SEASON OF BETRAYAL

a novel

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ONE

THOMAS' DEATH IS SO inextricably linked with my own story that I never could have imagined forgetting a single freeze-frame moment of that awful day, when we watched him die, over and over again, in painful slow motion.

One moment he is alive, standing on a wooden crate, blindfolded, a rope knotted around his neck. His time is running out, and he knows it. His hands are clenched, and his body twitches with fear. A foot kicks the box out from under him. His neck snaps, and his dangling body jerks and sways. And he is gone.

I remember it was stifling that June afternoon, in the makeshift office we'd set up in that Damascus hotel room. I remember the framed Syrian Air poster, in lurid hues, on the wall next to the door, the fraying teal carpet, the view of the swimming pool with its cracked tiles. I remember Predrag, sweating, working the controls of the editing machine, muttering "holy shit" under his breath, again and again, and Richard, stunned, silent, taking notes. But, somewhere along the way, I lost a central piece of this tableau and no matter how hard I try, I can't recall how I reacted. Surely, I wept. Surely. Didn't I? I remember heavy breathing—perhaps it was my own?

Does it matter?

I once considered that the longest hour of my life.

Now I know there are others equally long, if not as painful, others filled with fear or anxiety or incapacitating sadness. None, however, dealt such blunt shock. Not in Beirut, when the Lebanese shopkeeper died in front of me, nor in Iraq, where after reluctantly intimate study, I realized the charred object in front of me was a Kurdish child, incinerated by Iraqi Army artillery. Not in Cyprus, when police finally let us close enough to see the bodies of the Israeli couple, shot by Palestinian terrorists on the deck of their yacht, the wife, middle-aged and plump, in a stained, white nylon nightgown that made her real in a way the stench of her decomposing body did not. I wasn't sick that day, though I wished I were.

There is no catharsis for these things. You carry them with you forever, each adding another notch on the yardstick by which humanity measures such horrors.

But I was utterly unequipped to measure the enormity of Thomas' death and who was responsible for it. I've tried to collect every detail, every scrap of information still available so many years later to put together this account, but I can only tell this story my own way—how Mac and I came to meet Thomas, and the effect it would have on our lives. You already know the ending. Or, think you do.

A quick peek then at my 29th birthday in Cyprus, the night before Mac and I left for Beirut. In the morning, we would join the ranks of other uneasy travelers and a bootleg cargo of champagne, cigarettes, and Coca Cola, to be ferried across the Mediterranean, God and circumstance willing, in an old container ship.

Mac had booked a table at a nearby fish restaurant to celebrate, and I was ready to go when he announced a change in plans.

"You'll have to go to dinner alone with those guys, Lara. I need to call the magazine, make some fixes in my story," Mac insisted, picking up the telephone on the bedside table.

"This'll take a while. Sorry," he added, avoiding my stare.

I hesitated in the doorway, hating to go alone. They weren't really my friends. They were his colleagues—a married couple we'd known slightly in Rome, Mac's last posting, staying by chance in the same hotel, along with a couple of other Beirut-based journalists we'd undoubtedly come to know better in the months ahead.

"Please," I said, drawing out the syllables. "They're waiting in the lobby. It'll be fun."

"No. Go on. Shoo."

"Come on, Mac. It's my birthday."

But this birthday already was proving as ungratifying as the last, when Mac, covering the imposition of martial law in Poland, couldn't shout even an apology down a crackling phone line until several days after it no longer mattered.

"Hello?" Mac said into the receiver on this night. "Operator?"

I couldn't see his face, only the top of his head, and the thatch of graying, brown hair.

"Barrett McCauley, room 305. I want to place a call to New York, please."

"Mac?" I tried again.

He waved me away.

"Sorry, this is going to take a while, Lu."

The pet name gave me hope. I waited, smiling expectantly, in the doorway. Mac finally looked up.

"Okay, okay, I'll try to join you later," he said at last, his voice softening a little.

But we both knew he wouldn't.

I returned a few hours later to find he'd left a chunky, antique silver Palestinian bracelet, perhaps chosen by someone else, on the pillow on my side of the bed. There was no card with the desultory offering. It wasn't even wrapped.

