

The Sky Remained Silent

(Salma Awan)

“Grandpa, Baghdad¹ is blazing! American tanks and cannons are moving in its streets like mad dogs. The helicopters sorting every moment are creating storms of dust and smoke which has rendered its face cloudy and dusky. The dilapidated houses of Al’Azamia have turned into graves along with their residents. Dead bodies without sepulture & burial are scattered on the roads. Minor and innocent children from small houses of Al-Mamoon; whenever they peeped out from their balconies; they were fired at by the volley of bullets. There is no potable water. Grandpa yours and mine Baghdad has turned into Karbala².”

She was 19 years old Abeer; (the fragrant) a true reflection of her name. Her eyes were brimming with the deep emotions of grief and this intensity of internal agony was representing a strange feeling of detachment.

¹ **Baghdad** is the capital of Iraq, as well as the coterminous Baghdad Governorate. The population of Baghdad in 2011 is approximately 7,216,040. It is the largest city in Iraq, the second largest city in the Arab World (after Cairo, Egypt), and the second largest city in Western Asia (after Tehran, Iran). Located along the Tigris River, the city was founded in the 8th century and became the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. Within a short time of its inception, Baghdad evolved into a significant cultural, commercial, and intellectual center for the Islamic World.

² **Karbala** is a city in Iraq, located about 100 km (62 mi) southwest of Baghdad. The city, best known as the location of the Battle of Karbala (680), is amongst the holiest cities for Shi’ah Muslims after Makkah, Madinah, and Najaf. The city contains the Imam Husayn Shrine which is considered sacred by Shias, as well as the shrine of al-Abbas ibn ‘Ali.

Behind her; an attractive woman of around 35 while unveiling the scarf from her head, looked at a buoyant old man of 6 feet and 2 inches like the Karman date-tree whose upper lip was hiding under his thick moustache and said with a tone mixed with anger, regret and admonition.

“She is staying in Baghdad like a nail fixed on its axis and she thinks that if she would go out, ramparts of city would fall.”

On one hand there is the critical situation of the country, and on the other hand her madness and her insistence to go and work in Al-Mansoor Orthopedic Hospital. Her father’s breaths were at stake. She just brushed off his every fear and apprehension very easily as one chops vegetables. She was angry at the women participating in the study circle as she thought that they must come out of their houses at such a critical juncture of time. She is always obedient and responsive but now she is changing into impudent daughter.

“*Grandpa!* I didn’t even step out of the house yet Baghdad has collapsed.”

Tears surged up in the old Iraqi’s eyes. He stepped forward and hugged her granddaughter close to his heart. While placing his lips on her head covered by scarf, he said;

“Someone was bound to inherit my spirit in my descendents.”

Then they all sat there together as if they had just returned from a funeral ceremony. The old servants of the manor also came to join in this common sorrow. One of them placed the tray of Qahwa³ on a table before them. Abeer listened to her grandfather while sipping the Qahwa;

³ Black Arabian tea

“Iraqis are extremely unfortunate people. Turks didn’t value them at all and they were only concerned with their luxuries and the collection of tax for their treasury, and they didn’t care about Iraqis. The British exploited our simplicity and ignorance. They were benefitted from Iraq while they hurled us into the hell. Arab Nationalism also proved to be a fraud. Communists vowed for the golden era. The poor and deprived people rushed towards these slogans and fell betrayed. When Mosul, Kirkuk and Basra were drenched in blood, the hollowness of these slogans became obvious.

“We suffered a lot for democracy but we hardly got a fraction of it and rather this ignorant tyrant stuck to us like a parasite .And now!” A sad and pathetic smile appeared on his face;

“Economic sanctions for ten years, is an enormous blow on prosperous and strong social infrastructure of Iraq and it is a mere pastime and sport of the West.”

The greatest enemy of Iraq has proved to be its own oil. Those who were expelled by us from Iraq; have intruded again and they are waving the flag of the freedom of Iraq; just to kill the remaining poor and draw out the rest of the oil.”

Her younger sister, Nab’a had gone inside with her mother; Waldada. She just remained sitting there in that atmosphere of loneliness, seclusion and calmness, free from the devastation being launched in Baghdad, Basra, Nasirya, Karbala and Najaf.

She joined her conical fingers by entangling them unto one another and while reclining the back of her head on it, looked at the sky.

Something emerged before her eyes, a three years old memory, and a scene on the same place. The days and time were almost the same. She was totally absorbed in the beauty of that arena.

There was a sort of grayness in the beauty of evening. The sun was still far above the distant sand dunes visible distantly and the River Dajla was flowing smoothly.

Abeer was sitting on a chair in balcony and then she stood up to see a line of white seagulls, flapping their wings and descending slowly in a queue on the waves of Dajla.

“Uff”

She innocently screamed like a child.

“What a charming scene!”

The beauty related to the scene had surfaced into her eyes like the wavering of a flame. She enjoyed that state for some moments.

When she turned her face, there were fields of wheat and barley spread as far as her sight could reach. The reflection of the harmony of golden and greenery was quite absorbing.

Her grandfather liked these days of March and the beginning of the April the most than the rest of the year. The grandfather was right in his choice as in the months of May and June the land spewed fire. Abeer watched the clusters of trees and also cast an eye on the date garden, with small fruits on the trees.

“There is always freshness and a new charm in these scenes although they might have been sighted thousand times earlier.” She said to herself.

“Perhaps some change occurs in the perception or after lapsing of time a strange feeling of ecstatic joy arises again.”

She reached the garden with small steps where a bald headed old man wearing the moss like dress and glasses on eyes, was smoking pipe and reading something.

Abeer came closer to her grandfather, collected the long pipe of *Huqqa*⁴ spread on the ground and spoke while looking at her grandpa,

“*Grandpa*, it’s not good to smoke too much, you never put the smoking pipe away from your mouth.”

He laughed and said;

“Now you want to snatch even this minor pleasure from me in these dejected days, though I have accepted your sanction on *Nabeez*⁵.”

The grandfather saw her granddaughter through his thick glasses.

Abeer’s face was illuminated like moon amid her black hairs, spreaded on her shoulders and she was wearing a long skirt with black and pink flowers.

