

The Ghosts of Christmas Present

Untold despair. Misery. Grief. There is no single word to describe the deep well of sorrow in the hearts of the families of missing people. With life there is always hope; and with death, the healing process of bereavement can grind into action. But by definition, a missing person is neither alive nor dead. A missing person is another class of citizen, forgotten as a nameless number - an invisible creature who has the essence of a ghost. If you steal a man's son or daughter and leave him with a ghost, he shouts with rage, cries with anguish and whispers with hope all in the same breath.

There are a startling 13,000 to 17,000 people listed as missing in Lebanon. It is frustrating, downright insulting, that there has not been a single official attempt to track down our lost brothers and sisters - many of whom may still be alive in Israeli as well as in Lebanese and Syrian jails. And, unlike the families' grief, there is a word to describe the government's procrastination: shame.

Holidays are particularly painful for the families of the missing. Gathering around the traditional meal, there is an empty seat at the table, a seat that has been vacant for over a decade, a place reserved for the family's ghost. For Christmas and Ramadan, the Daily Star wishes to offer its readers an unusual gift: a chance to share a moment, however fleeting, with a handful of the 13,000 to 17,000 and those who still pray to see them alive. Until they are found, all that remains of them are their photographs, cherished by the families: images that are as flat and devoid of life as the paper you are now holding.

Consider two fathers: Andre Chaib and Alexandre Deeb were abducted together in 1985. Thirteen years later Andre's father is still fighting to find his son. Whereas Alexandre's father passed away a year after the kidnapping - he was discovered dead in his armchair, still waiting by the phone.

"I treasure the hope of seeing him again," says Emile Chaib softly. "I want my son. Is it too much to ask?"

The story of Andre Chaib's abduction is as tragic as it is straightforward: he was taken on the Green Line along with Alexandre. What is exceptional is the sequel - a tale of dogged determination by Mr. Chaib senior, a plot of intrigue and danger worthy of the best if most demoralizing of detective novels.

Discovering that Andre's release would be conditional upon the release of three Iranian diplomats held by a rival militia, he begged militia leaders to free the Iranians. He met MPs, human rights activists, self-proclaimed middlemen who disappeared with his money, and Syrian officers in a sordid sequence of events, following a trail that ultimately led him to a prison in Damascus.

"I was so excited," recalls Mr. Chaib. "After a decade of fruitless searching, we suddenly had the first positive sign of the whereabouts of Andre. We made an appointment with the warden who

confirmed that my son was being held there and when we reached the prison, the warden expressed his surprise that we had taken so long to find Andre.”

Mr. Chaib repeats incredulously, “He was surprised.” He shakes his head sadly. “No: we were surprised. How were we supposed to know where Andre was being held? And so, anyway, calm as can be, the warden asks if we’d like to see Andre.” He gives a humorless chuckle. “‘Yes,’ we told him, ‘we would.’ We were led to the door when the warden asked suddenly, ‘What’s your son’s name again?’” Mr. Chaib feigns contrition. “‘I’m sorry,’ says the warden, ‘we don’t have your son. We’re holding an Andre Chaaban.’

“Now it doesn’t take a genius to spot that you can’t have an Andre Chaaban. If you’re born a Chaaban, you can’t be an Andre. And if your Christian name is Andre, you can’t be a Chaaban.”

Mr. Chaib was not allowed to see the prisoner called Andre Chaaban, and to this day he can’t help but wonder with a gnawing sense of frustration if his son is in a Syrian jail. After his Ph.D. from Michigan in economics, Andre Chaib returned to Lebanon where he soon established himself as a rising star in the banking world. “But forget that he’s brilliant, and the kindest and most honest person you’re likely to meet,” says Mr. Chaib passionately. “Let’s suppose for an instant that he’s a criminal. Isn’t he now entitled to leave prison?” He moans suddenly, “I want my son. That’s all I want. Let those who took him give me all their conditions and I swear I will accept each and every one. But please, please free my son.”

Consider a wife and mother: Imm Daoud’s world collapsed Aug. 9, 1982. Her husband, Sleiman Khalil, worked in Beirut and spent the weekends with his family in Tyre. That August weekend should have been no different. Sleiman left his work in Chiah at 10 A.M., and headed south in his olive-green Mercedes. At 11:30 A.M. a neighbor of the family spotted Sleiman’s Mercedes several cars behind him in the line at the Shoueifat checkpoint. The neighbor was waved on by the militiamen and went home to his family. But Sleiman did not make it home that day nor on any other day in the intervening 17 years.

