



Source: Kirk Semple, 'Uneasy alliance is taming one insurgent bastion', *New York Times online*, 29/04/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [disenchantment](#), [desert](#), [politics](#)

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The windows of the caravan I am riding in are not sealed. Sand billows through, coating my clothes. We have been working all day, stumbling over dialects as we conversed with shepherds and nomadic tribes about the census. I am kneeling against the doors, steadying two stacked ballot boxes filled with leaflets. I pull a goatskin over my body.

The caravan grinds to a halt, bumping into the tow-bar. I hear a radio crackle outside. A bolt slides and the doors are pulled open. The desert is dark and cool. My comrade gestures and I jump out, pulling the skin blanket around me. Even in the dark I can tell his features are set. Something is wrong.

Two other vote reformers have climbed out of the jeep up front and stand some way off in the darkness. One of them pulls on a cigarette and I watch the lit end glow. My comrade leans forward, and I can see he is surveying my long hair, which has come loose from the baseball cap. I rub the peak of the cap nervously.

He motions to the radio, and suddenly I feel nauseous.

He explains that he has just received word that my brother has been murdered. I walk away from the caravan. My comrade continues to speak...the printing press...the factory raided...addresses...my brother tortured with Chiffon...I vomit on a patch of esparto grass. The men shift their feet, waiting nervously. Another cigarette is lit.

I straighten up, return to the caravan, and sit between the open doors in the back. My comrade passes me a water bottle. I swill out my mouth. I spit. The cigarette is passed to me. They ask if I am ready to continue. It will not be safe to return to our own homes. I climb into the back of the caravan with the lit cigarette. The men are watching me. My comrade closes and bolts the caravan doors.

My brother is dead. Our work will be moved, hidden, re-directed. It will take months for us to re-establish ourselves. On the way back to the town I decide I will go to my Mother's and I wonder how I will break the news of my brother's death.

My mother belonged to another war. She had officially joined the struggle when she was twenty, going underground under the nom de guerre Halima, as a barefoot nurse. She had many problems with the male militants. They thought that the women who joined the fighting did so to find a husband. But my Mother wanted to work, to fight. She would tell me, 'The desert was my school. I learned everything there.' She had lived out here when she was sent to look after the war-wounded by her colonel. It took her three months to walk to the border. How she survived alone!?

Once there she was set up in a villa and told not to go

out. For years she tended the sick and wounded. Finally she was captured at the villa and sent to a detention camp.

During her recollections she breathes heavily. Time and again she stands in the kitchen after dark, gesticulating wildly, recounting a story of amputation without anaesthesia, using a saw to relieve a corporal of his leg. She is overcome and suddenly animated, her taurine eyes relaying a mixture of pride and surprise at her own actions; her recollection of those years borders on giddiness. Her accounts, and the accounts of other women, are different from the official version later rewritten to glorify the male militia. How she had longed for a free and just society. While she was imprisoned, the country was rebuilt without her.

And I, as I sat at the kitchen table in the dark as she told those stories? I seethed, and swore that we women would regain our strength. I began to go out to protests with my brother. I joined his comrades to fight for a new kind of freedom. My mother was very proud.

Tonight as I am rocked gently in and out of sleep, clutching ballot boxes and wiping sand from my eyelashes, I cannot wait to go to her house, despite my news. I want to sit in the dark kitchen and say, 'One day, Mother, we will enter the political arena, like bullfighters in all our glory. And we will wave the red flag at the men'.

As the caravan lurches northwards over the plateau the mother sits at home, with heavy bovine eyes, in front of the television. Her body is still hard and wiry, but her eyes betray a lethargy; a resignation born of years of captivity and domesticity at the hands of her now-deceased husband. She leans forward with a level gaze at the screen and spoons gelatinous layers of meat from a terrine on the table into her mouth.

Two men appear in the doorway, her own countrymen, and silently she licks the spoon. She thinks, 'They have come for me, at last'. She is Halima again and she is smiling. The spoon is clenched in her fist as her throat is cut. In her other hand the remote control.

I say goodbye to my comrades at the end of my Mother's road. The sun is rising as I pass through the gate and enter the house. I hear the television.

Her eyes are staring wide at the screen when I find her small, dead body. I prise the remote control from her fist and turn off the television. I sit beside her with my head on her soaked chest, and stare into the little red standby light.

And then I run from that house, heavy as a bull on its last lap of the arena.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Clara Brennan.*