

The captivating story of a Christian Assyrian family living during the WWI era. It is told with humor and a fresh perspective on Middle Eastern history and politics.

Yesterday's Children: Growing Up Assyrian in Persia

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Yesterday's Children: *Growing up Assyrian in Persia*

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Yesterday's Children Growing Up in Persia

Although I am not quite eighty years old, I have yet experienced life as it must have been lived in the middle ages. I was born in 1915, and for the first few years of my life lived in a walled city with great iron studded gates. Inside the fortified city lay narrow cobblestoned streets flanked by two-story high adobe walls that hid private dwellings. Small latticed windows pierced the walls at the highest level and solid, strong doors - always locked - barred entrance to intrusive strangers. What went on behind those doors is impossible to tell. Was it a rich man's abode, light and airy inside with courtyards and fountains; interiors filled with priceless hand-woven carpets, silk cushions, golden ornaments, perfumed lamps, and bejeweled harem wives? Or was it a poor man's home; a warren of dark rooms and darker yet passages, where perhaps twenty families lived four, five, six to a room? No one could tell from the outside. For no one wanted to attract the evil eye of the jealous, or the attention of greedy and fierce tribesmen who, from time to time and without warning, descended on the hapless inhabitants of unwallled cities. They sacked, pillaged and carried off the young women, then withdrew to their mountain fastness where no government troops dared to follow. Who knew if these cutthroat tribal folk would not attempt to come into our guarded city as well?

Our town walls were as thick as they were high. When all the caravans bringing in merchandise from far off places like Samarkand and Bokhara, Isphahan and Khorasan, Baghdad and Basra, and other places to the east were safely in, the gates clanged shut. Afterward, only a special permit from the Governor or knowledge of the secret password could let you in or out.



Inside these thick city walls were granaries and sufficient stores to feed the inhabitants in times of siege or famine. There were also barracks for the soldiers who guarded the walls twenty-four hours a day, men always on the lookout for possible trouble. By sunset the noisy caravans had arrived at their destination to the great *caravansaries*, inns with large courtyards accomodating travelers and pack animals needing food, lodging, and rest for the night after an arduous day-long crossing of the desert, or seemingly interminable mountains. The caravansaries opened out onto the great bazaar creating easy access for traveling merchants to sell their goods, or to barter for the purchase of local wares before making ready for tomorrow's caravan. The great bazaar consisted of acres upon acres of shops laid out on a grid of narrow crisscrossing lanes. Covered and vaulted, the only visible daylight streamed in from skylights set twenty-five feet, or higher, at the apex of domed arches. To us children, the bazaars were an enchantment, a wonder-filled Aladdin's cave; a visit there to be prayed for, or dreamed about.

Just before sunset the streets were swept clean and sprinkled down with water from goatskin bags to cool and settle the parched, dusty ground in preparation for the call to evening prayer. I can still smell the scent of water on baked earth, and the fresh, sweet fragrance of petunias growing in secret gardens behind imposing walls. Then, thin and sweet in the evening air, came the lilting voice of the *muezzin* (he who calls worshippers to prayer) from his high perch in a nearby minaret, that place of honor towering above all other buildings: "*La Allah Alallah, Mohammed Rasul Allah*" (Allah is great and Mohammed is his messenger). Wherever he was at the time, a Muslim spread out his prayer rug and answered the call to prayer. He turned toward Mecca and performed rituals of his faith openly and unselfconsciously. With prayers over and the muezzin silent, the devotee picked up his rug, shook and folded it reverently, and went home to his waiting family.

It was a quiet time out on the streets at this hour, the city gates were now locked and barred against the evils of the night. But high up on the rooftops it was bright and alive with laughter and joyful anticipation. At



our home, as in every other, the oil lamps were being lit. Some lamps were very beautiful, fashioned from gold and adorned with ruby glass, while those in the homes of poorer families were made of inexpensive tin. With lamps and lanterns illuminated, tablecloths laid, and dishes set out, this was the time for families to gather for their evening meal; the time for fragrant pilaf, spiced lamb kabobs, chilled *sharbat* (a cold fruit drink), yogurt, and fresh fruits from our lands. In warm weather most people had their evening meals and slept on the flat rooftops of their houses, for the city was malarial and troublesome mosquitoes stayed close to the ground in the damp vegetation of low-lying gardens. The roofs were enclosed by high parapets for safety and to guard privacy, but you knew that people all over town were in their rooftop patios. One could hear laughter and whispering voices nearby, and see reflected light from lanterns on parapet walls in all directions, stretching for what seemed like forever.

By the time our evening meal was over the blackness of night was upon us. All around, voices had stilled to the hushed tones of more intimate conversations. In my family, baby Angel and the two middle children, Willie and Agnes, were soon fast asleep in their cots in a private little corner behind a chimney stack. On another stack, outlined against the night sky, our regular summer tenant, Father Stork, stood on one leg guarding his mate and her chicks. The servants had, by now, cleared remnants of our dinner and retired to their own quarters somewhere in the depths of the house. Finally, my older brother, Homer, and I were sent off to sleep under the magical night sky as the deep silence of evening descended, wrapping us in slumberous peace.

