IRAQ

ARE THERE ANY TEARS LEFT?

FELICITY ARBUTHNOT

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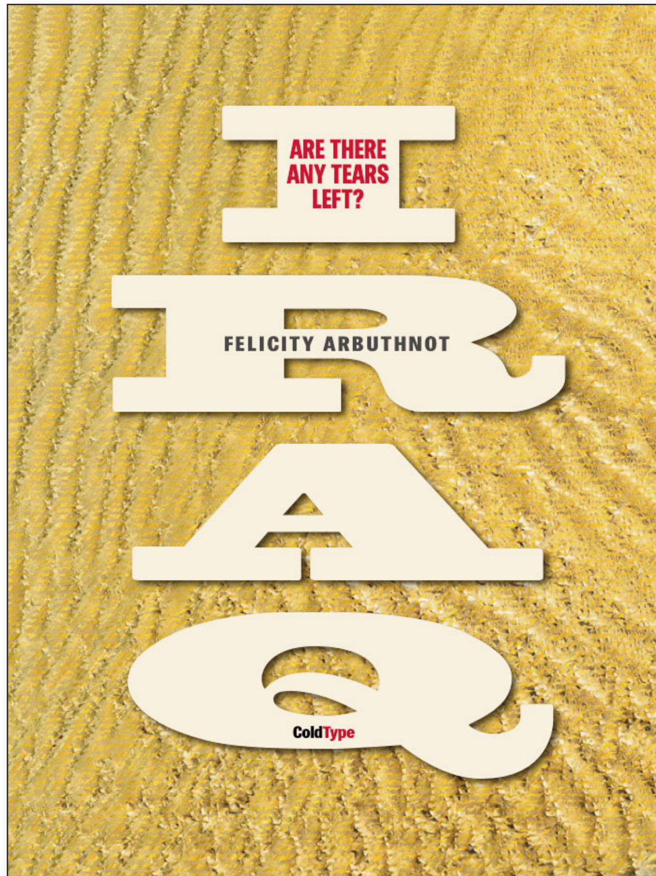

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IN the Inquisition-scale horrors inflicted upon Iraq over the past five years, the ghosts of the Western-imposed human cull of the previous 13 years flicker briefly in the light of yet another atrocity. But they always return – as they must – in a sight, a scent, a phrase or a phone call, reminders of the overwhelming sins of those in high places, as our 'leaders' in Washington and Whitehall bleat about their infantile 'war on terror' and 'rogue states'.

In reality, the 'terror' and the 'rogues' are closer to home: by the Potomac and at the Dispatch Box of the 'Mother of Parliaments'. But a telephone call has awoken spirits, which should forever whisper in the footsteps and scream at their shoulders to their graves and beyond. Most of these mass-murderers-by-proxy, of course, profess their devout Christianity, a faith their deeds may have sullied for generations to come.

As the nineties were drawing to a close and Iraqis were already anticipating another massive bombing or invasion, an international symposium was held in Baghdad, on health and the embargo's effects. Whilst eminent international experts presented papers, woeful statistics and practical wishlists – inevitably denied by the United Nations Sanctions Committee – which, if implemented, would have stemmed some of the tide of human tragedy, it was when slipping away, alone, to talk to families, wander streets and hospital wards, that the statistics came to life:

> The tiny mewings of small children in intractable pain, denied pain relief because of the vetoes or delays of the Sanctions Committee. There was the brief leap of hope in the eyes of parents, vigilant by a child's bed. A foreigner would, perhaps, be able to work a miracle and provide what their precious creation needed. The look almost always died. for, even with hard currency, stocks of painkillers simply did not exist. And there was the terror of women in labour, wondering if they would give birth to babies barely recognisable as human, deformed as a result of the depleted uranium and other poisons that had polluted the 'land between two rivers', since the 1991 bombings. As scanners and ultra-sound machines were vetoed, there was no way of knowing for certain the state of the baby until its birth

> The stories of parents selling everything to provide for their children; and, when there was nothing left to sell, whole families committing collective suicide. And the children's fear of the bombings will travel for ever; some were so traumatised that, in the absence of tranquilisers, they had to be held or even tied down, to prevent them harming themselves during the grip of their terror.

