

## Forgive me, Beirut

Maya Shams

Three weeks ago, I was sitting by my balcony in my old room in Beirut. Before me the mountains stood tall shimmering against the hot summer sun. The sky was a clear blue and the birds filled it with familiar songs. Songs that I had gotten used to hearing every morning and every sunset. I watched the harbor within sight, ships resting on the surface of a silent sea. Every now and then I'd hear the sound of a helicopter fly over the building. Electricity had been gone all day and I was feeling restless.

As if quarantine wasn't enough. As if the economy crises wasn't enough. As if being unemployed wasn't enough. As if having all my flights and dreams that had been canceled wasn't enough. The electricity would come back only to tease me then it would cut again ten minutes later. The internet gone along with it. The humidity adding to the heavy weight sitting on my heart.

I complained day and night with my flatmates. We tried to see the blessing in disguise, the meaning behind all of what was happening in the world. We tried to be grateful that at least we had a shelter over our heads. That at least we had a couple of hours of electricity a day while others didn't have none for days. At least we had water. At least we had some dollars we could exchange while others had nothing to exchange.

I still complained. I got so suffocated by the deteriorating situation in Lebanon that I started looking at cheap flights back to Istanbul, in Turkey, since it was the only country that was open for tourists. My mother and siblings were settled there. My old friends were there. I got excited about the prospect of living in a developed country again after living in Beirut for the past six years. I couldn't wait to live a life where I didn't have to worry about whether there was electricity today or not. Where I didn't have to worry about how much the dollar was worth on the black market. It changed every day.

Life was so unstable it made me hate Beirut. The Pandemic ruined everything for me. It affected an already fucked up situation in Lebanon and made it even worse. All the friends that I had grown up with over the past years had left me behind. Simon went back to Ireland. Judy, back to Ethiopia and Noemie was leaving too, back to France. The hostel where I used to work was closed and empty since March and I had lost my best friend over a phone fight. I thought I had to leave too. I couldn't stay in Beirut any longer.

My phone had broken a week before that. It was too expensive to fix it and so I had to adapt to a life without a phone as well. I tried to book a flight to Istanbul with my bank card but it wouldn't work. I grew anxious. I kept saying, *nothing is working out. Maybe I'm not meant to leave.* I reached out to my sister and asked her to help me buy the ticket. The first one she bought, was supposed to leave Beirut on the 29th of July. It got canceled a few days later and I messaged my sister again, this time with a growing panic. *Help me, please! I feel stuck here. I really have to leave.* She registered my panic then calmly said, *Maya you need to let go. The more you hold on to something, the more you block the universe from helping you get it. Just relax and let go.* She bought me another more expensive ticket the next morning. This time I would fly out of Beirut on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July.

The moment I received the flight confirmation, something switched off in me. I felt nothing. I realized I was not excited about Istanbul anymore. I was going to miss Beirut. I suddenly felt scared of going back to Turkey after all that I had lived in Beirut. I didn't know how to say goodbye to that city. I had always told people that with Beirut it was

always a love and hate relationship. Beirut would slap you around and strip you naked one moment then it would stretch out its arms and take you into a warm embrace to tell you everything was going to be just fine. Beirut changed me. It made me understand who I was better. It humbled me and allowed me a closer connection to a world that had always rested within me.

Three weeks ago, I'd go to Riwaq cafe, just around the corner from my home. I'd sit there with Noemie, our laptops open before us, and I'd write to you about my past while she'd study for her exams. Antoine, would come over to our table every now and then with his energetic and full of love spirit. He'd tease us in his French Lebanese accent, he'd make us laugh then he'd dance his way back to other tables. I'd write for hours at Riwaq. I'd write to you about my past adventures. A past I once enjoyed bringing back to life but now...I don't know.

Three weeks ago, I sat numbly on my balcony, my head clouded by an unnatural amount of hashish, and watched the sunset over the port. I saw smoke coming out of a building near the harbor. I had seen that smoke before. I thought it must be industrial or something. It bothered me. I had always seen that smoke coming from that building for a while. Everyone spoke of a possible war. The vibe on the streets was as restless as my dreams were.

As my departure date grew closer, I persisted in my denial and the amount of hashish I put in my joints increased. When there would be no internet, I'd put my chair on the balcony and listen to music saved on my laptop until its battery died. I had this song by Ibrahim Maalouf, that I would listen to on repeat, titled *Hashish*. In a way that was my own personal way of saying goodbye to the city. After all it was his song, titled *Beirut*, that had brought me to Beirut in the first place.