She was the most intelligent student of medical sciences. Whenever she visited Saryat-ul-Saniya, she used to hold lengthy discussion with her grandfather.

“Abeer ask someone for Qahwa!”

She had not uttered a single word when Mustafa Albarzani saw her with a naughty smile. His lips had the sweetness of those words.

⁴ Arabian and Indian mode of smoking tobacco; by filtering tobacco smoke in water.

⁵ A mild sedative drink made up of dates.

“I’ll not say”,

“Grandpa It’s harmful for you to drink so much Qahwa”.

While saying this, Abeer burst into laughter, a strange laughter which made the entire atmosphere melodious. The old man looked at her back with a loving glance while her unplaited thick black hairs waved while she walked.

She sent Qahwa to him through a valet and she kept on asking her mother about the menu of the dinner.

“What will be special in dinner?”

“Nothing special; just a simple dinner of *Falafel*”, her mother replied.⁶

“Why?” She argued.

“Sakina; is not well” was the answer. She felt some uneasiness for a while and then she came out. She never felt comfortable indoor.

When she came to his grandfather’s garden, some people were present there. She stood still for a moment, she didn’t know who they were.

“Would it be appropriate to go ahead?” Usually she was frank with her grandfather’s friends.

When her *Grandpa* saw her standing still, he said in a voice with pleasant tone and elation,

“Come ahead! Look! who has come to visit us?”

⁶ Falafel.....

A deep-fried ball of ground chickpeas seasoned with onions and spices, originating in Southwest Asia.

The backs of the guests were towards her. There were two faces and four eyes. One was old and the other was young. Both were attractive as per their ages. There was a glimmer of eagerness and interest in their eyes as they stood up. The old man stepped forward and hugged her, kissed on her cheek, peeped into her eyes and said,

“Would you guess who am I?”

She burst into laughter.

“Though I have recognized you, but it’s your test now. Would you tell me now who am I.”

The person whom she addressed also laughed loudly.

Then as his laughter echoed in the silent air, he said smilingly;

“If I win, would there be any prize.”

Then gazing into her eyes and bending his body a little he said,

“Well! You are lovely and dear Abeer.”

The rhythm in the voice of *Grandpa* was showing his happiness. There would be hardly any picture in his new and old albums which were without that person.

In long winter nights she always used to read their new and old letters stacked in files and see both of them in pictures. They were not strangers for her.

“Ahmed Bar Zanji, the Sunni Kurd from Salmania who was the bosom-friend of her Shia grandfather, his sincere friend in the struggle for democracy, staunch socialist. He was a nice and revolutionary poet. No one knew how he escaped Saddam

and the revenge of his Baa's party. There was no time in his death, when he escaped from the Jail to England.

The boy with him was his grandson. He was a doctor. He was raised and studied in Baghdad. He was settled in USA for the last seven years initially for specialization. Now he had joined 'Voices in wilderness' and many other organizations which were working against the sanctions imposed on Iraq, raising funds and making the provision of medicines possible and taking foreigners to visit the hospitals. Now he was coming from Basra. He portrayed the horrifying and tragic situation of the hospitals in Basra, the fatal diseases of children including cancer, Leukemia, Diarrhea, Hepatitis and the deformed organs.

Then a strange thing happened. Abeer, while listening to Dr. Masood Barzanji, she slowly said;

"You have been visiting Iraq continuously for the last four years. Oh my God! Why didn't you come to meet my *Grandpa* earlier? I might have worked with you, had taken you to many places where people and children are desperately in need of our assistance and help."

Mullah Ahmed Barzanji looked at Abeer. She was contemplating Dr. Masood. There was a restlessness, anxiety and sorrowfulness of emotions which was evident in her eyes. There were also many other colors on her face. He addressed to his friend in a low tone.

"Mustafa, abeer is a true reflection of your ultimate love with Huda."

"She is very emotional, outspoken, and fearless and steeped in love for Iraq. I fear from her. She has returned from Baghdad yesterday and has been arguing on this point throughout the night."

“Grandpa, I wish to stand up on Shuhada Burj, (tower of Martyrs), and ask Saddam to let the vicious actions of the rogue America on a side, you just tell me why your ruling clout is not affected by the sanctions imposed by the so called international organization, U.N.O. Why your children are not dying of common diseases, why don’t your women stand up in long queues for the rations? Why there is no load-shedding of electricity in your houses. Why your drinking water is not impure?”

“Reply me Saddam!”

“If America is cruel, you are crueler, you are buying your throne of power with the death and diseases of innocent children and you are America’s agent.”

“I folded my hands before her and censured her as well, but Zanj she possesses a true revolutionary spirit. What can I do?”

Still this conversation was going on when two women came there with a kid.

They were from a village, Saryat-ul-Saniya, about two kilometers away from there. The child was ill. There was not even a pill for headache in the hospital. She had come there despite of the worse conditions; knowing the fact that the head of this family had numerous contacts and wealth to fetch medicines from Jordan, Cyprus and from England. He also provided those medicines to hospital and they were also expected to be available in his home.

Abeer and Doctor both immediately got attentive.

It was a severe attack of pneumonia. The kid was having great difficulty in breathing. His chest was throttling. Oxygen

was desperately needed. But, what to talk of oxygen even required medicines were not available in the hospital.

Some suitable medicines were picked up and were given to the kid. The two women thanked them, grabbed the kid on the shoulder and moved to depart.

“How have you come?”

“By boat”

“Would the boat be waiting for you?”

“No! She had to go ahead.”

Mustafa Albarzani ordered his servant to escort them across the River.

That house owned by them was at the left corner of River Dajla almost half-mile away from the village. There was a land-route for reaching Baghdad-Mosal Road but they had to use boat to go to the village across Dajla.

After the departure of such depressed and wretched people, Abeer always felt drowning into the deep pit of grief and dejection. It always happened, when she saw patients dying due to the non availability of medicines, she used to become dejected for hours.

It was Dr. Masood Bar Zanji who attended the kid with full concentration and gave him instant first aid, which was there in his medical kit bag. Abeer had got the address of woman and finalized her program to visit and attend the child again.