The journey back to Jordan was another poignant insight. I had planned to travel the 1,200 km journey to Amman by bus. They were as reasonably serviced as possible in the circumstances, spares available in Jordan, where local garages turned a sympathetic blind eye to the embargo. But Iraq's taxis were run on little more than faith and the love of their owner for his four-wheeled bread winner. M., however, a friend and London-based Iraqi businessman, said he had hired a taxi and suggested we share. The drivers needed the money desperately and the Jordan fare would be a lifesaver for some months. 'It will break down', I said surlily, thinking of the remote road, with no help in a crisis and the vast excess fare on the air ticket from Amman to London, should we miss the flight.

Looking at the vehicle's tyres, I knew this was a bad idea. They were bald, nearly down to the canvas – as with most cars in Iraq – and in temperatures over 100 degrees fahrenheit, disaster seemed inevitable. M. was unshakable, the driver was desperate for the money, was proud and reliable, and he had done the deal and could not let him down. I gave in.

Then, four hours out of Baghdad, on the empty six-lane highway, desert stretching to the horizon both sides, a tyre blew. We all got out, the driver looking distraught. I, ungraciously, muttered to M., 'I told you so'.

The driver opened the trunk and we peered in. The spare 'tyre' was actually through to the canvas. There was no jack. Somehow, though, with that Iraqi ingenuity which never ceases to amaze, he changed the wheel with a home-fashioned wrench, raising the car, inch by inch, on bricks balanced beneath, one on the other. He adamantly refused help with the lifting; we were his guests, it was incumbent upon him to look after us – but beneath his dignity and his pride was the terror that his precious fare might disappear, should another vehicle pass by. M. and I looked at each other. We both knew. We would have stayed with him had we had to walk.

Back in the car, as we limped slowly onwards, we sought to ease his embarrassment and tangible misery. M. talked of the province we were driving through, the tranquil Anbar, where, from the main Baghdad-Jordan border highway, the desert seems to stretch until it meets the sky. Anbar is now, of course, 'a terrorist strong-

hold', 'restive', hosts 'Al Qaeda' and 'foreign fighters' – the latter, indeed, in their great squatted bases, wielding their lethal weapons, missiles and grenades, from before Falluja to Trebil, on the border.

As M. and the driver talked, the desert came alive, talking of the region's ancient and long gone settlements, of battles,from the Sumer to the Crusades and onwards. They spoke of the ancient trade routes, the silk, gold and spices on camel trains which had traversed the desert in time's mist, across Anbar. The customs of the Bedouin, whose great ornate tents could often still be seen in the distance, came to life – their homes, carpets, belongings, disappearing with their flocks, seemingly in moments, to spring up again on newly fertile land, the carpets rehung again on tent interiors recreating the familiar warmth as if they had never moved. Listening, I wondered if there was even a grain of sand which could not have told a story.

As they talked of their great history (including the British finally slinking from their base in Habbaniya, also in the Province now occupied by the U.S.) the driver straightened again. Mesopotamia's griefs and glories have been its historic destiny, its glittering history. Flat tyres pale in comparison. A couple of hours on, we spotted a garage and pulled in. The driver said he would buy a spare tyre, clearly a crippling investment. M. quietly bought him a whole set, securing his precarious income for another year. It was then I asked, as we waited for the changes, whether he had always been a driver.

No, he had been in a different trade until the 1991 war, when all collapsed and he had walked 500 kilometers with the remnants of his unit back from Kuwait to Baghdad, surviving the carnage of the Basra Road. He then said: 'We had no tears left'.