Those little moments of dazed and confused contemplation, meditating through the humidity and the pollution in the air. Thinking, this is my Beirut. It was never perfect and it might never become perfect. Maybe that's why it became the city I stayed in the longest since I ran away. Something about its rawness, the authenticity of its streets, the bluntness of the bullet holes in its post war buildings, and the protective walls its people had around their already broken hearts.

I persisted in my denial. I didn't want to admit it even to myself, how much I was going to miss Beirut. How unreal it felt that I was going to leave it and this time, maybe for good. I'd stand with my hands wrapped firmly around the balcony's railings and as I'd look at the massive view before me, I'd see all the people's faces I'd met since I'd been there.

People I'd worked with at Radio Beirut on Armenia Street when I had first arrived. People I'd popped ecstasy pills with on weekends and danced through the night in underground clubs with. People that had broken my heart and made me feel worthless. People that had lifted me up and reminded me of my worth. People I'd checked in and out of Hostel Beirut. People I'd had one night stands with followed by one day disappointments. People I'd snored cocaine with in Hamra while trying to keep it up at another bar job one more hour. People that I'd hugged trees with at acid hyped festivals in old summers back when I still took drugs. People I'd had deep and enlightening conversations with over endless cups of coffee at Sole Insight cafe on Vendeme stairs. People I'd had secret crushes on and was never going to tell.

Johnny and his mother Margot at the corner shop that I had grown friendly with. Motaz the young Syrian man that worked at the bakery next to my home who was trying to learn English and always made me the best cheese *manaesh*. Majd my dear Syrian friend with whom I learned to understand people more and practice patience more. Versions of myself all through out those six years and how far I'd come. I'd sigh, as if by leaving Beirut, I was leaving all those versions of myself and all those conflicted memories behind as well.

I persisted in my denial until the last possible second. My flight was at four AM in the morning. I didn't sleep that night. The electricity cut at midnight and I stood in the dark. I watched a blacked out Beirut while smoking my last joint before I got ready and woke Noemie up. Her flight to France was booked to leave a few days after me. She helped me take my bags down. I was terrified. Nothing felt real to me until she hugged me in front of the waiting Taxi. We both cried and clung to each other. I realized how much I was going to miss her. I got into the taxi and looked through the back window at her standing in her shorts in the middle of the street waving at me until she disappeared out of sight.

I cried all the way to the airport to the dismay of the driver who happened to be a woman. She said, *you're lucky your leaving. Why are you crying? This country is doomed.* I couldn't explain it to her. I couldn't even explain it to myself. I knew I had to leave. There was nothing for me in Beirut anymore. At the same time I knew I loved Beirut so much in all its imperfections that it tore me apart to leave it.

At the airport, I cried even more when the ticket officer told me that I couldn't fly to Istanbul with a one way ticket. I had to have a return flight. I had no phone to arrange it and the ticket offices only opened at six AM. I stood on the side and begged the officer to let me through. I told him my family lived there. I told him I had no phone and I didn't want to miss the flight. I told him I didn't want to come back to Beirut. He felt sorry for me and asked his colleague to lend me his phone. I couldn't remember anyone's number and they were all asleep at that hour. On a note I had with me, my friend Seda's number was written. Her husband was picking me up from Istanbul Airport the next day and I had written it down in case I couldn't find him. I called her silently praying she'd answer. She was my only hope to get out of Beirut. She answered after the second ring and booked me a return flight on the spot then sent me a screenshot of it to show to the officer. They let me through and I boarded the plane on time.

When I arrived in Istanbul, I felt exhausted. I couldn't absorb anything. My soul and heart were still back in Beirut while my body walked lifelessly around the old Taksim square. I felt homesick the minute I landed my feet on Istanbul's ground. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Turkey, the country that once felt like home to me, felt like nothing now. I sat in my room at a hostel my friend sorted out for me and I climbed to the roof through its balcony. When I looked up at the night sky, my heart jumped at the sight of the moon. I hadn't seen it the past nights in Beirut. Seeing it again felt like home. Staring at its enchanting white light I felt transported back to my balcony in Beirut.

A week passed. During which, I hung out with my brother, found a small room in a crazy duplex flat with nine other flatmates, and slowly started accepting my new reality. I hung out with my old friend Nigel who like me was stuck in Syria for six months, his plans were all canceled and the only country that would have him was Istanbul. Along with my brother he helped me move my luggage from the hostel to my new home. I told him as we walked in the sun with all my life's belongings on our shoulders, that I was never going to forget his kindness and that I was going to write about him in the blog one day. There you go my Aussie mate. Thank you.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020, at 6:10 PM, I was sitting at a restaurant with Nigel introducing him to my favorite Turkish dish, Cig Köfte, when my phone beeped. Noemie messaged me. I opened it to see four to five different videos of an explosion that had just erupted in Beirut. She was safely in France by then. I didn't know what I was looking at when I played the first video. That same smoke I used to see over the port was there in the video. I thought it was just another big fire but then the sound and the explosion happened and my heart stopped. I replayed that video probably a thousand times. I was in shock. I said goodbye to Nigel and went back home. I started calling everyone I knew that was still back there while at the same time replying to all the messages from people asking me if I was safe. I felt horrible telling them I was actually in Istanbul. I felt so guilty that I was safe while Beirut wasn't.

