Purgatory on Gardenia Street

I was 9¼ when war broke out on the streets of Beirut. In the early stages, the war seemed little more than mischievous in contrast with later years. Everyone was excited, and everyone knew their cause to be just. In these first months it was as if the whole population had been invited to a hunting weekend but with the added thrill that the animals were to be allowed to shoot back. Doctors dropped their stethoscopes, surveyors abandoned their theodolites, street vendors left their carts stacked high with rotting vegetables, and they all donned Balaclava helmets to fight the enemy for fear of being recognised at work.

This was to have been a dirty weekend affair - a security crisis that would soon abate, like past hiccups. Two men would fire at each other from neighbouring rooftops on a Saturday, and on Monday they would meet for business as usual: the bank clerk serving his client, the doctor extracting the bullet he had fired. Compared with the later years, this first phase of the war was comical, almost endearingly innocent.

I still picture with vivid clarity how I'd go to bed at night wishing for an escalation in the fighting, or dreaming of the appearance of a new front closer to home. During the first months of intermittent combat, when shells rained down on Beirut, the streets were empty of school buses and cars, and schools and businesses alike had an unscheduled day off. On the days and nights when the fighting became particularly intense, with the city burning as one monstrous lighthouse, all the children on Gardenia Street, my street, had to be sent to Purgatory - and we loved it.

Le Purgatoire was a makeshift bunker, a seedy cabaret where poor Lebanese girls had entertained wealthy Gulf Arabs in the city's heyday. For our parents in 1975 this underworld, constructed below street level, served to shelter the neighborhood's children from the shells and snipers. But for us the disused nightclub was an exciting playground where we could hide camouflaged by the black walls and seek others in the many lovers' alcoves, or form armies of pillow-fighting warriors. We never wanted to return to our boring schools. North European kids pray for snow blizzards; we prayed for more bombs.

I remember during one short lull when schools opened again, our Maths teacher turned up with his Kalashnikov and a belt of cartridges. The most humdrum teacher in the dreariest school had, overnight, been transformed into a dangerously exciting militiaman. He handed us a test on algebra and settled in the corner of the classroom to wipe and polish his machine gun. He was so taken by the task that he never noticed that all the children were not in the least interested in the test and had all eyes riveted on their militant Maths teacher and his gun. He looked down the barrel, blew and wiped his weapon and balanced it for weight like a pro, all under the adulating gaze of boys and girls alike.

Like many children of my generation, I missed an inordinate number of school terms - around two years, all told. Half of which was spent underground poring over books on

Phoenicians which my father had lumbered me with in the firm belief that, with an impending peace and a resumption of schools, my failure in all other subjects might somehow be exonerated by an 'A' in ancient history. The other half was spent in Cyprus when my truant dream was realized and a new frontline came to within shouting distance of Gardenia Street, prompting us to leave our home in a bullet-ridden taxi and westward on a cargo ship that transported an equal number of cattle and refugees to Larnaca.

The war had stopped being fun some time before we fled to Cyprus, when my best friend, Hazem Salhani, was driven away from our neighborhood. Of all the kids on our street, I can especially summon up the friend and the foe. Elie was the bully: a stocky child, fiercely anti-Muslim, who could swear like an adult and who picked on the weak with the passion of an experienced militant. His father, built like a block of cement, was a captain in the local party, a militiaman whom everyone secretly despised (and who, incidentally, stole my mother's Volkswagen Beetle when we were in Cyprus). Elie, very much a chip off the old block, had a field day with my friend, Hazem.

The Salhani family was doubly cursed. They were Muslims in a predominantly Christian neighborhood, at a time when a person's religious affiliations printed on the ID cards became a life and death issue. Worse still, the Salhanis were Syrians in a part of town that would later declare a regional war against Damascus. Elie's father and his ilk probably saw themselves as descending angels, as the last knights of Christendom driving their stolen cars with dagger crosses painted red on the bonnets. They practiced a policy which, in a later decade and another country, would be euphemistically known as ethnic cleansing, and strove to turn Gardenia Street to its "pristine" Christian past.

To be sure, I became confused by my friendship for Hazem. Before the war, Hazem had been like everyone else - another kid who happened to be my best friend. We always played on the same side in the Gardenia Street football bouts, glaring as one at the occasional drivers who would interrupt our game as they maneuvered their cars around our makeshift goalposts of rocks. I bought him his Bonjus from our grocer's, Abou Ahmad, and he bought me mine - the routine exchange as we left the shop somehow serving to cement our best-friend relationship.

But after the Christian loss of the downtown Qantari district, and the massacre in Damur (we never heard of Muslim accounts of Christian barbarity), I began to feel guilty about this friendship and totally perplexed because, despite the anti-Muslim propaganda, the Salhani family at least was neither deceiving, dark, nor dirty. Those Syrian Muslims looked and behaved exactly like everyone else.

After "Black Saturday" (Dec. 6 1975), the war lost all pretences of innocence. The militiamen removed their Balaclava helmets, and settled down to some serious fighting. As mortars and rocket-propelled grenades rained down on our neighbourhood, pitting buildings like swarms of locusts ravaging a crop, I learnt about Cadmus and Adonis and other Phoenician myths in the suitably dim interior of *Le Purgatoire*.

By the time heavy artillery and tanks were introduced onto the streets of Beirut, I had progressed to the second Punic War, experiencing an inexplicable sense of sorrow upon learning that only one elephant had survived Hannibal's Alpine trek.

It took a concerted effort to drive the Salhanis away from Gardenia Street. One of their two cars was blown up in the parking lot; their apartment was shot at; but it was only with the brutal slaying of Abou Ahmad, the Sunni grocer that Mr. Salhani finally threw in the towel, packed his bags and took his family to West Beirut.

Abou Ahmad died when militiamen tied him to the rear bumper of a car and dragged him several times around the block - a car replacing a horse in this wild west treatment of the outcast. His body was left on the ground for a whole day in front of *Le Purgatoire* on Gardenia Street. And as I stared at his gory T-shirt, I could think only of Phoenicians dyeing their cloth.

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