

Marin Independent Journal

BAGHDAD DAIRIES

by Karen Day

February 10th, 2003

Mr Aldouri, the head of the Iraqi Interests Bureau, in DC called. My visa has come through today. He advises me to leave as soon as possible, tomorrow would be best, even though it is Hajj, and I'll be sharing my trip to Amman Jordan with two million travellers on their way to Mecca. He is concerned, and asks if I still intend to go. When I applied for the visa six weeks ago, they were getting 200 requests a week for journalists to go to Baghdad. Now, even the network crews are being cut in half. I tell him I won't be able to live with myself if I don't take this opportunity. I immediately call my editor at Oprah magazine who informs me, "A month ago, maybe, but it's too late. Our publication machine grinds too slowly to take advantage of any insights or war coverage." So I pay my own way, maximum price for a last minute ticket, and assuage my guilt by promising myself I'll pitch the story when I get back. Who needs a summer vacation when you're saving the world? I have six articles under 30-day deadline and one due tomorrow. Stay up all night, writing about my trip to Afghanistan. Thank, God, for people like Zainab Salbi. What a gift. Her work- everyone at Women for Women, allows me to write about hope in the midst of chaos and suffering and the piles of dirty laundry I'm leaving behind. Remembering how a library card got me past more than a few bemused third-world guards in Kabul., I design an "International Press Corps Pass" on the computer and go to Kinko's to laminate it at 2 am . I hang it around my neck, plastic signage that looks impressive enough to get me into Saddam's Palace—unless he lacks a sense of humor and checks the small print, where I have plagiarized the US dollar and "The Wizard of Oz" by inserting "E Pluribus Unum" above the official-looking fake stamp. I fall asleep wondering if anyone in Iraq has been executed for impersonating irony.

The sun rises, violently pink and orange, while I pack. Bo has news talk today. I make his lunch as he cuts out an article where Bush declares war is inevitable. Bo announces he'll tell his fifth-grade class that his mom is on her way to stop the war. I suggest he take a more realistic approach. With ten-year-old matter-of-fact optimism, he says, "Lighten-up, mom. It could happen." As I am walking out the door, my husband of nineteen years hugs me then hands me a sheet of paper, which he asks me to please sign—"now." Though we have met with collaborative attorneys only once regarding our "amicable" divorce, he has taken "the liberty" to have it finalised before I go to Baghdad "Just in case." I remark dryly that "custody and debt allocation seem moot points if I'm dead" He doesn't say anything— as usual, which is one of the reasons I don't mind signing.

February 11th, 2003 (morning)

Arrive Amman Jordan 11:30 am—I have lost a full day of my life according to Pacific Standard time. Royal Jordanian provides a free hotel room—I immediately love this place—when they inform me the plane to Baghdad has been cancelled and rescheduled for tomorrow. American controls the "NO-FLY" zone where we will fly and it's closed today. I ask if the Americans have been informed that we're flying tomorrow? Every hour on very TV in America you see our

troops, 100,000 and swelling on the Kuwait border with cocked triggers and nothing to do but scan the endless desert skies for errant Iraqi planes. I ask again if the Americans have given us permission to fly tomorrow. The man behind the counter laughs and says it's not the first time he has heard this joke.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, Mr Aldouri in DC told me to pick up my visa at the Iraqi Embassy in Amman. When I call, a man with a hacking cough answers and assures me they are closed until Hajj is over—on Saturday. “But you are there,” I say. “But we are closed” he says. I am instantly reminded of “The Wizard of Oz.” and therefore, grab my “press credentials” and a taxi and go bang on the door. Being a woman, I will sit on steps and cry if necessary, but a man who speaks perfect English with a cigarette dangling from his mouth lets me in before I must resort to emotional manipulation. Two Japanese press people are already standing at his desk, arguing why they need their visas. They arrived from Okinawa four days ago, they remind the man who is now lighting a new cigarette from the one dwindling between his lips. He nods and shrugs as if he doesn't understand their broken English. The one who does all the talking, the girl, yanks out the tiniest cell phone I even seen and waves it in his face. Her “Little Kitty” pink parka and matching lipstick make her look about as menacing as a Nickelodeon anchorwoman with a toy gun. “That's it! We are here to film for peace! I call Japanese Ambassador!” She stomps into the next room and her silent buddy, the camera guy or low-on-testosterone boyfriend (or both) skulks after her.

I shrug, smile and hand my letter from DC to Mr Chainsmoker, who reads it and says “We are closed until Saturday.” “Mr Aldouri in D.C said you would be open for ME.” At that moment, just like in bad B-movies, the phone on his desk rings and a lot of nodding and Arabic ensues in a haze of rising cigarette smoke. He hangs up and tells me to leave “quietly,” pointing out back to a big house with a sign that says “CONSUL.” I smile for the cameras I have failed to see.

The consul is a handsome man, sixtyish, white-haired and pipe-smoking with a hacking cough that sounds suspiciously like the first guy on the phone to tell me the embassy was closed. I immediately ask if he's married, not for a date, but to see if he has a wife who should be hiding his tobacco. He says his family is in Baghdad. He can't sleep at night. “War in inevitable,” he sighs. “Only a miracle could stop Bush now.” “Enshala,” I say, which is the only Arabic word I know and the only one I can think of after hearing our President's name and the word “miracle” used in the same sentence— by an Arab! It means “God willing.” The consul stamps my visa, coughing.

