

Passion.

Beauty.

Life.

I'd say those are the adjectives that define Lebanon.

But not perseverance.

No, survival seems more fitting.

Surviving through the hardships.

To persevere, you'd have to be in control of your situation.

We control nothing but the way in which we react.

And the way in which we react is painfully beautiful.

No piece of literature will ever be able to describe the feeling, the sentiment, the absolute wistfulness of being Lebanese.

Nobody will ever understand how alive we are. How we claw and carve and dent our way into the world, even if the world doesn't want us there.

Even if the world rejects our efforts. Our work. Our passion.

We *are* passion.

No words can describe the brilliant monstrosity that resides in our State. No words yet too many words. So much so that you might get lost in a sea of letters and commas and periods.

And tired. Our sentences are tired. Our letters are depleted. Our alphabet is rotting. Our thoughts won't come out of their little shells anymore because there is too much to say and there is too little time. There is too little life. There is too little space.

There is no space. We are suffocated, yet we laugh. We are beaten, yet we stand. We are oppressed yet we demand freedom.

We are so full of nostalgia. Nostalgia for what? Nostalgia for this utopic Lebanon that we've all been dreaming of. That we've all been cherishing the idea of.

The golden age.

Even if you haven't lived it, you miss it.

That is the nostalgia that is so far ingrained into us that we can't seem to look past it.

A Lebanese soul is made of nostalgia for something they've never seen.

But more than that, it's the feeling of constantly being scared, stressed, frustrated, angry, tired. Of always turning on the TV, the radio, the phone. To just check, to make sure. Make sure that today is not your last, that this hour is not your last, that right now, right this very moment is not your last.

It's looking behind your back, making sure your enemy's not there but then turning back around, looking in front of you and seeing a burning nation.

You were too busy making sure you were okay. You were too busy making sure you weren't being stabbed in the back.

And now when you look forward, you can't see anything there.

It's burning and you watch.

You watch as the thing you're devoted to burns to ash.

Then you ask yourself why.

Why?

That's always the question.

Why can't I breathe? Why am I shaking? Why am I hurting?

Why is it burning? Why is it cracking? Why is it dying?

And truly, it's like watching somebody die over and over again, without being able to do anything else but watch. Because you know that the prosperity in which it lives is finite. That no one shall let it rest for it is too good to be true.

And you're just a helpless soul in a sea of others.

You are one in four million.

You are one in ten thousand four hundred and fifty two square kilometers.

And not one meter less.

And ripped away, everything is getting ripped away from you. Every single aspect of your life is being torn down.

What is normality?

We haven't heard of that in years.

We haven't experienced that in centuries.

So we joke and we laugh about it. We try to live through it. We try to make it normal.

This isn't normal.

Why should a Lebanese child look at an American, a European, an Asian, and wish they were that lucky? Why should we wish for our basic human needs? Why should we not get the same chance and privilege that other kids get? Why should *our* reality be a destructive one?

Why should our trauma be overlooked and cast away as normal?

And our rights? Where are our rights?

We have the right to go to school. We have the right to go out with our friends. We have the right to live and breathe and smile and laugh without the burden of carrying the mistakes of our peers.

We have every right.

And we *are* angry.

Never in any lifetime will you watch a real Lebanese, run at the mention of danger. Never will you catch them escaping their troubles. Never will you see them cower from despair.

This generation is ravenous for justice.

So God help you if justice isn't what we get.

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I sit at the kitchen table of my home.

The coffee cup's in my hand. It has beautiful, colorful swirls around the edges and towards the bottom. It's small. It fits perfectly within my fingertips.

The coffee swirling inside is warm and dark. Its color reminds me of my grandma's charcoal eyeliner. She had shown me some wedding pictures the day prior.

They were good times, when she got married. The mid 60's.

I examine my nails next. They're cracked and imperfect. I hadn't gone to the salon in a while. I hadn't thought of my appearance in a while. I'd been too busy with...

I feel a small breeze slither its way through my hair. My mom had cracked the window before leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I look up and take in the space.

It's made of old, yellowed and real stone. There's an arc on my right. It's the door.

There's a bowl of olives in front of me. We had picked them from the garden yesterday.

As I stand up to walk over to the window, the wooden chair creaks beneath me. It's old and rotten and beautiful.

Every step I take towards the window is more dreaded than the last. Because I can already hear them. I hear them from the comfort of my own kitchen where there's glass jars filled with water that my grandpa likes to drink from. In the kitchen, where there's a box of sweets my grandma specifically made for my siblings and I. In the kitchen, where dad eats his various cheeses and za'atar. In the kitchen, where my mom pours so much love into every single dish. In the kitchen, where I used to have dance parties with my siblings before they left. In the kitchen, where my aunts sit and listen to my various theories, indulging my fantasies about change.

And I make the mistake of looking outside.

Not only do I hear them, now I see them.

