

PREFACE

Greetings, dear reader! Who could have guessed, when I first sent these observations to a friend to post online almost twenty years ago, that anyone outside of Baghdad would care what I had to say? I was writing for my fellow Iraqis at a time when we were rebuilding and dreaming and suffering, and I used the language and the people and the places of our everyday lives. But now that my stories have traveled so far from home, perhaps I can set the stage for you?

You'll find your new friend Shalash reporting from Thawra City, the suburb of Baghdad that takes its name from the Arabic word for revolution. This area is composed of seventy-nine sectors, or blocks, each of which contains a thousand houses made up of exactly a hundred and forty-four square meters. Thawra City is the largest suburb in the Middle East, with more than three million residents. But you're more likely to have heard of it as Sadr City, named for one of the most powerful religious families in Iraq, whose scion, Muqtada, plays an important role in the tales you will soon read. Of all the people you'll encounter here, you've probably heard the most about a guy named Saddam Hussein, and maybe his sons Uday and Qusay. But there are other names in what follows—the names of religious, political, and cultural figures—that may be less familiar. If you are curious, you can learn more via that most remarkable tool, the internet, which

made its way into Iraq after Saddam's fall, soon before I began writing. Still, let me lay out some few general details before we begin—some background that you might find helpful, starting with our religion, which appears on almost every page of our lives.

According to the religion of Islam, God chose Muhammad as his Prophet and sent him a holy book, the Qur'an. After Muhammad's death, Muhammad's followers disagreed over who should serve as caliph. This conflict was the origin of the split between the Sunnis and the Shiites: the Shiites believed that Muhammad's nephew and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, should have filled that role. The Sunnis, on the other hand—among whose number we might include almost all the residents of our beloved Thawra City—revere the entire household of the Prophet, especially Ali and Ali's sons, Husayn and Hasan, both of whom were killed, along with most of their immediate families, at the Battle of Karbala (680 CE): a massacre that we commemorate each year during the festival of Ashura. One of Husayn's sons was spared, and he and ten of his descendants—together with our beloved Husayn—are believed by the largest branch of Shia to form the Twelve Infallible Imams of Islam. Their tombs are important shrines for Shiite pilgrims. The Twelfth Imam in that chain, however, known as the Mahdi, is believed to have gone into hiding to avoid being murdered, and he is expected to make a miraculous return one day to purge the world of injustice.

No small number of Muslims trace their lineage to Muhammad and Ali, and they wear black turbans and are honored with the title sayyid. But it is the Islamic theologians

who play an especially important role for Shiites, because believers are expected to follow the guidance of the religious clerkship in all matters, large and small. That clerkship is dominated, on the whole, by five major families, named Sistani, Hakim, Sadr, Kho'i, and Haeri. These families, based in both Iraq and Iran, wield immense religious and political authority, and have often competed with each other for bigger slices of the same.

When Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, he and the Ba'athist Party consolidated power, often by killing or exiling anyone who might stand as competition, including the abovementioned theologians. The Sistani lived quietly in Iraq largely by avoiding political affairs; the leader of the Hakim family sought refuge in Iran; and as for the Sadr family, Muqtada's brothers and father were assassinated. Members of opposition political parties moved to the US, the UK, or Iran, while the Kurds were able to carve out a measure of autonomy in the north thanks to a no-fly zone enforced by the US and the UK. Everything changed after Iraq was invaded in 2003. With Saddam out of the way and in hiding, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim came back from Iran, backed by a militia largely composed of Iraqi exiles called the Badr Brigade. Muqtada al-Sadr was supported by his own militia, the Mahdi Army. Ayad Allawi, Ahmed Chalabi, and Ibrahim al-Jaafari were just a few of the exiles who arrived from the US and the UK to play roles in the new Iraq.

After disbanding the Iraqi Army and outlawing the Ba'athist Party, the US official who oversaw Iraq from May 2003 through June 2004, Paul Bremer, set in motion a plan for a new democratic government. Bremer worked with the Iraqi

Governing Council (which had a new president each month to satisfy all the parties and factions), which was replaced in June 2004 by the Iraqi Interim Government. Elections were held for the Iraqi National Assembly in January 2005, and that Assembly confirmed the Iraqi Transitional Government, which took power in May 2005. In October of that year, Iraq voted in a referendum to approve a new constitution. Then, in December, elections were held for a permanent government, which took power in May 2006.