“Only a miracle could have saved the child and it was perhaps Dr. Masood who was sent here by the Providence.”

She after their departure had said while looking at Ahmed Bar ZANJI.

She saw the sun at a far distance. Its radiance and luster had faded and the weakness of decadence overpowered it.

When the sun was setting they all stood up. While entering the house the poem of a revolutionary poet Nazaar Qabani came on her lips, which after slipping out of her lips automatically spread in the air. This was heard by that young man too, along with the two old men while walking slowly and they appreciated it.

“We desperately need a generation of youth, full of zest

That would tear the sky apart

The generation which would jolt the foundations of the history

We need such a generation

That would never tolerate mistakes & errors

That would never kneel down (before anyone)

We need a generation of djins.”

Then they all entered from that 15 feet high gate. The high parapets of that vast home were made of clay during Mustafa Albarzani's father's time. They remained as like that till his age. When his sons grew up they made it with solid stones. A little ahead from the porch, there was a pool of blue granite at a corner. There was a vast quadrangle lawn in the middle surrounded by the trees from all four sides. There was a veranda on front and at their back was the queue of rooms.

At that time there was load-shedding of electricity. The candles lit in the compound, were making the atmosphere very reverie-like.

They all came in Mustafa Albarzani's room. The half portion of room, formed like the heath type dice was decorated with carpets brought from Izmir city of Turkey. The rifles of old times were hanging on the walls. Abeer as per instructions of her grandfather went to arrange for the dinner.

The dinner was lavish. All family members sat together and the dish of *Malqooba (An Iraqi Dish)* was liked very much by all of them.

Abeer said laughing;

“We got this grand dinner due to *Grandpa Mustafa*, otherwise Uncle would have served us only “*Falafel*” (*An Iraqi Dish*).

The round of Qahwa drinking started and old memories and those letters were revived which Ahmed Bar Zanji had written to his close friend during the days when they were desperately busy in transforming Iraq into democracy investing their energies and resources actively.

Abeer drew out a letter from the file while laughing and handed it to Ahmed Bar Zanji. The time jumped into past. The blood-boiling days of 1958 were recalled. There was not only a strange smile that appeared on the lips but also a beaming light engulfed their faces.

“Mustafa Albarzani, by God, my heart doesn't settle on any of the possibilities before us. Please tell me what are you doing in Saryat-ul-Saniya? Every rising day in Baghdad, with every passing moment is a victim of anxiety, restlessness,

hopelessness, disappointment and suffocation and it is not concealed from you. Do you have some magnet bar below your feet, which has attached you to the ground?

Is your wife expecting? Are you sitting close to your wife's knees and you will get up only after she gives birth to the child? Otherwise you do not have slightest love for Khair-un-Nisa and if you had been in love with her then you would have done something very exceptional. My thoughts also go towards your greedy father who is perhaps lost in the thoughts that the land which this opportunist and utilitarian tribal chief had grabbed by flattering British lords might not be snatched away by any revolution of Iraq's independence. In such a situation it is very important for you, being his only son to take care of him, isn't it?

Muhammad Ar-Rakabi has come from Basra with lots of news. Aflaq Shafi's, Muhib Nasir's group in Baa's party is becoming over-emotional these days in Nasir's administration. Yesterday, there was a raid on "Haras-ul-Istaklal". All were gathered at Bashar's home in Hurriya. Police arrested fifteen of them.

Last night, there was a dinner in the honor of Muhammad Al-Raqabi in the same café of Al-Magrib Street. Muhammad Al-Ubaidi's new poem inspired all of us. Now please assume this letter as an urgent telegram and rush towards me."

Smiles appeared on the faces of two old men. The corners of their eyes were welled up with tears. Now the letter was in Masood Bar ZANJI's hand.

That letter also entertained them a lot, which was written by Mustafa Al-Barzani's paternal cousin Ibrahim Alavi.

He had deep grudge against Ahmed Bar ZANJI and always provoked Mustafa against him.

“Aye, he is Sunni Kurd, try to understand him, these Kurds are seasonal birds. They are not sincere to Iraq. They want to found Kurdistan. They are American & British agents and slaves, always ready for violence. Though the Turks have crushed them a lot but still these wretched never stop their activities to retain their individual identity, they suffer many wounds.”

Many memories slipped out from the corners of their brain.....

Speaking loudly at the Qahwa café in Khalifa's street.... listening to Al-Javahiri's poetry..... sometimes, reading Muzzafar-ul-Nawab...criticizing bitterly Shah-Faisal Bin Ghazi and Noor-ul-Syed Jaffer Askari..... When they were raided at by the Government they ran away scuffling. Sometimes they hide in the Damascus & sometimes in Cairo. They brought the revolution by raising the slogans of Jamal-Abdul Nasir. The pieces of Noor-ul-Saeed dead body were scattered in the streets, Iraq became a democracy but there was no consistency and stability in the fate of this country. The period of Abdul Karim Qasim, rebellions, intrigues, attacks by the communists, cunning activities of Ba'as party, the interest of Arab nationalists and the poor people yearning for the peace were given blood bath. Abdus Salam Arif, Doctor Abdur Rehman Al Bazaz and then the patrolling of tanks in the streets of Baghdad in June 1966.

When Saddam launched cannons at the ideology of communists, many people like Ahmed Bar ZANJI were thrown behind bars and in torture cells. When he came out after many hard efforts, he found it safe to go to exile, first to Italy and

then to England. Those letters written by him from various foreign countries were stacked in the file very neatly and accordingly.

She took out the one which was full of anguish of exile and contained the poetry of Muzaffar-al-Nawaab; the eminent poet of Iraq; who himself had bitter experience of exile. The loud voice of Abeer had made the atmosphere agonizing.

She has just said after sipping from fresh Qahwa;

“Well, *Grandpa* when you tell me the memories of the days of the struggle for the Independence, why do you elude the story of that girl who used to come before you during the struggle every day in one way or the other?”

Mustafa Al Burzani said cheerfully;

“My child, Abeer, there was not one girl but there were many girls who joined the struggle for making Iraq a democracy.”