Often I would lie awake on my back gazing at the stars so far, far away. On one particularly clear night they seemed closer than usual. I felt that I could stretch out my arm and pick a star, keeping it for my very own. I would gaze and gaze, fighting off sleep, wondering if somewhere out there among those millions of worlds there were other little girls who would like to be my friends, to come down and play with me. The spectacular night sky brought to mind my kinship to those long gone Assyro-Babylonian



ancestors who were the first to transform the practice of stargazing into the art of astrology, then into the science of astronomy.

Suddenly, something startled me. Except for the perennial chatter of our river, the Sufi Chai, just outside the city gates, there was usually no audible sound, light, or whisper at this hour. I listened carefully and then...yes, I heard it more clearly. It was the sound of donkey hooves on the cobblestoned street below. I ran to the parapet and climbed onto a chair to get a better look, and in the pitch dark I could see a lantern bobbing up and down in the distance. As the lantern approached, for a brief moment, a man came into my line of vision. He ran ahead, lighting the way for his master who was riding astride a donkey. The master was a *mullah* (an Islamic cleric) on a mission of mercy, perhaps going to the bedside of a dying man. For no one, unless on illicit business, would be out at this time of night without a pass, or knowledge of the official password. Papa, being a doctor, always knew the password, which was changed every few days. The “word” was passed directly to him by his friend, the Governor. Papa was at the Governor’s compound almost every day, as there was always someone sick in his large household.

As the mullah’s light was swallowed up by the night, I could hear the town crier’s voice approaching. Every few yards he stopped and called out at the top of his voice, “It is now ten o’clock (for instance) and all is well. Sleep well all you true believers, for Allah is great.” Then he, too, vanished from sight. I still did not want to go back to bed, because I was waiting for something special to happen. Once again, I heard clippity-clop, clippity-clop, this time the sound of horse’s hooves on cobblestones, and the chink of metal on metal. When they came into view, by the light of their lanterns I could see that they were fierce looking men armed to the teeth. They would have to be, for this was the night watch, and because of them we all slept more soundly. They, too, vanished into the velvet darkness, the noise of their passage gradually diminishing with distance.

It was silent again, all the world asleep. Father Stork remained seemingly awake, still on one leg, guarding his precious nestlings. In the deep and eerie silence, I imagined I could hear dim, unintelligible fairy



voices singing songs of Arabian Nights, enticing me from the stars above. All of a sudden, I was afraid and felt so alone in the world that I no longer liked the night, or the mysteries it held. I scurried to Mama's and Papa's bed and nestled in between them, to be held safely in their arms. Once comforted, the night no longer held fearsome secrets and I drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke, the balmy dawn of a new day was unfolding. The night-time breeze had quieted, and the poplar leaves that had been rustling, as if singing lullabies to slumbering children, were quiet too. All of nature seemed suspended, waiting for sunrise and the regeneration of life.

① Our Family

Our family consists of Papa, Mama, Grandma Ghozal, and five children. Angel is the baby and her name suits her perfectly. She hardly ever cries, amuses herself happily, and is attempting to crawl. The next older child is Agnes. She is adorable with large dark eyes, creamy skin, and curly hair. She once met with an unfortunate accident caused by my energetic brother Homer. He was vigorously wielding a wooden sword which met with Agnes's face, piercing both cheeks. After a painful healing there remained no visible scars, only two enticing dimples and an enchanting smile. Agnes loves playing with her dolls and with Angel, which leaves Willie very lonely in the middle. Homer and I aren't ready to include him in our games as he is too young to keep up with us when we hurtle up and down stairs, or slide down banisters. Willie is a sturdy and cuddly child, always setting progressive goals for himself and achieving them without fuss or fanfare.

I am the next eldest child, and according to the servants, a pampered pest who has her poor Papa, the doctor, wrapped around her little finger. I can certainly wheedle most things out of him if I set my mind to it. I know the power of my enchanting smile and I can whine and cry and keep the tears flowing until the poor man, so soft where his wife and children are concerned, gives in.



Finally, there's Homer, the eldest. He is tall for his age, handsome, and clever. He is also inventive in devising mischief and planning getaways through the interconnecting buildings which encircle our three courtyards. The courtyards have three solid gates and a doorman who admits patients to Papa's medical clinic. He is not permitted to let us leave the grounds unless we are accompanied by an attendant.

Homer is my closest friend and playmate. Outside of the high-walled school compound (especially in winter) we don't see much of our friends, except on special occasions when they come visiting with their parents. My brother is also my Knight in Shining Armor. He assures me that if those thieving Kurds ever come down from their mountain lairs to take me away, he will personally kill them all! At this, he draws out his wooden *khanjal*, the same one that pierced Agnes's cheeks, and with a blood curdling yell whirls the thing around and around his head until I get dizzy.

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