

Chapter 1

Childhood

I was born in 1937. That much I know. The date of my birth I will never know.

In Iraq, that was the way things were back then. Every Iraqi was born at home and a birth meant another mouth to feed.

Those of us who lived in villages and small towns often never had a birth certificate and did not need one. We lived simple lives. Farming the land, tending to flocks of sheep and goats or fishing the rivers. That is all we knew and all we wanted to know. Birthdays were not important in our culture. Life was too hard scraping a living to stop and celebrate. And why would anyone celebrate such a life? It did not matter how old you were, what mattered was how hard you worked.

Only if you went to school did you need a birth certificate. Then the government would tell you what day your birthday fell on. It was always the same date - 1st July. Why it was that date, no-one knew or bothered to ask. Sometimes, even the year was wrong but no-one really cared about that, either.

How old you were did matter if you wanted to join the army. You had to be eighteen to do this. Help was at hand, as the military had ways to estimate your age. Occasionally, a doctor would be called for his expert opinion but mostly the sergeant decided. If your moustache was thick and your build was strong, you were over eighteen - even if your mother had said you were only sixteen!

The army was considered a good career for people like me. It was our only escape from a hard, peasant life. Usually, this

was only a brief respite. National Service only lasted three years but, because no real study or schooling was required, it could become a life-long job. The only real talent you needed was to be able to take orders and carry them out.

Many young men in my small village welcomed the chance to have money in their pockets for very little effort. The only drawback, although no-one really considered it to be one, is the likes of us never seemed to make a

rank higher than sergeant. It could be argued that higher positions were held for the Sunni elite. They were the ruling class in Iraq. The truth of the matter was, we Shia were not very interested in further education or the responsibility that goes along with the military rank and the higher pay of an officer. To say there were no Shia officers in the army would be untrue. Some Shia recruits were very ambitious and had the determination to make their way slowly up through the ranks. For the rest of us, being the 'boot boy' of a General was to have 'an ear to power' and that was the height of our military ambitions. Most of us served our three years and returned to the village to earn our living from the land - as my father had done.

I was born into a Shia Muslim family. Like most children, I only marked my religion by the festivals we celebrated and occasional visits to Najaf and Karbala - the holy cities where the Prophet Mohammed's relations are buried. Hussein, Ali, Abbas, Hamza - those are all names of the Prophet's family. They were also the names of my family, friends and others in the village where I lived. Those names were so popular that second names or nicknames had to be given so we knew who was who. We had strong beliefs in Hussein and Ali. So strong, that maybe they surpassed our love of the Prophet Mohammed and, possibly,

even Allah. My mother would tell her children, "Whatever you dream of, ask Ali. He will bring it for you." So we dreamed and asked.

My village was in Al-Emara (Mi-San). It was a scattered collection of ramshackle, mud-brick buildings. Our little house had only two rooms. This meant there was precious little room or privacy for a large family like mine. As well as my parents, I lived with my seven brothers and sisters. The size of my family was not unusual - all the village families were large. We had no indoor toilet, electricity or running water but neither did anyone else. We just accepted that was how we all lived. It was exactly the same way our fore-fathers had lived for centuries. And what you have never had, you do not miss.

I was the eldest son. This is a great honour to us Arabs but with it goes a duty of care. It meant, after my father, I bore the weight of my family on my young shoulders. In actual fact, I was born the second of eight children but the eldest of my siblings was a girl and so the responsibility of helping to look after the family lay with me, as I was the first boy. My older sister,

Zarah, would go with my mother to tend the fields. All women did and always had done. Their destinies had been replicated for generations. My mother was married as soon as she had reached puberty and her children were mainly born within nine months of each other.

In our village, girls were mostly married by promise. One family would promise their first daughter to the first son of another family, cousin to cousin. It was the way things were done then and had always been done in the past. Only one percent of all marriages were through love or physical attraction. That was very unusual. Neither of these ways was how my mother came

to marry my father. My mother became married through fassil. Fassil is tribal law.

