

## **Bill Spring - Writing Sample**

### **“The Bull of Heaven: The Story of a Boy Who Grew Up in a War Zone to Become a French Stock Market Millionaire Fighting for Shareholder Justice in North America”**

Memoir by Nawar Alsaadi (with Bill Spring)

My father grew up in a city called Nasiriyah, about 200 miles southeast of Baghdad. His early years were marked by desperate, terrible poverty. He was the first person in his entire family to attend college, studying in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and ultimately earning a PHD in the food industry. After spending several years working for the government of Syria in the late sixties, he was recruited by the Iraqi Minister of Industry to come back to work for his native country. Initially offered a consulting position in the Ministry, he rose quickly up the ladder of promotion through a combination of hard work and personal charm, and eventually became a General Director, which is a level subordinate to only two others: the Minister and Vice Minister. The job put him in charge of huge, government funded projects where he would work with foreign experts, mostly from Eastern Europe, to build centralized factories producing nutritional staples like cooking oil, tomato paste and baby formula. He was involved in every aspect of construction, from the initial designs to the final food products that were loaded onto trucks and sent to all corners of the nation. He even got to choose the baby whose face would adorn the infant formula and baby food labels for all of Iraq, and of course picked my very adorable sister Tania for that honor. I grew up eating food that often came from a jar with my own sister's picture on it!

My father's family was enormously proud of him, but his status and success also caused them to be very suspicious of my mother. They thought my mother stole him

away for his wealth, despite the fact that he spent a large percentage of his income on his own side of the family, buying his impoverished relatives clothes, cars, and even houses. Still, this never seemed enough for them, and so relations between my own family and my father's family were always very complicated and difficult. But of course, my father was a very complicated man in his own right. Driven by the dual passions of women and wealth, he led two lives, walking a tightrope between his public persona as a loyal government employee and a private life that he struggled to keep hidden from both the authorities and his own family.

Truthfully, he was not very good at keeping his sexual affairs secret. As a handsome man with an important job, it was a simple matter for him to find women who were interested in him, and he enjoyed both the attention they provided and the illicit thrills of conducting extramarital affairs. This was all possible because at the time Iraq was a secular society. Even though the population was majority Muslim, we had no Sharia law ruling us, as Iran would have after their 1979 revolution. The ruling Ba'ath party would publicly denounce the west as enemies of Iraq, while at the same time accepting French and American military weapons and importing products and culture from Europe and the US. This limited openness may have made it easier for my father to spend a lot of time with his girlfriends, but being a resourceful and determined man, he likely would have done what he pleased no matter what the social climate had been. I don't even think he felt particularly guilty about his lifestyle; our family was part of the minority Mandaean faith, but neither my mother nor my father was particularly devout.

This is not to say that my mother accepted my father's behavior without objection. I often listened to my parents have terrible arguments, and can recall more than

one occasion when my mother found the phone number of one of her husband's mistresses and called the woman up to shame her. But, despite all the deception and conflict, my mother never left my father. One reason is that divorce is simply not allowed or accepted in the Mandaean community. But equally important is the fact that deep down she loved him with a devotion that bordered on obsession, and she was constantly seeking his love and devotion in return. She was prone to melodramatic gestures in pursuit of his attention, like feigning illness. I remember one day as a teenager, I walked into the house to find her lying motionless, sprawled out on the floor. I didn't know if she was dead, or in a coma, or what. But once I checked on her and determined that she was fine, I understood that this was something she had staged for my father's benefit, so she might shock him into reacting to her pretend blackout.

I don't know how much this sort of psychological warfare affected my father, but I do know it didn't inspire him to devote more time and effort to his marriage, and it didn't stop him from seeing other women, often in a manner that was so bold that even my sisters and I could not help but realize the truth of what was happening. I remember one night when my father called my mother to explain that he would be very late returning home because he was called into a meeting with the Minister of Industry himself. Then she hung up the phone and turned on the television, and we all saw that the Minister was, in fact, in London that day. My father had not picked a particularly effective lie, but perhaps he felt that he did not need to, as the secret was more or less an open one anyway. And so my father continued living this hidden life that was not really so hidden, and it was up to the rest of us to either accept it, ignore it, or resent it. It was just the way things were; sometimes he would be at home with his family, but more often

he was away at work, with his women friends, or with his brothers, sisters and parents, whom he always considered to be his true family.

