

Nancy Steffen

It has been fully two months since I encountered another grandma on the MAX train while enduring the week- day commute to work. I usually enjoyed the lulling movement of the ride and 25 minutes of one of my favorite past times. Most times everyone exists in their own little bubble of anonymity, co-existing with other readers, cell-phone game players, mostly discreet music listeners and cat-nappers. This ride was not to be one of those comforting rides. My seatmate and I began by chatting about inconsequential things that pass the time for many commuters. She asked if my book was good. She was about my age, conservatively dressed and unusually soft-spoken.

With the clatter and clack of the train and the buzz of other conversations and rap leaking out of the ear-buds of a bouncing to the rhythm teen, I almost missed her query about my book. I showed her the cover, smiled and said, "It's pretty good."

As I recall, I went on to say a bit more about the paperback then asked her if she liked to read. She told me that she had been a teacher for small children in her country and was quite a reader herself. I went on to discover that she came from Iraq, specifically the city of Babylon. I have to admit that just the name of the city from which she hailed gave rise to some naïve and romantic images; women drawing water at a communal well, children, playing with modern toys, running up a winding dusty pathway, thousands of years of history. She and her husband had immigrated to America several years ago to escape their own, war torn, country. She has family still living there and she told me she worried about their safety and welfare.

I proffered for our discussion that I had enjoyed reading A Thousand Splendid Suns learning about another culture and religion as I absorbed the story. She asked if I'd read The Kite Runner? "I had", I commented, "and been fascinated enough by the authors' insight to read the second book." I told her that The Kite Runner had portrayed for me how militant times and war affected children. We smiled at each other and a look passed between us that transcended all those polarizing issues and joined us in our basic humanness. I think that's what prompted her to feel invited to divest her soul of her horrifying personal experience.

She straightened her body in her seat. She seemed to shrink into herself. Her once animated voice sunk to a tortured monotone and I needed to lean in closer to hear what she was saying.

"In my city, we celebrate and all my family gathered. It was a good day, a cooler day in my city. The sun was shining. We are in the home of my Uncle Gabir. He lived near to the ruins. There was music, the children running and playing. The men and boys were playing soccer in the street. The women and girls were drinking tea and gossiping in the house. Two of the older boys, using the excuse of thirst, came in to admire the young women. The girls all giggled behind their veils," she said, her lips curling up in a small smile. "Good smells came from the kitchen; everyone looking forward to a feast later in the day."

First, we hear the men yelling and wailing.”

At this point, her small voice became tortured and it seemed as if some force was pulling the words, unbidden out of her soul. She went on.

“Then we hear gunfire and the soldiers came in the house, herding the men in front of them. For a while, the soldiers contented themselves with shouting questions while pointing their guns at us. The women and girls were weeping. The men were cringing and beseeching the soldiers.

A baby, held by his mother, started crying. First, the soldiers menaced her; finally, one grabbed the small baby from her arms. There was an exchange between the soldier and the leader. The soldier carried the baby to the cooking area and opened the oven. A waft of the chicken being prepared for the Kubba floated out among us. The soldier placed the baby in the oven, forcing the cooking pot to the back. He shut the door. The soldiers made us wait in silence until the wails of the baby stopped. It seemed like a very long time. They left soon after that.”

Her head fell forward as she finished dispelling that day. I was unable to speak. I battled unspeakable images out of my mind. I held her hand. We swayed together with the gentle movement of the train. A few minutes later, she rose and indicated it was her stop coming up. Our hands were still clasped and remained so until she traveled far enough down the aisle that our contact broke. Our eyes remained engaged until she stepped off the train and I lost sight of her on the platform as I traveled on to work.

I went about my day normally but my mind kept replaying what she’d told me. I actually think I was in shock for a while. Like I said, it has been two months, or more, and I am still haunted by this encounter. I’d like it to fade away but I still hear her words and hold her hand. I think it might be some while before it fades for me, and maybe never. My mind wants to reject that things like this happen. Things like this should not happen. Not during war, not during peace, not anywhere, not for any reason.

This I believe.