

## Our Past Inspires Our Future

It was a fine Saturday morning for a March in Toronto. My two sons suggested an outing to Unionville Town, a 40-minute drive up north. We were in mourning. My husband – their father – had died precipitately a couple of months back. I curled up in the back seat of the car in pursuit of solitary solace. On the highway, I stared out of the window, contemplating, “I can never get enough of this tranquil landscape.” Spring was approaching, and snow blankets were tentatively giving way to yellowish grassland patches.

Upon arrival, I shivered from the gusty winds. In Iraq, where I am originally from, summers are long, with temperatures reaching a sweltering 52°C. It makes some people sick and nauseous, myself included. My son, teasing, said, “But mama, you love winters!”

As usual, the boys had googled the town before our impulsive excursion. So we strolled towards the pond, arriving at the Varley Art Gallery, named after one of Canada’s most expressive painters, Frederick Horsman Varley. It was nestled right at the bottom of Main Street in Unionville. Inside the gallery, I sensed a consoling, unruly ambiance.

The gallery that day was displaying a local artist, Alma Duncan. I was gazing at a piece when a line written on a wooden palette caught my

attention. It said, “Our Past Inspires Our Future.” The past has a strange way of creeping into our present, leading to inevitable, sometimes unfair, comparisons between them.

In 2010, after a seven-year absence, I went back to my hometown Bagdad to work for the New York Times’s Bagdad Bureau. The nature of our job involved reporting on bombed sites. So, I did not hesitate when my colleague, the award-winning correspondent Anthony Shadid, asked me to go with him to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s house in May of that year.

The name 'Jabra' was to me reminiscent of a bygone era. Not for the renowned Arab novelist, poet, and critic. Or the art collector. Nor as the Oxford and Harvard graduate, he was. But because of a personal experience in adolescence, a lifetime ago during the 1970s.

It was at the Mansur Equestrian Club. A compact club comprising a restaurant, swimming pool, it also had a smaller hall for cultural evenings, held by prominent figures like Nizar Qabbani.

At that moment, I was once again a shy 13-year-old girl. Dressed in my floral mini dress and walking hurriedly towards the summer cinema, I bumped into a couple heading to the garden, overlooking the horse racing track. He was holding a pipe and donning a colorful scarf. His wife told me softly, 'Careful!' I apologized politely and ran to catch up with my friends,

who said that his name was Jabra and that he had something to do with writing. Thereafter, reciprocal nods were exchanged whenever our paths crossed.

On April 4, 2010, in Baghdad, a car bomb had been detonated, targeting the Egyptian Embassy, killing 17 people and inflicting damage to the houses and cars in the blast's proximity. After the US invasion against Iraq in the spring of 2003, our city turned into a battlefield overnight.

Kidnapping became rampant, and a new norm ensued.

Terror shaped our mundane. It was not safe for women to drive nor girls to board school buses anymore. My husband now had to escort our daughter to school. One time my son returned from school horrified. He said, 'I saw a dead body on the sidewalk. That was not a scene for a 12-year-old. In the summer of 2003, our family fled to neighboring Jordan.

The owner of the most damaged house was the late Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. A custodian inhabited Jabra's house after his death in 1994. Unfortunately, the custodian and her son both died in the explosion.

I did not know where Jabra lived, except it was in the Mansur district

in Baghdad, where I was raised and schooled in. Mansur used to be an upmarket district. The immaculate tree-lined paved roads, trimmed shrubs,

well-kept parks, and gardens, with low fenced spacious houses, reflected in its simplicity, sophistication.

When we arrived at the bombed area, I realized it was futile to hope that the Mansur District was immune from distortion. For security purposes, cars had to park at least 500-meters from any diplomatic mission in Baghdad. Walking that short path, I noticed the palm trees were unharvested and ruined, and rotten fruit desiccated by the scolding sun fell into piles of uncollected garbage and overgrown weeds.

The foul smell of destruction and decay was palpable. A charred car parallel to a high brick fence was deserted on what used to be a lawn.

Potholes consumed the road. The thick weeds and sandy driveways suggested all the homes were abandoned by their lawful owners, except for one. A young boy of around 8 was peeping through closed heavy curtains in broad daylight from its second-floor window. Perhaps when he heard our voices, he feared that someone had come to kidnap him or his father. I contemplated what quality of life this boy lived, bereft of any childhood.

His home was a double-volume gardenless house. It was presumably built in the nineties during the international embargo that was punitively imposed on Iraq. Our economy was reeling then from wars of attrition and economic sanctions. We were drained consequently, some started to concoct a

sense of delusional pre-eminence. Elegance eventually caved to vulgarity.

