

# Life Goes On

**Dahlia Wasfi**

*"It is better to die standing  
than to live on your knees."*

*- Ernesto "Che" Guevara*

"Dahlia, come here," my father called.

I was upstairs in my parents' house, during the winter break of my sophomore year at Swarthmore College. On the East Coast it was 5 p.m., Jan. 16, 1991. In Iraq – my father's birthplace and homeland of my paternal family – it was 1 a.m., Jan. 17. I went to the balcony overlooking the family room.

"They started bombing," he said.

Fear and sadness came over me because my relatives were among the millions of Iraqis who had no say in their government's actions, but would pay dearly at the hands of the most powerful military force in the world. Once the initial shock of the news passed, I found myself nervously humming. I soon realized the song was R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It." And it was.

My father was born in Basrah, Iraq. He earned a government scholarship to study in the United States and completed graduate work at Georgetown University. While in DC, he met and married my mom, a nice Jewish girl from New York. Her parents had fled their Austrian homeland during Hitler's Anschluss, emigrating to the United States. Was it love at first sight? I don't know, but my sister was born in 1969, and I arrived in 1971. To pay back his scholarship, my father taught

at Basrah University from 1972 to 1977; thus, my early childhood was in both Iraq and the United States. For me, the bombing of Basrah was equivalent to bombing Yonkers.

Upon returning to campus for the spring semester, I was dumbstruck by the pro-war atmosphere. Sports teams sewed American flags onto their uniforms. More flags and pro-military banners hung from Parrish Hall. What was going on? Why didn't the best and brightest understand that war is unacceptable, no matter who is directing the tanks? Why was the anti-war sentiment drowned out at this "liberal" institution? I condemned the hypocrisy of militancy on a campus that purported to reflect Quaker traditions. But the hypocrisy I truly despised was within me, for I was continuing my life, business as usual, while bombs rained down on my family.

Although more than 100,000 Iraqis perished during the 42 days of Gulf War I, my blood relatives survived. The worst was yet to come, however, because our aerial assaults had purposely targeted Iraq's electricity plants, telecommunication centers, and water treatment facilities. In a matter of days, life became desperate. There was no potable water; no electricity; and, with draconian economic sanctions in place, no means of rebuilding. And it was summer: heat of 115 to 140 degrees as well as

humidity, with neither fans nor air-conditioning. I knew I had many relatives suffering under these conditions. But I had only faint memories of aunts and uncles, and most of my cousins were born after we left in 1977. I condemned the hypocrisy of my government for starving the Iraqi people while claiming to punish Saddam Hussein. But the hypocrisy I despised was within me. I continued my life, business as usual, graduating in 1993, and moving on to medical school, with a sadness I couldn't explain.

After medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, I began a surgical residency, first at the University of Maryland, then back at Penn. After 3 grueling years – unconscious of the contradiction fueling my unhappiness from within – I believed that changing fields would bring me contentment. I switched to a training program in anesthesiology at Georgetown University Hospital, where I began working in June 2000. My experiences there would be the final straw.

Most residencies are abusive, and this one was no different. But the environment became even more hostile following Sept. 11, 2001.

"I don't want to operate on any Middle Eastern people," one attending physician said.

"We should blow up the countries of each of the hijackers," another said.

These were my supervisors – medical professionals who had taken the Hippocratic oath. But I continued to work under them, business as usual.

By early 2002, we had invaded Afghanistan, and our administration was telling lies to build support for invading Iraq. My relatives, from whom I was still separated, had been starving under sanctions for more than 12 years. Now, we were going to shock and awe them. My tax dollars would help foot the bill. "We should just nuke 'em," my attending physician said.

In September 2002, overwhelmed by the hypocrisy without and the painful conflict within, I couldn't

continue business as usual. I burned out. I was hospitalized.

From that time on, there was no room for anything but honesty in my life. After rest and recuperation, I understood what my heart had been saying for years. I needed to know my family.

In February 2004, I made a 19-day journey to Iraq. I flew to Jordan and made the 10-hour car ride to Baghdad, whose airport was (and is) controlled by our military. In Iraq's capital, a year after the invasion, damage from bombing raids was omnipresent. Iraq had been liberated from electricity, security, and potable water. "Democracy" meant sewage in the streets, rolling blackouts, shooting, and explosions. Basrah was much the same, except that the damage appeared to be more extensive; this city had been destroyed during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf wars, and sanctions and neglect had thwarted rebuilding.

Despite the desperation, the novelty of a visit from an American cousin brought us all joy. Getting to know each other for the first time, my cousins and I were like little kids, giggling and joking, whether the electricity was working or not. My stay was short because of the unpredictability of a country without law and order. I had to return to Amman via Baghdad to make my flight home, but I promised my cousins I would return for a longer stay soon, we hoped, when things were better.

But conditions continued to deteriorate. Electricity and water became scarcer, as did jobs. Then, the horrors of Abu Ghraib came to light. Then, came the April 2004 siege, October 2004 assault, and November 2004 massacre in Fallujah. At that point, fearing for my safety amid the widespread anti-American sentiment, my family said, "Don't come." But after another year, with no end to the chaos in sight, we decided I would visit again, before the situation worsened.

On December 11, 2005, because the road from Amman to Baghdad was now exceedingly dangerous, I planned to fly to Kuwait and take a taxi to the border. However, elections were only

days away, and Iraq had so much freedom that occupation forces had to close the borders to contain it. I arrived in Kuwait City on Christmas morning, and although the landscape was clear on the drive to the border, Iraq's road to Basrah was still littered with bombed-out civilian cars and tanks.

On my first day in Basrah, we lost electricity completely. On the second day, we lost water. On the third day, we lost telephone service. "I think tomorrow, we lose air," one cousin said. Despite suffering the hardships of war and occupation their entire lives, my cousins still have a sense of humor. "Do you have electricity in the United States? Can you drink water from the sink without throwing up?" Iraq was a First-World country reduced to Third-World status by American foreign policy. But upon seeing "advancements" like Pepto-Bismol and space-saver travel bags, another cousin said, "I'm in the 15th World!"

Electrical service is now so poor that most families own a generator (which requires gasoline). Water must be pumped to most homes from a reservoir, so when the electricity cuts out, so does water. In one phone conversation, my mom tried to distract me from this ridiculousness with news that basketball star Kobe Bryant scored 81 points in a game. "I don't care! There's no water!" I responded, with little calm. Even when available, this water is not potable. RO (reverse osmosis) stations exist around the city, where drinkable water can be purchased. Although it won't make you sick, this water is hard, with a metallic taste, and probably contaminated with depleted uranium. My cousins rely on bottled water for their young children, predominantly imported from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Speaking of children, epidurals for childbirth are simply not available in Iraq, and many women choose to deliver at home because the hospitals are dirty. Life goes on in the hope that, one day, circumstances will improve. For now, however, they struggle. One cousin with an economics degree changes oil. Another with a degree in education stays at home. Still another with a biology degree is considering joining the police force.

Iraq is a country that my tax dollars have helped

to destroy. Government officials reap profits from war. For example, nine out of thirty members of the Defense Policy Board, a Pentagon advisory group, had ties to companies that won more than \$70 billion in defense contracts in 2001 and 2002. Meanwhile, ordinary families pay the price, from Iraq to Palestine to Southeast Asia to Latin America to the United States. My life has directed me to know my family; I would do anything for them. My medical career is on hold, so I can speak out on the realities of war and occupation. I have family in Iraq. You have family in Iraq. And Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Arlington Cemetery. New Orleans. Planet Earth.

What would you do for your family? What will you do?

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