

D*iary*
of the
Beirut
siege.
Monday
9 August
1982.

Negotiations to arrange D-day have begun.

My own day begins with her letter from the far-off city:

"Beirut always has struck me as a body, an immense body in which life goes on slowly. The heart of this city maintains its silent beat. This heart is our house in our sweet little quarter and that is what I hang onto more than anything else."

In our sweet little quarter, the first floor neighbour, an old boy in his fifties, lives with his sick mother and their two

Egyptian servants. He is a translator and claims he is not interested in politics. He passes most of his days on the lookout for fresh vegetables for his mother. As the siege grows worse his daily rounds lengthen and the difficulties multiply. Today, our first floor neighbour knocked at my door to ask me for a bottle of mineral water for his mother; he also wanted to tell me about his see-saw fortunes in his search for fresh vegetables...

"We've got one case of luxury products left, let's split it."

As he leaves, he says:

"When we left Palestine, they told us 'you'll be back in two or three weeks.' That's going back 34 years already. What are we going to do now?"

And I, what could I say to my first floor neighbour?

In our sweet little quarter, the building is almost empty, give or take two or three flats. The latest one to go is my fifth floor neighbour. An Iraqi architect, he was determined not to leave Beirut, even though he works outside the country, even though his colleagues and friends – mostly left-wing party militants – left weeks ago. He believed that the very fact of staying in this city was a duty, a way of participating in the local resistance: "What happens to others will happen to me," he said stubbornly. And now that his wife's health has deteriorated alarmingly, he has left against his will.

He left me a caged bird and a copy of the plan for the construction of a memorial to the battle of the Khaldé Crossroads. (*Editorial Note: The battle took place in June 1982 when Israeli troops reached the outskirts of Beirut*). Every night, my neighbour had contributed to the city's resistance, labouring under candlelight or gas lamps. The memorial is a large esplanade surrounded by a park and water, overlooked by a monument which faces the sea and has a continuously burning flame. To the right, the Pool of the Martyrs. Under the esplanade, a large exhibition hall in which scenes of the Crossroads battle are shown around the clock. A long tunnel leads to two whitewashed caves in memory of the fighters from the LNM (Lebanese National Movement) and the PLO: in one of them, a helmet riddled by bullets; in the other, a shattered

Kalashnikov. Who will realise my architect neighbour's dream?
And when?

In the meantime, he writes me from far away, about how torn apart he feels: "Imagine, I'm helping to build a city in the Gulf while Beirut is being destroyed!"

Tuesday, 10 August

Beirut is without water.

Along the streets, Israeli soldiers confiscate bottles of water, or whatever may contain any kind of liquid, even if it's a baby's bottle. Not a drop of water must be allowed to slip into the capital, as it burns with bombs and thirst. Washington and Tel Aviv ordered water to be pumped in for a week. In order to cut it off again and make things ever worse. The wells are drying up and their waters have become saline.

Beirut is without food.

At the check-points, they confiscate every kind of nourishment, even sandwiches. The bread is black and has become scarce. The queues in front of the bakers lengthen. Several families fall back on the old methods last used in the siege of 1976: they bake the bread on the *sajj*, a primitive oven in their homes. It's been weeks since we've had fruits and vegetables, we've forgotten what they taste like. As for the enemy, he's maybe forgotten that this is the second siege Beirut has resisted.

Beirut is without medicine.

At the check-points, they stop Red Cross ambulances from delivering blood to West Beirut. Most hospitals and clinics have been hit by the bombardments. Most doctors have left. Only the hospital at the American University of Beirut is still functioning. But they lack in everything and only operate on emergency cases. The fuel oil reserves in houses are being emptied for the AUB electrical generator.

Cases of typhoid and cholera have been detected. The siege is beginning to get under the skin of Beirut's inhabitants. Only the rats are healthy.

Beirut is without electricity.

But the people have got used to long nights with candles and gas lamps. Our moons are the lights of parachuted rockets that illuminate the skies, our stars are tracer bullets. When they ask people: "aren't you happy that they promised to put back the electricity?", they answer: "we want neither them nor their electricity!" The electricity hasn't returned and, moreover, they've cut the telephone lines.

It's night. You walk along a little dirt street between Aychah Bakkâr and Karakol al-Drûz, guided by a flashlight, stepping over little puddles of water – that precious and wasted commodity. Mountains of garbage give off a pale glow and thick smoke. The city is silent. You can hear it slowly breathing in the intense heat. Suddenly, just as you reach the empty street, you are assailed by the violent, pungent odour of jasmine. That sweet-smelling whiff stops you for a moment before you continue on your way, a breath of soft voluptuousness rises to your head.

I love you, Beirut of jasmine.

Wednesday 11 August

This humid morning, before the sun reaches its peak, the occasional breeze rustles through the branches of the sycamore tree in front of my window. On the roof of a modest house, a young girl hangs clothes out to dry. She has deft movements: she bends over, then stretches up, her arms near the clothes line, her light brown face appearing and disappearing behind the clothes. Now, all I see of her is her heels, the tendons of the foot muscle looking like a bundle of sheafs of wheat that spread as they go up the leg before they disappear under her skirt.

On the radio, Feyrouz sings the words of Gibran Khalil Gibran:

*My country, breaker of chains,
My country, the farmers,
the vine-growers and the builders
My country, land of wheat.*

Above the sycamore tree, on the roof of the big building,

a flock of pigeons come to rest then fly off again at the same rhythm as the bombs fall.

Thursday, 12 August

The air raids last from six o'clock in the morning until five at night...

