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INSIGHT

Kuwait; Putting faces on the headlines



John remembers the taste of salt in his dry mouth and the sand and dust that somehow always found its way through his clothes. His mind is filled with memories of an old and tranquil land . . .

by Linda Dias

In 1947, shortly after the end of the Second World War, a young man, recently discharged from the British Army, emigrated from India to Kuwait with his new wife. They were searching for a new beginning. Bearing with him the experience of fighting a war, the opportunity of settling down and starting from scratch seemed ideal, full of promise.

Forty years and eight children later, John and Sev finally emigrated from Kuwait to Canada to "retire" and spend time with some of their children who lived here.

Now, on a hot Sunday afternoon in mid-August, an anxious John and Sev hover around the television of their new home, watching with shock and pain the developments in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Three weeks have gone by without any information of their sons and their families still residing there. Sev is especially frantic about her daughter-in-law, who is expecting a child any day now.

The bronzed skin and lines of John's face are well defined as he wearily contemplates the possibility of another war. He scans the news channel, where a report claims that the international military presence in Saudi Arabia is experiencing a temperature of 39C. He laughs to himself — it is a blistering 49C, perhaps 59C.

John remembers the taste of salt in his dry mouth and the sand and dust that somehow always

found its way through his clothes. His mind is filled with memories of an old and tranquil land with bedouin villages, donkey carts, dhows (Kuwaiti boats), mud houses and paraffin lanterns; nights in the diwaniya (a gathering room for men) eating dak-hous (a meat specialty).

It is a far cry from twentieth century condos, cars, Italian yachts and a string of fast food joints.

John is safe here, but fears for the safety of his children and their future. For all the years of sacrifice — putting in long hours, where his family didn't see him for days because he was an "employee," not of Kuwaiti blood — his labour seemed to be in vain.

To John, priorities consisted of providing for his wife and children, pouring thousands of dollars into their education abroad in the hope that some day they would take care of him and his wife. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized that eventually he would no longer be able to work, and that this tradition would have to be carried on by his sons. His Indian passport and those of his Kuwaiti-born children did not strike him as a problem then.

Anyone living in Kuwait led the life of an expatriate, providing a service and returning to their country of citizenship. No provisions seem to have been made for those who were born and had lived there all their lives. You had to renew a residence permit,

obtain visas to enter or leave and save money for your future.

If you were a young woman, you were lucky to have your residency renewed periodically (you were not considered a threat to the economy). Being male and foreign was not easy. Then, there was the matter of "vasta." Everything seemed to work by connections — speeding up applications, obtaining a driver's licence, dental work, reserving seats, having a decent life.

No one seemed to complain. If you were Asian with connections (some rich Kuwaiti or a sheikh) you were fortunate; you could expect some respect and benefits (your relatives were sponsored or relieved of red tape). If you were white, you were even luckier — you would not require qualifications either.

The land and its people took what they could out of you. You gave and gave. You dared not refuse or complain for fear of repercussion. Besides, there were such things as loyalty and the belief that "inshallah" (God permitting) or "bukra, inshallah" (tomorrow, God permitting) all would pay off one day.

Immigration laws became tougher each day. Your family could not visit you if your salary was too low. Food was cheap, health care free and imports from Taiwan to Paris were all tax free. — Censorship and restriction of alcohol proved cumbersome for foreigners and non-Muslims who, on occasion, smuggled or made

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