

Get the Hell out of Here - They are Coming to Kill Us

Hiba Haidar

1975, a year engraved in my soul and memory for ever.

1975, the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, I still remember what happened that day in September.

We used to live in East Beirut, in Ain El-Remanneh, where the civil war started on April 13 of that year with the Ain el-Remmaneh bus incident. For four or five months, the war remained limited to that area before it spread over all of Lebanon.

It was September, I was a child of 8 years and the war had been going on in the streets for almost five months.

Snipers surrounded the area waiting to harvest the lives of those who dared to venture out to run errands.

On that day in September it was still early in the morning, we were having breakfast, all the females in the family were sitting around the table eating. My father had taken my brother with him to our village in the Bekaa Valley to take care of our lands there. As the fighting in the streets in our neighbourhood had become more ferocious, it was now unsafe for them to return to Beirut. Most families had already left because they were afraid of the fighting. On all the high buildings, there were snipers from the different factions, and I recall that whenever my mother sent me to get bread, she told me to run, not to walk, because of the snipers.

We were among the last to stay in that area. This was mainly due to two reasons: first we didn't believe that the fighting would continue, and were convinced life would soon be back to normal. This in itself was not uncommon, for not in their wildest dreams did the Lebanese people imagine that this would be the beginning of such a long and costly war for them, and that a whole generation of children would grow up and become adults before it ended in 1990. The

second reason was that we were living in the building adjacent to al-Hayat hospital where doctors were striving to help the injured, and due to my father's medical background he assisted in healing the sick and the injured. It was only that week that he had had to go to the Bekaa valley to take care of our lands there.

That morning we heard the doorbell followed by a strong knocking on the door. The person was in a hurry, my mother ran and asked who it was. A familiar voice answered, 'It is me, Georges.' My mother, relieved that it was our neighbour, opened the door. He was tense and she sensed that something serious was going on.

He stayed there standing at the door and said, 'Auntie, you should get out of here, leave the house, it is very dangerous to stay, the Palestinian Liberation organization (PLO) and Lebanese National Movement are coming tonight and they are going to kill us all.' He turned his back and left my mother there mesmerized. She looked at us and said, 'How can we leave? We don't have a car.'

At that time I did not understand what he was saying or who these people were, all I sensed was the fear on my mother's face. She sat for a while, thinking what to do. Then I saw her picking up the phone and calling someone. She was just opening her mouth to tell him what had happened, then suddenly I saw her face relax a little. The man on the other side of the line was an old family friend and a neighbour living two blocks away from our house. He told her he was going to pick us up, 'I am not leaving you behind to be killed. Don't pack things, there's no time and I can't stay long in the car waiting, you know it is very dangerous', he said. My mother hung up and quickly turned towards us and told us that we had to leave right away. She ran to our bedrooms and packed a

few things, turned to her own bedroom and put some clothes in a small bag, then turned to the kitchen and washed the dishes. It was obvious that the Kataeb party through its fighters were informing everyone to leave the area. The Kataeb were the dominant party in our neighbourhood and wanted to let us know the enemy was coming.

We could not take anything with us apart from the barest necessities. I can still vividly picture how I cried, 'Why can't I take my favourite toys and more clothes with me?' While my mother was pushing us out of the house, hurrying, yelling at us to, 'just go!' When we reached the stairs of the building, she told me to, 'Run quickly, hide inside the car and keep your head bent, don't show your head, do you understand me?' I looked at her and said, 'yes.' This was repeated with my two other sisters, and finally she did the same.

We left, speeding down the street, gun shots just missing us, the snipers were trying to hit the car but God was looking after us that day and we managed to flee the area safely. We left for the mountains of Aley where we stayed at my uncle's house. My parents' friend went to his village in the Shouf area in Nabeh Al-Safa. The second day, my father came to Aley and took us to our village in the Bekaa valley.

My Mother had the radio near her all that time, following the news, but nothing in particular happened that day. The fighting continued. There was actually an assault on the neighbourhood later on, however, it was a fight between the different parties concerned at that time, and as in all such fights casualties did occur among both fighters and civilians, but it was not about private houses or slaughtering civilians as we had been made to fear.

When in November 1975 a ceasefire was brokered between the factions, we decided to

return home, but with fighting flaring up every now and then, we spent the time going back and forth between the Bekaa valley and Beirut until May 1976, when it was clear that the Syrian army would intervene militarily against the Lebanese National Movement. Then my parents decided to empty the house in Beirut and move all our belongings to our village. The fighting finally ceased in October 1976 after the Syrian Army succeeded in quelling the resistance. Unfortunately for us, we could never return to our home as it had been occupied by the Syrian Army. It had been a rented house, so when we came back to Beirut, due to the divisions in the town, we decided to move to another area.

The threat was never explicitly issued – it was only spread as a rumour. But it was impossible to know whether it was true or false, and when your life and the life of your family are under threat, you'd rather not take the risk. Luckily for us nothing happened that day. Nonetheless, this rumour has marked my life and I will never forget the fear on my mother's face, and how terrified I was about those monsters that I thought were coming to kill us.



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