

MUSE

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Beirut, Redacted

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I AM SITTING ON THE CEMENT WALL IN FRONT OF MOUAWAD'S MANA'ISH STAND, corner of Adbul Azziz and Makdessi streets in Beirut, eating one of the cheesy man'ousheh he serves up with an angry face while glaring at the passersby. Traffic is gridlocked, so white-robed Saudis and girls in halter-tops are jay-walking together through the throbbing cars.

But I'm thinking about Madrid, 20 years ago, when that man came running downhill with the sledge hammer so fast the police had no chance to stop him. He jumped up on the hood of the parked car (it was his, after all) and bashed in the windshield, then pivoted and bashed in the grill. A circle of spectators gathered, but the police stood aside, because they were still going to tow his car, with its banderilla of tickets, when he finished — this is Madrid 20 years ago!

What's the connection? No Beirut would ever beat up his car: this is the capital of patched-up, repainted, duck-taped and tenderly used Mercedes-Benzes. But there is that sub-surface violence, and spectatorship. One event is editing my perception of the other, an experience I have here more and more.

But before I can figure out why, a girl crosses toward me wearing gold shoes, pink tights and a Madonna bustier. On her arm is her mother in a black burka. All us guys sitting on the wall eating pizza stare. Mouawad stops sliding pizzas in and out of the oven. It's okay to stare like a village hick. Half of these guys are virgins, but they won't admit it. They have their arms over each others' shoulders — habib, you have a problem with that?

We are staring at evidence of an ancient mammary cult, one that goes back to Phoenician fertility icons of 3,000 BCE. On my second day here I found them in a museum, cupping their breasts in porn-star style, and now I see them on the street everywhere. Impossible to tell which breasts are real, however, for this is the cosmetic surgery capital of the Middle East. We might be looking at saline sacks. Women fly in from Dubai for hymenoplasty and, incidentally, a new pair. Tell-tale white bandages replace fine Arab noses. More disturbing

are the breasts on Lebanese guys. I see unreal pecs at the gym, puffy nipples under muscle shirts. All this makes me nostalgic for all my flat-chested and sexy-is-natural ex-wives, wherever they are, but I don't think body culture unites these pieces.

I have \$5,000 cash in my pocket, so I ought to be moving along. I went to HSBC and withdrew the money to get the hell out of here, before the war starts up again. Everyone carries large amounts of cash — I don't feel threatened, not ever. My girlfriend, when she came to visit, felt scared on certain streets because of a palpable Hezbollah presence. I daresay the Madonna bustier girl doesn't walk them either 'cause those guys might spit on her, yell at her -- but they wouldn't rob me.

On the list of dangerous places I have lived, Detroit and Cleveland rank above Beirut. But that is, I realize, a ranking — not a redaction. In the real dangerous places, you don't realize you're in danger. Like when we were in Baalbek during Ashoura and I was trying to joke with the guys from Amal as they were patting me down. Later we saw them crawling down the main street and beating themselves with whips. Real blood, glistening in January sun. The next day a car bomb went off.

It's intimidating to find out, as my brain wanders from thought to thought, that I don't even know what to call this process. I didn't think this way when I lived in Spain. Or Detroit or Cleveland. Boobs, blood, religion, money, danger — I can see how you would be tempted to study it. But that's not how they live here, baba. Beirut is the land of buried redaction, like a chunk of computer code that has been patched for 2,000 years. The program prints your receipt without you noticing, but the code has been edited 200 times and contains the lives of programmers who, constrained to COBOL

and FORTRAN, did things that cannot be undone. It's the repressed connections that trump everything. I've been living here during a calm. Some travel writers have declared this a new tourist destination. Is this the "atrocity tourism" I've heard about?

I want to write that Lebanon is like a beautiful, old, crackle-glazed bowl: it looks like many small pieces are united in one glowing surface, but at the slightest shock it will shatter into pieces. Redaction is important: many texts are joined, after having been in major and minor ways edited to make them into a single work. The Bible is a heavily redacted work; the Koran is not. Sometimes the redactor adds a frame story, like the tale of Scheherazade in 1001 Nights. Sometimes the redactor can't police all the details, called "redaction fatigue," so older stories show through. Lebanon is the ultimate in redaction.



