Every Friday we would head out for a picnic around Mosul.

Often we'd go to the archaeological site of Nimrud.

I'd play ball and climb on anything I could.

Hold still, I'm going to take a picture.

If my father had known that those winged lions would be destroyed one day, I'm sure he would have framed the shot differently.
On March 7, 2015, the site of Hatra was levelled with dynamite and bulldozers.

Because it's 130 km from Mosul, we picnicked there less often.

It was the perfect spot for climbing around on ancient stones.

And for picking poppies.

They'll wilt right away, honey.

But taking stones was strictly forbidden.

Cars were searched on their way out to preserve the site forever.
In 1947, my father, Matti, left Iraq to study dentistry in France.

One of his brothers, Jacques, had studied architecture there.

Another brother, Behnam, got his engineering degree in India.

And a last brother, Salem, studied medicine in Syria.

Thirty years later, Iraqi universities offered training in all fields, and their degrees were recognized worldwide.

Parents didn’t have to send their children abroad anymore.

But then my father wouldn’t have met my mother on a platform at the St. Lazare station.
My parents were married in Paris in 1950. My father returned to Iraq right after, just long enough to let the family know.

His mother had found him a fiancée in Baghdad.

For six months, he didn’t dare say anything.

On the way back from a visit to the fiancée’s family, he finally confessed to his mother that he’d already got married in France.

His mother never did give him the tailored suit she’d ordered for his wedding.

And my mother didn’t exactly arrive on conquered ground.

But since she was from a country that had been through five years of war, she was nonetheless politely accepted.

Skinny, isn’t she?

They have nothing to eat there...

To this day, some 95 percent of marriages in Iraq are arranged.

Except that since the 1980s, with the heightened surveillance under Saddam Hussein, people have grown distrustful of each other and many marriages are between first cousins.
Since my father was Orthodox Christian, I was baptized by an Orthodox priest. And since my mother was Catholic, I was baptized a second time by a Catholic priest.

I went to a public elementary school, Abu Tammam... Christians were excused from Koran lessons. I found myself in the playground while the others stayed in class.

Feeling left out and rejected, I cried bitterly. And I told the whole story when I got home. My father went to see the principal and, after that, I sat in on all Koran lessons. We memorized verses from the Koran, without much explanation.
When I got to sixth grade, my parents enrolled me in Oum Elmaouna, a school run by Syriac Catholic nuns, so I could receive my first communion. I memorized prayers in Aramean that I didn't understand either. None of which made me a believer.

I got a watch. And I'm dressed like a bride.

I got a watch. And I'm dressed like a bride.

It's funny, I don't remember the name of the school... But my friend Nadwa who emigrated to San Diego five months ago would probably know.

Especially since I was switched to another public school the year after my communion.

That still doesn't make me a believer. It's just a coincidence.

(Huh? Oh, wow... It's Nadwa.)
Nadwa was the daughter of our neighbors in Mosul.

A door led from one garden to the other... We spent a lot of time together.

And since they were Muslim, I did my Koran homework with her mother.

The last time I saw Nadwa was 26 years ago, in 1989, before the First Gulf War.

In June 2014, she and her husband rented an apartment in Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, for a two-week vacation.

They left without a worry, packed only for their trip.

The next day, ISIS invaded Mosul.

Nadwa and her husband would never see their city again.

After their two weeks in Erbil, they couldn't re-rent the apartment.

Costs had sky-rocketed with the influx of refugees.

There's no loss without gain...