At Jabra's house, I realized that the neighborhood was familiar. A few places away sat one of my high school friend's home, Nadal. At her birthdays, we devoured homemade tabouleh and börek. It was also close

to my children's elementary school. But I could not see the school because of the three-meter-high concrete walls, which were a characteristic of the modern era. In Iraq, houses are typically built from brick, concrete, and steel to withstand the harshest bombings.

Yet, Jabra's façade was no more than a pile of rubble mingled with shards of glass and metal. As for the garden, it was one huge crater. A burning reflex came straight to my throat. The world commemorates their fallen: Lest we forget. Since I arrived in Baghdad in March 2010, there have been Black Sunday, Bloody Monday, Devastating Wednesday; the Embassy Day; all acronyms for wreckage and loss, leaving not even fortitude to memorialize.

At the house's entrance, a force held me back. We were walking into a property in the absence of its owner. I asked Anthony from afar, "Are we disturbing the sanctity of the home?" He was already caught in his thoughts over some artwork, too gripped to answer. I wondered how the American

soldiers felt when they rolled uninvited into Mesopotamia, into Iraq—walking into a land possibly unheard of before they enlisted. Ultimately leaving behind a trail of tribulations and destroyed lives.

While I was confounded in my sense of loss amid stacks upon stacks of scattered books, broken, dusty furniture, and shattered windows, I caught a glance of Anthony. Even this person from a world apart was in awe of such a multitalented human being. "Could there be so much wealth in a world of turmoil?" he questioned.

Jabra's library of hundreds of books and his collection of art that included works by prominent Iraqi artists like Shakir Hassan Al Said or Mohammed Ghani Hikmet was not likely salvageable. Equivalent to Varley Art Gallery, a local museum could have been founded, revering his legacy in an ideal world. Instead, we were rummaging unguarded through paper, close to smears of blood, next to a twisted steel table lamp.

I reckoned it was a house of the seventies. Erudite and rich in knowledge, art, and humanity. It is hard to persuade the younger Iraqi generation, like my children, that Iraq was a prosperous, wealthy country when I was growing up. Two of my three children were born amidst the Iraq-Iran war, waging from 1980 to 1988. Consequently, I didn't expect the local staff – or

Anthony the foreigner – to fathom that people like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, once upon a Baghdad, were not a rare commodity. Any description of my juvenile life about Iraq before the wars inevitably receives a doubtful stare. Alarming, there was no one to corroborate my memories. I felt profound lonesomeness. Anthony once said, "You will never reclaim it back." And we haven't.

I pondered what Jabra would think of today's Iraq, all marred by blood and devastation. A Syriac Orthodox Christian who moved to secular Baghdad in 1948 from Palestine married into an Iraqi Muslim family. The pious were defined by their good deeds rather than by their extremism back then. He built a career, home, family, and friends in secular Baghdad. One friend happened to be the archeologist Max Mallowan, the husband of the writer Dame Agatha Christie. Mallowan and Christie met, fell in love then lived in Iraq amidst the ancient sites of Nimrud and Ur. Biblical Nimrud with its ruler Ashurbanipal II, whom the Old Testament describes as "A mighty hunter before the LORD." Amidst those sites, Christie wrote, *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Gate of Baghdad*. Throughout the 1950s, Nimrud became a second home for Christie. These ancient sites' fate was no less painful than the rest of the country. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) bulldozed it in March 2015.

After the Gallery tour, we headed to the main road, and it was littered, dusty with scattered dead bodies. My reminiscence had left me confused and disorientated, causing flashbacks from my troubled past. While, Unionville town's historic Main St., settled in 1794, was no more than a snapshot from a Hallmark movie: spas and small boutiques accentuated by lushes of foliage and flowering. It was everything my troubled vision was not.

My motherland has changed beyond recognition as if the whole universe's wrath has fallen on it. Agatha Christie's Murder in Mesopotamia is not so much a novel anymore as it is a fact, practiced fervently daily.

When leaving Jabra's premises, I glimpsed a small green shrub sprouting from debris in the corner of the garden. The tree was bearing a tangerine – that was the only sign of life in this once vibrant home—an apt metaphor for Baghdad's existence. Clinging to life by a twig, yet miraculously managing to sprout.

People migrate for different reasons and motives. Often, they relinquish everything except for their memories: the bitter, the sweet, and the ugly. In the Varley Art Gallery, a simple line triggered a vivid past. By the end of our excursion, my vision was clear. Baghdad is the past I cherish

and long for, sadly a mere mirage. Toronto is the existent present I enjoy, embrace, and appreciate.

I gave the main street one last glance before getting into the car. I took in the picturesque scene, a year-round Christmas town. We left with sachets of homemade fudge, truffles, and memories old and new.

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