

My Port of Beirut

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This book was written in the heat of the moment, with urgency, rage, and despair, in the four months that followed the explosion of August 4, 2020.

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A message appears on my phone screen: “It’s cursed, your poor country!” I imagine the friend who sent the message is referring to the terrible economic crisis that’s had Lebanon plummeting to rock bottom for the last few months, and the Coronavirus pandemic that’s been raging for a few days. As I’m about to set my phone back down, I notice that I also have seventy new messages on our family WhatsApp group, which has been somewhat inactive recently. Suddenly I have goosebumps. What’s going on? The first of the seventy messages—“All safe?”—is sent by my cousin. My heart drops. Something bad has happened. With a pit in my stomach, I scroll through the next few messages. The first two—“yes” and “me too” sent one minute later by my brother and sister—confirm the urgency of the situation. The third, a photo of a sofa barely visible under the debris of a smashed patio door with the caption “I was sitting there a minute ago” is sent by one of my cousins, who is at the other end of the city, while another writes: “I don’t have an apartment anymore.” Then a selfie of my sister with her face bloodied, all the windows of her office shattered and the furniture in shambles, and my heart starts beating out of my chest. Immediately my mind goes to an Israeli bombing; it’s been fifteen years now that they’ve been promising one, fifteen years that we’ve lived with their threats 24/7 and their planes flying over Lebanon several times a day for so many weeks. Trembling, I open the *L’Orient-Le Jour* website, but it’s not loading. Then in the Whatsapp group, my brother shares a short video that was sent to him. The first images of the blast break me into a thousand pieces.



Despair, terror, anguish, devastation, distress. Since the explosion, I'm barely alive, I sob at all hours, I can't sleep at night, I go to bed in the early morning, I wake up two hours later thinking it was all a terrible nightmare, I realize a minute later that it wasn't a nightmare, it was real, I weep in my bed thinking of the destroyed silos. I am in Paris, but not for a single second do I think of anything other than Beirut. Beirut leveled, destroyed, traumatized.

I am riveted to my phone, toggling between WhatsApp and Instagram, because that's where everything is happening. Since the revolution that started in October 2019, it's the most efficient way to be informed. Everyone in Lebanon is their own press agency and updates come at the speed of light. Worse than the news are the images—terrible, unbearable. Apocalyptic images of the port and the city streets. And the videos of the explosion. Watched on a loop, watched in slow motion, ten, fifteen times per day.

I cry non-stop, like a five-year-old. I think of the victims, of the dead, of the wounded, mutilated, disfigured. Of those who lost their lives as they lost their homes. Of the houses, palaces, hospitals, all destroyed. Of all this tragedy that struck everyone simultaneously. Everyone in my family has had their apartments destroyed. My parents, my sisters, my brother, my aunts, my cousins. But—I hardly dare admit it—it's the pulverization of the port silos that affects me the most.

The silos were, for me, the most unshakable symbol of Beirut, barely scratched during the fifteen years of war, standing so tall, so white, in the prodigious light of the port, as majestic as snowy Mount Sannine towering over them in the distance.

As precious as the columns of Baalbek. They were our Egyptian pyramids. Nestled within the port, they were the identity of the city. Their constancy reassured me, their appearance comforted me, I thought of them as a pagan sanctuary that watched over the city. With the silos destroyed, anything was possible. Now there was nothing to stop Beirut from sinking into darkness.



The front page on August 5, 2020.



*The front page on July 12, 1982,
during the Israeli bombings of blockaded Beirut.
It's a curse, always in the summer.*

The Sirens of the Port of Beirut

My grandmother's house, on rue Pasteur, has an unobstructed view of the Port of Beirut, right across from the silos, only a few hundred meters away. I spent most of my childhood Christmases in that house. Teta's pine tree, seven meters tall, touched the molding on the ceiling. The nativity scene, representing all of Judea, was at least three square meters, with an archaic but functioning water flow system symbolizing the River Jordan. The tree and the nativity scene were so magnificent that many family friends would bring their children to visit the last week of December, the way families go to peer in the windows of Galeries Lafayette in Paris.