In those days, no-one in our village and others near-by went to the police, we sorted it out ourselves. This meant, when a member of my mother's family killed a member of my father's family, the matter was brought to the Tribal Elders. They served as our judge and jury. Sometimes, the Tribal Elders would decide that a life be taken in retribution - and it was. In other cases, they decided compensation must be paid and that amount of money was agreed upon by them. In this case, my mother's family had no money or livestock to be given in compensation and so the Tribal Elders decided a daughter would reimburse my father's family. That daughter was my mother. She was just thirteen years old at the time and completely innocent of the crime.

To be married through fassil was to serve a life-sentence in slavery and disgrace. No-one would forget how you came to be in your new family and the girl could never wash away the shame which was seldom her fault. But, as a child, these things were unknown to me.

My mother had beautiful brown eyes. She always had a comforting hug and a kiss for me and I loved her. She was the best mother she could have been to me and that was all I cared about.

At the age of eight, I asked my father if I could go to school. My best friend Ali went to school in the next village which was five kilometres away and I wanted to know what he knew. He seemed to know everything. My father agreed and set about getting the paperwork sorted. My date of birth was put down as the 1st July 1937. When this was done, me and Ali

set off on Ali's

donkey for the ten kilometre round trip. To me, the excitement of leaving our village was a daily adventure. Apart from rare trips to holy cities, I had never before set a foot outside it.

I spent a year travelling each day with Ali to school and learning how to read and write. I found this very difficult. I found learning to count even harder. I never got beyond ten as that was all the fingers and thumbs I had. For some reason, I did not like to use my toes. It did not seem to matter much as my family never had any money. Nor had we any prospect of getting any. I was first to admit I was not the smartest boy in my class. However, I was the biggest for my age and no-one laughed or teased me too much. I tried my best and the world was opening up around me. During the school holidays, I worked with my father, mother and sister on a farm close to our home. It was hard work but the thought of going back to school for a second year kept my spirits high.

What we earned was just enough to buy bread, cucumber and tomatoes to eat. When I say just enough, I mean just enough to keep us from starving. Farm owners were well known for being greedy and paying low wages but, because they had protection from the government, workers like us did not dare complain or cause them any trouble. It was more than our peasant lives were worth.

During this time, my father became very ill with malaria - a terrible disease which made him weak and feverish. There was no hope of him ever recovering as we knew it was incurable. Like the rest of the community, my family used the small river that ran through the village to drink and wash in. It was the same water the livestock and the wild dogs used. Our village did not even have a well. My mother and sister would carry water home

from the river and boil it up for us to drink. However, if you were working hard and your goatskin was empty, the river became your water supply and boiling it did not seem so important when you were hot and thirsty. We learned through my father's illness just how vital boiling the river water really was. We learned most things like that the hard way.

As father's illness worsened, only me, my mother and my sister went to work on the farm. The younger children took care of themselves and father

during the long days. And they were long days. From first light in the morning, through the scorching heat of mid-day, until late in the afternoon. Sometimes, if he was in a generous mood and the crops were growing well, the farmer gave us food to keep us working hard. We would bring any spare food home to the others but it was tiring work under the hot sun and we usually needed all we were given to keep digging, planting, watering and picking.

Ik-Tahie was the name we all gave to the farmer. It meant 'God of the Land' and that is truly what he was to us for his land stretched as far as the eye could see. With his land came power. Power over us. No-one dared argue or disobey him and every village that stood on his land was his own personal slave-mill.