Smoke. There is smoke everywhere.

Ash, filling the air and eventually my lungs.

Planes, going too fast, breaking the barrier of sound, making my ears ring.

Drones, buzzing about, having the nerve to replace the birds.

Just like the smoke is replacing the sky. Just like the fire is replacing the breeze.

Just like a dead weight is replacing my heart.

I close the window.

It's too late now, the smoke is inside and I wonder how stone can burn as I watch my kitchen go up in flames. I wonder what would happen if I just lay there and let myself burn along with the memories.

My eyes are heavy and I'm tired.

I don't know when I dropped the small coffee cup but it is now shattered on the ground, liquid pooling at my feet.

It looks suspiciously like my heart.

I stare at the ceiling, the dirty fog blurring my vision.

I stare at the ceiling and I wonder.

I wonder if this is how they truly see us.

I wonder if they think less of us.

I wonder if this is the extent of our importance.

I wonder if they believe we are animals. Stupid, worthless, brainless beasts.

I wonder if this is what our lives are worth to them.

And I realize that it's worth just that.

Nothing.

Do they watch us and laugh? Do they watch us and cringe back? Does disgust hit their gut the same way it hits mine? Fear, perhaps?

The instinct to kill us like they would any potential nuisance?

Am I a nuisance?

Here is what I do know: I am the least human I have ever been in their eyes.

And that is no fault of mine.

I am standing precariously over a river of rage and I am not afraid to fall in.

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I sit in front of my TV, wrapped up in blankets.

A man is speaking. He is holding a speech in front of a big crowd. A crowd that worships him.

My hands tighten around the cushion on my lap.

He is speaking of his superiority. He is speaking of his greatness. He is speaking of his heroism.

And people cheer.

They believe him.

They believe him when he says he is doing this for the good of our country. When he speaks of the things he wanted to do that no one *let* him do. When he says exactly what they want to hear.

And he smiles. He smiles so brightly you'd think he means it.

You'd think he wouldn't be capable of betraying his country.

You'd think he wouldn't sell out his people to narcissists.

You'd think he wouldn't steal all the wealth of a people.

You'd think he wouldn't stand by as they all bleed and die because of this man's actions.

This man.

My fingers are digging into the cushion now.

I feel my nails puncturing into the soft fabric.

My blood is boiling with the rage of generations before me.

Then he waves goodbye, gets off the podium and another one comes on.

This one's more stoic than the last.

He boasts and croons about his victories. He pretends they are *our* victories. He pretends that we gain anything from them.

He preens at the crowd who laughs at his jokes as if they were old friends. They're boosting his ego; I want to rip my hair out.

Instead, I maw down on my inner cheek and keep watching.

He promises a better future. He waves his fist in the air as if he were the savior.

Our savior, sure, the one that allows his people to starve, waste away and die.

He acts as if he is completely unaware of the raging chaos that is our nation. He acts as if he lives in his own little world.

My phone buzzes and lights up beside me with a notification.

*'Airstrike on Baalbek'.*

I clench my fists around the holes already punctured into the cushion. I think that maybe the soft material doesn't deserve my rage.

Baalbek, the beautiful city, filled with culture, is being bombed as these people speak.

The city that holds history. *My* history.

I wonder if I will ever see those beautiful columns again. I wonder if anyone will hold a perfectly chaotic Lebanese concert there again. I wonder if the best stylists in the world will have their fashion shows there again.

Will it forever be destroyed by the wrath of weak, uneducated men?



I look at the TV, listen to the static. It gets louder as my blood reaches new levels of madness. It's too loud now for me to make out what the man is saying.

I don't need to hear him to know that he's lying. He's lying about his plans; he has none. He's lying about his riches; they're the riches he stole from us. He's lying about his love for our country; he's already sold us out.

Most importantly, he's lying and we believe him.

And in that moment, I am an endless pit of darkness, waiting for the day that I can explode into a supernova.

Waiting for the day that I can make this right. That I can finally free my people, held down by shackles of their own making.

I wonder if my rage is enough. I wonder if my intelligence is enough. I wonder if I am enough.

Who am I, to make it alright?

Who am I, if not the monster they created?

Would it be so bad to be as savage as they think I am?

A lady stands out in the crowd of people. She is yelling something the microphones are barely picking up.

The crowd of cheering sheep goes quiet. They listen, truly listen, for once.

The man at the podium frowns. He must not be used to impertinence.

Too bad, considering we *are* impertinent.

His face falls as he listens to her.

She is screaming about her rage. The same rage I feel.

She is screaming about her pain. The same pain I feel.

She is screaming her accusations. The same accusations I have.

And I feel so deeply connected to her.

I had never met her, I had never seen her face nor spoken to her. Yet at this moment, she is my sister.

And my sister is being taken away by stern looking men.

She is thrashing in their arms, writhing in anger.

I stand up, the cushion falling uselessly to the floor.

