A Brighter Fear

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BEFORE THE BEGINNING

I am Luisa. I am Amira. I am Maysoon, Fay, Samara.
I am black. I am white. I am Asian.
I am Sunni, Shia, Christian.
I am Arab, Persian, Jew, Iraqi.
I am Mesopotamia. I am a million.
I am everyone. I am Baghdad.
I want to tell you my story, yet I want you to
hear everyone's. Mine is not unusual, it is not special.
So many the same: the difference only a name,
a job, a family, a religion.
A million voices, a million stories.
And I am one.
My name is Lina.

CHAPTER ONE

Baghdad, March 2005

Before the war, fear hung over everyone, and we all knew that even voicing our true opinions was dangerous.

Although it was one threat, one regime, there were a million eyes and ears looking out over every city and town and street and home, ready to hear that one wrong word spoken, or that one wrong opinion offered. By anyone.

Before the war, before the Americans in 2003 with their bombs, I couldn't have spoken like this, because even thinking like this was impossible if you wanted to live, if you didn't want to disappear. As my dear Mama discovered.

Fear was never discussed, because fear was constant;

you lived in it and it lived in you.

Back then, before the war and the madness it brought, my papa would've been shocked to hear me speak like this. He would've taken hold of me, I'm sure, scared for the life of his only child, clasped his hand to my mouth, his finger to his lips, his eyes wide with panic. But I knew, as all Iraqis of sound mind did, the importance of muted opinions and quiet anonymity, and the memory of how things were lies only just beneath the surface, even now.

Years of living like that are difficult to change, and I pause to remember that back then, merely what I've already spoken about would've been of interest to the Mukharabat, the secret police; that they would've found reason to arrest me, torture me, kill me even.

And so Iraqis spoke in silence, and to hear them, to really *hear* what they thought, what they felt, you needed to listen not to what they said, but to what they didn't say.

Now? I shake my head. Now, one threat has been replaced by many. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Each with its own opinions and wishes and aspirations for the future.

What do I want for my future? I hear you ask. Is it

survival? Or dare I wish for more?

No. I don't want to survive.

I want to *live*.

But this is not just my life. This *is* life and I have to tell you all about it – for me, for everyone. To make sense of things, to understand and to be understood.

Sitting here, looking over the remains of my city and my home, the memories hang heavy around me, filling the air, stifling, and as I breathe them in, they burn my throat and chest like summer heat.

I can't breathe, yet I can remember.

I remember the beginning of 2003. I remember the silent trepidation it brought. What did it mean, that year? To me, it meant more than three years of Mama missing and the frustration of still being no closer to knowing what happened to her. It meant finally telling Papa I didn't want to be a lawyer as Mama had been. It meant exams and university applications.

And it meant war.

To all of us, it meant war. Just a question of when, how and who would survive. Nobody mentioned it on the streets, in the markets, or at school. Of course they

didn't. They knew better than that. And so did I. Did anyone even think about who would win? Was I the only one who dared to assume Iraq would fall? That our country would be occupied? Just that thought, that thought in my head, without the words even forming, without my lips opening to speak or to whisper, made me worry, made that fear grow inside me.

I was scared.

And as I sat in the kitchen alone one day listening to the noises of the neighbourhood outside, my friend Layla's younger brothers playing in the street, the market not far away, car horns and chatter, moped engines and the muezzin's call to prayer, I wondered what would change.

What would my city, my home, be like when war came? What would happen? What would be destroyed?

But the possibility of the regime changing, of it falling, seemed unthinkable, unfathomable. I knew what democracy should be, but I couldn't imagine how we would live it, how things would change, how life would be with freedom thrust upon us.

I wanted war to mean we could think freely, speak freely, offer opinion.

I wanted war to mean choice would come.

I wanted war to mean Mama would return home again.

I heard Papa talking to her sometimes, though he never would admit it to me, or to Uncle Aziz, and definitely not to Auntie Hana. He'd tell Mama about his work, the paper he was writing, his students. He'd whisper about the Ba'ath party, sharing with her why he joined, why he had no choice. "It was for protection," he'd say. "To protect my job and our daughter. A member in name only. I do nothing for them," he'd whisper. "*Nothing*."

He'd tell her how her sister Hana was doing, how grumpy she'd become and what a nuisance her children were. He'd tell her about me and I would hear the pauses in his speech, waiting for her reply yet knowing it would never come.

Why? I wondered. *Why do this to yourself?* The one time he talked to me about her, in the days when I still dared to ask, he insisted she was still alive. Countless times I'd seen him emptying out her jewellery box, and I knew he was looking for her necklace, that necklace with the green stone and filigreed gold, but even I knew he would never find it, because she always wore it and would've been wearing it, I'm sure, on that day she disappeared.

That necklace, wherever it was, was wherever Mama was.