Ik-Tahie would ride past us on his horse to his huge villa that stood at the centre of the farm. How different his villa was to my humble home. Even the stable his horses lived in was bigger and better built than the ramshackle house my family lived in. Ik-Tahie was always accompanied by his second-in-command. This man's job was like a secretary. He kept notes and made sure his master's bidding was done. This man was named Abbas. He was short and stubby. An unpleasant, grey-haired man who would ride past us keeping one eye on his master and the other

on the female farm workers while they were bent over working in the fields. In one hand, he carried a riding crop which he used to encourage workers he deemed were not working hard enough. That was most of us. He cracked his whip above us and sometimes even on us. He did this a lot. As we laboured, his whip would ring out like gunshots.

One day, Ik-Tahie stopped his horse on the track beside us. He waited for Abbas to catch him up, spoke to him briefly then trotted off. Abbas called my mother over to him, "You there! Come here!"

Before my mother could get to him, he told her, "My master is in need of a new housemaid, be at the villa at sunrise."

No reply was needed or volunteered by my mother. If Ik-Tahie wanted her as a housemaid, she was now his housemaid.

The sun was setting as we trudged wearily home. That day, it seemed a very long way. I was aware my mother was not her usual self, she seemed

nervous and anxious. When we arrived home, my mother shooed the younger children from the room. She bent over my sick father, who was too weak even to sit, and explained how Abbas had told her she now had a new job as Ik-Tahie's housemaid.

My father mustered his strength to sit upright. He rolled a cigarette, looked at us and murmured, "Allah help us all."

I thought this a very strange thing to say. To me, my mother working at the villa meant a better wage and a better life. Better than back-breaking work in the fields, at the very least. Besides, we needed more money as I would be going back to school and so would not be working on the farm.

The next day, as usual, we walked together to the farm. Suddenly, my mother stopped. She took each of us by the arm and stooped down to be the same height as us. Very solemnly, she looked us in the eye and said, "Look after each other. Abdel-Hussein, take care of your sister. Zarah, take care of your brother. When I leave you today, don't come and look for me. When I can, I will find you."

Me and Zarah looked at each other with a mixture of confusion and concern. Why could we not look for her? Why should we need to look for her? She was only working at the villa. We knew where that was, everyone knew. Was she never coming back to us?

We continued walking but, as the farm loomed larger, I started to panic. What was happening? Did this mean I could not go back to school?

My mother left us with a sad smile as we started our work. That day, seemed the longest ever to me. As the shadows lengthened, I kept looking up from the dry soil, hoping to see my mother return. Deep down, I knew she would not. My feeling was right. As the sun was setting, just me and Zarah walked the long, lonely road home. We said nothing but we were worried about mother and more worried about what father would say. I was the eldest son. Should I have done something? What could I have done? What was going on?

As we crept into our house on that first evening without her, my father never lifted his head to see how many of us had returned. From the first moment she told him, he had known exactly what was going to happen but me and Zarah were too young to understand.

A whole week passed until I saw my mother again. A week that seemed like a year. Mother ran up to us in the field. I was so happy to see her and Zarah was too. We jumped up and down with delight. Mother smiled and hugged us both. In one of her hands, she held a bag made of cloth. This bag was slightly bloodstained. Mother promised she would make us something really tasty to eat from the contents. That night, the long walk home was short and happy. I cannot remember what we talked about but it did not matter. All that did matter was my mother was back and everything was all right again in my world.

We entered the house in a joyous clamour. The younger children ran to mother's side and clung to her legs like snails on a gate-post.

“Now,” she said, “Go and wash yourselves, I am going to cook something special to eat.”

As we ran outdoors to wash in the river, I saw my father raise himself up onto his elbows and a look of happiness flashed across his face. I was pleased. After all their years together, it seemed my mother had come to mean something to him, something more than a blood-debt repaid. I was glad.

That night, we all truly feasted. I had never eaten so much in my life. The cloth bag contained chicken's feet and heads. Mother boiled the heads into a broth. The feet were fried until crispy. The meat was stripped from the heads and eaten with fried onions. For once, our daily diet of bread, cucumber and tomatoes were not on the menu. It was the happiest meal I have ever had - before or since. All my family were back together and, for the first time in our lives, we had more food than we could eat.