They both smiled and looked at each other.

Ahmad Bar Zanji while moving off his admiring looks from glowing face of Abeer, fixed it on his friend’s face and said;

“Certainly, many things would have come in your mind.”

“Yes a lot, how can one forget? It is penetrating in the veins of life.

The smile spread on the lips which bore the charm and defeat of past.

As soon as his lips were soaked by drougths of Qahwa in gold colored crystal cup, he was transported there where he always wanted to be. He saw the scene on his front wall

through the top corner of small cup with such deep glare as if desired scene was painted there.

That evening, too, their group was present in a café in Al-Magrib Street, which is not very far from Dajla in the area of Najab Basha. The owner of this Qahwa café was himself a staunch communist and a revolutionary.

That evening too, he had just touched his lips to the Qahwa cup when the door of café opened with a loud voice as if a delicate & pleasant blow of air transfers an ecstasy in the body. She entered like that, wearing flowery long violet skirt spread till her feet, a necklace of beautiful stones in her neck, which touched her belly with a scarf of black flowers on her head. Another girl of the same appearance followed her. Her face was like a flower blossomed in the early days of spring.

The cup of Qahwa from which he was going to take a sip remained hanging in his hand. He just continuously stared at her. Some senior boys who present there stood up to receive her. He asked Abul Hasan about them and discovered that the two girls were Huda & Umm-e-Zainab Turkamani. They belonged to a village Sarchinar situated about 5–7 kilometers away from Salmania but they had recently come back from England. They had been living there with their uncle for last ten years.

As soon as she sat down, she cursed & condemned the boys in a way that he became confused. "Just a little raid of police and you cowards ran away. O you wretched, would you show some determination or would keep on running away like the women folk. Nori-Al-Syed would even throw the pieces of our flesh to the British, Have you seen the Baghdad Pact? When you are destined to die, it is better to die for a cause."

The boys listened to her with their heads down. She told them the details of the protest of the next day. She went in the manner she had come and Ahmed Mustafa Albarzani felt as if all the light and glare had gone with her.

During those days there was great turmoil in the streets of Baghdad. In the ancient streets of Aazamia and Karkh, the men, women and even small children used to wave their punches in the air and raise slogans.

“Imperialists, Leave Iraq, we want free bread, no inflation!”

The mob couldn't be controlled in any way. There was a crowd of people across the Mamoon Bridge. The administration didn't let the people get together and assume a shape of crowd. The Machine guns and armed vehicles opened fire. The people fell in Dajla like leaves. Huda handed over the flag to her sister, signaled her to move ahead. 14 or 15 years old Mun'ta'ha held the flag and walked ahead along with Huda. Mustafa Albarzani held the hand of Ahmed Bar Zanji, ran and they took the two sisters in the circle of their arms and boys also started walking left and right.

Huda had settled in his soul. It was impossible for him to miss any meeting or procession where Huda had been present. He and Huda's sister could escape and Huda herself was soaked in her blood.

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This guest who had arrived after many years was compelled to stay for three more days after many requests. Abeer and Dr. Masood spent most of their time among the children, women and old folk of the village. Various topics; like

Saddam, Iran & Iraq and Gulf war were discussed. Abeer always spoke passionately.

“This America, UNO and Security Council are big frauds and cheaters. Saddam is not acceptable to them. They want to kill Saddam. Kill him. He is the culprit of Gulf war. He does not listen to anyone but why the poor are being punished?”

It looked as if she was too innocent to comprehend Saddam and Saddam was too brave to take such a bold step without the consent of America and its allies. Though Kuwait was part of Iraq and all these vicious activities were initiated by Britain which separated Kuwait, gave it to Saba family in charity and filled her banks with the wealth of the Sheikhs.

However, Abeer also saw another perspective in the discussions of elders along with sorrow and grief. America, afraid of Iranian Revolution, and Israel, frightened of Iraq's increasing military power, has made them fight with each other. America provided armaments to Iraq and Israel funded Iran, hour cunning tactics!

As far as Kuwait was concerned it had always been the part of Iraq. If only this stupid Saddam had evaluated the opportunity, while he had attacked Kuwait he could have held elections there as well. Kuwaiti's were already fed up with the Saba family. But how could he do that there, when at home he had forcibly ruled over his people and no one was given the right of expression.

As far the sanctions imposed on Iraqi nation were concerned; this was also a part of their planning. As Ahmed Bar ZANJI had been abroad he was better aware of the implications of the conditions and intrigues and means being employed by Americans. Abeer was surprised when he said that Americans

wanted to strengthen Saddam. It was not due to the fact that American liked Saddam but due to the unavailability of a more suitable person. The way Kurds were crushed and their villages burnt with poisonous gas, these things are enough to freeze one's blood in the veins. What happened with Shi'aas of the South that was a worst example of (state) atrocities.

And now when they say that Iraq is making the weapons of mass destruction (Atomic and chemical weapon) and proliferating them, these are all nonsense and meaningless blames. But American would one day come here riding on these baseless pretexts.

She listened to it aghast and then said in a wounded tone;

“Mustafa *Grandpa*, will America occupy Iraq?”

“God forbid, but the way things are heading, the situation looks very disappointing.”

At the time of departure, Masood made few promises to her; to come to Baghdad at their home, to meet affected families with them, to get them checked up and treatment of the kids of these families.

While leaving Ahmad Bar ZANJI kissed her forehead and said, “Would that I had a granddaughter like her.”

She retorted instantly,

“Why did you say that?”

“I always thought you as my grandfather as I love to listen news about you and always eager to read about you frequently. I cannot even complain for your long absence as the reason is obvious.”

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Many days rather months passed on.

Then one afternoon when she had brought a little girl to Almansoor hospital that was from a family of Basra that came from the neighbors of Ra'ana; the employee of study circle on Qu'taiba Street, saw Dr. Masood Bar Zanji.

Her eyes did not twinkle to see him, though a dim light of familiarity blinked. Masood stopped and looked at her with full attention. Then he begged apology from her that he had to leave instantly.

He had reached Iraq just the previous day.

