

Memories of an Evacuation

An eyewitness account by Carl Conradi

“You are good when you are one with yourself. Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil. For a divided house is not a den of thieves; it is only a divided house.”

-Khalil Gibran

Delicate plumes of smoke were rising from the southern suburbs, threading their way through the sky like the sweet tobacco of a *nargileh*. I remember devising this simile on a bus, staring out at the incongruous burning skyline of a beautiful city, trying to make real what I was witnessing with my own two eyes. The naiveté of my comparison filled my heart with grief; is it impossible for me to comprehend the magnitude of such sorrow without making recourse to the romantic?

The downtown streets were deserted, save a soldier on every corner. I had seen this sort of military presence while celebrating the World Cup only a few days earlier, when tens of thousands of revellers poured through the streets with flags and warm cheers. People shot fireworks through the roofs of their cars, the explosions echoing off of skyscrapers, turning each Roman candle in to a mighty cannon. The day I returned to Beirut, in the middle of this summer's war, everything felt sad and alone.

The city was flocking to the Charles Helou bus station. Hundreds of women and children sat on the curbs with their worldly belongings scattered at their feet, their husbands and fathers jostling for tickets to freedom. At times, these men would get in to fist fights, their minds unable to tolerate the pain of not knowing for even one more moment. Every soul was moving, and every one was suffused with fear.

I escaped to the mountain town of Bcharré a few hours later, sitting next to a Lebanese student my age. I asked him about the war. Like many of his countrymen, he was exasperated. He told me very simply that all he wanted was to finish school, start a business and love his girlfriend until the day he dies. He shook his head at the name Hezbollah, expressing resentment typical of the Christian Maronite region from which he came. But he also asked: what else could be done? It's a form of resignation found in the young and old of this region. Indeed, when news of the first Israeli bombardments reached Bcharré—a spectacular village best known as the birthplace of poet Khalil Gibran—many old men simply sat back in their chairs and continued playing backgammon.

Only a few days earlier I had found myself lost in those same southern suburbs, gazing up at massive posters bearing the image Hassan Nasrallah. Who was this bearded man with the enchanting smile? And what should I

make of these pictures next to him, of men garlanded in rainbows, with butterflies perched in their hair? I didn't know it at the time, but that area was a Hezbollah stronghold, and I later discovered that those men were martyrs. Tacky photos covered the front door of a wonderfully friendly pizza shop, whose proprietor loved to crack dirty jokes. When eating with him, I would never have assumed he was a Hezbollah supporter. He was too friendly. He humbled me, and a sharp line was drawn in my mind between men and the politics that often overshadow them.

On the other side of the border, a Jewish friend of mine was sending daily reports from Tel Aviv. His fervent efforts to convince me that the suffering of his people was comparable did nothing but incense me. However, as the days passed, his friends were called away one by one, marching off to war. He may have been comfortably ensconced in Tel Aviv, enjoying a level of security that no other Lebanese city could boast, but the ripples of conflict had certainly lapped at his feet, and for this I was humbled once again.

War stacks irony upon irony. Another Jewish friend of mine was almost killed when Israel bombed the port of Jounieh. A Lebanese-American friend, who only weeks earlier had tearfully hugged an Israeli student at a peace and conflict symposium we were all attending in Cyprus, lost her eleven-year-old cousin to an explosion. My first friend is now questioning his faith, whereas the second is questioning her friendships. Where once there was innocence and no experience of war, there's now nothing but psychological turmoil and hate.

I had to leave Lebanon. I'd spent two weeks there already, arriving only three days before the war commenced, expecting nothing more than delicious food and world-famous hospitality. This isn't to say that I wasn't well fed or well treated. The man who ran my empty hostel treated me like a grandson, as he was obviously concerned that a 20-year-old foreigner was travelling through his war-torn country alone. We would eat dinner together every night, devouring whole plates of exquisite chicken taouk and stacking little mountains of naked apricot pits.

When it was finally time for me to evacuate, I was taken back to Beirut at midnight, chauffeured by a man who was choosing to risk his life on my behalf. We'd driven around Bcharré a fair amount over the previous few days, and we'd become good friends.

When we left the town at one of the most dangerous times he kissed his wife and children goodbye, and promised he would be home in a few hours. Instead, he slept in the back seat of his car outside of my hostel in Beirut, wanting to make sure that I was well taken care of until the very end. It was one of the most generous and compassionate moments of my life.

The evacuation itself was a dream—or a collection of terrible vignettes that I can't seem to piece together. The waves rocked us fiercely on our way to Turkey, and I had to shut my eyes tight so as to not see each person, seat-by-seat and row-by-row, vomit into their cupped hands. Once, when I was awoken from my sleep, I watched a woman fall to the ground, as her skin turned the colour of porcelain. Her chest wasn't moving. The crew performed an emergency intubation and she was taken away by ambulance when we docked spontaneously at Famagusta in Cyprus. I still don't know what happened to her.

Another time, my eyes still crusted with sleep, I watched a group of screaming children receive emergency intravenous fluids; they had spent so many hours vomiting, they were delirious with fatigue and dehydration. The cabin smelled sickly and sour, and fumes from spilled gasoline filled the air. This is what became of us.

I've witnessed many migrations in my life, but I'd never been part of one myself. Last summer, I watched thousands of children build makeshift beds in the streets of Gulu, fleeing the prospect of kidnapping and child soldiery in rural Northern Uganda. My own grandparents fled from Germany during WWII. But in truth, I never imagined such a forced migration would fall to me.

The night before I left Bcharré, I asked a Lebanese mother what was happening on the news. All broadcasts were in Arabic, and I depended upon constant translation. She turned to me with infinite sadness in her eyes, her eight children dozing peacefully in the adjacent room, and asked: “What do you care? You're leaving.”

I urge you, whoever you are, to treat the refugees of the world with kindness. This world is far too complex to draw distinctions between the good and the evil, and our lives are far too unpredictable to assume that we will never face such overwhelming tragedy. Indeed, we are all of us inhabitants of divided houses, and yet we all too often mistake each other for thieves.



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