And if you should find any of that a little confusing, well, think of how we must have felt—especially when there were multitudes of political parties, ethnic groups, and religious leaders vying for control of the territory and its natural resources. Violence between the groups and against the US and other foreign troops was a common occurrence, especially when al-Qaeda began operating in Iraq and fomenting sectarian violence through suicide bombings against the Shiites.

It is for you to imagine, dear reader, what it was like for a person to wake up one morning to find American tanks driving through the streets of their already exhausted city. Without warning, people we had lived among for our whole lives were turned into historical figures, pulled this way and that by the orations of religious men, whose photos our neighbors carried and whose names they chanted. That's what happened to me. I found myself a stranger in my own country, as bewildered as if I were suddenly thrust into the role of an extra in a movie about the Prophet of Islam in the early years of his ministry. Yes, my country vanished from the map after the invasion, and it was a bitter shock. But the

real shock was when the people with whom I had spent my whole life became strangers. That realization is what drove me into the street, laughing with bitter pain. And that was the moment in which these writings of mine were born, writings my readers took even more seriously than I could have imagined. And so I lived those first years under cover, writing under a pseudonym and afraid of violence at the hands of the same people I had loved since I was born.

SHALASH THE IRAQI
Probably somewhere in Iraq, 2023



OCTOBER 4, 2005

*You Want a Bottle of Arak?
A Missed Call's All It Takes*

When you pronounce the Arabic word *al-'abeed*, slaves, as *a'ibeed* (so, dropping the initial *laam* and vowelizing the letter *'ayn* with an *I* sound instead of an *A*), you get the slang word used in Thawra City for people with dark skin, of whom there are many in the neighborhood of Al-Gayyara. They get special treatment here. Respect. No, really! People step aside to let them by is what I'm saying. First because the story goes that they're especially fearless and ferocious when they get into fights, which is often, since fights are always breaking out in this crowded city. But also because they're the ones who put our city on the map. Take the Fiori soccer team, for instance, which was the most famous sports team we had, back in the day, and if you wanted to play in the nationals, that was your first stop. We all remember Bashar Rashid, who played internationally and then got executed by the old regime. And there was Ali Hussain, and . . . too many to list. All of them *a'ibeed*.

But look, it's not just sports. They've had a hand in every cultural institution in Thawra City. We all remember Falayful's *shadda*, and the one led by the artist known as Alexander the Great. (For those who don't know the term, a *shadda* is a band that performs at weddings and other festive occasions.) And there were so many famous singers that won our hearts, people like Abade Al Amare, Hussin Albasry,

Abd Rambo—who changed his name to the far more pious Abd Rabo, meaning “Servant of his Lord,” after he became a religious poet, writing poems to our revered Husayn and declaring his loyalty to the Sadr family. Of course, the a’ibeed also invented dances like the *bazzakha* and the *khawshiya*, and without them, who would ever have thought to bring us break dancing?

People like to say that the a’ibeed don’t join political parties or get too pious. But they preserve our culture in an even more important way by opening coffeehouses and rattling the cups all day long after being trained by our local sheikhs in the traditions of tribal hospitality. And everyone knows that while they won’t take any shit from outside their community, inside it they live together in a truly admirable peace.

What I’m leading up to is that the a’ibeed of Thawra City probably wouldn’t have had a whole lot of racial discrimination to worry about even if the list of their accomplishments went no further. But the major reason they get so much respect here has to do with what they did for the city at the end of the ’90s. Each month of Ramadan, when Saddam’s religious revival was in full swing, the a’ibeed community played a heroic role, inscribed forever in the pages of glory, by secretly providing Thawra City with all the arak, gin, vodka, and cold beer we needed. They would put the liquor in big plastic bins with blocks of ice and go door to door to quench the city’s thirst—or, anyway, the thirst of those citizens of the city who didn’t see it as a holy month of fasting so much as a month when alcohol was particularly hard to get. It’s true that prices went up a little, but they were taking a risk for which we held them in the utmost reverence.

