

Green Island

PAUL WILLIAMS

Tuesday, 24 October was a hot day in Baghdad. Abraham parked the car, a metallic blue Volvo, at the top end of Al-Rashid Street. His two children, Amira aged nine and Mohammed aged five, were with him.

'Stay in the car and lock the doors. Speak to no one. I won't be long.'

Going to the bank meant shaking hands with many people, sitting sometimes to drink coffee with the bank manager (Abraham's uncle was a wealthy businessman, and hence had many friends), and waiting patiently in long lines. Amira and Mohammed played a game in the hot car—he could see them clapping hands and counting as he walked off.

On his return, Abraham waved to his children. He reached for the keys in his pocket. They clambered to the window, opened it. 'Baba, do you have any sweets for us?'

He was ten feet away from the car when the bomb exploded.

The fireball threw him back onto the pavement. He saw the car shatter and fly in pieces into the sky. He heard screaming. Maybe it was coming from his own mouth. He saw people running in the smoke, and he found himself lying on the hard concrete amidst rubble. Then he saw that his arms were pierced with a hundred pieces of concrete and metal. His shirt was ripped. Blood seeped from what looked like a thousand knife wounds. But he was all right. He could feel no pain. He could stand. He could shout. He didn't care about himself. He ran towards the mangled wreckage of his car. He could see two bodies. They were both lying very still, one in the frame of the wrecked car, the other on the pavement, thrown wide through the glass of the window. No screaming, no crying. He fought his way through the flames and heat—a passer-by was trying to hold him back—and saw the blood. He went for his daughter first. She was face down, her brown hair gleaming in the sun.

An arm. A leg. A head surrounded by a bloody halo.

She was heavier in his arms than she had ever been alive. The weight in his heart was so heavy he could hardly stand. 'Please God. Help us.'

He laid Amira on his jacket, listened for her heart. The ground was rumbling. His own heart was beating loudly. But she was quiet.

He reached into the car and pulled Mohammed from the backseat. He was torn in a thousand places, very heavy. 'He's alive! Quick, the ambulance.' He reached for his mobile phone, but his trousers were in shreds and the pockets were gone.

A crowd had gathered: some talked excitedly on their mobile phones, others took pictures like tourists. 'No,' he shouted.

Abraham heard the ambulance siren long before it arrived. And then he was scooped up in the strong arms of a medic. 'You sit in the back, old man.'

Abraham was not an old man. He was thirty six. But today he moved like an old man, and his brain was befuddled. He had lost most of his words. All he could say was: 'My son, my daughter.'

'Your boy is in critical condition, old man. He may not live. We will do our best.'

'Amira?'

The medic shook his head.

'A phone, I need a phone...'

He got through to his uncle. They were closer than brothers. 'I'm at Ibn Al Bitar Hospital. Tell my wife.'

There was no mystery. Abraham was a policeman, and Al Qaeda didn't like policemen co-operating with the American occupiers or the puppet government. The bomb was a message. But he had been a policeman long before the fall of Saddam—it was his career, his livelihood. For fifteen years he had been a policeman, dealing with petty crime and family disputes. He had juggled compromises and taken into account human foibles. He had been a good policeman—corruptible, conscientious, compassionate. There was no other way here. Although Iraq was the first place on earth to have the written rule of law, this was not how business could be done these days.

On his mantelpiece at home, there was a photo of himself with his arms around a US soldier at the beginning

of the occupation, when they were all heroes together. He was smiling, showing the world the V sign for peace.

He was treated for minor lacerations and discharged. His son was kept in intensive care with a drip in his arm, a bandage around his head, and his arm in a sling. His daughter was buried at a quiet funeral so as not to attract attention. Every day after work, he maintained a vigil at the hospital, watching his son. His uncle too spent the evenings with him.

Was he angry? Did he want revenge? No. He was defeated. The sadness was too much to bear. The lead skies fell down that day on him and buried his girl in the rubble.

He had nightmares. Every night, his wife would wake him gently. 'You were shouting.'

He watched his son heal, went to the hospital every night for three months. His uncle was a faithful friend, sat by his son's bedside, and they talked, to while away the night hours.

The wounds began to heal. He picked shrapnel out of his own flesh for months. His son was now covered in deep purple scabs. Don't pick at them Mohammed. Don't pick. They're itchy because they're healing.

'It's a miracle, this healing,' said his uncle. 'A miracle.'

But one day at the hospital, his uncle did not show up. Abraham called home, and listened to his wife crying.

'He's been kidnapped.'

Sure enough, that night, there was a cold, cruel voice on the other end of the phone. 'We're going to kill your uncle.'

'What has he done? He has done nothing.'

'We want a hundred thousand U.S. dollars. By Friday. Bring it to the place we tell you.'

'I don't have a hundred thousand.'

