Playing Monopoly in Baghdad

Maysoon Malak

Those were different times in Baghdad....

Those were times when the streets of Baghdad—not only what is now called «the green zone»—were embroidered with palms and eucalyptus trees, and when its gardens, full of jasmine, roses, mint and basil, quenched their thirst from the waters of the Tigris, bringing yet new life to our ancient city.

Those were different times in Baghdad, when the spring rain brought with it the sweet smells of orange blossom and wet earth, and in the early mornings, the milk women carrying their milk and cream, secured in small baskets placed on their heads, proudly marched into the city, looking very much like those statues that were hosted from the magnificent Iraqi Museum during the recent invasion of Iraq.

Those were different times in Baghdad, when the gates of Baghdadi homes were wide open in anticipation of friends, who would come into the cool living rooms and comfortably join in whatever was taking place, and when often, someone would produce a late in the evening, and a singing party would quickly start in the garden, and more friends and neighbors would join.

Maysoon Malak was born and raised in Baghdad, studied Economics in the United Kingdom and at the American University in Beirut. From 1974 to 1979 she worked in the Iraqi Ministry of Planning. She has been employed by different UN agencies working in Tunisia and Jordan, Afghanistan and New York. Mother of two daughters she now lives between Cairo and Amman.

Why do I chose as I write about those times in Baghdad?

It was in those times that I was given a brand new bicycle, and a cousin taught me how to cycle with my hands floating in the air like a rope dancer, another took me to exhibitions to see the paintings young Iraqi artists were producing, and yet another taught me to enjoy Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker and his Sleeping Beauty. In those times in Baghdad, summer was the time for pleasure. When August came we would gather in the evenings, old and young, carrying candles glued to tiny wooden pieces, to have a boat trip in the Tigris. Once we were all on board and the boatmen moved their boats into the dark waters, we would light our candles, carefully put them in the river and make wishes we wanted to come true as we watched the little lights floating away from us.

How sure we were then that no wish was impossible!

It was in those times in Baghdad that one early morning my grandfather woke me and my brother up and asked us to dress quickly because he wanted to take us to see a thief who had been caught in the neighborhood.

When my mother objected, he told her that he had once heard me saying that I was afraid of thieves, and therefore we had to see a thief to know that he is human. “Do you want your children to live with fear?”, then he winked, “except for the fear of God of course!”

In those times we dressed and walked by his side: a man in his seventies, still very good looking and tall and straight like the old palm in our garden, taking him with two teenagers to prove to them that a thief is only a man.

Decades later, as I watched on a television screen tanks marching into my city, a fear like the Great Flood swept over me, but my grandfather suddenly entered into my Time, hurrying me to get dressed to see a thief, and as I walked beside him I knew he was taking me in his Ark to the land where no fear can break the soul.

It was in those times that I began to love my city and its people and its gardens and its trees and its river and its bridges and its palm groves and its old buildings and its mosques and its churches and the cool darkness of its bazaars, with men sitting on Persian carpets in their small shops, looking like masters of the world, but who would stand up politely when my mother approached to buy goods for our home or clothes for the feast.

It was in those times in Baghdad, when I was still at intermediary school, that one summer my brother and I were given an English game that had newly arrived to Baghdad. It was called «Monopoly».

I still remember our excitement when the game’s intricacies were explained. We had in front of us a world of make-believe: we could buy houses and hotels in London, win hundreds of British pounds with a stroke of luck that came through the Chance Cards, and sometimes we would loose all the assets we won, again with a simple stroke of luck. It was hard for us, though, to understand why houses in Mayfair were more expensive than those in Strand, and why did we have to pay for them in British pounds, but our elders explained that the game, designed by English designers, was originally thought of for English boys and girls who had fruits bought for them from Covent Gardens, who shopped at Oxford Street, and who would spend weekends in hotels in Mayfair if their parents were rich.

That summer, Monopoly became our favorite pastime. Every day, as Baghdad became solemnly quiet under the heaviness of the summer heat and our elders enjoyed their siesta, we would invite cousins to share Monopoly with us.

One day during that summer, a twenty-seven-year old cousin, Nazik al Malalik, an established poet in the Arab region, arrived from the United States after receiving her Masters Degree in comparative literature. All the young generation in the family adored her because she was a very loving person who always had unusual stories to tell us. Once she arrived we started to spend our afternoons in her study, where books covered every wall.

We would sit around her listening with awe to the new stories she told us of her life in that faraway country Iraqis called «America» then. She told us how autumn leaves were the colour of fire in a place called Virginia and how she and her friends made a snowman during a Christmas holiday in another place called Wisconsin. In between
there she told us stories of her experience with those American men and women who were so generous to this young Iraqi who came from an ancient land, seeking knowledge in their new country. I still remember a story that caught my imagination for a long time.

«I was sitting in the tenth row of the university hall during a music lecture. The professor was discussing Beethoven’s works so sensitively that I almost cried. Suddenly, he stopped his lecture and walked towards me and held both my hands and whispered: it’s alright my child... Let’s have coffee together after the lecture. I was struck! How did he sense how I felt? I don’t know, but maybe souls do speak with each other across geography and culture. After the lecture, he took me for a coffee and we discussed Iraq and the United States, music and poetry, and that was the beginning of a strong friendship between a sixty years old American professor and a twenty seven years old Iraqi student»

Why do I Choke as I Remember the day when we received our Iraqi Monopoly?

Is it because for the last twenty-three years I have never stopped dreaming of the day when I will be back to my city, enter a storage room, look inside my ancient trunk where the first love letters I received are kept, and take out that Iraqi Monopoly to give it away to my daughters who are now too old to play with it, but who may hand it over in future, with its story, to my grandchildren?

Later, my cousin told us how she made this new game. She asked a carpenter to make the board, a calligrapher to write the street names and the paper money, and then she herself wrote the text in the Chance Cards. There was one more room like the sober messages on the Chance Cards in the English Monopoly, the new one included jokes, which she herself wrote, to make sure – she told us – we would laugh when we played!

I still remember that whenever the game gave me the chance to buy a hotel, I would proudly announce: «I am buying a hotel next door to my school and shall soon invite my friends to eat kabab sandwiches in its restaurant!» As I made this important announcement, I felt immensely happy because I would imagine «Ma Mère» the French nun who was the strict principal of my school, looking angrily at this teenager, brimming with too much life and dreams for a student of her school, standing at the gate of her hotel and inviting her best friends to those forbidden kabab sandwiches!!!

And I would giggle with the thought that she could do nothing to stop me buying a hotel next to her school, for I was playing with my Iraqi Monopoly...

Cairo, March 2006

Martina Kamp

Die Re-Konstruktion des Irak

Demokratisierung zwischen Konfessionalismus, Ethnität und Geschlecht