My father's more dangerous secret, and the one that he worked much harder to keep concealed, was the fact that, during most of his years as General Director, he was also working with foreign individuals and companies who wanted to get a foothold into the Iraqi market. Under the Hussein regime, Iraq was officially a planned economy, but there was still quite a bit of capitalism going on, as well as opportunities for profits through government contracts. Traveling through Europe as part of his official duties for the Ministry of Industry, my father was in the unique position to offer assistance to those who were eager to establish businesses and build factories inside Iraq. There was nothing particularly sinister about this sideline job as a "freelance consultant," and in many parts of the world this sort of thing is more or less accepted. But in Iraq in the 1970s, any unauthorized business dealings with outsiders was strictly illegal, and could even be classified as treason. Just having a foreign bank account, like the one my father had, was a capital offense.

Many years later, my sisters and I learned his reason for taking this enormous risk: he was working on the long-term goal of moving our family out of Iraq. By the end of the 1970s, my father had few illusions as to the true nature of the nation's ruling regime, which was becoming bloodier and more oppressive every year. He was determined to get the family someplace safe, and his secret business with foreign companies was the first step. When the time came to leave, it would likely be impossible to take any Iraqi money out of the country, so my father's foreign account would be

essential. To start over in a new place, the family would need cash, so he took any opportunity to earn money outside of Iraq, knowing all the time that he was breaking the law by doing so.

He was of course very careful to keep all of this hidden from the authorities, but in the end he was exposed by the politeness and gratitude of one of his clients. In 1980, a foreign businessman sent a letter to our home, thanking my father for his help in his attempts to do business in Iraq. The letter was intercepted by the Secret Police, my father was immediately arrested and taken away, and all of his plans came crashing down. I was just two years old at the time.

The term “Revolutionary Tribunal” has its origins in the French Revolution and the subsequent Reign of Terror, when political prisoners were tried by ad-hoc juries and often convicted with little or no true evidence. In Iraq, under Ba’ath Party rule, the Revolutionary Tribunal served much the same purpose, acting as a court that essentially did the will of the government to identify and eliminate perceived enemies of the state. It was to this “kangaroo court” that my father was brought in 1980 to face charges of espionage and treason. A guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion, as almost no one faced the Tribunal and walked away free. And given the seriousness of the charges, a guilty verdict meant only one thing: execution.

Despite his enormous wealth and power, Saddam Hussein fashioned himself a “Man of the people,” and as a gesture to his citizens, he allowed ordinary Iraqis to make phone calls to the Presidential Palace every Thursday and ask to speak with the President. Deciding that a direct appeal would be her husband’s best chance at survival, my mother called the number and was, to her surprise, eventually connected to Saddam himself. She

gave an impassioned summary of my father's arrest and detention, and Saddam decided to grant her a personal audience.

My mother is a talented artist who had gained a fair amount of local notoriety and fame in the late 70s, often creating large, impressionistic oil paintings with a distinctly Middle Eastern or even Ancient Babylonian style to them. Her works were quite popular in the Baghdad art scene, and she had been featured in many regional magazines. When she went to the palace to meet with President Hussein, she took one of her best paintings with her and presented it to him as a gift. She also gave him a six or eight page letter that made her case that her husband was a patriot and a loyal worker, not a traitor. Pleading with this all-powerful man, who had discretion to either execute or release my father with a word, my mother told him of all the factories and projects that my father had built for Iraq, how he was instrumental in creating the infrastructure that made it a strong, respected nation. Here was a man, she explained, who had given his sweat and blood for his country and his government: a smart, hardworking man whose skills and knowledge would be needed in the coming years. Saddam was dedicated to the idea of developing Iraq into a regional superpower to offset the strength of Western nations, and the Tribunal had just arrested one of the men who could help him do this, on completely false charges. The charges against him, my mother claimed, must be some sort of huge misunderstanding.

Saddam looked at my mother, and at the unread letter she had put on his desk. After a moment, he responded. In this part of the world, he reminded her, even the rulers are not above justice. If a king makes a mistake, or betrays his people, we cut his head off. The message to my mother was crystal clear: If a king can be beheaded, then to

execute a lesser man, and ordinary man, is nothing. Sensing that her visit had been in vain, my mother reached for the letter on the President's desk, to take it away with her. But he stopped her hand with a gesture. Leave the letter, he said. He would read it, and consider her pleas. My mother returned home with the standard wristwatch that the President gave to all his personal visitors, knowing that the chances that the man would change his mind were slim to none. Then a few days later, we heard the startling news: Saddam had indeed read my mother's impassioned letter, and against all hope and all precedent, my father would be allowed to speak to the Revolutionary Tribunal in his own defense. No one had heard of this before! In Iraq, people accused of crimes against the state were simply not allowed to speak, ever. Now, my father would defend himself. It was an incredibly hopeful sign.