On the way out, a young man is weeping in the reception room. I go back and tell the consul, ask if I might help in anyway. He says the man's 7-year-old son was playing football yesterday and fell backwards through a plate glass window and eight stories to his death. They are taking his body back to Baghdad on my plane. The consul introduces me and says I am an AMERICAN journalist covering “the war.” The man eyes me silently, then suggests that I should write his son was the “first causality of the war.” They had recently fled Baghdad and moved to Amman to **avoid** the bombs. I flinch. He asks what magazines I work for and I name a few, suffering his abject stare, until I mention Oprah. Wiping his face, he mentions his cousin appeared on Oprah. “Do you know Zainab Salbi?” he asks. “She is my cousin.” I begin to cry too.

Later that day, I watch the small white coffin being loaded onto the plane from my window seat on the plane. We take off for Baghdad. In all my life, I have never felt so lost.

February 11th, 2003 (3:00 pm)

The plane was near empty, but the airport is packed with officials wearing cheap, dark suits and police wearing rifles. The consul apologized that a “minder” (what WE call secret service agent) from the government Press Center will not meet me because it’s Hajj. I believe this is a good thing until an affable man herds me into a small room with weak fluorescent lighting and asks for all my electronic equipment. He speaks English until I ask him why. I’m prepared to fight for my four cameras, laptop, cell phone and array of batteries, but don’t fancy going to jail my first night in Baghdad. Instead, we sit and sit while he tells me increasingly bad Bush jokes. I’m hungry and suffering PMS so I practically tackle the six-foot-five British journalist who strides in with a loud laugh, a wad of cash and hugs for the “official” guy. “How much do I need to give him?” I ask. The Brit surveys my pile of equipment—“sixty bucks.” I hand over the money, which the “official” insists must be US dollars and walk out with everything. A woman from New York (and my plane) offers me a ride to the El Fanar Hotel. I noticed she was crying when the plane landed, but didn’t ask why. She said she had seen me crying when the coffin was being load on the airplane. Iraq is beginning to feel synonymous with grief to me. I take out the picture of my kids and have to smile. Some days, in Afghanistan, I performed this little ritual five times a day.

The hotel is a smallish place and temporary home of Rob Collier, a SF Chronicle journalist, who has been on assignment in the Middle East for three months and e-mailing me throughout. I’m told Rob left the country a week ago. “Perfect?” asks Kaled, the man at the counter who seems to know only three words of English. “Perfect.” I say, shaking my head.

*****I’ll spare you a few excerpts

February 12th, 2003

My driver takes me across town to meet Dr. Al Hashimi at his run-down offices of the Organisation for Peace, Friendship and Solidarity. He was previously minister of Higher Education and Ambassador to France, and is an adviser to Saddam Hussein. Those of us who make a living in human suffering stick together. Therefore, I have been preceded by a personal reference via e-mail from two people I have never met. Scilla Ellworthy, from the Oxford Research Project for Peace, and Dennis Haliday, former Assistant Secretary General of the UN who resigned in protest at the genocide caused by the UN sanctions, when he was director of the Oil-for Food program in 1998. I request meetings from.

Dr. Hashimi with Tariq Aziz (Deputy Prime Minister); Dr Huda Ammash, the most senior woman official in the regime; a visit to a girls’ high school, a hospital, women in their homes, and Amariya, the bomb shelter hit on 13.2.91.

Dr. Al-Hashimi says he will do his best. He’s a sad and very angry man, profoundly attached to rhetoric. He talked at length about the effects of the US/UK using depleted uranium shells (Hoon, UK defence minister, has apparently admitted to Parliament using 50 shells; Dr. Al-Hashimi says 130 **tons** were dropped) Somewhere in the middle of all the propaganda and lies, the Iraqi people are living dying with the real truth of radiation poisoning. The particles are spreading by wind and water but they can’t check in which direction because not allowed the

airborne radiation detection equipment. Rates of cancer have increased catastrophically, and now they're getting a spate of birth defects. I think of Bo's news talk article, where Bush promised to hit Baghdad with more firepower in the first three days than they used in the entire Gulf War. I look out the window and wish I could take out the kids picture while Dr Hashmini rambles on. When medical equipment is sent to Iraq, he says, the US and UK insist on the computers that run the machines being taken out, so they lie useless. On inspections; When Blair announced his 'dossier' in September on WMD in Iraq, they invited him to send British inspectors to wherever he said the weapons were. He didn't reply. Two weeks ago they invited the CIA to take inspectors to wherever they say the weapons are, and they declined. He asks me what I think is going to happen. I remind him that I'm an American and arrogant by birth. Why not believe in the impossible?

We conclude with some Iraqi Bush jokes. Three leaders caught by guerrillas in South America and lined up before a firing squad. First leader shouts "Earthquake!" and in the ensuing chaos he gets away. Second leader shouts "Hurricane!" and in the ensuing chaos gets away. Then it comes to Bush, left alone before the firing squad. He shouts "Fire!". Nobody will tell me any Saddam jokes. I bet they've got them though.

Let me know if you want to see more—they go on and on.