“Three days,” breathes Imm Daoud. “I waited for three whole days and nights without sleeping.” Her hand straightens the foulard that covers her head both as a nervous twitch and in an effort to conceal her tears. “But they never came home to me.”

Her story is immeasurably more poignant because her son, Daoud, was also in the Mercedes and is also missing. In 1982, Daoud was only 11 years old.

“They stole my child!” she wails suddenly. “Why did they steal my child?” There is an uneasy silence as she wipes her tears. “Isn’t he beautiful?” she asks at length, showing a picture of her son.

If Daoud is still alive, he is now 28. But in his mother’s heart he is frozen at 11, ever the child who plays football on the streets of Tyre, who rocks his baby sister to sleep.

“You can learn to live without your husband,” confides Imm Daoud. “It’s hard. But you learn to accept it.” She pauses and the hand straightens the foulard. “But you can never get used to living without your son.”

After waiting for three of the longest days in her life, Imm Daoud headed northward on the trail of husband and son, driven by the same neighbor who was the last to have seen Sleiman. At the ShouEIFat checkpoint, she swears she saw their olive-green Mercedes discarded off the road. "I screamed, 'Stop the car! Stop the car!' but the driver wouldn't stop. He told me that if I didn't shut up the militiamen would take me as well." Imm Daoud's tone becomes coldly vindictive. "But they saw me. The militiamen saw me pointing at our car." Six hours later, as she returned from Beirut, the olive-green Mercedes had been moved.

"I wish Sleiman had been a militiaman," she says softly, her tone now more confused than spiteful. "If he'd been a militiaman, it might have made some sort of sense. When you fight, you expect to be killed or imprisoned. But Sleiman didn't do anything. He's a civilian, a family man. And Daoud - " her voice trails off. And then she pleads chillingly: "Give me back my family. Give me back my baby."

Consider a sister: Even in her sleep, Imm Talal cannot help but think of Samia. "I swear to God she always comes to me in my dreams so I won't forget her."

As young sisters growing up together, Samia was always the brighter, the more studious one. "She's the first person in our family to have gone to university," says Umm Talal, and proudly: "She was offered a scholarship to study pediatrics in Moscow. She used to say, 'When I graduate and set up my own clinic, the poor will be treated for free'. She's like that. Samia loves people, especially the poor." Umm Talal's expression turns cloudy. "But they never let her finish her studies. She was never given a chance to help the poor children."

In the summer of 1982, halfway through her course, 22-year-old Samia Mahmoud spent her holidays in Beirut with her family and friends. "The airport was still open," recalls Umm Talal. "But was closed by the time she had to return to Moscow."

Anxious that she should not miss her lessons, Samia decided to travel to Damascus to catch her flight. "We told her to wait," says Umm Talal dejectedly. "We told her that the airport would open soon. But she wouldn't listen. And we let her go." Umm Talal stares intently at her palms. "We let her go because we all thought that no harm could come to a young girl who was only interested in children, not in politics."

Umm Talal's hands clench tight into fists. "Samia could've done so much good to so many people." She adds sadly, "They should have taken me, not her." Abruptly, she begins to shake her head as though answering an unasked question. "No. We can never forget. The Lebanese government wants us to forget. They tell us we can now bury the ones we've lost. But how can you bury someone if you don't have a body?" The fists are unclenched, and the palms move to her face. "Allah is my witness: I know Samia is alive." She nods for emphasis. "When I was pregnant, I dreamt I was going to have a girl and that I would call her Samia. My sister appeared to me in the dream and told me I couldn't use her name. 'I'm Samia,' she said to me, 'and I'm coming back'." Umm Talal's sudden smile carries little mirth but much hope: "Samia will return."

Consider a mother: Mrs. Zakariya lives in constant fear. She answers the phone reluctantly and opens her door with a heavy heart. Seven years after the end of hostilities, Mrs. Zakariya is still

hounded by the thought of strangers coming to her home in the middle of the night to steal another of her children.

Iskandar Zakariya was not taken away from his family off the streets, at a hazardous Green Line crossing. More distressing for a mother, he was kidnapped from her home and before her disbelieving eyes.

