

Portrait of a Day in Baghdad

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2AM

My first drink of *arak*, an Iraqi liquor, that tastes like liquorice and stings like rock candy. The poet Farouk Salloum told me he was drinking *arak* at his house when the missiles hit Baghdad in the first Gulf War. After his first glass, he prayed the attack would end quickly. After the second, he wished he had more *arak* at his house because there was no way he was going to get more during an attack. After his third glass, he screamed at the missiles to bring it on.

9AM

I remember now the party last night at Farouk's house. Members of the Iraq Peace Team were invited to a private party of musicians, journalists, and poets. Farouk was dressed in casual black. He had sleepy eyes. He was gracious and demanding, ordering drinks be constantly filled, especially for the women. The socialist Baath Party banned public drinking in 1995. Ever since, Iraqis have taken their drink underground and at each other's homes. Farouk's second daughter is named Reem, which means one who is as graceful as a deer running. She doesn't have her father's eyes.

A droll pianist and a veteran of the Iran/Iraq war in the early 80s played Bach and a jazzy funeral march. Earlier in the evening the pianist had told me that he had killed six men in the war, and that the men and women of Iraq are all trained in combat, and will take to arms and stones if need be to stop the Americans from entering Baghdad. I ask him if his experience in killing shaped, in any way, his piano playing. No response.

NOON

A word or two about *kubbe* in soup. At the Al-Shadbandar Café, where the Iraqi literati come to drink tea and speculate about the war, and who is the number one poet of the week, Almad, a young sculptor, invites me for *kubbe* in soup. It is close and it is good, he says. Fair enough. I'm ready for it. Before I had left the States, Aviv, a dear friend and member

of New Kids On The Black Bloc, an artist political collective in Barcelona, asked me to seek out *kubbe* in soup. "I know you're not going to Baghdad for a culinary tour, but promise me you will try it".

It is a meat-dumpling the size of my head swimming in greasy soup. The skin of the dumpling is thick and wheaty. Inside, a mixture of ground meat of unknown origins and cinnamon. Other spices too, but who can tell. The soup is hot water with onions. Sometimes with tomatoes.

Almad wants me to come. But Haider, another sculptor, says it may not be such a good idea. It will be crowded, he says, and the water is not so good for foreigners. Okay, I say to Almad, next time. I drink my lemon tea and dream of dumplings the size of my head. A cinema critic enters the café. He's the number one critic in Baghdad, Haider tells me, because he is the only one in the city. He jokes to Ellen, my travel companion for the day and a full time peace activist from Maryland, that he would like to do a cultural exchange with her; she can take his post as the number one critic in Baghdad if he could get a visa and go to the US.

3PM

We wander around the booksellers' row, a *souk* (open market) next to the Al-Shadbandar Café. Former engineers sell their collection of books on statistical analysis here and whatever else they can find in their house. Books are indiscriminately piled on the sidewalk for people to browse through. Iraq had, before the sanctions, one of the highest literacy rates in the Middle East and the largest number of PhDs. This is why you will find not only books on mathematics and structural mechanics, but also Hegelian philosophy, Pop Art, and Modern absurdist drama in Arabic, English, French, German, and even Chinese. I find a nice copy of Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Also a beautiful book on Islamic calligraphy.

We have what's called a magic sheet. On one side of this piece of paper is an explanation of what the Iraq Peace Team is about and why we are in Iraq. On the other side, the same thing in Arabic. We pass this out and hope to enlarge our family. It does work like magic, and a bookseller quickly becomes a friend (because, not surprisingly, everyone is against the war). It is only paper but has the weight of gold.

I meet a poet named Suha Noman Rasheed. He is slowly selling his collection of poetry books on the row, to live. He has published three books of Arabic poetry and promises me he will bring a copy of one of them next week. A writer friend in the US asked me to bring back some books in Arabic so they can be translated into English. This is our rescue mission, he tells me.

4:50PM

Walking back to the hotel, Ellen and I noticed the pristine quality of the Iraqi police cars. Some of the plastic coverings haven't even been taken off the seats. Ellen, who served for four years in the US army, and I agreed that one can tell the health of any regime by the cleanliness of the police cars.

6PM

An action-planning meeting for the Peace Team. Productive. There will be an action on December 31st entitled "Resolutions and Celebrations". The goal is to throw a party and get Iraqi mothers, fathers, kids, poets, writers and peace activists together to make New Year's resolutions that would replace the UN resolutions now serving as the litmus test for war. I am in charge of the visuals. I imagine 10,000 Iraqi children dressed in white suits and dresses, singing and waving their hands up as if they were surrendering. Musical accompaniment: Aretha Franklin. Special Guest: sub-commandante Marcos. I don't tell the others about the plan. Let's see what I can do in four days.

7:30PM

Found out George is leaving the team because his father in Massachusetts is in serious condition after he broke his hip. I'm very fond of George. A Lebanese man who also stays at the Al-Fanar hotel, who may or may not be a war profiteer, said George has a heart of gold. I believe him. He's been to Iraq nine times and financially supports eight families here. On this trip he brought two suitcases of medicines and toys. Baghdad is the city of infinite need.

8PM

Saddam is on television. He is sitting on a white leather couch. The reception is bad. Just now there was a cut-away shot to the crowd listening to him speak. It is immense. But there is never a shot of the crowd and Saddam together. Did you know that the Russian KGB was the grandfather of Adobe Photoshop? Not only did they make people disappear, they made their appearance in photographs disappear as well. With a razor blade, pen and ink they would retouch photographs with such precision, it was as if the person had never appeared in the original photograph. Now the cut-away is the standard, whether it is used to subtract or add people. Reality has never been so elastic. Followed by a music video of children singing, and images of Saddam at various state functions.

11PM

Saf, a young student who I play dominos with sometimes, asks me if I have any aspirin for him. I tell Saf, tomorrow.

11:50PM

Every night at 11:30 Iraq television plays a movie. Tonight it's *Mission to Mars* starring Val Kilmer. Kilmer, incidentally, came to Iraq in 1998 as a part of a campaign called "America Cares". One of the members of the board of directors on AC was Barbara Bush. The campaign was set up to take the media spotlight away from former attorney general Ramsey Clark's delegation called "The Sanctions Challenge", which was in Baghdad at the same time. It worked. No one paid attention to Clark and his crew, who were campaigning to stop the sanctions. All eyes were on Val and his vague promises to bring democracy and bad movies to the Middle East.

1AM

Cannot sleep. The wild dogs of Baghdad are out, barking and laughing at the few cars that are still out on the street. I find the following quote in a book about Lao Tzu, mystical Chinese philosopher, that seems appropriate to the times: "Vulgar people are clear, I alone am drowsy. Vulgar people are alert, I alone am muddled".

The Iraq Peace Team Project

Paul Chan is part of the Iraq Peace Team Project. Since September 2002, Iraq Peace Team members have travelled to Iraq and have taken up residence in major cities. They have sent back reports, digital still photographs, open diary entries, digital video footage, press releases, opinion articles, recorded audio, letters to the editor, and more. Chan is a member of the December Iraq Peace team and was in Iraq until mid-January 2003, creating media and art that tells the story of this unspeakable drive for war and the people caught in its path. Chan's video work is distributed by Video Data Bank (www.vdb.org) and his new media work is online at (www.nationalphilistine.com).