She told Masood about the girl standing a few steps back from her with a woman. That 9 or 10 years old girl had tumor in her abdomen. She had been operated in Basra six months ago. Now it had reappeared. Doctors had predicted that the girl would live for maximum 2 to 3 months.

Mosood bent a little and lifted the frock of girl to examine the tumor and then while looking at the dejected Abeer, standing nearby, he said,

"This is Lymphatic cancer. The best agricultural land around Basra was the battlefield for allies. The hurling of uranium shells had poisoned the land and poor people have to eat the tomatoes, onions and potatoes grown in the same land and have to succumb to its poison.

"So she is also a victim."

"The hospital wards are full of children with disfigured legs, inflated bellies, weak faces, dim eyes, and bent limbs. What poor doctors could have done? There is neither medicine

nor edibles and milk. They are dying as cruel rulers, rogue Americans and British have forced them to die in such way.”

Dr. Masood saw that two drops of tears fell on the black cardigan from her sparkling eyes.

“Ok good bye”, she said. She stepped ahead when Dr. Masood said that he would like to have dinner with her family at their home.

Night was extremely cold. The house situated at Khalid Bin Waleed Road was built in a specific historic style. The decoration of some rooms was in purely western style whereas it had also a room with specific Iraqi traditional interior. The dinner was served there and the atmosphere was homely and full of love whereas the housewife with her two daughters was busy in serving and talking politely. There were not so many dishes. *Malqoba* was served in silver tray and all the family members along with maid sat there and ate together.

While drinking Qahwa, Abeer’s mother said.

“What should we do about this daughter of ours whose every breath is having pain of Iraq? She objects over Saddam’s actions and criticizes the policies of Baa’s party. We make every effort to make her understand that she should be careful otherwise Saddam would kill her rather all of us, but she never listens.”

Dr. Masood lifted his gaze suddenly and settled it on her. She while reclining to wall, holding the crystal cup of Qahwa in her hand was sitting unconcerned and drinking it with small sips. Candlelight was spread in the room.

Wuldada again unleashed her criticism;

“We don’t even have permission to turn on the UPS or the emergency light during the load-shedding. As a matter of fact Dr. Masood she does not like to let us live in a little comfort.”

Dr. Masood laughed and once again contemplated at her.

She was like a rebellious character of Nazaar Qabani’s revolutionary poetry.

They did not let him go at night and stopped him for a stay.

Iraqi national orchestra was performing in Rabat Hall. Masood was invited there and he telephoned her;

“Abeer, would you come there for a little while.”

She replied;

“Masood curse on going there, Let’s visit that museum in Ammariya, where the old people, children and poor women were living as refugees but they were martyred by the bombing of wretched Americans.”

He couldn’t help laughing.

“Have mercy upon me, I want to live, I have just returned from Krama Hospital.” He at last brought her forcibly to attend the orchestra performance.

Rabat hall was full of people.

Their seats were in front rows.

The conductor of orchestra appeared upon the podium. Abeer looked at the eminent Iraqi musician; Muhammad Amin Izzat, with a deep esteem. His left hand could not move and the fingers of his hand were attached to one another. “Oh what’s

that?" she looked at Masood with restless gaze. She was not aware of the tragedy that had befallen over him. Due to the irregular supply of electricity this prominent Iraqi artist was also compelled to use kerosene oil like common Iraqis. Once while cooking food the stove blew up. Amin Izzat's wife was also burnt dead and while trying to save her, his hand was burnt and fingers were attached to one another.

"My God!"

She fell into the deep sea of grief and anxiety. A sigh came out of her inner self repeatedly.

Then a strange thing happened. The orchestra was rehearsing the Nut Cracker Suite, famous symphony of world-renowned musician Chaykoski, but it sounded quite unorganized to her then as if everything was stopped. Mohammad Ameen Izzat's voice raised steeped in grief and sorrow.

Reeds are missing from clarinets and chords from the violins. Musical scores are hardened like parchments of ancient times. It has become very difficult to acquire paper. Only two people from this ancient and grand orchestra are left; rest of them have gone wherever they could find refuge in the entire world. I don't blame them. There is nothing more important than life and food.

Abeer's face had turned rubeous. She said to Masood "Why are we so coward? Why don't we speak up? I shall go on stage!"

She was anxious and was boiling with anger. If Masood had not held her hand she would have climbed up the stage.

Show was held, whatever the artists could do, they performed. But it was all tasteless, as if all the joy was spoiled.

“What can we do? We cannot import them from abroad, sanctions are imposed. Whatever we can do on our part, we try to make it in spite of difficulties.”

Once, when Masood said lightly,

“Abeer, since long I haven’t wandered in the streets of Baghdad. I wish to go there and revive the past memories.”

“Strange! She laughed, why didn’t you tell me earlier, come let’s go now.”

“Not today, some other day, today I wish to visit some park, garden or open space.”

Some of the good deeds of Saddam included the beautification of Baghdad. Beautiful gardens and parks were built and were decorated by the sculptures and memorial monuments. There may be hardly any historical character whose statue was not built in Baghdad. But look at the irony, it was destroyed after being beautified and then in a very limited time he made the repairing of the entire infrastructure and buildings by making the labourers work like giants. What kind of person Saddam is?

“Well! Masood have you met the famous artist of Baghdad; Muhammad Ghani? The mirror of his studio was broken by the bombing of these rogue Americans in 1991 and you know what that world-renowned artist said?”

“Iraqis are proud of their country. I cannot even think of leaving Baghdad. I shall live and die here.”

During that week, both of them saw the monuments built for unknown martyred soldiers of Iran, Iraq and many other. Abeer could not stop discussing the havoc caused by Gulf War and the sanctions imposed as its consequence.

“Why were these wars fought, why a Muslim killed another Muslim and provided a chance to the opportunists of the world to laugh.”

Shuhada Tower was preserved in their memories with reference to their grand fathers. They stood on the tower and took snaps of each other. Every struggle for making Iraq a democracy ended on this tower. Abeer remembered her grandfather’s beloved Huda and prayed for her.