When she'd been gone a year I walked into their bedroom and found him standing in front of her open wardrobe, his face pressed against her clothes, his hands holding them to his cheeks and nose and mouth. I moved around to see what he was doing and listened to his heavy breathing as he sucked in the last of her scent before it faded completely from the fabric. He turned and saw me, and for the first time in my life I saw tears in my papa's eyes and stuttering down his face. When I stepped forward to hold him, he growled at me to go.

After that she became a taboo subject in his presence.

Her clothes still hang in the wardrobe.

Or did. Until the bomb.

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I opened a new sketchbook, pressing down the white pages, smoothing my fingers along the inside of the spine. I picked up a pencil and held it over the paper, the tip trembling in my fingers. I wanted to make a record of this war, if it arrived. I wanted to remember how things were, what things looked like, draw the buildings in my city that had inspired my dream to be an architect.

Yet I wished I could put my thoughts on paper too, take my worries out of my head, stop them spinning and bouncing around and making me feel sick. Maybe then, I thought, I could sleep at night and my chest wouldn't burn during the day, and I wouldn't feel dizzy at the prospect of bombs and troops, and my head wouldn't hurt with the worry of what might happen.

And I knew the door behind me was locked, but I felt the danger still, faceless, invisible, knowing every secret I held in my head. A lifetime, seventeen years, of being allowed no opinion but the right one, had left me with a fear of expression and a caution to my own thoughts. Could I really write them down? What if it was found? What would happen to me? To Papa? Nobody would know and nobody would ever find out, because we would disappear and nobody would dare to ask where, why or how.

I picked up the sketchbook and stepped from the house. The sun was bright on my eyes and the wind blew around my clothes. *I'll sketch the buildings while they stand,* I thought, *the people while they breathe, and the city while it lives.*

And I wandered around alone, stopping here and there, sketching things that caught my eye, things I

wanted to capture while they still existed. I stopped at a market, breathing in the different smells; the fruit, the spices, the tobacco the men smoked, and I sketched the face of a young boy helping his mama, catching a look of cheekiness behind his tight-lipped grin.

I paused to watch a coppersmith, a skinny man with glasses, wipe sweat from his balding head before continuing to beat away at a huge copper pot.

At a row of shops my pencil dashed across the paper; the shapes of the bold signs, the darkened windows, the arches above.

But everywhere I went I saw him. Posters of him, paintings; holding guns, smiling at his people, surrounded by tanks, waving to crowds. Saddam. His presence loomed over us; his mirrored sunglasses hiding his eyes, yet reflecting ours, and our fear. Everywhere I went, I felt him watching.

I found myself at Al-Mustansiriya University, sketching the straight lines of the roof, the patterns on its beige walls, the blackness inside its massive arches. I remembered Papa talking about it, how old it was.

How many people have walked through its doors, I wondered, *in all these hundreds of years it's been standing? How many more will in the future? Will I? Could I?* And

I thought of all the people who were students here, or lecturers, or staff, and all the other people in this city; every one a husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, sister, friend, colleague, teacher, pupil, of someone, somewhere.

Every one, loved by some one.

And I realised that every person in the city would be thinking the same thing, would be wishing, hoping, praying that they wouldn't lose anyone they loved, or they cared for, or even just knew.

But how many would? How many people would be crying in the morning? How much grief would it take, to fill this place of five million people?

I strolled towards home, but there were too many thoughts and worries in my head. I didn't want to be inside. I didn't want to be alone.

I headed towards the river, a place where I knew some friends would be, and together we lounged on the bank, hiding in the shade; everyone solemn. Some had left the country already; those whose families could afford it, or those with relatives abroad, and already it felt like there were holes in our group. Friends missing who would probably never return, yet alive at least. I hoped.

These were friends I'd known for years; friends, it seemed, I'd never not known, and for a moment I

watched their faces and a fear hit me that we might never be together again.

With a sigh I turned towards the river and took out my sketchbook. On a clean page the river took shape, flowing away in the distance; grey, concrete bridges spanning it; hotels and high rises reaching up into the pale sky; clumped grasses sprouting near its banks; palm trees, walkways, streets bustling with traffic. Flat and dusty. Sun bleached and muted.

I stopped drawing and stared into the distance, imagining the palace, just visible, watching us. I glanced away from it, in case it caught me staring, in case it read the thoughts that shouldn't have been in my head. I daren't draw it, daren't even look at it. Could only just dare to think about it.

I'd heard whispers about its swimming pools. I closed my eyes and felt the heat envelop me.

If that palace is ever empty, I dared to think, *I will walk along its marble floors in heeled shoes, the noise bouncing off the walls and announcing my presence. I will stroll outside to the swimming pool, slip off my shoes and dive into the cool water. I will swim to the centre and float on my back staring up at the sky, the bluest sky in the world. And I will listen to the silence.*

I opened my eyes and my mouth to share this thought,

but couldn't say the words. Not even to my best friend Layla.

The words weren't even stuck in my throat. They daren't get that far. They daren't even form.