



Source: Omar Al-ibadi, Reuters, 'Amid ruins of Iraq, pupils raise the barre', *The Age online*, 26/04/06.

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The bushes by the roadside are heavy with monsoon rain. Judith stares at them with her forehead pressed against the bus window even though the constant rattling from the engine is giving her a headache. Everything is diesel fumes and damp. The salt of her own tears has dried in tight patches on her cheeks.

The bus is stopped in traffic on the way to the Islamabad International Airport, taking a busload of American diplomatic families out of the country. It is flanked by two rumbling green Army jeeps, but even the military can't get them through the squalling traffic. The donkey carts and bicycle rickshaws are having better luck, pulling off and riding through the soupy mud of the ditches. A little girl with a shaved head and kohl-lined eyes watches from her family's house—a shelter of soggy cardboard and corrugated iron in the middle of the traffic island. A few skinny, soaked chickens huddle beside her.

Only yesterday morning Judith's family woke up to the news. President Bush, small and grey, on CNN announcing the air attack on Baghdad—the beginning of Operation Desert Storm.

He doesn't know what he is doing to us, Judith had thought, but she didn't say anything. Just curled her legs under her nightgown and pushed her chin into her knee, hard, until it hurt her bottom teeth. Normally her mother would have told her not to stretch out her nightgown, but no one said anything. Her sister Louise was sitting beside her on the floor, sucking furiously on the end of her braid.

The phone started ringing straightaway, the black phone that only her father was allowed to use. He took it into the dining room and shut the glass French doors, emerging half an hour later with a tight jaw and the instructions that they were to pack two suitcases and leave the country in 24 hours. He would be staying behind.

'Things aren't safe here. The Pakistani government is supporting the US, but the people are siding with Iraq. There were two street riots yesterday, and a Belgian woman was attacked. I'll move into the Embassy compound, with other necessary personnel. When things settle down here I'll come and join you in the States.'

He put his hand on his wife's shoulder. 'The rest of our things I'll ship over later. I'm going to the Embassy now, but I should be home this afternoon.'

Her parents looked at each other for a moment. Judith wished her mother would say something, but she just went through the swinging doors into the kitchen and began talking in a hushed voice to the servants.

When her father left the room, Louise began to cry. Judith went to her bedroom. There was nothing she could leave behind. There was nothing she could take. She ran her hand across her dollhouse with intricate mirror-panelled halls and a miniature family. A father, mother, boy and girl, all with peach-coloured skin and stitched-on clothes. Her stuffed toys, which she kept lined up on the windowsill in the order of favourites. The quilt her grandmother made when she was born. She wanted to take them all. She wanted to burn them all. She walked into her bathroom, shut the door, turned on the shower, turned on the exhaust fan and took off her nightgown. She sat down on the bottom of the tub, water falling into her eyes and mouth, and began to cry thick sobs that echoed on the tiled walls. The sound of her own voice was unbearable.

No one seems upset now—the bus is crowded with familiar faces and most of them are joking and talking like the end of the world hasn't come. Louise sits next to her and the muffled sounds of Paula Abdul are just audible from the headphones of her Walkman. She seems almost happy to be going, and already talks about what she will do when they land in Washington DC.

'First I'm going to go to Pizza Hut and have an extra large pepperoni pizza, and then I'm going to go to Dairy Queen for a hot fudge sundae. Or maybe a Butterfinger Blizzard.'

The thought made Judith's stomach growl. She replies 'I wish we weren't going. I don't care if I never eat Pizza Hut again.'

'Liar,' Louise says, and puts on her headphones.

The traffic is at standstill and rain pelts the bus, making steel drum sounds on the roof. The bushes outside are so full of rain they quiver.

Suddenly all the water in one bush gives way, congealing into a giant drop and falling, exploding onto the muddy ground. Judith is amazed. She has never seen anything like it in all of her twelve years. The single drop of water was bigger than her head. And then it was gone.

This is something I will never forget, she thinks. This is how I will remember this moment. More than the chickens, the little girl or the way the donkeys trudged through the ditches—I will remember how the bush held the rain until it was nearly liquid itself, and then released it, magnificently, into the thick yellow mud below.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Eleanor Limprecht.