“Masood, sometimes I wish to stand up on this bridge and address Saddam at the top of my voice and ask him,

“Don’t make yourself, a God. You are bent upon making Iraq a heap of ash. Your stupidity has landed Iraq into the abyss of downfall. Poor people of the land of gold are dying for bread and medicine.”

He laughed and said,

“Don’t enact this wise idea ever. Haven’t you seen the end of his real sons-in-law? He had made both of his daughters widows and their kids orphans.”

Masood recalled his childhood in Al-Tehrir (Liberty) Square. Whenever his mother needed any item even if it cost a penny she boarded on double-decker bus and reached Al-Tahrir Square.

“What beautiful days those were!” he looked at the surroundings passionately.

The next one and half day, they spent on locating that home in the round city of Kurkh where once Masood lived with his parents.

Abeer was herself unaware of these narrow and dark streets in Baghdad and the markets scattered there. She watched everything with amazement.

“Look! We need to visit the culture of our country spread in these streets. Abeer my home was at the corner of street and the door of drawing room opened in the adjacent street. In the opposite house *Nabeez*⁷ was prepared. There was a pair of date tree. You know how much old and historic were those trees?

And Abeer said laughing,

“You have been coming to Iraq for so long. Have you ever tried to locate all these thing?”

“Yes I did, Abeer, many times but I could not find anything from this web of tangled threads. I have brought you here so that I may find some help.

“Well! One thing is for sure that I also got a chance to see all that along with you. I came here once or twice to see the kids of some family but did not go in these mazes as the people with me were aware of the ways. I had not seen the unpaved streets, narrow bazaars and the beauty of antiquity spread here all around”, abeer admitted.

Then he had gone away. His tone was normal as usual though it had a tinge of sadness added to it when he spoke,

“These tyrants have pushed Iraq into hell. No fly-zone was left to be imposed which is now done. One has to travel for

⁷ Mild sedative drink usually made from barley.

24 hours to reach Jordan from here. I am terrified of travelling so long in desert. And that we have to bear.”

Abeer listened to it but did not lift her head to look at him. Abeer examined her mobile two or three times unwillingly. There was no message, no missed call, nothing. But after some days, she received a small letter.

“I got many chances but what stopped me to speak of my heart, I did not know.

“I had tried to say when beside the lake near the Martyr’s Memorial you had started to sing Nazar Kabani’s poem while strolling with me.

“The oil of our deserts

Can turn into blazing dagger

(But) we are a heinous spot on dress of our ancestors

(And) our oil is on disposal of harlots.”

I wanted to ask you to speak in low voice. Anything said here against the Imperialists of rulers would hit back like bullet. Nobody knows how the poet had suffered. But I could not say that. I did not like to stop you.

Though Abeer is the beauty of Iraq, the charm of Baghdad but for me her charm lies in her heart. My heart yearns to settle there. I am a Kurd as well as a Sunni. Kurds are not considered to be trustworthy. They are neither on this side nor on that side. They adopted Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish and Arab flavors of civilizations but also carry their native colors. They yearn for their identity and ethnic distinctiveness. What else these poor can do? They are divided into three countries. At times, they were beaten by the Turks and sometimes had

quarrel with the Persians and sometimes raised the revolution against Iraqis and at times became the agents of America and Britain.

You might have perhaps heard about that famous Arabic quotation that there are three types of plagues, mice, infectious worms and Kurds. Kurds are not less than anyone. They have also coined some phrases for the Arabs. The funniest among them is in which they refuse to acknowledge the camel as an animal and Arabs as human beings. Look how many indecencies are attached.”

And Abeer while closing the letter just mumbled,

“If I am an Arab and Shia what can I do about it.”

In Professor Dr. Ahmed Alawi’s class of medicine when the professor, as a routine, drifted from the main subject to the newly discovered disease of modern times, Schizophrenia, Abeer who was apparently giving the impression of listening to the lecture attentively but in fact was confused and thinking.

“Would that I have been a patient of Schizophrenia. The love of this wretched country has made my life miserable. The dark shadows are spreading like thick clouds on me.”

Suddenly, Jalal Shelabi who had just come in from outside placed the screen of his mobile before her. She read what was written.

“Oh! Unbelievable”, her eyes filled with amazement;

“How can it happen!” She stared at Jalal Shelabi.

It was a matter of moments, from one to second, third, fourth and then half of the class was hit by this news. Then as if

the swollen belly of the news was picked by some needle and it burst, there was a storm in the class.

The tragic event of 9/11 was under discussion.

Different views and opinions were circulating around. Who dared to hammer the wall of the greatest rogue? It was really very big news.

The entire Baghdad was in ecstasy as if some shower of cold water was thrown on the blowing emotions of the people, or as if cold finger touches the desiccated lips.

Masood was in New York those days. There was no contact. After four or five days she received his email.

“New York is trembling like an autumnal leaf. A new drama! Now you will see the villainous arts of this rogue state on the pretext of this incident. The influential Jews here have started saying that the attack on Iraq is indispensable. Now who would be punished first, Iraq or Iran? Still to decide.”

She used to read the analysis of foreign journalists and after being frustrated thought whether anyone else felt endangered by the chemical and atomic weapons of Iraq or not but only Israel is the most scared concerned and that Big Rouge can't see anything beyond its interests; except firstly Israel should be saved and secondly the oil reserves should be in its possession. All the rest is all well.

Masood came to Iraq in the last days of 2002. She was sleeping and woke up by the beep of mobile. She said 'hello' while in sleep, but when she heard Masood on the line, she jumped out of her bed.

“When did you come? Why didn't you tell me? Where are you?” She asked so many questions in one breath.

He was speaking from Arabeel. He told that he would reach the next evening.

Someone from behind said in Karmanji (Kurdish language),

“Please stay for a few days more. You always try to run.”

When Abeer asked, he said that it was his mother’s voice. “I have been sitting close to her for the last five days but she is still not satisfied. In fact, Democratic Party of Kurdistan invited me and I came via Istanbul instead of Oman.”

Though there were no special arrangements for the reception of the guest but still an excited and heartiest welcome was visible. Abeer made Iraqi dish of Masgoof fish, and Iraqi Kubbha with a lot of care. Masood had brought many gifts.