When we arrived in Amman, after a 17-hour journey, rather then waste his precious fare and tips on a bed for the night, he turned the car and headed back for the border, showing the spirit of the indomitable, courageous toughness of the ghosts of Anbar and Iraq.

Being made of lesser stuff, I persuaded M. to accompany me on a fantasy shopping spree to Amman's Gold Quarter, to briefly escape the images, before I returned to them to write of them. We gazed, in shop after shop, at intricate, impossible, beauty, a world away from the pains of Jordan's geographical neighbour.

As we left, an old man in worn clothes and shoes approached, holding out a hand. I put mine in my pocket, seeking some change. M. suddenly extended his. It was an

old friend he had at first not recognised. His friend had been a senior engineer with Iraqi Airways, seconded to many overseas airlines, his brilliance known throughout the industry. There was no Iraqi Airways now so he had come to Jordan to earn hard currency to send home to support to his wife and children. He was working as an engineer on elevators, anything where his skills could be used, but Jordanians, too needed work, having taken in nearly half their population after the displacement of 1991 and things had become very hard.

We were going for a meal, would he join us? We talked for a long time of Iraq's plight and he told us, hesitantly, of his fear of anything happening to him. If it did, what would befall the wife and children he loved above all else. He looked very ill and utterly exhausted, but refused to allow hope to be diminished.

We left the restaurant as the sun was setting. He thanked us, shook hands and turned to walk up the steep, darkening street to his lodgings. I had asked if there was anything I could do for him, a clumsy euphemisms for handing over the remaining money I had left. He said no, he would be fine, something would turn up. I had promised to telephone his old contacts, at airlines he had worked for, on my return home.

We watched him fading, bent, as the light fell. Suddenly he turned and walked back. He, straightened, took my hand, then said, 'You can do something for me. You can adopt my son. Make him safe, away from the tenuous life of bombs, sanctions, return him some childhood normality.' But with British Embassies across the Middle East refusing visas to Iraqi passport holders, even for medical treatment to those with potentially life-threatening illnesses, there was no way to give an Iraqi child sanctuary for the embargo's duration. Iraqi children, anyway, belong with Iraqi parents, not subject to situations dictated by the evils of foreign-imposed illegalities and political pressures.

This seemingly frail old man, was 47, his son 11. Back home, I called the airlines, as promised, but Iraqis, however respected they had been, were now non-people. Unemployable.

Two days ago, M., telephoned. He had been working in the Gulf and had met his friend again, now finally in better financial times and again working for airlines, still separated from his family, but able to provide for them. Except for his son. In a taxi, in Baghdad one day, a stolen childhood rooted in nothing but fear of bombings, actual bombings, uncertainties, deprivation – in spite of his father's immense sacrifice and endeavors – caught up. He collapsed and died, a teenager tentatively entering the threshold of his aspirations.

M. hesitated, then: 'My brother, we were born a year apart. He was my dearest, closest friend. He managed to flee, with his family, to Damascus, after the invasion.' Last November he, too, simply collapsed and died. Another victim who will not be added to those of the embargo and invasion. How many countless more?

'You know us', said M., 'We do not cry ... I cried for a week. I do not know if I will ever come to terms with losing him.' M's 'baby' sister and her family live in Mosul, now the latest city to be razed, raped, desecrated, homes 'cleared', families, children, toddlers, assaulted, shot, rounded up.The portal to the sanctuary of their homes blown, or kicked in, during night's witching hours, when door and walls should represent all that is safe, not kicked in by uninvited thugs, wrecking, unaccountable raiders, defiling even the carpets with their boots. M. cannot reach Mosul by telephone or email, the communications are cut, reportedly sabotaged. 'Perhaps no news is good news ... but if anything happens ....' His voice trailed off.

For Iraqis – apart from the quisling traitors, laughing all the way to their Geneva bank accounts – are there any tears left?

And could I, somehow, have saved just one child?

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