

St. Peter's Bones

the beauty and the limitation of DNA. You can tell paternity 99.99 percent of the time. But when you're dealing with a large family such as Saddam's, you need more to go on."

So Abu Hassan was Saddam Hussein's nephew, and his real name was Saddoun Adnan al-Ibrahim al-Takriti. As I repeated it out loud, I felt an uncomfortable shiver run down my spine. Before, I had felt the presence of evil. Now I knew I was facing the Devil himself. And he knew my face, my voice, even my name.



Soraya, my great-grandmother, was born in Tabriz at the turn of the century, when that country was still called Persia. She was widowed at the age of 22, not long after she bore a single son to her husband, Boutros. "I asked God to take me instead, but He had other plans for me and that Issa," she told me when I was just old enough to remember. We called her Nana Soraya, the grandmother we never had. She lived with our family in Baghdad until she died in 1987.

Issa, her son, was my mother's father. His name meant "Jesus" in Aramaic, the language of Christ, the language we still use in church and among family. But from listening to Nana Soraya, he bore little resemblance to his namesake.

Tabriz in 1922, when Nana's husband Boutros was martyred, was in the final throes of the genocide. A Kurdish warlord, secretly in league with the Persians, had recently murdered the young Patriarch of our church and 150 of his best soldiers who came to the Kurd's palace on a mission of peace.

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The Kurdish chief put on a banquet in their honor, pledging to set aside generations of bloodshed and form a new alliance with my people. Everyone warned the young Patriarch that it was a trap. His top general pleaded with him not to go. And yet, he acquiesced, clutching to hope for the sake of his people who had suffered mightily from the hatchets and the Remingtons and the scimitars and the butcher knives of the Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians who were bent on eradicating all trace of them from our historic Assyrian land. As the Patriarch and his guard were getting back into their carriages, heavy but joyous from the meal, the Kurd summoned the thousand warriors he had dissimulated behind the rocks and in the hollows around his palace, and gave the order to open fire. After the massacre, he went to the Patriarch's carriage and cut off the finger bearing the signet ring he had so recently kissed as a token of peace.

“Here is my token of peace,” he said, holding aloft the slain Patriarch's finger and the large ruby ring.

Such were the stories Nana Soraya nourished me with throughout my childhood, cradling me in the ancient walnut rocker she managed to save from their stately house in Tabriz after the mob set it on fire and murdered her husband.

My Assyrian nation, murdered and martyred.
And yet rising, generation after generation, like a Phoenix from the assassin's flames.



LTC Wilkens was flipping through a stack of documents the next morning when he called out for me to enter the small office he kept at battalion