Abeer was a girl of simple disposition but still she liked it very much.

Holding the cool water in her hand she said,

“Masood I will not say why have you brought all that but I liked it.”

And when both of them took Qahwa and talked, Masood while heaving a deep sigh full of grief said, “I feel like hearing chatter of the devastation of Iraq high ups in the skies.”

Abeer heard that deep sigh of grief and disappointment, and added,

“Our enemy is very mean.”

“Abeer! enemy is always mean.”

Then Masood said something, which made her almost to jump.

“Abeer is it possible that you should go to England to stay with your brother Mishal.”

“Never, not even at the cost of my life, I would like go to the country of that poodle. I already detest this tail-wagging dog.

“Ok, if you don’t like that, go with me after marriage.”

“Masood, what’s wrong with you. Why should I go to Mishal? Marrying you and going with you? Why are you insisting me to go to Mishal and as far as marriage is concerned, I would definitely marry you but after completing my medical education.”

Abeer saw many emotions twinkling in his eyes; she understood them and said,

“Masood, Iraq has millions of daughters. I am not alone. And listen! I will never go anywhere leaving my country.”

“Ok, leave all of them alone. Come, I will show you Zawara park. It is also one of few good works done by Saddam.”

In the first week of March, while talking to one another if Masood had anxiety in his tone, she was also very much disturbed.

“I was reading the articles of New York Time magazine a little while ago. Though America is on the way to constrain Iraq but Saddam never did anything without prior permission of America; whether it was Iran-Iraq war or attack on Kuwait. Therefore, there is no logical justification of invading Iraq. All pretexts are mere nonsense. These are the political feats of

high-ups to say that Iraq is preparing the weapons of mass destruction and the world is threatened. All the rubbish and lame excuses are to initiate the war. The reason is obvious just to hold oil and the grip on the Middle East. But the unfortunate part of the situation is that even our own deserters think that imperialists will be better for Iraq. My own maternal uncles think like that. Why should I complain about others?

Sometimes, Masood, I think why are Iraq and especially Baghdad destined for devastation?"

Then the havoc came blowing its trumpet loud. Just like Halaku Khan of ancient times Iraq's army, government and Baghdad was demolished. The Halaku Khan of present times had also acquired the services of deserters like Al Jaburi and Mashadni and soul-less people like Ahmed Shilabi and Kina'an Makia.

Baghdad fell and Abeer was boarded on a car to be safe from fire and dynamite.

She boarded on the car, saw around. She felt her heart bursting. The onset of streaming eyes rushed. She also did not stop it and let them flow. The tears fell on her cheeks like beads of broken rosaries. The expression of internal agony was evident from her deep sighs. Waldada saw all that. While wiping her eyes she had said to herself;

"What else we can do over the destruction of our country?"

Before heading towards Baghdad-Mosal road, the driver drove the car from the internal small lanes of the city. The suburbs of Baghdad were like all developing cities, unplanned and scattered. And the debris of war was adding strange terror to the locale.

They had to cross six posts till Saryat-ul-Saniya, which were all in possession of American soldiers. The safety measures, the walls of the sacks of sands, which were imprisoned in the circle of iron rods and barbed wires, all presented a horrible scene.

The car was stopped at first check post. The six soldiers of G-I Battalion of US Army surrounded it. The passengers were asked to step down for search.

“What a tragedy! It’s our country and we are to be given search to those who are usurpers and offenders, those who came here backed by their rifles. Oh God have mercy on us,” Abeer thought.

Her elder maternal uncle had got issued a special permission from the Chief Administrator of Baghdad Zone; with his signatures to avoid unnecessary checks but still this was going on.

She had a glance at boundary walls of some homes; there were some bunches of yellow flowers visible here and there. “Iraqis love flowers so much,” she was thinking.

On third check-post Abeer was asked,

“What is its meaning of your name?”

Abeer while staring at him with sharp eyes said;

“What concern with it?” But Waldada rebuked her daughter and said to them;

“It is the word of Arabic language, the mixture of the fragrance of saffron and its deep red color is called Abeer.”

The old black American grinned and said,

“Your daughter is a reflection of her name.”

Now this was sixth check-post. Clad in camouflage uniform and wearing iron helmets with spotlights attached to them, for our soldiers of same stature stood around the car.

The interior and rear compartment of the car was checked. Waldada brought Abeer and Naba out. Abeer was wearing black cloak. Only her eyes were visible from the hood and her lake-like eyes that were full of sorrow and disappointment.

One of them said with arrogance, “Show your face, and remove your veil.”

“Why” She said with indignation.

Waldada pressed her hand and then turned her attention towards the young man.

“In our society, girls observe veil.”

“In fact, we have to obey orders, we are ordered to search.”

She removed the veil from her face with a jerk and there was a storm of abuses from her tongue. All four of them stayed dumbfounded and listened to her abuses. It was such a moon-like face, which forced them to contemplate her with their full attention.

Though the search was conducted but in a soft way. The number of car was noted down. The address of the places of their departure and arrival was noted.

“If I would have been armed with hand-grenade, I had certainly turned them into pieces.” she said while sitting in the car.

Mustafa Albarzani was looking at Abeer for quite a long time. Trying to console her, he said,

“Abeer, we may hope that a policy like Japan will be adopted with Iraq. If this happens it will be good for Iraq.”

She looked at her grandfather for some moments, then said,

“*Grandpa*, it will never happen. Thinking like this is living in a fool’s paradise.”

There was a long silence between two of them.

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She switched on the T.V. The scene stunned her to stand still and stare it.

Saddam’s new grand palace was being trampled under the feet of white and black American soldiers. The ornamentation of rooms, furniture, the railing of stairs, the royal paraphernalia everything was so marvelous and fabulous.

“Uff!”

She shut her eyes for a moment, then opened and said to herself;

“Alas Saddam, would that if had you spent all that money on the poor!”

The second daughter of Saddam; Raghda was the class fellow of her aunt Zukhraf. She also loved Zukhraf’s sister, Ra’ana.