Nothing made sense. When I called Majd, he didn't answer. I texted him over and over again to ask him if he was safe. He sent me a quick voice note to let me know he was but that the hostel was completely destroyed and there was no internet anymore so he couldn't have phone calls. He sounded tired and I worried about him. Motaz from the bakery was safe but his father was injured at the hospital. My old landlord texted me back to say that the building I used to live in was destroyed.

Everyone told me how lucky I was that I left just a week before that. *Good timing*, they said. I didn't feel lucky. They told me I was protected. I felt uneasy when I heard that. I felt undeserving of that protection over others. I still don't understand it. A week has passed since the explosion and I still can't understand how such a thing could happen. I thought these kind of things only happened in the movies.

Around me in that duplex flat, my flatmates drank on and smoked up as if nothing happened while I stared at my phone flipping from one video to another in complete and utter astonishment. I grew restless as life around me in Istanbul went on. I couldn't sleep that night knowing that my friends were homeless back in Beirut. That the neighborhood I had lived in for years was no more. That the city that held me with all my hopes and fears was no more. That those protective walls over my friend's broken hearts were no more.

They say grief hits you in waves. At first there were no tears. Only shock and worry then shock and relief that all my loved ones were safe. Then came an unfamiliar obsession with following the news that I never had before. All those who know me, know that I never liked talking politics nor did I ever follow the news. I used to frown at people who told me the first thing they did when they woke up in the morning was read the newspaper. I only cared about the spiritual journey and making it as a writer but ever since August the fourth, I've lost it all.

I've lost my joy in the beauty of life. I've lost the fulfillment that comes with writing. I can't sit still for a second to write. *What about?* I'd ask myself. There is no desire in me at all to write about my past adventures. With this new obsession came anger. An anger that builds up within me day by day without an outlet nor a place to put it. An anger at the whole world. An anger at those in power. An anger at the unfairness of it all. How did we get here?

I am so angry, it scares me.

I sat the other night on a balcony with a view quite similar to the port view I had in Beirut and my heart tightened. I thought, this too could all just explode one day. Nothing lasts

forever. All these buildings and streets could all in one second turn into rubble. What's the point?

This morning, August the thirteenth, I woke up to a video sent from my old landlord. I watched as she walked around breathless in my old apartment showing me the broken doors and windows and thanking God that I wasn't there when that happened.

I went out to a cafe determined to try and write something but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't. I talked to my friend Amy and when she asked me how I was feeling, I finally broke down and cried. I hadn't been able to shed a tear ever since the explosion.

I walk down Istanbul streets and all I see is Beirut. I look at the Graffiti in Istanbul and all I see is Meuh and Exist and Spaz covering up the walls, buildings and stairs of Beirut. I look at the young Turkish faces walking around me and all I see is the Lebanese faces that have endured more than enough.

I feel I can't be unless Beirut can too. I feel I am nothing until Beirut rises again. I feel I can't sleep until the Lebanese people are fully avenged and compensated for the crime that their despicable, corrupt, and moronic government committed against them.

I am not Lebanese. I am Palestinian. I never lived in Palestine though so it was never my home. It is always my roots. Beirut, however, was a home for my soul for a long time. Although I am not Lebanese I feel this explosion in Beirut has taken a big chunk of my soul and buried it along with the city under the rubble. My heart is so broken. I can't stop crying. I love every single Lebanese and non Lebanese on the streets of Beirut right now as if they were my own family. I want to hug every single one of them. I want to have some fucking super power, bring back the dead and build back the city in the blink of an eye.

I feel guilty that I am safe, as though my pain is unjustified, as though I'm undeserving of this life. I feel I've betrayed my Beirut. I feel anxious and triggered every time I hear an ambulance siren or a helicopter passing or a door slamming with the wind.

I wasn't there. I was in Istanbul yet it feels as if I was in that explosion, and half of me died along with it, and my already restless dreams have become even more so.

My heart is literally with you, Beirut.

Forgive me, *habibti*.

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13 August 2020



Figure 1: XXXXX