The first time I saw Beirut was on Google Earth. I hovered above it, surprised. Most large cities have a lattice-work of straight streets at least downtown—Beirut had none. Move a little north and twisting roads led up into mountain villages. Move a little south and the roads shrank to fingerprint lanes—the Palestinian camp of Bourj al-Barajneh. Add a boiling range of 9,000 foot mountains right down the center of a country seven-tenths the size of Connecticut. Pour on four million people adhering to 17 sects, speaking four recognized official languages (plus local Arabic dialects), and 300,000 unwelcome Palestinians. Sounds like a recipe. The landscape is visibly divided into enclaves, villages, mountain redoubts, and defensible points at bridges, springs, and junctions of valleys. At the mouth of the Nahr al-Kalb (Dog River) passing armies from Ramses II onward have left engraved plaques. This is a geography of possession and obstruction, given coherence only by the satellite.

I'd like to say those fertility icons lead somewhere, that the Egyptian, Persian, Assyrian, Greek, Turkish, Vichy French, and Phalangist plaques at the Dog River explain a "layering" in today's culture. We could go to the National Museum to see the centuries all laid out, to watch the groups of students and visitors. We would see—in this country 60% Moslem and 26% under fourteen—not a single a woman in hijab, no Muslim school-groups. But the toy machine-guns sold in the souks are probably more important.

Academics come though to lecture on the Malehke this, French Mandate that, the Roman baths discovered under the site of new Beirut Souks (soon to feature a Mikimoto pearl shop), which happens to be almost on the Green Line. Now you could see the Green Line on Google Earth, so-called because of the grass and small trees growing back while bullets flew overhead. The vegetation shifted as the battles surged between East and West Beirut. Close to the sea, the green line was wide: it's still a half mile between the elephantine Virgin Records on the east and Bistro Paul on the northwest—the space now filled with parking lots and the white-tented, flower-filled homage to assassinated Rafik Hariri. Farther east and south, buildings are still pimpled with bullet-holes, gape-mouthed with mortar-cavities. I heard an architecture professor deliver a lecture about the 'deep structure' beneath this shifting green zone: beneath it all, he said, is "the scene of the ritual murder, committed as the foundational act of the polis."

Which murder? There were two last week that I would call political. I could say there's a Green Line on the east side of Mt. Lebanon (counter narrative). In October we walked above tree-line where the Lebanese Armed Forces had built pill-boxes and machine gun emplacements to defend against a Syrian return. They had planted land mines, which allowed the slopes to re-grass. Now the sheep and shepherds find them, slowly, so this green line will soon be invisible, like the line demarcating the Hittite Empire.

There was a Green Line in every neighborhood, sometimes on every block. But war also makes things erode: water enters bullet holes, softens concrete, exposed rebar rusts red, and the creative destruction of money makes people forget. Later I find out that Christian Phalangists built the pillboxes against Amal, whose leader Nabih Berri had recently been living in Detroit, working for GM as a lawyer.



Katija returned from Paris four years ago. During the day she sits attentively at the Interlibrary Loan desk in a gray business suit, sometimes a flash of red Hermes scarf over her shoulder. With her spiky red-brown hair, sharp chin and nose, she looks like an anime heroine. She has a Matrise in Library Science from Paris IV.

On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights she is Monique, a diva of the local tango scene, which floats from Hamra to Gemmazieh to downtown. In her car she

carries tango dresses, two pair of \$200 heels from Buenos Aires, which she visits every fall. Monique has lovers on the tango floor: there are Stephan, the instructor, with whom she slept for 18 months (even though he is gay); George, the founder of the tango scene here, who is writing a book about the group; and Jorma, one of the Finns who flies in for a week to give lessons. Tonight Monique is mad because in his book George describes her as "nice" and "fun."

"What does that mean? I'd rather be ... you know, the saloupe."

Someone is making a film about Monique. "Yesterday they came to my apartment, you know, and I let them film me putting on my makeup and clothes—I couldn't believe I did that." Kind of Star Academy Lebanon. At the gym, where I met her, Katija favors black Danskins and push-up bras. The videographer has been in Beirut since the war ended, living on remittances from parents in Dearborn.

Monique, the best sort of cosmopolitan, wants star in her own Amelie Poulain. Katija was born in a Maronite Christian mountain town, with extended family stretching from Montreal to Cairo (three older brothers, two younger sisters, one still in the village). Monique relates to each dancer on the floor. Katija is careful and secretive, but wants to be the next Director of the library. For Monique it's all obvious: who dances with whom, how they dance, and how often. Excusing herself to meet Michael for the last milonga at midnight, she says, "We have this tradition. He's not my lover, just a very elegant dancer." The filmmaker picks up his tripod and follows.



