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Waiting for Sadaam

by Lesley Dawson

The colleague with whom I am sharing a room wakes up with a start.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” I mumble.

I stir my brain to wake up and listen to the silence, which seems oppressive as we are expecting to be summoned to the sealed room. It seems that another scud attack from Iraq is imminent, and we are all on tenterhooks. I sit up in bed and look over to the corner where the dog is sleeping, snoring and yelping in time to his dream. There has been no siren, no alarm bell and no one has banged on our door, so no scuds coming over. “Go back to sleep.”

An hour later, after tossing and turning and not being able to get back to sleep, I hear something. Cars race up and down the hill outside, gunning their engines to beat the traffic lights at the top as the traffic begins to build up in the fight to get to work. The small tractors are moving fruit and vegetables into the market in the Old City, grinding their gears as they negotiate the steps. Drivers shouting to each other and market stallholders unloading boxes share the day’s news. Children, heading for the Freres School, chatter to each other as they weave in and out between vehicles and pedestrians, avoiding reprimands and accidents by the skin of their teeth. Mothers watch from windows above and shout advice as they feed babies and hang bolsters out of the windows to air.

“Al hamdullillah, Sadaam must have been sleeping last night!”

They are even more tired than I am. They have had the additional worry of listening for gunfire in the narrow streets, reverberating in the alleys and under the arches, loud bangs on their doors and checking that their teenage boys were safely in bed and not out having fun dodging the settlers.

“Settlers on the rampage again, coming up from Jaffa Gate!”

“Thank goodness the gate to our compound was locked at sunset.”

“Did you hear that?” The unexpected sound of the siren from the Russian Compound causes everyone to scatter and run home.

“Now he is mounting daytime attacks!”

Back at Notre Dame we are outraged at this change in routine and scramble into tracksuits. We must be awake as we have beaten the alarm bell. Just as we grab our gas masks and open the door to dash to the chapel, Elias bangs on our door and wakes the dog up. This delays us as we stop to calm him down and feed him before we can leave. The pattering and thumping of feet signal that our fellow guests are not far ahead of us.

“Come on we will be late and be accused of holding up the sealing of the room.”

Now in full flight we skid round corners and down the stairs. The door is still open, and we slide through, out of breath and apologetic, to the loud tuts and sighs of the porter who is waiting to seal the room. Every eye turns towards us, and almost heard comments reach our ears from those who have entered a split second before us.

“Selfish people...can't get up quickly enough... putting other people in danger.”

We smile apologetically and hide in a corner without saying a word.