When we had finished eating, our tummies were full and the chores done, my mother began to tell my father of her days at the villa. Whether she intended for us to hear or not, I cannot say but in such small and cramped living conditions, secrets were hard to keep.

On her first day, to my mother's great surprise, she was taken to a hammam (an Arabic bathroom). She was always clean but this was the first time she had taken a bath in her life. She was given a housemaid's uniform and told never to wear her footah in the villa. This surprised me. A footah is similar to a hijab but is only made in black. It covers the woman's head, leaving only her face exposed. My mother had always

worn a footah. I would hardly have recognised her without one. She only ever took it off to sleep. Not being allowed to wear one would have been very strange for her, I thought.

I carried on listening. I heard that after she had bathed and dressed in her uniform, she was taken to the housemaid's quarters. This was a room with brick walls and beds she was to share with two other women. As she continued to tell my father of her experiences, she tried to hide her excitement but failed. These simple things were great luxuries to her. Real brick walls and a bath were things she may only have dreamed of.

Her job at the villa was to do as she was told. Cleaning, cooking, serving. Whatever was needed, whenever it was required. She spoke of great parties at the villa with high-ranking politicians, businessmen and Ik-Tahie's rich friends who came to visit and stay with him. It sounded a completely different world to us.

I could see my father was troubled but he remained quiet, keeping his thoughts to himself. Through no fault of his own,

his wife was now the breadwinner of the family and her wages, though not greatly increased, stopped us all from starving.

That was how our lives went on. Off my mother would go and we would next see her clutching the cloth bag containing whatever treats she had been able to muster. There might be tobacco for my father, a hunk of meat, fruit, or sometimes just bones to make soup from. Whatever it was, we were grateful. Grateful to have her home and grateful to know we were always on her mind.

The months passed by and Eid, an important Islamic holiday, was fast approaching. We all hoped mother would be with us for Eid or it would have been the first one in our lives we had spent without her. Two days before Eid, at around midnight, there was a loud, desperate pounding on our door. We were all asleep. I was first to awake and ran to the door. When I opened it, my mother fell inwards onto the floor. She was screaming and crying. She was wearing her house-maid's uniform but it was ripped and torn, exposing parts of her body.

All her children huddled around her as she cried and rocked in terrible distress. We were asking her what had happened. My father struggled up

from his sickbed and showed surprising strength to scoop her up off the floor. He held her in his arms and told us to get some water. As I tried to find a clean cup and fill it with water, I heard father ask, “What are these marks on your face?”

My mother’s only reply was uncontrolled sobbing.

“Fatuma! (a nick-name for Fatima) What happened to you?” My father’s voice was raised, but still got no answer.

He grabbed the cup of water from me and ordered us into the other room. We all obeyed him and scampered off but listened intently.

“Fatuma! Tell me what happened?” father’s voice shouted. We heard a slap.

“Tell me, woman!” he yelled.

“It was Abbas,” we heard mother say between sobs. “It was Abbas. He was drunk... he.. he raped me.” Then her quiet voice turned into a low moan. A moan of pain, shame and humiliation.

My father left the house. He sat outside and rolled a cigarette. I glimpsed him smoking it, deep in thought.

In small villages like mine, the rape of any woman brings huge shame for both the rapist and the woman. In many cases, both are killed and the feud between the two families can continue for generations.

My father disappeared for a few hours. Only when the sun was rising did he return and he did not return empty-handed. He carried a double-barrelled shotgun he had borrowed from his brother. As he came towards us, we gathered around our mother. We were not afraid of him but wary of the look he had on his face. I now know that look very well. It is one of resignation. An emptiness, when all hope is gone. A grave look, that I was to always remember from that day onwards and would see again many times in my life. I also remember my father’s final words to us.

“No-one is to follow me. I have a shame I must make clean. Whatever happens to me, at least you will know that despite being ill, I am still a man for my home and family.”

He left us.