Given this one last lifeline, my father seized it with both hands. Or, more to the point, he seized it with his voice. I have already said that my father was gifted with personal charm; in this case it served him very well. Using the same "silver tongue" and likable charisma that had helped him forge profitable relationships with all those generous foreign businessmen, my father eloquently and categorically denied all the charges against him, and cast himself as a dedicated civil servant who had been wrongfully accused. The Tribunal members, perhaps weighing the extraordinary fact that President Hussein had taken a personal interest in the case, decided to believe him, and they let my father go. He had escaped the blade that had been hanging over his neck, thanks to my mother's letter and his own talent for self-preservation. He left prison after a few months in detention and came home, a free man. He was even allowed to return to his job at the Ministry, as if nothing had happened.

After narrowly escaping death in this manner, one would think my father would have walked the straight and narrow path for the rest of his life. But out of stubbornness, or a sense of individualism, or even perhaps a belief that he was somehow not subject the regime's law, my father once again put himself in mortal peril.

By 1985, five years into the fighting, the war with Iran was having drastic effects on Iraqi society and the economy, and my father, who had always been secretly critical of the Hussein regime, became increasingly discontented with how the country was being run. As the conflict dragged on, more and more money and resources were devoted to the fighting, and my father saw it as a tragic waste. From his position in the Ministry, he could see that there were important projects that were being cancelled or abandoned, and the only thing the war was doing was bringing more death and misery to both sides. Frustrated by the government's singular obsession with the military, he was looking for a way into the private sector. As part of a privately funded plan to import gold into Iraq, he started meeting with an expatriate Syrian man named Abu Rafi, who owned a restaurant in Baghdad. My father didn't care about the restrictions that made this sort of commerce illegal, even though similar activities had, just five year previous, nearly resulted in his execution.

At the same time, my father was becoming more outspoken with his political opinions. He had been criticizing Saddam inside our own house for years, as well as, very carefully and quietly, with other men in the Mandaean community. Even so, we were careful to appear loyal and patriotic to outsiders. Like all other families in Iraq, we complied with the law that required Saddam's official portrait be displayed in our home, and of course we consumed, as did all Iraqis, the constant stream of government



propaganda from the state-run media. But when the TV reporters would make bold boasts predicting an imminent victory over Iran, or when government fabrications about the state of the economy would be reported as fact in the newspaper, my father would often show his skepticism by cracking a joke or making a sarcastic comment. Inside the walls of our house this was normal, but we all knew from a very young age that outside in the street, or in school, this talk was forbidden. Fear of the very real consequences of loose talk forced us to keep our mouths shut, toe the line, and never, ever betray evidence of critical thought. If you had opinions or beliefs that didn't come from the approved government script, you kept them to yourself, because there were spies everywhere. It was the one rule we knew we could never break.

Still, my father's growing disaffection with the ruling Ba'ath party made him increasingly critical, and he became careless about who he chose to voice this criticism to. On a number of occasions, my father invited his new Syrian business partner to our home for dinner, where talk would eventually turn to politics. My mother was uncomfortable with this, as she was not sure that this man could be trusted. She could not help but notice that, for instance, the man often brought gifts of whiskey or other alcoholic drinks to our home, but he himself never touched a drop while he visited. Countries in the Middle East are filled with men who don't drink for reasons of faith, of course, but my mother never saw this man as particularly religious, and suspected he had ulterior motives for avoiding alcohol. In the end, it turned out that her fears were justified. This man was, in reality, a spy for the government, and he remained sober at my family's table so that he could better perform his duties of seeking out, and reporting on, anyone who displayed dissident behavior or anti-Saddam sentiment.

Unaware that his new business partner was a government informant, my father felt free to express his true feelings that the regime was steering Iraq in the wrong direction, and that perhaps someone else should be in power. In Iraq in 1985, this sort of seditious talk was the highest crime imaginable short of actually taking arms against the government, and my father's conversation with this undercover agent had immediate consequences for him and for the rest of his family.

One night not long after my father started talking to this Syrian, the government came for us. I remember distinctly that it was eight o'clock, because my mother was putting me down to bed and I could hear the introductory music for the evening news, which aired at 8pm. A man simply walked in to my bedroom with a pistol in his hand, waved it at my mother and me, and told us to go to the living room. I did not know if this was a robbery, or some kind of kidnapping, or what.

