and at each one he says there were abducted people. Some of the abductions were political- some religious and many were for the money. He says the worst part was not being able to see anything around him, but being able to hear the others being beaten... and anticipating another kick or punch from any random direction.

I saw him again yesterday and he still looks haggard and tired. L. says he can't sleep all night- he keeps waking in the middle of the night with a nightmare or some sort of hallucination- thinking he's still caught.

And so that's how we've been spending our last few days. It has been a nightmare and I've had to examine a lot. Everything has felt so trivial and ridiculous... the blog, the electrical situation, the insomnia, the 'reconstruction', the elections, the fictional WMD... politics and politicians... I've been wondering about all those families who can't pay the ransom or the ones whose sons and daughters come home on a stretcher instead of on foot or in a garbage bag, as we heard about one family... and I've also realized how grateful we should be just being able to make the transition from one day to the next in a situation like ours...

- posted by river @ 4:16 PM

## Saturday, January 31, 2004

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### A Whole Bunch of Links...

I have a lot of links to share.

There are several new Iraqi bloggers. The first blog to introduce is the [Iraqi Agora](#)- a group blog by Iraqis inside and outside of Iraq. It's basically a blog for Iraqis too lazy to begin their own blog. The truth is that 3 of the contributing bloggers ([Salam](#), [Liminal](#) and I) have our own blogs. The guy calling himself 'Liminal' is a twenty-something Iraqi living in the US and [you'll have to read his personal blog to learn more about him](#). Hurria is an Iraqi woman who has lived abroad for a long time and has some fantastic opinions about... everything. Torshe is another Iraqi abroad and is new to blogging but you won't want to miss him either. You'll have to be patient with the group blog because we're still getting it on its feet (and Liminal is doing most of the work). I have two other contributors inside of Iraq interested in blogging on it.

Another Iraqi blog is Iraqi's [Iraqi Spirit](#) by an Iraqi network engineer in his 30s and he warns you that his blog is not meant to be politically correct.

For those of you who want Iraqi music, check it out at this site: [www.iraqimusic.com](#). It has some fantastic classics as well as some of the more modern songs, available as downloadable MP3 files.

This link came from B. from North Ireland and it's a link to a site he \*insisted\* I check out. [Physicians for Human Rights](#). They have a special page devoted to Iraq and have apparently done some extensive work in the region. Check out what they have to say about [cluster bombs](#).

- posted by river @ 2:39 AM

## **The Big Eid...**

We've been cleaning again these last few days. The 'Big Eid' or "Eid Al Kabeer" or "Al Eid Al Adh'ha" is on Sunday and everyone has been hectically taking down curtains for washing, polishing furniture and rearranging sock drawers.

The 'Big Eid' is known as the big one because it lasts a day longer than the other Eid, "Eid Al Futtur". During the Big Eid, Muslims from all over the world go to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and visit 'Bayt Allah' or 'God's House' which was built by the Prophet Abraham. Visiting Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam which include fasting, 'shahada' or bearing witness to God and the Prophet, prayer, visiting Mecca (at least once during the lifetime), and 'Zekat' or charity.

After visiting Mecca and taking part in certain Islamic rituals, a man becomes a 'Hajji' or 'one who has done the Haj' and a woman becomes a 'Hijjiya'. That is why it is quite common to see people in Muslim countries calling an elder 'Hajji' or 'Hijjiya'. It is assumed that by the time a man or woman reaches a certain age, they have gone to visit Mecca and gained the prestigious and respectful title of Hajji or Hijjiya.

The whole Islamic world celebrates this occasion. In Iraq, the festivities include visiting family and friends, lots of good food and money handed out to the younger kids in the family to spend on candy and other things that will ruin the teeth and complexion.

Like the "Eid Al Fittur", the house has to be very, very clean. For those of you

who don't know her, [I blogged about the Martha Stewart of Baghdad a few months ago](#). She has been emotionally terrorizing the area for the last few days by making daily appearances in her garden and in front of her house, washing down windows, wringing out clothes and keeping a hawkish eye on the front doors of all the neighbors.

Yesterday, our street which normally rings with the cries of children playing street football was eerily silent. I stood at our gate, pondering the sudden disappearance of half a dozen rowdy boys. I caught one of our 9-year-old neighbors dodging from his house to the one across the street. He scampered in what I imagine he must have thought a stealthy fashion... he actually looked like a lizard escaping the scorching sun.

"Haydar!" I called out to him before he had a chance to close the gate behind him. He halted in mid-scurry and turned around. His little shoulders sagged with relief as soon as he saw it was me. I waved him over and he rushed towards me with an expression of consternation, looking over his shoulder.

"What are you hiding from?" I asked sternly. It seemed a more diplomatic question than the one that really flashed in my mind: what have you done?

He pushed up the big glasses he wore and pointed to the dreaded house across the street. "I'm hiding from Umm Maha!" Ahhh, I nodded my head sagely and he rushed on, "Yesterday, she made Mahmud pick up alllllllllllllll the litter up and down the street... and today she wanted me to sweep the sidewalks of all the houses..."

"Well, just tell her that you won't." I said, not believing I was actually promoting anarchy. He shook his head emphatically as he slipped off the glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, "I can't do that... I can't. She scares me and..." His voice slipped to a whisper, "... she told Mahmud to

take a bath yesterday because she says he smelled like sheep... she scares me." I secretly agreed with him because, well, she terrifies me a little bit too.

"So is that why you're all hiding?" I was referring to the little mob we had running our street. On their good days, they would play gently, as little boys tend to do- pushing, shoving, scraping knees and elbows and stubbing toes. On their bad days, they'd end up blocking the road from both ends with broken bricks and tin cans of sand (to represent goal posts) and fighting at the top of shrill voices as to who would get to be Ronaldo or Beckham.

I sympathized with him and he looked up at me for some sort of solution.

"Well, next time she catches you, just tell her you're running some errands for me." I offered helpfully. He was dubious, but he silently accepted and I allowed him to scurry back across the street.

This morning, I went out to the roof to hang some clothes that had been washed. I saw Umm Maha on her own roof, across the street. She wasn't hanging clothes, she was hanging out some relatively large rugs that she had washed- by hand of course- just that morning. I balked- no one cleans their rugs until the summer or immediately before putting them away in late spring. You just didn't do that. First, there was every chance it would rain on them and second, you'd just have to clean them AGAIN before putting them away.

I waved at Umm Maha just as she looked up from her task and she smiled and waved back. "I hope it rains..." I muttered and shook out the shirt I had in my hands, knowing that somehow it wouldn't. It didn't dare rain on Umm Maha's rugs.

Other than the cleaning, nothing feels festive. It's just normal- electrical outages, explosions and helicopters. Students now have their mid-year

holiday and sometimes you can see them in the street although everyone is at home by 7 or 8 pm, which is a contrast to the past when the fun didn't start until 7 or 8 pm. Anyone who can is spending the holiday in either Syria or Jordan. It's hard to believe that those two countries have become havens to Iraqis... Baghdad was always the place everyone wanted to be.

- posted by river @ [2:16 AM](#)