At midnight on December 31, it was tradition for all the boats of the Port of Beirut to roar their sirens at the same time to ring in the new year. We would go out on the balcony for that magical moment. The sound was deafening and fantastic, the blaring announcement of a new year full of promise. And I would secretly make a wish, always the same: Please, God, let the war end this year.

During the restoration of our apartment, which had been struck by a Syrian firebomb during the attack on the Achrafieh neighborhood in 1978, my brother and I lived in that big house from another time, just a few hundred meters from the Green Line. Teta piled up two or three mattresses under her crystal Baccarat chandeliers in case a nearby explosive made them drop from the ceiling. Two bedrooms,

a small living room and a bathroom, which were west-facing and in the firing line of a sniper, were off limits. It was in this house that my brother and I started our collection of shrapnel. We would gather shells after each bombing, on the little flat roof that we reached by climbing the rafters. Still today, I associate shrapnel with the smell of laundry, because on rainy days the clothes were hung to dry under the rafters, on lines strung between the beams. Kalashnikovs, bazookas, mortar shells, and other heavy weapons sometimes made holes in the walls, broke the windows, the tiles, and made the plaster on the ceiling crumble. At the end of the war, the house was damaged all over but still standing.

There is almost nothing left of that house after the August 4 explosion. The ceilings fell, the roof collapsed along with some of the walls, and most significantly, the facade with three finely crafted arches, its marble columns and its balcony with a view of the silos, no longer exists.

The photos that appear on my phone screen pierce my heart. I burst into tears thinking of my grandmother and sob for hours, inconsolable.



A scene from a nightmare.



*One minute to midnight! Let's go out on the balcony
to listen to the port sirens! They'll keep away the city's
demons for the new year.*



The Heroes

The first face appears on my phone. A young, beautiful, beaming woman. She is sticking her smiling face through the open window of a firetruck. It's "the paramedic," my phone tells me, part of the brigade sent to the port at 5:54 p.m. to put out the fire in Hangar 12. Her name is Sahar Fares, she's twenty-seven years old, she died on Dock 9.

This face is seen around the world; within a few minutes it becomes the incarnation of the tragedy. Her body will be identified by her engagement ring. She was supposed to be married the following summer. Arriving at the port, she sent her fiancé a video of Hangar 12 in flames. That famous video is the only testimony of the final moments at the port. He called her, and as he was pleading with her to take shelter, the first explosion happened. Half a minute later, the second.

At her funeral, the orchestra booked for their wedding will play a zaffa, the traditional wedding song, and people will dance with her white casket. Just before, during the final goodbye at the Karantina fire station, her coworkers will wail the sirens from every firetruck at the same time to salute, in a deafening sob, "the bride of Beirut."



سحر فارس

*“I am broken... life is meaningless now.
May God burn the hearts of those who robbed me of your smile and your
affection. You are my soul, and I will love you until I am reunited
with you once more...”*

*...That rose, that child, strong as a hundred men, killed in an instant:
who can explain it to me...”*

At the same time as this smile bursts through our screens, information on how the tragedy unfurled rapidly pours in and breaks our hearts: 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate had been stored in Hangar 12 since 2013! The authorities knew it, even those at the very top. Including Aoun (I can't bring myself to call him the president), but we'll find that out later. A cache of fireworks had apparently been placed in the same hangar. The say the fire started around 5:50 p.m. In any event, at 5:54 p.m. the phone rings in the Karantina fire station. A brigade is sent to the port, including nine firefighters and one paramedic. They arrive at the site eight minutes later. They have no idea what's in the hangar.

A new photo appears on every phone. Three men, two firefighters and a civilian, try to force open Gate 11 of Hangar 12. The gate to hell. It's the last photo taken by Sahar and sent by WhatsApp to her fiancé a few seconds before the explosion. The nine men were between twenty and thirty-seven years old. Their faces invade the phone screens of the Lebanese people reeling from so much tragedy.



Hell lies beyond this gate...