She is being pulled through the crowd, still screaming, still fighting. She points one finger to the speaker and that one finger says everything.

He is forever cursed by the rage of the Lebanese.

The man looks pale and sickly. He clears his throat, thanks everybody and gets off the stage.

Cameras flash where he used to stand, journalists flood forward for questions, the crowd breaks in uproar.

There is only static on my screen.

I don't know when I walked over to the TV. I don't know when I had placed my fingers against the screen. I don't know when tears started flowing.

I am standing there uselessly, an endless pit of emptiness eating at my stomach. I am standing there uselessly, listening to the angry voices of my ancestors.

The light of the TV reflects on my flowing tears and I feel as dead as the static buzzing around my ears.

I am walking down the street.

There is all kinds of talk.

“Did you hear? They’re closing down that store.” One man says to the other. They’re sitting on white, plastic chairs in front of their shops, small coffee cups in their hands.

There’s a man shouting down the street. He’s asking if anyone would like more coffee. He’s holding two cups together with his fingers and tapping them repeatedly against each other to create some sort of melody only he can comprehend.

“He went to jail. Well, if there even *is* a jail.” Another man says further down, smoking a cigarette in his old Mercedes, letting his arm stick out lazily over his window as he speaks on his broken phone.

I keep walking, listening in on conversations once in a while. My steps become lighter as I let every bit of conversation flow through me and then right back out.

“The prices are so high these days, I’m not sure my gig can pay off my daughter’s university tuition.” I hear a woman say by the glass door of her fashion shop, speaking with another lady wearing her finest items as if she were attending a wedding.

I ignore them and keep going. I can see Nejme Square from here. There’s a few pigeons milling about. I pick up my pace.

“You heard his speech yesterday? What a liar. My son voted for him anyway. He’s not living with us anymore, at least that much I can say!” An elderly gentleman says gruffly to another white-haired fellow who nods along as if these words were law.

I can feel myself letting go of the burden of others. I can feel myself caring less and less as I reach Nejme Square in the middle of Beirut. I am so deeply used to my people.

I see the pigeons more clearly now.

I grin like a fool and make a run for them.

I giggle like a child as I approach them, some sort of unchecked giddiness and adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I know it is childish and I know it is strange but I keep going until I reach them, ecstasy running like warm liquid all over my skin.

The pigeons make some sort of squeaking sound and they all take flight at once, getting away from the menace that is me.

I am happy like a kid on Christmas Eve.

But unlike my childhood years, Nejme square is empty.

Unlike my childhood years, most of the shops around me are closed.

Unlike my childhood years, my mother isn't holding my hand.

I don't stop running.

I run until I cannot feel my feet.

I run until I am completely out of breath.

I run until I am one with the sky and parted from the earth.

I have transformed into some sort of bird, I must have.

And I am soaring through the sky, carefree of any worries, hopeful for the first time in years.

I am flying above Beirut's skyline and I pass by a buzzing drone. I scream and flap my wings at it. It makes an odd sound and speeds away.

I raise higher still, reaching the clouds. There, I find a war plane. I bite at its metal edges with my beak.

Its metal edges are so different from my feathers. So unnatural.

To my great surprise, it leaves.

And I am flying up, up, up...

My freedom has no limit. I am forever a creature of the sky, cursed to enjoy the simplicity of flight. I am conditioned to feel the wind against my feathers, rolling through them as if they were home. I am made to soar and whiz higher and higher still.

And I think I might have freed my people. I think that maybe, all of this anger, all of this frustration is what turned me into a bird.

I am free.

I am the vengeance of my people.

I am the revenge my generation has been craving for like starved men.

I am the curse my ancestors kept praying would befall this great evil.

I am the savior of my descendants.

I am the personal weapon of my rage and I am being wielded the way I was always meant to.

But I am Icarus.

I have flown too close to the sun and I am now plummeting.

I thought too greatly; I hoped too much; I wished too hard.

Thoughts, facts, statistics, *reality*; They all make their way back to me and I am falling, wings flailing in front of me, feathers being ripped, limbs getting twisted.

I am falling towards the shining ocean of my beloved country. I can see Beirut's curve from up here.

I am falling towards the sea that has mothered me since I was a child. The same sea I learned to swim in. The same sea I missed every winter. The same sea I lived beside every single day.

The mediterranean sea is welcoming back its child with open arms as if her child had done no wrong.

As if her child hadn't dreamt too big.

As if her child hadn't hoped too great.

As if her child was always made to find her way back to her.

And I meet her with the same warmth she is giving me.

I meet her with my bleeding heart.

I meet her with ten thousand four hundred and fifty two square kilometers etched across my skin.

I meet her with the blood of generations upon generations of pain.

I meet her with patriotism to a fault brimming in my eyes.

I meet her with my red, white and green flag raised high. The cedar behind me. The sea in front of me.

And I am not afraid.

I have never been afraid of home.