Saddam had displayed strange barbarism by getting her both daughters divorced from her nephews Hussain Kamal and Saddam Kamal and then killing them brutally. During those days

her aunt had come from Florida. She visited that new palace for condolence and had also asked Abeer to accompany her.

“Pardon me!” Abeer replied. She had no interest in that palace. On her return when she was telling about the grandeur of palace, Abeer could not resist her saying that when abundance of wealth is spent in getting all luxuries of life and collecting antique specimens and building palaces and minarets, naturally they would be enamply.

She switched off the TV; saw out of the window, the sky was overcast. The wind was blowing fast and tree branches were swaying. Everything was so gloomy.

She had placed empty tumbler of water on stool. Grandpa was not feeling well. After giving him soup and covering him with blanket she had come back in the room a little while ago.

The collection of selected poems by Sa’adi Yusuf was lying by her pillow. She flipped through the pages. Then she recalled Nazzar Qabani’s poem.

“It is hard to listen in morning news

The enemy has not (only) violated the boundary of our country

By deploring our weakness, he has invaded our homeland like ants”

Qasim-ur-Rahim Albarzani was expected to arrive in a day or two. She wished for some good news. She reclined on her bed while talking to herself. Some English poet’s stanza was echoing in her mind. She replaced Iraq in place of people,

When will thou save Iraq?

Oh, God of mercy! When?

Leaving the next lines she repeated 'when, when', for a number of times, wiped the tears flowing from the corners of her eyes. In this state she went into sleep...

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On that evening sky was overcast. There was a little drizzling before Maghreb prayers. The four young American soldiers at the last check post were drinking 'Rasatoon' wine, prepared by the mixture of Syrian honey, which some Iraqi had brought for them on their insistence. While drinking it, they remarked that 'Nabeez' was rubbish.

They got intoxicated and while missing their beloveds, wives and children, they sighed and started abusing the Iraqis. They had come all the way from their beautiful homeland to this troublesome land, leaving the life of luxury, so that these ignorant people might get rid from the dictator Saddam and rather they had come to introduce a taste of democracy instead of Islamic fascism.

Just during those moments, they remembered that deep black-eyed Abeer. They raised a sky-rocking slogan, opened the register and noted her address, boarded on the jeep and went off.

One of them had seen that mansion in the day light while patrolling. The lofty wooden gate was closed. They knocked at the door and the servant opened the wooden window as he was expecting Qasim-ur-Rahim Albarzani.

Their first victim was that old servant. With a swiftness of panther, they surrounded all the rooms.

They made Mustafa Al Barzani unconscious on the bed in a moment; Suddenly, she woke up.

The room was full of her mother, sister's screams. For some moments she could not understand whether she was dreaming or the scene rampant on the streets and bazaars of Baghdad had intruded in her home.

Four soldiers were standing in the room with their rifles pointed towards them. Her mother asked in a frightened and confused voice speaking loud in English, why they had come to their home? What brought them there?

She had hardly accepted the reality of this scene when the cruel and brutal scene was before her. Two hands moved forward and shot at both of them in a moment; There were streams of blood and cries spreading in the room. The bodies were falling with the thump. She could not even hold any of them.

Then followed the greater catastrophe; The fragrance of saffron was blown away and the deep red color became colorless but the sky of Samrah remained as it was, it never fell.

Three of them were intoxicated and the fourth could not enjoy this feast. He was hurling abuses in a loud voice; he abused Landon and Wilson as the sons of bitch. "What led this bastard, Landon to show this adventurism?"

"I know this warrior, how brave he is! He jumps into the bunker on a little noise before all of us. The woman was charming and a little bulky. The girl was not underage. If she had not been a full rose; she was a bud of spring."

Landon looked at him with satanic eyes,

“Why are you crying, then she is there, no matter if she is dead, go ahead and satisfy your lust.”

He spat at him with contempt and hurled dirty abuses at him.

When the hunger of body was satisfied, the hunger of stomach arose. They went to the kitchen, drew out the chicken from the refrigerator and started to roast them on the fire.

All three of them were sitting in the kitchen and eating roasted chicken legs. In the courtyard, the body soaked in saffron fragrance and red color was burning in the kerosene oil and flames. The howling of winds and barrenness hit the walls of mansions, as if everything around was lamenting. The fourth while stumping his boots was abusing them and capturing all the scenes on mobile.

One of them while nibbling the pieces of flesh with teeth said,

“I am feeling pity on Jufialz, the poor guy remained thirsty.” Jufialz listened to them and screamed. But his howl was not of concern for them.

“Poor fellow!” they got up while wiping their hands and came into the courtyard.

The reddish fire had become little bit dim. There was a frightening scene as if some sculptor had laid a statue carved out of black and red granite. All three of them remained standing around her for some time and watched. Then they fired in the air and while dancing they sang a very popular song, which is usually sung in military training camps.

“This is my Rifle

This is my Gun

This is for killing

This is for fun.”

While celebrating their victory they reached at their abode. After a while, their snors were echoing in the air.

Then Mr. Jofialz sat in his car and departed for Baghdad. Saddam's palace, Green Zone was transformed in American headquarter. He, while passing through obstacles on the way and introducing him, reached the security in charge.

At that time an Iraqi army officer of colonel rank was there. A little bit of effort was made to stop him. He could have moved ahead with the pretention of conveying an important message for the General but he stopped, narrated all the details of that case and also showed him pictures. Colonel Ibrahim Saad Khalili was stunned. The prominent and activist family of Iraq became a victim to open barbarism and violence.

Now Americans soldiers were insistent upon making this crime of gang rape and murder ineffective. The group of Ahmad Shilabi's fake government was insisting upon the court martial of the criminals. Grand jury, after the hearing of the case in Camp Liberty, said that the final decision will be made by American General whether there should be court martial or not.

The defense lawyers after putting in all their strength had made the case strong by insisting that the poor culprits were in violent state of mind. Seventeen friends of their Battalion were even killed in the attacks of suicide-bombings. They didn't even fall in the category of normal and immoral culprits.

Now Qasim Al-Rahim Albarzani, Masood Bar Zanji, Mishal Albarzani and Abeer's maternal uncles had no other option but to blame Al-Qaich.

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The end.