'Your uncle does. He's a business man. Go to the bank and talk to them.'

Every morning at six, they'd phone and harass him for the money. Meanwhile he would hold his healing son. A brave boy. Stop picking at those scars, Mohammed.

He had to get the hundred thousand. It was easy enough. His uncle had a secret bank account; one Abraham had access to for emergencies.

It made his heart constrict, if that's what this tightening of the chest was, this painful thumping. They must have tortured him, Abraham thought. They must

have gouged this secret truth out of him with a knife. His uncle would never have told them otherwise. One hundred thousand U.S. dollars was the exact amount his uncle had stashed away. He tried not to think about what they had done, what they were doing, what they would do to his uncle. He had heard the stories. He knew people who knew people who had fallen into their hands. The chills up his spine—or whatever this tightening of the skin was—this restricting of the larynx—these cold sweaty palms—told him his life was not going to be good. And that there were no secrets anymore. No secrets.

He forged his uncle's signature, used his PIN, as they had planned for such an emergency, and withdrew as much money as he could, five thousand.

His wife caught him thumbing through the grubby pile, and then pressing it behind the tins at the back of the cupboard. 'You're not going to give them the money.'

He ignored her.

'It's a trap. They want you, and when they have you, they'll kill you and your uncle and take the money too. Go to the police.'

'I am the police.'

So she brought in reinforcements. His friends sat around him on the veranda after supper, sucked on their cigarettes, and talked into the smoke. 'Don't go, Abraham. Where do they want you to take the money, anyway?'

'Sadr City.'

'They'll shoot you in the head. You know Sadr City. It's where they execute people. Haven't you watched them on YouTube?'

'What are you telling me? That I must let my uncle die?'

'Yes. Leave the country before they kill you and your family. Leave your uncle. He's an old man. He's lived enough.'

'Get out.' Abraham stood. 'I didn't invite you here to insult my uncle.'

'Abraham, please.... You asked for our advice. Listen to your friends.'

'My uncle saved my life many times. I love my uncle.'

'If you asked your uncle now, he would tell you the same. He would say—save your family. Save yourself. Leave the country while you still can.'

'There must be another way. Maybe I could talk with them. Reason with them.'

'They speak with bullets and bombs, Abraham.'

They talked long into the night. Abraham postponed sleep as long as possible. And when he did sleep, the nightmares jabbed him awake. Always the same—a shot to the temple, the weight of his daughter's body. He leaped out of bed, still hearing the echo of the shot in his head, still feeling the weight of the ceiling pressing down on him.

If he went, he would surely die. And his uncle too. The money would be gone. All the money his uncle had saved.

His boy was healing rapidly. He could walk now, and move his right arm. He wore the bandage around his head like a crown.

Abraham removed more and more of the money from the bank that week. He took pocketfuls to the Souq and waved it in the money changers' faces, shouting out 'U.S., U.S., U.S.'

It made quite a pile in the kitchen cabinet. He hadn't realised how much money one hundred thousand U.S. dollars actually was. It could serve them well. They could flee the country, go to Syria, start a new life. They would be OK.

So said his friends, his tempters, the so-called 'wise' old men. But he knew he could never do it. He would be haunted by his uncle's death; he would die with the guilt and shame. He might as well take a gun to his uncle's head himself and shoot.

Every day, he went back to the bank where his daughter had been killed. And every day he changed the money at the Souq, waved fistfuls of dirty notes, and the money changers replaced them with crisp neat piles of greenbacks.

They were watching him, he knew; they were everywhere; they knew his every move. He lived these days like a rat in a cage.

When the pain became so great that he could not bear it any more, he made a decision—to go through with it. He would take them the money, plead for his uncle's life, and his life, and for the life of his family. And once he had decided on a path, he felt happier. See, he said to the hidden eyes watching him from dark alleyways, see, I am doing what you want me to do.

If they killed him, if they killed his uncle, his wife and son would have to flee. But where could a woman go on her own? She would have to return to her relatives in the South. And for this she needed money. So he made a contingency plan: the money stashed in the kitchen was for his wife and son. He would go with a few thousand to the kidnapers, plead for more time to get the rest of

the money. The promise of the remainder of the money would keep him and his uncle alive. He would buy time. Meanwhile, he would talk to them—reason with them.

This is when Abraham had the Dream. Not the usual nightmare, but a peaceful vision of a green island where the waves frothed onto the golden shores, where the palm trees were ripe with coconuts, and dates hung heavy over him, within easy reach. Servants offered him cool drinks in the shade of a leaning loquat tree. The land was quiet, the sea—deep blue. Everywhere was still. And in the dream his son and daughter played on the beach, laughing, clapping hands.

He had never seen a place like this. He had always lived land-locked in Baghdad; he had been to the grey, churning sea only once, but Al-Basra was a hellish sea, sticky and hot, choked with litter and dead fish.