It was 9:30 P.M. June 2, 1985, when three armed men arrived at the Zakariya residence demanding to see Iskandar. "They said they only wanted to ask him a couple of questions," recalls Mrs. Zakariya. "That's all. A couple of questions and they'd bring him back." Her face has a sunken, haunted expression. "I believed them. Iskandar believed them. What could we do?"

With little more than a backward glance and a quick wave to his family, Iskandar was led out of the front door and, for the past 13 years, out of his mother's life.

He was 26 years old when the armed men abducted him, an MA graduate in marketing from LAU (then BUC). "I don't know why they took him. He wasn't involved in politics. He was kind to everyone and everyone liked him." Her voice rises in a plaintive cry, "Why did they take him?"

In a twist that is as grimly horrifying as the abduction itself, Mrs. Zakariya may not know why her son was kidnapped, but she is adamant she knows who is responsible.

"The man who stole Iskandar from us lives in our neighborhood," she states in a frail voice, eyes filling with dread. "The three men who came to my home work for him. He is a neighbor, an ex-militia leader, and now an MP. He knows where Iskandar is." She pauses and then repeats with morbid defeat, "He knows where Iskandar is but I can't say his name."

She cannot mention his name because she has two other children. Having stolen one child, she reasons fearfully, he may do so again if provoked. "But he is well-known and was in the last government," she hints, adding bitterly, "I paid him a lot of money to have my son back. He kept both the money and my son."

Her hands reach across to a bundle of letters on a coffee table. "The government talks of hostages in Israel, in Khiam. But they are quiet about all the hostages here in the Bekaa. Many of our sons and daughters are still being held in underground cells in Lebanon. When is the government going to do something about them? When will we have human rights in our own homes?" She lifts the stack of letters. "And what am I going to do with all this?" she asks, disheartened. "Iskandar isn't at home," she moans, and begins to weep.

Iskandar Zakariya is listed as missing, not dead. And therefore he still receives mail mostly from his alma mater - 13 years worth of LAU newsletters. The most recent, top on the pile, is an invitation to dinner addressed to Iskandar. As if receiving mail was not poignant enough a reminder of his absence, the card has an unwittingly distressing title. With reference to the university's claim as being a second home for its alumni, the title reads: 'Welcome Home, Iskandar.'

Consider a community: The list of missing people gets depressingly long the moment one steps into the labyrinthine neighborhood that is the poorer end of Bir Hassan. Samira and Akram lost their father and three brothers, the youngest of whom was 15; Naim lost his son; Fawzi lost two brothers and an uncle; and 16-year-old Fatima lost a father she has never seen in the flesh.

At the crack of dawn Sept. 17, 1982, the residents of Bir Hassan woke up to gunfire and to shouts of “Surrender or die”.

“Of course we surrendered,” remembers Samira. “We fired our guns only three times that day: three bullets for three of our own men who were planning to escape.” She was 12 then and witnessed one of the three collapsing on the ground. “We did that to surrender in good faith. We had already raised the white flag.”

Her brother, Akram, sits besides her. He is alive and with his sister today because he was only 4 when the militiamen entered the camp. “First they separated us according to nationalities,” says Samira. “The Lebanese residents of Bir Hassan went to the left, and the Palestinians, Kurds and Syrians to the right.”

“And then they took the men,” adds Akram.

“Yes. The women and young children had to go to the Cite Sportive - leaving their men and older boys behind them.”

Fatima’s grandmother is haunted by the sounds on that day. “As soon as the women left, the militiamen shouted: a’al sikeen al-bateekh,” she says morbidly (Come and get your watermelon by the slice - i.e. “carve your victims”.) “That and: ‘We’re going hunting today.’”

All the non-Lebanese men and boys from the age of 14 were taken on that bloody day: most were summarily shot; and 20, whose bodies were not found among the pile of cadavers, who have consequently been listed as missing.

“My father and three brothers are still alive,” insists Samira. “We went to the Red Cross and handed them the pictures of all our missing kin. A year later, the Red Cross returned our pictures, and some of them had mowjoud (present) written on the back. They were sent to Israel,” explains Samira, “to the prison where our men are being held.” She adds gloomily, “But some pictures returned without mowjoud.”

In Bir Hassan, a single, otherwise innocuous word stuck to a photograph can mean the difference between a missing person who may be in a jail and thus alive, and a missing person lost to oblivion.

Akram states simply but forcefully: “We want our father, our brothers and our neighbors returned to us. That’s all we want.”