At around mid-day, the whole village erupted in the news Abbas had been killed - murdered. Shot twice in the head with a double-barrelled shotgun. I think my father must have spent the hours in-between searching Abbas's known haunts and waiting for the right moment.

The police were called. This was not just a village matter to be dealt with by the Tribal Elders. The right-hand man of Ik-Tahie had been killed and all the resources available to Ik- Tahie were set in motion to find the culprit of this most serious crime. A crime that disrespected our landowner, lord and master.

Just hours later, the police were in our home. They questioned my mother and all of us children - even the very youngest child, who could barely talk.

“Where is your father?” we were asked.

We all told the truth when we said we did not know where our father was but the police searched the house for him anyway - all two rooms of it. Just as they were leaving, my father returned still holding the shotgun. Finding the police at his home did not seem to surprise him. Their presence did not even seem to concern him. They ordered him to drop the weapon but he was a man with a sense of purpose.

“I have cleaned one part of my shame, now I must finish the second.”

He ran into the house and shot my mother in the head with both barrels.

I remember she looked at him calmly as he pointed the shotgun directly at her face from just centimetres away.

Her expression did not have the chance to show surprise or pain and I will always be grateful for that. One second, she was there staring at father exactly as she had looked at me that day in the field before she left us - a deep, penetrating, powerless stare. A split-second later, she was gone forever.

The younger children screamed as her blood splattered across their shocked little faces. I was too stunned to move or even cry out. I loved my mother. She was the only person who had shown me any real love. It did

not make any sense to me that she had been hurt by Abbas and yet her own husband and father of her children - our father, my father - had killed her in front of us in this terrible, cold-blooded way. We were a family. We all struggled to survive together. And now this...

My father did not look at us. It was as if we were not there. He calmly walked back outside to the waiting police and threw the shotgun on the ground.

“Here is my gun. I have cleaned my shame. Now do what you want with me,” he told them.

All of us children were devastated, confused and distraught. Me and Zarah did what we could to comfort the little ones, though not fully understanding what had happened ourselves. In a matter of a few hours, what I had known as a happy, family life flowed away like my mother’s blood into the dirt floor. She had died for an honour, an honour that was not hers. Just as she had been given to my father many years earlier as compensation for another honour that had been slighted. We knew nothing of honour. All we knew, was our mother had been murdered by our father - right in front of us.

Our suffering and grief was not over for the day.

Ik-Tahie arrived with several men on horseback. When the police told him what had happened, he ordered them to leave. He was the power in the area and he would deal with the situation.

“Fetch me a length of strong rope,” he called out to one of his men.

A length of strong rope quickly appeared.

My father was tightly trussed-up from shoulder to hip. He did not struggle or protest. He still did not look at us. He just stared into the distance with that same look of resignation on his face I had seen earlier.

Ik-Tahie dragged my father behind his horse. He galloped through our village and round the farm for all to witness. Father’s body bumped, twisted and rolled behind the horse’s kicking hooves. When Ik-Tahie finally returned to our door, my father was a bloodied, dusty rag. He was not moving on the ground behind the exhausted, sweating horse.

Despite what he had done to my mother, my father was still my father. I had spent all my life with him. He had encouraged me to walk. Smiled at me as we ate. Allowed me to go to school. I hoped he was still alive and, by some miracle, he would recover to look after us. That would be my dream to Ali.

I ran to give him a cup of water. Praying to Ali as I ran.

Before I could get to him, one of Ik-Tahie's men grabbed me and held me back. The cup of water was spilled.

I was forced to watch as Ik-Tahie dismounted. He stood over the motionless remains of my father like a triumphant cockerel and said, "You took my right hand, my man Abbas...a lif

Then he was handed a gun and shot my father at point-blank range.

We had very little but we lost everything. Our parents. Our childhoods. What little we knew of love.

On that day, I cried and cried until my tears ran dry. But not one tear has left my eyes since.