The dream was a vision of paradise, and was calling him home, its recurring vivid tangibility a sign that he was surely going to die.

Friday morning, the bank was closed and he had only twenty five thousand dollars. The phone call came at six promptly. He appealed for mercy. He suggested an instalment plan.

He heard men arguing in the background.

'I can't withdraw more than five thousand a day, you know that...'

The voice was calm. 'OK. Bring the money today after Friday prayers. You can get the rest later. But we want all of it, and only then he goes free. Maybe.'

His wife did not speak to him as she prepared breakfast. She chopped and peeled and fried and bustled, banging pots and pans, slamming cupboards.

As he had no car, he hailed a yellow and black taxi and directed the driver where to go. He could see the whites in the man's eyes as they approached the area. At the roadblock, he nodded. 'This is OK.'

He picked his way through the rubble of the suburb that had been left untouched since the 2008 siege of Sadr City.

The building was ahead. He knew they were watching; he thought once he caught sight of the muzzle of an AK. He was calm. If I die, I will die with a clear conscience.

The building was musty with the fear of all who had passed through here before him. He took measured breaths.

The green island appeared before him, a shimmering mirage, something he could almost smell.

He put one foot ahead of the other, slapping each shoe down to show them he was here. No point in sneaking around. Show them he was not afraid. At a doorway, an arm beckoned and as soon as he poked his head inside, strong arms gripped him around the throat and pulled him into the darkness. They frisked him for weapons. He lifted his arms, let them poke and feel and tear. Satisfied, the arms steered him to a chair in the middle of the room. Although it was dark—there was sacking over the windows—he could swear he recognised the room from all those executions on the internet, from all those grainy clips on Al-Jazeera— masked men, banners behind them on all the walls. But these walls were bare, black with a thousand fingerprints. And speckled white and red spots had dripped like porridge on one section of the wall opposite him. Three dark figures paced the shadows like tigers in a cage.

‘The money.’

He recognised the voice on the phone. He pulled the notes out of the lining of his jacket in tufts and spread them on the table in front of him. ‘My uncle?’

As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he saw them. Young men with scarce beards. No masks, no face covering, just jeans and t-shirts. American clothes, he wanted to say to them. You who hate Americans are wearing their clothes. They each held an AK 47. No one needed to tell him that this was a bad sign. They only showed people who they were if they going to kill them. A young man paced up and down the room, playing with the safety catch of his weapon. Two others spoke in fervent whispers. They had a mission. He wondered which one had planted the bomb that had killed his daughter.

‘Not even twenty thousand, old man. What are you trying to do here?’

‘There’s twenty five thousand. I’ll get the rest. Where is my uncle?’

The leader of the group stirred the greenbacks with his rifle muzzle. They had not pointed their weapons at him—a good sign. He looked at each man, appealed with his eyes.

‘My uncle?’

The leader he had identified as the older man gave a nod, and the young man opened the door to an internal room. A man was hauled through the door, bound, gagged, doubled up, the whites of his eyes all Abraham could see.

‘He’s OK?’ Abraham half-stood but the man behind him pushed him down, gripped his neck and pressed the muzzle of a hot AK into his temple.

‘If you kill us, we cannot get the money.’

He should not have spoken. The arm yanked his head back so that he stared into the dead metal barrel of the rifle. ‘You think we want money, you think this is what it is all about? Who do you think we are?’

‘You tell him, old man.’

The older man pulled off the filthy rag. His uncle’s lips were cracked, his nose bleeding. Abraham could see he had not had any water or food. ‘You have to stop supporting the regime,’ his uncle said to the floor. ‘They watch you go to work every day. They want you to stop.’

‘We’ve been watching you,’ said the man behind Abraham. ‘And we don’t like what we see.’

‘You have to stop. And because you don’t stop, because you don’t listen, we will have to stop you.’

The young man stepped forward and cocked his weapon. He stood with feet apart, balancing himself.

Abraham’s mouth was dry—he could not speak. He wanted to talk, but the words were not there. He opened his mouth to speak, and the words came from his uncle’s lips.

‘What will his wife do,’ said his uncle. ‘What will she do if he is dead? She can’t be left alone. She’s a woman on her own. She can’t be left alone without a man.’

‘Where is her father?’ said the older man. ‘Her family?’

Abraham shook his head.

‘At the beginning of the occupation,’ said his uncle. ‘They died in the bombing raids. The Americans killed them.’

The older man chewed on his cigarette.

‘Allah is merciful,’ said his uncle. ‘To those who obey His laws. And it is against His laws to widow women.’

‘Who are you to tell us the law?’ The young man whisked the AK around to point at his uncle. But the older man held up his hand. He stood, gave a slight turn of his head and walked out of the inner door. The other boys had to follow him. Abraham heard them whispering, heard the younger man scuffing his boot against the floorboards.