Then we heard a scream of terror come from the next bedroom, where my eleven-year-old sister Tania was sleeping alone. On her bedroom wall, by the door, were two switches. One switch turned on the light, and the other activated a cooling fan, like an air conditioner, inside the wall. The fan had been broken for a long time, so that when the switch was flipped, it made a very sudden and very loud noise. The man who invaded her room did not know which switch activated the lights, and hit the one for the fan instead. So my poor sister was startled awake by a burst of frightening sound, followed immediately by the lights coming on and illuminating a strange man who was pointing a gun at her. It was the very opposite of waking from a bad dream: one second she was peacefully asleep, and then next she had woken up to face a real-life nightmare.

In the living room, my mother, sister, father, grandmother and I were all made to sit silently on the couch. A dozen men with guns surrounded us. These men had no badges; they didn't need them. Their confidence and their weapons marked them as agents of the Secret Police, and their authority was absolute. It was within their rights to do anything they pleased, while my family, now suspected of being traitors, had no rights at all.

A large collection of bags sat on the carpet in front of us, filled with thousands of dinars in cash. To the men, this was clear evidence that my father was engaged in criminal activities. I learned later that the men had very likely brought this cash with them to plant in our house. But they were not content with just the evidence they had brought with them, and soon began searching the house from top to bottom, looking for anything that pointed to a conspiracy against Saddam or his Ba'ath Party regime. They opened every cabinet, they emptied every drawer, they poked in every nook and cranny and cubby in every room of the house, seeking anything and everything that could be construed as the slightest bit incriminating. They even dumped the contents of the refrigerator and the freezer onto the kitchen floor, tearing open every food package to see if it contained hidden illicit items. As the search stretched long into the night, I lay my head down on my mother's lap, trying to sleep and finding that rest would not come as long as my heart pumped with fear.

Anyone willing to search long enough is going to find things that look suspicious, especially when the term "suspicious" covers as much as it did in Iraq at that time. As the policemen found various items, they would bring them to us accusingly, waving them in our faces as clear examples of our disloyalty. My grandmother had a bundle of old

newspapers, relics from Iraq's pre-revolutionary imperial era, when the nation still had a king and royal family. To keep such things, the men claimed, we must be traitors. My mother had a briefcase that held American cash, about four thousand dollars that she had earned by selling her paintings at an art show in Morocco in 1982. This too, in the eyes of the investigators, was a serious offense, and proof that we were up to no good.

During this rather noisy and destructive search, the men were very careful to confiscate anything that had any value. Electronics, jewelry, silverware... it all went into the bags or into their pockets. They even emptied my piggy bank, containing my small collection of the foreign coins and bills that my father had brought back for me as souvenirs of his business trips. Like locusts denuding a wheat field of every last grain, the men took every single item of worth from my house, leaving no pillow or mattress unturned in their greedy digging.

Ironically, our house had been built with various secret compartments, small caches to hide jewels and other valuables from burglars. We had one beneath a bookshelf, and even had a door that was built with a hollow space inside. But my parents never used these little safes. They were empty, and everything that the searchers found was more or less unconcealed. I'm not sure why my parents were not more careful about hiding these things. It may have been because my father's status as a government employee left us feeling privileged in ways that others weren't, or that my father's previous escape from death gave him the idea that he was somehow "untouchable." Whatever the reason, they left these secret hiding places empty, so when the secret police sprung their raid, they didn't have much trouble finding contraband.

When the searching and looting was finally over, the men led us from the house and put us into cars. My father went alone into the lead car, and my mother, grandmother, sister, and I went into the rear car. As we rode in terrified silence through the dark streets, the car in front kept stopping every ten minutes or so, and we would see someone get out, and then a minute later, get back in. It was my father, whose fear was so intense and so physical that his driver was forced to constantly let him out to relieve his bladder. There were other stops, too, as the secret policemen visited homes of people my father knew, rounding them up as witnesses to my father's activities or as co-conspirators in his alleged crimes. Looking for enemies, the men were dragging a very wide net, and anyone who was in regular contact with my father was automatically a suspect.

This small, silent motorcade eventually drove us to a part of the city far from our neighborhood, to an unmarked secret police building. We were soon locked inside a windowless room: four bare walls and an empty tile floor, with no furniture aside from a small desk. After a few minutes, men took my father away to an adjacent room for questioning.

