August 21, 2003

I waited while Fred Eckhard spoke on the phone in his office at the United Nations yesterday. "She wasn't supposed to be the one," he was saying. "She was invited into the meeting. We haven't heard. She isn't on any hospital list. We suspect she's been buried in the rubble. The newspaper in Baghdad said she was dead. We don't know that. Oh? Yes, they thought they saw her on television in France. Thought that was Nadia. Then they said maybe it wasn't her. She wasn't supposed to be at the meeting." Eckhard is the spokesman for Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general. He was talking about Nadia Younes, who was the chief of staff for Sergio Vieira de Mello, the United Nations administrator in Baghdad.

The meeting in Baghdad was about land mines. As Vieira de Mello and Nadia Younes sat in the room, a cement truck drove up to the building and the driver, the truck, the meeting blew up. Nadia and Vieira de Mello wanted to live and the truck driver did not.

The weapons of mass destruction in Baghdad on Tuesday were a cement truck, explosives and a driver ready to die. It was obvious that if Iraq had these other weapons, nuclear bombs or germs in bombs, they would just like the truck. They never had them. We started a war over something that never was.

America wanted no part of these United Nations laggards. Today, we have Nadia Younes and Sergio Vieira de Mello dead on duty on the battlefield America started.

Once, Nadia had been here in the UN building as the spokesperson, in an office with the aide who had just splashed Eckhard's office. The bulletin yesterday showed meetings about living: on the laws of the sea, the children's fund, on knowledge systems for development, on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination. Downstairs, the first tourists were lining up to start their trip around the halls and meeting rooms. They were in summer tourist clothes, bright polo shirts and shorts, the children in T-shirts.

Outside, a fountain's rain sounded across the lawns. The river surface was covered with widespread fires of sunlight. The traffic on First Avenue was rush-hour size, but the sparkling day caused the loudest truck noise to lose its pain. Across the street, on television, one of the American officials in Baghdad said that this bombing that killed so many was a good thing because it crystallized the American effort to bring legitimate violence to overthrow the establishment of democracy. That was truly a marvellous statement. But this is only as preposterous as virtually everything said by the rest of the government.

Here yesterday, having coffee on First Avenue, I am reading some of George Bush's interview with the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service. The reason you haven't read it is that it was around on a day in Washington when so many newspaper people were on vacation that a congressmen could commit homicide and a man could be given a fat payday at 1:55 p.m. Pacific Time coast.

Bush was asked about the black out. That was totally out of town. Bush was talking about the "wake-up call." Sensational. You might read it as a requisite for citizenship.

The interview went like this:

Q. One final question, Mr. President. The families of America's fighting forces, they make huge sacrifices in the name of freedom, just like the service members. You touched on it earlier. You touched on it in your speech today. For months at a time, they give up their service members, they don't know where they are, they don't hear from them; they don't know if they're safe, they don't know if they're dead or alive. What message do you have for these families today?

Bush: Well my message is that what your loved one is doing is the right thing for the country. We are called upon to defend the United States of America. I take that oath, and every soldier takes that oath. And on 9/11 our world changed and we realized the country was vulnerable and we better defend it. And the best way to secure the homeland is to get the enemy before he gets us. At least that's my attitude. And so I - first of all, the commitment of those who have served, of those who have made the families of the service members have made, is in line with this business about winning and fighting war. Every person is a volunteer in our military. They've chosen to defend the United States of America. And therefore they need to get the best - if they're out of their attitude, and they made up their mind that's what they want to do, then my job is to get them to the best equipment, the best pay, the best training possible, so if we ever have to send them in, they'll be able to do the job.

The true world gets on without this sort of wandering, delusional language.

At about 5 o'clock, at the UN late yesterday afternoon, a man from the security office walked into Eckhard's office and said that Nadia Younes was dead. At the moment, she should have been looking out at the sunset over the great city instead of being dead in the rubble in Baghdad.