His uncle winked at him. He nodded back. He was sweating. Keep calm, he told himself. Keep the tsunami of fear back, back, back. Hold it in.

And then the door opened. They held their AKs at port. The young man held his weapon stiff. The older man untied his uncle. He had been bound in a foetal position for days so he could hardly stand when he was released. Abraham had to help him up, though he could

hardly stand on his own shimmering legs. The older man opened the outer door.

'Go,' he said.

Leaning on each other, they stumbled out into the passageway and down the concrete steps. His uncle was heavy. Heavy like death. He remembered the shape of his daughter's heaviness. He placed one foot in front of the other. That's how his life would be now, a placing of one step in front of the other.

The entrance was a blinding green flash of light in his eyes. Green as the island in his dream. He heard his daughter laughing in the sand. But then the darkness behind him choked the vision. He dared not turn around—he could feel the cold hand of a black shadow on his shoulder. They could still shoot: it had happened before. Either they change their mind or the young one decides to do what he wanted to do, or else it's their plan all along, to execute them this way.

The light at the entrance blinded him. Every step. His uncle pushed through first, and then he squeezed through. His back was covered with spiders of fear.

Out on the street, they were not safe yet. The men watched from the window above, trained snipers. No leaping or running or anything that would change the delicate hair trigger of their wills. Even when he began crying, his uncle jabbed him in the ribs. 'No, no,' he hissed. 'No.'

And then they were at the roadblock and past it, and in a taxi and driving at breakneck speed, their windows open, their bodies shaking as they held each other tightly. They said nothing: there was nothing to be said. The only way Abraham could show gratitude was by clenching his uncle's hand.

At home, over supper and a smoke, he tried to express his gratitude in words. But the words were heavy, slow in coming.

His uncle shook his head. 'I made them a deal.'

'What deal?'

His uncle shook his head again. 'You must leave the country. You and Hiba and Mohammed. And take the money with you.'

'What about you?'

His uncle shook his head.

'I'm not going without you.'

'They'll come after you, Abraham. That's the deal. Leave the country, or they kill you.'

'And you, uncle?'

'I'll be OK.'

The journey to Syria was smoother than anticipated. The money helped. A few folded greenbacks in the passports were all it took. They went straight to the United Nations refugee centre in Dimashqa and stared up at the blue UNHCR sign while the guard searched them. Inside, they waited in queues, squatted on floors awash with crying babies and women with dead eyes, and finally were ushered into a sterile office.

The office was cheerful, its walls hung with pictures of smiling brown faces in clean, bright cities. Al-Qaeda was a magic word that attracted sympathy and understanding from the white faces. His record as a policeman helped too. But what helped the most was the photo of Amira smiling at the camera in her bright t-shirt, against the backdrop of her father hosing down the Volvo in his driveway.

The paperwork was typed up in triplicate by a Pakistani man in the sweltering heat on a manual Olivetti typewriter. Dozens of photos were stamped and stapled to the forms, and greenbacks were passed from palm to palm to expedite the process.

They waited in a hotel. One week passed. Two weeks. Three weeks.

Finally, a white, bright man in uniform called them into his office. 'Two countries have offered you asylum. Canada and Australia.'

Abraham was blank. 'You mean we can choose?'

He had never given one thought to Canada or Australia, ever. He didn't even know where they were. Two Western countries where no one spoke Arabic were of no interest to him whatsoever. But now, they were magic words that gleamed with effervescent light.

'You can apply... But look at what each offers first.' He handed Abraham forms, and more forms, all in tiny hieroglyphics, in writing that sloped backward. He piled him high with brochures of glossy smiling faces against beautiful landscapes.

'They set you up with some money, accommodation, medical facilities... until you can find your feet.'

Outside again, Pakistani translators pocketed their greenback gifts and read out the forms. They also offered free advice. 'Take Canada. There are many of us there.'

'Canada is a vast icy wasteland,' said another. 'Your soul will go grey and die there...'

'Australia is a big desert. And so far away. You'll never see family again.'

The brochures made it feel like a holiday they were planning. They stared at snowy mountains, red deserts, glass cities and sparkling beaches.

'Wait,' said Abraham. 'Where is that?'

'Somewhere in Queensland, Australia.'

Abraham let his fingers slowly spread over the glossy page. He could almost hear the waves crashing, the laughter of children. Glossy green water shimmered, and palm trees rustled as they bowed low to the water, ripe with fruit.

Author

Paul Williams grew up in Zimbabwe and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin (USA). His young adult novel *The Secret of Old Mukiwa* won the Zimbabwe International Book Fair fiction prize (2001). He has also published several short stories and a memoir (*Soldier Blue*, 2008) about growing up in the Zimbabwe civil war. At present, he teaches Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

