

Story for performance #815
webcast from London at 07:21PM, 13 Sep 07



Source: Joshua Partlow, 'Shelling near Iranian border is forcing Iraqi Kurds to flee', *Washington Post online*, 13/09/07.

Tags: war, incarceration, child/parent, death
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He was telling me about the events leading up to his imprisonment. I had my tape recorder set up but for some reason the microphone wasn't activated. I apologise.

I'm trying to remember, but perhaps the particulars are not important. Maybe you'll understand that this is quite a common story with that type of high-ranking official. They were all men of a certain age—they would have had to be, to have reached those kinds of positions—so they all had military-age sons, but none of them had actually gone anywhere near the front line. All of their sons had been squirrelled out of the country. It was a well known fact.

In this case there were two sons. You can imagine that however bad things might have got at home he would be able to console himself by thinking about what his sons might be doing. Filling in the years since he'd waved them off, I don't know, on some minibus down by the river in the early hours of the morning. That's just natural affection: the bond between fathers and their sons.

Sometimes he might imagine that they'd made it to America and sorted out domestic arrangements and green cards. Maybe they'd got themselves an education, found beautiful wives and were living like princes. Maybe they were doctors in New York or somewhere. Chicago maybe. He'd probably picture them strapping the baby seats in the backs of their cars and playing basketball with each other at the weekends, like they did when they were boys. At that time almost everyone knew someone in America, but unless you'd been there yourself all you'd know about it would be from music or what you'd seen on TV—you know, the Beach Boys and I Dream of Jeannie—or in films. Well, that and the money people sent home, when you could do that kind of thing, which was real enough to have kept many families going. At idle moments he'd probably think about the presents he'd buy for his grandchildren when this was all over. How he'd hold them to his breast and pinch their rosy cheeks.

There was a knock at the door late one night. 'Do you hear that?' he asked his wife, but she was already half-way down the stairs. He heard the vase in the hallway break; heard a voice—familiar and yet unfamiliar—say 'Mother!' Maybe he wondered, 'Why only one voice?'

He would have been furious when he found out that they hadn't got out of the country—that they'd been in prisoner of war camps all that time. He probably couldn't believe it, what with the strings he'd pulled. He'd have wondered who it was that he couldn't trust; who he could have paid more. He'd have started taking it out on everybody around him; taking a harder line in negotiations. With that kind of power you can make

people suffer if you want to. In his case this is all a matter of record. He was never shy; always in front of the cameras.

I don't know why only one of them returned. Maybe they were being moved around and they'd been separated. There were prisoner swaps, from time to time, that kind of thing. Either way it was just one son who appeared. You can imagine the shock. I don't think he was ever quite right after that. His health. You'd think in some way he'd be pleased at least to have one son return to him: There are few burdens that can't be lightened by the presence of a loved-one. But perhaps it's different when the beloved's very presence only reminds you of a corresponding absence, and one with equal claim on your heart. I think he would simply have retreated into the day dreams that had kept him going before. Those kind of dreams are hard to let go of, particularly if you've learned to cling to them. I heard that if they were grilling some meat or something he'd turn to his son and ask, 'How do they do this in America?' or 'What kind of car did you drive?'

The other son never did come home, though they all waited for another knock at the door, and jumped whenever the phone rang. Some people said that he'd been shown a video in prison of what his father was doing, and he'd killed himself from the shame of it. Others had different stories.

I think before the end, when the net was closing in, he might have been lucid enough to realise that he wouldn't be remembered well. Maybe it's lucky that we never see our own obituaries. He had a hospital appointment and his cardiologist recommended rest. It was his blood pressure. At times of stress it would go up very steeply. But of course he never liked to take advice.

I wanted to go to the funeral. I'd thought that maybe I could get a story out of it, but in the event I decided not to. A few months after that I tried to phone to get another interview or at least a quote. I wanted to tell him that my tape recorder was broken when I'd interviewed him before and would he like to set the record straight, tell his side of things. I wanted to say that people would be interested in his experiences; that he wouldn't automatically be thought of in the same way as his father; that if anything he was seen as a victim. The person who answered the phone told me that the family didn't live there anymore. He was sorry. He had no forwarding address, but he'd heard that the son had moved to America.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tony White.