Scratch a Lebanese politician, a political name, and you find something nasty. I found Geagea's name funny at first, pronounced like Zsa-Zsa Gabor's. His lean face and John Cazale-mustache scowled from posters on hillside buildings in Achraifeh. Once I entered a store where men watched him on television. "Isn't that Geagea?" I asked.

Everyone turned to look at me but said nothing. I said a lot of stupid things at first.

Geagea killed so many of his rivals, and maybe a prime minister, that he should be dead. After eleven years in solitary confinement, he's now running for parliament. His clan is from Besharra, the home of Khalil Gibran, but he went to the university where I teach. He was probably like this kid H. I'm teaching. H. always sits at the end of a row, away from windows, with an obviously European guy between him and the rest of the class. I did the names, dates and addresses on-line. It could be that his father commanded the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Could be that he worked for the Syrians, carrying out a dozen assassinations, until he was assassinated.



Usually I am the only Westerner at the gym, and by far the oldest person. I don't speak much Arabic, but I manage to fit in: guys shake my hand when I enter, and the Beirut beauties say hi. Then another American started to work out, and yesterday a Lebanese guy pulled me aside and asked, "Is your friend crazy? Does he have a marble loose?"

Maybe he is spy?"

"Well, he's not a spy," I said. Conversation paused a moment as he gave me the gym's collective opinion that I resemble a sinister F.B.I. agent on the television show 24. The Lebanese watch a lot of television. Sets play in every store and restaurant, satellite dishes pop like



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mushrooms from roofs and walls. People see themselves as series characters, but you don't know their shows. The murder of pop star Suzanne Tamim by an Egyptian tycoon had them transfixed. I could redact Beirut by television, but I don't watch their shows.

"Why do you think he's crazy?" I ask

It seems my countryman addresses everyone familiarly. He looks at the person on the next machine and asks, "Ya 'bout done there buddy?" Or "Whatcha got left to do, lady?" He thinks he's House M.D. Even the Lebanese who speak English don't know what to make of his familiarity. They only watch conspiracy TV.



Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah (and same age as Katija), fought against his own brother Hussein, a life-long member of Amal, when the two groups were at war in the 1980s. This is regarded as proof of his faith and integrity. Nasrallah's son was killed by the Israelis, and people prefer to focus on this: that smoothes out the narrative. It fits with hadith, the oral interpretation of the text.

Politics in Lebanon are conditional. You meet pro-Syrian Christians and former-Communist Druze. In the 1980s the birthrate was nine children per Shi'a family, eight per Sunni, and only six per Christian. But young men left Lebanon at the rate of 100 to 200,000 a year, going to jobs in Dubai or Dearborn, so it was reasonable that some Christians thought they could prevail. Then the Shia would return every year at Ramadan—like a river that takes a completely new channel—and the Christians got nervous.

There may be as many Lebanese living outside Lebanon as inside, from cold places like Montreal and Helsinki to Capetown and Caracas. In the 1970s when

Shi'a in the Bequaa got pissed, they called on Nabih Berri. He was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, but grew up in Lebanon, and had been working in Detroit for General Motors as a lawyer. Detroit is where you go to get a divorce, avoiding the "confessional" nonsense in Lebanon. Dearborn has more Lebanese than Baalbek. Lebanese politicians go there to raise funds. At Metro Wayne Airport in 1998 the Feds pulled a Ford engineer off a flight: he was taking Boeing aviation GPS systems, night goggles, and thermal imaging units to Hezbollah.



That woman in the black burka came laughing down the steps of Miss Poem, a lingerie store on Hamra Street. She'd didn't care if the world looked into her bag. Down the street, sweeping up the sidewalk, was my vegetable man Osama: the customers call him "Haji." The Rock Inn had just opened, and the Ukrainian hookers were standing outside to smoke. Snack Zbeeb was closing for the hot afternoon, but at the hair salon the Filipinas were still threading eyebrows. This is my Beirut, and I'm looking for more, heading down to the Corniche, where this one extremely graceful young man dives into the Mediterranean every day at 5 p.m. He's not there yet, so I watch this girl in peacock hijab, wearing silver heels and standing on one leg like a heron. As her mobile phone rings, she turns away from a slick-haired guy.

"You never laugh at my jokes," he continues.

"Mish hala," she said, "not now."