Now, with Ramadan standing sullenly at our door once more, we drinkers remember with longing the days of the a'ibeed and their glorious service to their fellow citizens! But, what's this? It seems the a'ibeed have insisted on demonstrating their liberty once again. They've set about knocking on the doors of the customers to inform them, on the QT, that the goods in question will again be plentiful this year . . .

Knocking on doors, you say? Can't they get with the times? But of course! They've stocked up on burners and have provided their clientele with emergency phone numbers in case any should be seized by a sudden, pressing need for liquor. When Irhayam, the distributor for our particular block in Thawra, visited our house unexpectedly last night, he said, "It's easy, Uncle Shalash. A missed call's all it takes. Just dial and hang up, and the bottle will be in your hands within minutes." I thanked Irhayam and stored his number in my mobile under the name "Abu Wagafat," the Bedouin nickname for someone who always has your back.

And what a lovely surprise it was, ladies and gentlemen, when I saw Irhayam himself, this very day, on a sectarian religious TV channel, speaking clearly and distinctly: "I congratulate the holy Hidden Imam (may God hasten his noble appearance!)—I congratulate the high religious clerkship, with Sayyid Ali al-Sistani at its head (long may his shadow stretch!)—and I congratulate each and every son of the Iraqi people, on the occasion of this first night of the blessed month of Ramadan. May God renew it with every blessing for us and for you."

Ramadan kareem, my brothers: a generous Ramadan. Now you know the true origin of the blessing!

OCTOBER 5, 2005

*Hassoun the Dane Spends His Vacation
in the Nation's Heartland*

My neighbor Hassoun just got back from Denmark. He's staying with his family here in Thawra City. The first person to report on his reappearance was Khanjar, that meddlesome son of a meddlesome man, saying "What?! He shaved his mustache right off!"

All us neighbors crowded together inside Hassoun's place, turning this novelty inside out with our stares. Some of the women called out blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad and the Prophet's household so that Hassoun would be protected from the evil eye; others took this opportunity to find fault with his fancy clothes and his new, pretentious way of talking. "Look who's gotten too big for his boots," said one.

That wasn't what interested the men and the older boys, though. They were waiting for Hassoun to finish with all the welcomes and all the see-you-soons so he could spill his guts to them about his sexual adventures abroad—for Hassoun had undoubtedly indulged himself with plenty of young Danish women, not to mention Danish divorcées, as the spirit had moved him.

Whereas all Hassoun could think about was how miserable he was to have come home. He was in agony, let's not mince words. There was the climate—the temperature here felt simply lethal to him now. And then the filth of

it! He couldn't bear sitting anywhere dirty, and the house wasn't exactly clean. There was no way, absolutely none, that he could reuse cups or dishes that hadn't been washed. Anything less than what he'd gotten used to in Denmark was unacceptable. Likewise, he had a throbbing migraine from the constant roar of the generator. But he could hardly admit all that; he could hardly say anything without being cut short: "Hey, who do you think you are, anyway? Why do you keep blabbering on about this Denmark? What, you think we haven't been around the block a few times ourselves?"

Khanjar—that despicable son of a despicable man—led the charge. He couldn't wait to find something to hold against Hassoun. He brooded there like a knife in his side. Every so often he would say something like, "Hassoun, you're not the only one who's traveled, okay? We took a trip to Iran to see the shrine of the Eighth Imam once, remember? And we've been to Syria to visit the tomb of Zaynab bint Ali. And in a few days, we're even going to go to Turkey!"

Luckily, Hassoun's aunt, Umm Jabbar, was there too. She was a nice lady who worked at the government food bank in some official capacity. She had a sense of how much Hassoun the Dane must be suffering, particularly as she was used to dealing with cheeses. Yes—as it goes with cheese, so goes it with men. Umm Jabbar could as easily judge the worth of a man as compare Egyptian cheese—with which Saddam used to poison us during the days of the sanctions—to the soft, delicious Danish cheeses that Hassoun now resembled. That's what prompted her direct request, delivered in an imperious tone: "Come along, then, all of you! Let the boy get

some rest! You're killing him! Nephew Hassoun, go to your room. Relax a little, take a nap."