My mother, who was pregnant at the time, held on to me and my sister. She was clearly very frightened, but this alone was not enough to convince my sister and I that the situation was grave. Our mother was naturally worried and anxious, always scared of the smallest thing, so Tania and I had seen her in this state many times, often in circumstances that turned out to be less than dire. Rather, it was my grandmother's reaction that let me know that we were in a very bad place that night. A strong, resilient woman, she was visibly shaken by what was going on, and seeing the look of fear in her eyes immediately confirmed the serious nature of our plight. Yet despite this, I don't

remember feeling hopeless or terrified in that room, and I certainly didn't think I was going to die that night. It's difficult to explain my rationale, my assumption that everything would eventually be okay, but I remember feeling as if an invisible shield was somehow protecting me. It may be that most children feel somehow invincible, or it could be that my mind somehow found a way to detach from the immediate threat of the situation so as not to succumb to despair. But one way or another, the events in that holding cell presented themselves like something out of a bad dream, one that would surely end as soon as I opened my eyes. Lost in such thoughts, I eventually fell asleep on the floor, with my sister Tania beside me.

As we slept, the sound of shouting came through the walls from the next room. My mother could hear angry, forceful questions, even if she could not always make out the words themselves. The men were interrogating my father, surely demanding he spill the details of some vast, imagined conspiracy against Iraq, or warning him to give up the names of his compatriots in his efforts to undermine the government. It is possible that all this shouting was at least partially meant for the family's ears, perhaps to inspire my mother to break down and confess something she knew. There is little doubt that it wasn't the last time my father was interrogated. Although he never spoke of it to me, I am certain that far harsher questioning went on later, far from the ears of witnesses.

Eventually, after we had sweated it out for perhaps 16 hours in our gloomy cell, a man came in to the room and told me, my mother, my sister, and my grandmother that we would be allowed to leave. My father would have to stay some time longer, but we would at least be allowed to see him for a quick goodbye.

I was only seven years old, but I still knew without being told that my father would not be following us home later that night, or any night in the near future. Growing up in a totalitarian state forces you to be politically aware at a very young age. From as far back as I could remember, I had listened to my parents and their friends, who were all educated and thoughtful people, sit at the dinner table discussing and debating the policies and actions of the government, and I understood that the things they said were very different from what my school teachers were required to teach us about our leaders. So I knew a little something of how things really worked in my country, and I was not naive enough to think that my father might be let go with a stern warning, or be asked to pay a fine and then be released. I had heard the story of his earlier arrest and detention, and understood that he had avoided execution only thanks to a series of small miracles and extraordinary events. I could also tell that, this time around, the things he was accused of were just as serious as then, if not more so. So all this added up to a very clear realization in my seven-year-old mind: this might be the last time I would see my father for a long, long time.

And yet when we were finally allowed to see him that day, I heard myself asking him if he would be coming home with us. I already knew what the answer would be, but I asked him anyway. Perhaps I simply wanted to hear his voice, and this was the only thing I could think of to ask, or maybe it was just my way of letting him know that I cared about him and wanted him to come back. For his part, he tried his best to reassure me, explaining that he would be home safe and sound just a few hours after the rest of us. Of course, this was a comforting lie, told by a man wishing to give his son some measure of

hope, if only for one night. The harsher truth was that this brief moment would be the last time I saw my father, or even had any substantial news of him, for over a year.

Many months later, the government got around to officially sentencing my father. They informed my mother that they had audiotapes of him speaking negatively about the government, and that was all they needed to condemn him to 25 years in prison. I don't even know if there were specific charges; perhaps he was imprisoned partially for his efforts to import gold without proper permission to do so, or maybe his recorded anti-government statements were all that his accusers considered.

It may be difficult for people who grew up in nations with a tradition of free speech and free thought to understand this, but in Iraq in the 1980s, criticism of the rulers was in and of itself a crime. On top of this, the entire system of law, from the police on the street to the judges in courtrooms, was simply an extension of the ruling Ba'ath party, a political tool to serve the interests of the President and those in his favor. Civilians were granted no power, given no rights, and had nowhere to turn for legitimate justice. At the top, power and authority was ultimate, and at the bottom it was nonexistent.

The months that followed my father's imprisonment were more than difficult; they were hellish. The police had seized all of our money and nearly all of our possessions, and my mother had no work and no income. Without the help of my maternal grandmother, we would have starved. She had a small inheritance from when her husband died, and she spent this money to keep us clothed and fed.