Job is an anonymous citizen. On the walls of the Hamra quarter he writes of the city's patience. He spreads banners full of defiance and tenacity throughout the neighbourhood.

"Beirut is a tune from a brass band, the kingdoms are glass palaces"

or

"Good morning Beirut:

morning of tenacity,

Morning of the poor, looking for their daily bread."

Monday 16 August

What have they cooked up for this country? Shimon Peres declared to the USA: "The most realistic solution for Lebanon is to divide it up and bring it back to its pre-First World War borders" (Jonathan Randall in the *Washington Post*).

If this is the cooing of Israel's "doves", what are the claws of its "hawks" like?

The delegation from the Federated Union of Egyptian artists leaves Beirut. It holds a final press conference: "There are no words to describe it, it's a gigantic human experience... If we had not come we would have spent the rest of our lives regretting it... The response from the masses, the combatants, the Lebanese and Palestinian leaders has been overwhelming." A mixture of Egyptian cinema and fighting solidarity. Whatever it is, our gratitude towards these sons and daughters of the Egyptian people is immense. They shared these days of suffering and heroism with us.

Two of the delegation members visited the apartment that has become our headquarters, office, restaurant and dormitory. In the midst of the hullabaloo, of comings and goings, of endless telephone calls, there was, in the words of this Egyptian mother, a long hour of frank and warm solidarity. As a woman, she had

had no education, she had successfully put herself through her studies, she had become one of television's most outstanding television scriptwriters (...)

The Birds of Beirut

(for Jana)

"Shall I tell you a story?

"An shiki, 'an biki, 'an dibs shdid ba'albaki, ma biyinshal bil'id, illa bi'khatim sitti umm Shdid." (Editorial Note: A common prelude to tales told to children: "It's about complaining, it's about crying, it's about thick molasses from Baalbek which can't be spooned with a finger, but only with the ring of Grandma Umm Shdid.")

One day, my neighbour decides to leave and gives me five caged birds.

"What am I going to do with your birds? We're in wartime, bombs are falling... and we're out of water. Who's going to have time to look after them?"

We began to think it over. You know that I'm not too keen on caged birds, I like them when they sing in trees. When your mother bought you a pretty cage, I refused the idea that you'd put some birds in it.

The first idea was to open the cages and allow them to fly free. It was a good idea, but we quickly changed our minds. My neighbour told me: "These are exotic birds that don't exist in Lebanon. They've been cooped up in cages for so long that they no longer know how to fly or look for food. If we let them go, they'll die in the space of two or three days."

"But it upsets me to keep them caged up."

"Yes, it's upsetting, but it's better than letting them go and allowing them to die."

We then decided to leave them in the cage and look after them. Better to have caged birds than dead ones...

Every day, I would go up to the neighbour's flat and look after them. I gave them seeds and water. Despite the war, the noise of dropped bombs and explosions, the birds went on singing in their cages. And the birds in the large cypress-tree right next to the building, well, they would answer them. One day of

particularly intense bombardments, the people went down to the shelters, the children clung on to their mother's skirt for fear. Some screamed and cried.

As soon as the bombardments were over I rushed up to my neighbour's flat. The birds no longer made a peep, and even the birds in the cypress-tree were silent.

A bird was prostrate in the cage. I opened the cage. The bird didn't move, I nudged it, still it didn't move... it was dead, and the other birds remained silent... How it saddened me that this bird should die in the cage...

There you have it: my story is neither pretty nor joyous, but it certainly took place. That's what happens in Beirut:

in Beirut, birds die because of war and bombardments;
in Beirut, birds die if they leave their cages;
in Beirut, birds die in their cages because they can't stand being locked up.

That's my story. I've told it to you.
I've dropped it into your little heart,
don't leave it in your little heart,
tell it to your little friends,
tell them the story of birds that die in Beirut.

Friday 20 August

Sad evening.

Gunshots have been echoing ceaselessly ever since the sun set. The Palestinian fighters are saying farewell to Beirut. Each one in his own way, and all of them use gunshots. Hundreds of them are wandering through the streets. They're fitted out in their new uniforms, the farewell costume, and they shoot without targets in front of them. Out of protest, out of anger, out of pity, and maybe also out of fear that the ammunition will otherwise fall into enemy hands....

Sunday 22 August

Day two of the Palestinian hegira.

Lunchtime with my painter friend. He was plunged into his water-colours when the war took him unawares. His colours

became darker – him, a master of light – and his lines trembled. His mythical bird, so proud when draped in brilliant colours, now resembles a crow as it lies prostrate at the back of the canvas, its feet up in the air.

Opposite the studio is a building taken over by refugees. Lebanese or Palestinian? Who can tell the difference? From the South or the Bekaa? Who knows?

Who cares?

A young woman, barely 18 years old, dressed in a yellow robe, plays with her daughter: she has a calm beauty, the lines on her face reflect confidence, her posture is upright and confident, as if to better show off her rounded and pregnant stomach....

War has made our women more beautiful.

In the South, women call their husbands "my home". I propose we inverse this custom: in this country of people without land, of people deprived of their own land, of displaced persons, of refugees, of émigrés, it's the woman who is the home, the woman who is the homeland.

From the studio of my painter friend I go to the hotel room of my poet friend.

"What did you do yesterday?"

"Nothing. I barricaded myself into my room and I cried."

He does not want to go with the fighters.

"I'm a poet, I'm not a fighter... and you, what are you going to do? Do you also want to leave?"

"Why leave? It's my country, I'm staying ..."

"Are you going to go underground?"

"I suppose so, we've been preparing ourselves for weeks now..."

Now we're amongst a circle of friends who've joined us: who's going and when? Who's staying?