Hassoun couldn't believe his luck. He obeyed: got to his feet, hitched up his jeans, headed off into the next room. But back he rushed in alarm only a few seconds later.

"What's wrong, my son?" asked his mother, reaching up to caress his face. "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate, what's the matter, my child?" But Hassoun didn't so much as look at her, just stood there stock still, his mouth hanging open. "What's wrong with you, child? Speak!"

Hassoun could only point mutely toward the room he'd so quickly vacated. His mother of course rushed over to find out what on earth had so spooked her son. Hassoun's sister-in-law and a few other women I didn't recognize accompanied her.

Hassoun's mother grasped the problem at once. She came back and laughed in her son's face. "What's wrong with you, child? Why so scared? That's only your brother's rocket launcher and your brother-in-law's old machine gun. The other stuff, the explosives, rifles, and grenades, those are all ours. Look, child, we've all joined Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, didn't you know? What, you never heard about the Mahdi Army in Denmark, my dear sweet child?"

This was one blow too many for poor Hassoun. Here he'd come to visit the home of his honorable family only to find that they'd become a detachment of fifth columnists while he was away! And yet, even still, Hassoun allowed himself to be convinced to stretch out on the bed and close his eyes for a bit amid all those guns and bombs. His mother tucked him in with a beauteous smile upon her face.

At which point the well-wishers saw the fun was over and decided to leave. I'd like to report some of the comments I heard as people passed me at the door, intending to go their separate ways:

"It's no wonder he was shocked. He's probably never seen a gun in his life. The boy's been a draft dodger as far back as I can remember."

"Give him a break, guys, he'll come to his senses eventually."

"Hey, it's not like the Danes don't kill people like anyone else. They know plenty about guns over there. Denmark even had troops in the attack on Al-Suwaira in the '91 war, remember? But what can I say, Hassoun's always been a bit . . . you know."

"The way Hassoun jumped! Like a cat at the dog pound!"

"Hassoun off to Denmark while we're stuck here being eaten alive by bugs. Sure as hell didn't see *that* coming."

But that rat and son of a rat Khanjar didn't leave with everyone else. He stuck around Hassoun's house, trying to ferret out information, since he still hadn't gotten answers to his many questions . . . questions like:

"How many dollars did he bring back?"

"How long's he going to stay?"

"Does he support Sadr? Or is he with Sistani?"

"Is it true he's going to marry a local girl and take her back to Europe with him?"

"Is it true he's already married an old Danish widow?"

"Will he be visiting the shrines of the Imams while he's home, particularly Al-Kadhimiya Mosque, or is he going to spend the whole time drunk?"

“Is he spending his whole vacation with family, or is he going to move into a fancy hotel at the first opportunity? That’s what Farhan, the quilter’s son, did when he came back last year from Australia . . .”

But that’s only a sampling! That rogue and son of a rogue Khanjar had plenty more shots in his locker, and no intention of giving up till he got what he was after. For that reason, among others, Khanjar held firm despite all the hints from Hassoun’s mother and sister, increasingly brazen, that it was past time for him to get going. Khanjar pretended not to notice. Pretended to be deaf and blind both.

Meanwhile, it transpired that the crowd who’d left the Hassoun house hadn’t gone home either. They were still outside, standing around, burning for news from their spy, Khanjar, who was taking so long to come out. It took till long after half the rooster slaughtered for Hassoun’s arrival had flown down his gullet for Khanjar to come out for an audience, smacking his awful lips and sucking his greasy fingers. He made no statement apart from a single sentence delivered in passing:

“Uncles, don’t tell me you really fell for Hassoun’s theatrics? The weapons in that room are actually part of a crooked deal with the Danes. Our very own Hassoun the Clean-Shaven brought them into the country with the intention of hand-delivering them to the minister of defense, Hazim al-Shaalan, as part of al-Shaalan’s latest profiteering scheme.”