My grandmother "Bibi," Aziza AlBadi, is a strong and fascinating woman. When she was just 16 or 17, she was pulled out of school and forced into a marriage with a man 20 years her elder. An army veteran with the rank of colonel, he was a very strict



taskmaster who managed his household like a military base, requiring his children to keep to an unbending schedule of eating and sleeping and ruling his wife as he would a subordinate in the ranks. Yet despite the fact that my grandfather kept her subjugated and subservient, my grandmother was no shrinking violet. Sharp and resourceful, she was also very thoughtful and politically wise. Ba'ath party agents had assassinated her brother in the 1950s because of his ties to the Communist Party, and this left her with a permanent mistrust of the government and a general awareness that many Iraqis did not have. She and I shared a ritual every morning as I prepared to go to school: she would turn on the radio and tune in to the Voice of America, the station that the US government operates all over the world, broadcasting in many dozens of languages. Together we would sit and listen as the announcers gave us the “real” news of the war with Iran, telling us the facts and offering analysis that the Iraqi state media would not report.

Back in the days when my mom still worked, up to about 1984, my sister and I spent much of our free time at our grandmother's house. We passed many happy hours in her vegetable garden, planting and picking tomatoes, cucumbers and potatoes as she taught us the secrets of having a “green thumb.” She also kept chickens that I would feed and chase around the yard, and during Mandaean holy days there was often a sheep living there as well. One of the most popular holidays in the Mandaean faith is The Eid, a celebration roughly equivalent to Christmas, when we honor the day that god created heaven and earth. Leading up to the big day, I would always befriend the sheep that my grandma kept in the garden, feeding and naming them. I always felt sad and a little bit empty when these almost-pets were eventually slaughtered for the ceremonial sacrifice and traditional holiday dinner.

After my grandfather passed away from Alzheimer's in 1984, my grandmother moved in with us, which is why she was there on the night my father was arrested. After we returned to our wrecked and ransacked house, she used some of her money to buy us replacement furniture, and to help cover the monthly expenses and bills. She also became a replacement parent to my sister and me and provided much needed emotional support for my mother, who was devastated by my father's arrest and detention. This all despite the fact that my grandmother had lost her own husband just two years before, and was still wearing the black garb of mourning every day. In fact, she wore black every single day for a full decade before putting on another color, but her grief never once took away from her strength. This was a woman, who, while under arrest and being held in a secret police interrogation house, was bold enough to ask for her confiscated jewelry back! Amazingly, the agents agreed to give the items back to her, even as they kept everything belonging to my mother and father.

In the late summer of 1986, we were finally allowed to visit my father at Abu Ghraib, the infamous prison to the west of Baghdad. But as difficult as it was to secure government permission for the visit, it was almost as hard to find transportation to the prison site. Many years previous, my mother had driven her car into a neighbor's fence while dizzy from a particularly strong pain medication, and as a result, she had stopped driving. My father's family had a car, although they were unreliable people and were rarely willing to help us out or spend time with us. In fact, they had already been to see my father, and had not even bothered to tell us they were going! On this particular day, however, my normally combative aunt agreed, after much begging and cajoling, to give us a ride to the prison.

In July and August, Iraq becomes almost unbearably hot, with daytime temperatures as high as 50 degrees celsius (122 Fahrenheit). On this very bright and sunny day, I was packed into my aunt's car with my mother and two sisters, with the rolled-down windows letting in a rush of warm, dry desert air that did little to relieve the sweltering heat. We were all sweating and suffering as if we were slowly roasting inside an oven, and yet our spirits were high, because we were going to see our father for the first time in more than nine months.

Abu Ghraib is a vast, sprawling complex. Built by British contractors in the 1960s, the forbidding, fortress-like compound was more than just a jail; It was a black hole of terror, a place where human rights did not exist, and where Saddam Hussein's political enemies disappeared to be tortured, starved to death, or murdered. In Iraq in the 1980s, the prison was something that people whispered about, like they were talking about hell itself, as if open discussion of it might bring some curse of bad luck that would land the speaker in that very place we all dreaded most. For the government, it was an effective tool of fear: stay in line and don't challenge us, or you know exactly where you will end up.

We parked the car on the outskirts of the complex, made our way past the first checkpoint, and still had to walk for another 20 minutes to get to the building where my father was being held. Dozens of people walked with us, some wearing suits or Western clothes, others in traditional Arab attire. Old and young women wearing abayas carried pots and pans of homemade food that they had prepared for their imprisoned husbands, fathers, or friends. Others brought small grocery bags with a few necessities like soap,

toothpaste and cigarettes, knowing that even if the prisoners could not use them, they might be able to trade them for other things they needed to survive.

The room where my father lived and slept was a single enormous space, like a warehouse, filled with row upon row of utilitarian steel bunk beds, perhaps a hundred or more in total, with my father's bunk somewhere near the middle of the group. When we found him, he gave us warm hugs, and took my baby sister Tamara in his arms for the very first time. He looked very thin and tired, and seemed to have grown a decade older in his year of being confined here. Much later I learned that all of the prisoners were required to give blood, more than a liter every two months, to supply the soldiers fighting on the front lines of the Iranian war. When added to the scarce and poor prison food, the sub-standard sanitation, and the unimaginable stress of daily living inside this house of horrors, the result was that my father, like most of the prisoners there, was clearly malnourished, weak, and generally in very bad health.

Outside of my father's building was a concrete-floored courtyard, open to the sky save for some large, ragged squares of fabric stretched between the high walls to provide some blessed shade from the midday sun. The effect was of a gigantic tent, with dusty rugs and carpets scattered about for people to rest on. My father sat down on one of these rugs and took me into his lap. I recall vividly what happened next. I had some loose skin peeling from the tender flesh around my fingernails, the sort of thing you might absentmindedly play with but mostly leave alone because of the stinging pain. Without warning, my father simply reached down, grabbed this flap of skin, and pulled it off, like he was ripping off a band-aid. I don't know what compelled him to do this, but the shock and pain were nearly unbearable, and I felt the tears instantly spring to my eyes. Yet I bit

my tongue and forced myself not to cry, for fear of upsetting my father or spoiling this all-too-brief time with his family. Looking back, it seems ridiculous that I thought I might upset my father that day, given the nightmares he was enduring on a daily basis.

He pointed to a nearby building, explaining that this was where they kept the prisoners who were scheduled for execution. Most of them were Shia Muslims, members of the majority Dawa party that the ruling minority Ba'ath Party kept repressed and subjugated in order to maintain control of the country. These men were accused of being allied with Iran, and of plotting the attempted assassination of Saddam in Alwja in 1982. I listened quietly as my father explained that, every Wednesday, guards would circulate among the prisoners and, seemingly at random, choose the ones who would die that day. The detainees would usually remain totally silent on this day, watching hat they all called "The harvesting."

After we said our tearful goodbyes and left my father at the prison, we made the long, hot walk back to the car as if we were zombies, or shell-shocked soldiers. The hellacious conditions of the prison were almost too much to bear speaking of, and we walked in silence. We didn't do very much talking on the drive home, either. There wasn't much we could say... it was all too overwhelming.

My father spent a total of two and a half years away from us, with nearly two whole years spent in Abu Ghirab. When he was finally released in mid 1987, it was, as before, thanks to my mother's efforts. She did not talk to me or my sister very much about our father during the long months that he was in prison, but I know that she never stopped thinking about him, and about the idea of getting him back... for herself, and for the family. Despite her nervous anxiety and her fearful nature, my mother was a dreamer

and an optimist, and she was also quite determined and persistent once she set her mind to a task. Because of this, Tania and I were quite confident that she would succeed in getting our father released.

The first time my father had been arrested, a direct appeal to Saddam Hussein had succeeded in freeing him. So my mother decided to try the same tactic again, but this time she wanted me to be the one to call the palace on the telephone. I was eight years old and very shy, and I begged my mother not to make me do it. But she was convinced that a young boy stood a better chance of being connected through to the President, and so I eventually gave in. Hesitant and a little embarrassed, I dialed the number she gave me, and asked to speak with “Uncle Saddam,” as my mom had coached me. But unbeknownst to us, the government had long since ended the “Thursday phone call” program, and the number my mother had dug up didn’t even connect to the palace. In fact, it was an anonymous government employee in some unknown department who answered the phone, only to be utterly confused and mystified by a little boy’s request to speak to the supreme leader of Iraq.

Still, my mother was undeterred. If she could not reach the President by phone, she would simply find another way. As she had in 1980, she decided she would use her natural artistic talent to get a foot in the palace door. This time she would time her offering to coincide with the President’s birthday, which was a national holiday and a day of celebration when many Iraqis sent their leader gifts. Saddam also had a reputation, whether real or imagined, of becoming very magnanimous at this time of year, and many Iraqis felt that the good mood he felt around his birthday made him generous, or at least more approachable, than he was at other times. One of his favorite ways to celebrate, by

the way, was to give gifts to Iraqi children who shared his birthday of the 28th of April.

As a kid, this always annoyed me, since my own birthday is May 3rd, and I always felt it particularly frustrating you miss out on this bounty by only a few days.

My mother knew that if she was going to make an impression, her gift to the dictator would have stand out among all the other presents he would be receiving from his subjects. With the era of the Thursday telephone calls over, it would be her painting alone that would, if she was lucky, reach the Presidential palace and the man himself. She needed it to be spectacular. Rather than give Saddam one of her existing pieces of artwork, she would paint something new, just for him. And so my mother chose a very large canvas, took out her paints and brushes, and set to work on her plan to once again spring my father from prison.

1987 was the year of the Palestinian Intifada against Israel, and the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians was a subject of great concern to Saddam. In return, many Palestinians, including PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, revered and respected the Iraqi President as a strong and proud leader willing to stand up to the West. And if nothing else, Palestinians and Iraqis were united by their mutual hatred of Israel, which had bombed an Iraqi nuclear plant in 1981 and was seen as an enemy by nearly all nations in the Middle East. With all this in mind, my mother decided that the theme of her painting would be the suffering of Palestinian children at the hands of the Israelis. She painted a tragic, almost haunting image of a young Palestinian girl as viewed from behind, wearing a traditional Muslim hijab head scarf, and looking out at the smoking remains of a burned, utterly destroyed city.

My mother had made a smart and politically informed choice for her painting's subject matter, knowing that it would appeal to Saddam's vanity and interests, but one of our neighbors, upon seeing the finished painting, actually thought that it was too powerful and inflammatory an image. He joked that if she were to give this to Saddam, his fury at Israel might grow so strong that he would decide to bomb Israeli cities with SCUD missiles! In fact, Saddam did exactly this just a few years later, and although it's very unlikely that my mother's artwork played a part in his decision, the oil painting did exactly what my mother wanted: it got the President's attention and gained her a private audience with him.

Meeting with Saddam, my mother again pleaded for her husband's life, and for his release. For her, this was familiar territory, as she had been in this precise position seven years before. But as she begged Saddam for his mercy, she got the sense that he had no recollection of the previous situation; he did not remember her or my father. As a dictator with unlimited power, he had doubtless seen thousands of people in these very circumstances, desperately asking for something only a man of his influence could give them. But as my mother wept, he once again took pity, telling her that he did not like to see tears on the faces of Iraqi women. He listened politely as my mother explained my father's case, then picked up his phone and asked to see the relevant files. My mother thanked him, and left, once again taking with her Saddam's parting gift of a gold watch with his own picture on the face. For the next six months, we heard nothing.

Then one day in the spring of 1988, my mother received a phone call from the director of the prison. He told her that on the next Tuesday, her husband would be having lunch with his family at home. It was his melodramatic way of informing her that my



father was going to be freed in less than a week: an order for his release had arrived from the Presidential Palace. All at once, we felt stunned, relieved and elated. My mother and grandmother immediately enlisted the whole neighborhood to start the preparations for a major celebration and feast to welcome my father home. The party was a joyous day for us all, but of course the happiest person there was my father, who had, in a society that offers very few second chances, somehow managed to secure an amazing *third* chance at life.

The strangest part of having my father back at the house was the fact that my younger sister Tamara, who had been borne while he was away, had no idea who he was or why he was suddenly living in our house. For many weeks, she called him “Uncle,” which was a little bit funny and a little bit disturbing.

My father did not return to his position in the Ministry of Industry; instead he started a small import/export business. But he did go back to his old life in other respects, going on dates with his female friend and gradually spending more and more time away from his wife and children. His hair was whiter than before, and much of his strength was gone. He was older and more tired. His years in prison had not broken him, but they had clearly worn him down considerably. His feelings towards his wife were more complicated than ever. What should have been pure love and gratitude for securing his release from prison was mixed with large amounts of resentment. As a man who always strived to control his won destiny, he could not stand the idea that he owed my mother his very life twice over. It was a debt he could never possibly repay, and it was a subject that would never truly go away, the proverbial “elephant in the room” that he could not talk about, but could not forget.

My father's relationship with me had changed as well. He had always held me at arm's length, but now he was even more distant and uncommunicative than ever before. What little warmth there had been between us, it seemed, was extinguished during the long months in Abu Ghraib.