Mac was asleep, evidently aided by the half-empty scotch bottle and the remains of a room service dinner. Sadly, the wine I'd drunk at dinner wasn't enough for a similarly quick transit to sleep. Instead, I fidgeted quietly on my side of the room, into the small hours of the night, a natural worrier sleepwalking through the anxiety-strewn terrain of the Middle East in 1983.

The next morning, Mac gulped the coffee and juice that served as breakfast. There wasn't time for more before we left for the boat, with our mound of belongings, the suitcases and duffel bags and knapsacks and plastic carrier bags, crammed with last-minute panic purchases from shops near the hotel.

"Sorry I didn't make it down last night, I was on the phone for freaking hours. Like the bracelet?"

"Very nice, thanks." I held out my wrist for him to examine and hugged him—the hug half-heartedly returned.

This wasn't the morning to pick a fight, but the truth was I hardly wore jewelry, just my wedding ring and the Tissot watch Mac paid a lot of money for in the Vienna duty-free during the layover on his way back from Poland. Gold, not silver. As Mac noted when he gave me the watch, it better suited a pale complexion.

As we crossed to Beirut that day, I slid the bracelet off my wrist, a small silver shackle cast into the glinting waters of the Mediterranean. I was prepared to lie, but Mac never noticed it was gone.

I choose this starting point of January 1983, so you'll understand that, although I was still young, I was no longer naïve. Though I was still hopeful, the illusions were wearing thin and I feared what might lie the other side of a failed marriage.

Although I worked part-time and was going to grad school when we met, my own vague career prospects dissipated in the churn of Mac's ambitions and his string of assignments around the globe. He acclimated and thrived, happy to have someone look after him when he was home and miss him when he was not. But marriage only intensified the sense of isolation I'd felt since childhood, when my parents' very closeness as a couple excluded me, the late-in-life child. A perennial outsider. That was how I felt again, in the first year of my own marriage, as Mac spent much of his time in a succession of foreign capitals, while I stayed behind in New York.

Then, too, things were still good between us, and we both hoped the next posting, to Rome, would give us more time together. Within months, however, the pattern resumed: Mac off somewhere interesting and dangerous, with me at home, only this time in a city where I hardly knew a soul.

In many ways, it was a privileged life. The magazine paid for our huge, light-dappled apartment on Via Terme di Tito—named for the thermal baths of Emperor Titus—just a block from the Coliseum and the Forum, and Mac's frequent absences meant time to become familiar with these mighty ruins, and begin a Renaissance romance with Florence and Lucca and Sienna, only as far away as a timetable and my imagination. Accountable to no one for my days, I became an unashamedly knapsack-toting, perpetual tourist, with a hardcover diary of sorts, to capture stray bits

of information, occasional musings or clumsy attempts to render the beauty surrounding me.

I took Italian lessons twice a week, at a language school in a 17th century palazzo a few minutes walk from the Spanish Steps, and duly attended cookery workshops on regional cuisines and wines, though I never used our own kitchen unless Mac was home. I picked up the flute again for the first time since childhood, and found an elderly Polish gentleman, who, for a weekly fee of 10,000 lira—about five dollars—came to Via Terme di Tito and listened in gloomy silence to my amateur fumbling, perhaps daydreaming of the time when he proudly served as first chair flutist at the Warsaw Conservatory, in the years before the Nazis stopped the music.

No, I won't complain. But these pursuits were largely solitary, and by the time Mac announced our move to Beirut, the sense of disconnect was nearly complete. America had become a void for me. My parents were dead, a traffic accident just before we moved overseas, and any remaining link to my North Carolina hometown disappeared with them. There were a couple of Kershaws, cousins on my father's side, and only one Wedgeworth left, my mother Florence's much older sister Parthenope, a retired school teacher, who lived in Meridian, Mississippi, in the low-built house where they grew up with their little brother Henry, a picture page out of America's past. A long, white railing girded the verandah, and upon it sat an oak rocking chair and a rusting, squeaky glider bench that hadn't been oiled since Henry failed to return home from the Korean War.

Friends and acquaintances dotted the map, here and there, of course, from grad school or the New York years, before and during

my marriage to Mac. Living in Rome, however, did nothing to foster ties, and it's fair to say that over time, Mac came to mean everything to me: home, family and, as unforgivably old-fashioned as it now sounds, for all intents and purposes, my career.

This was enough for me, for both of us—or so I hoped. But by the time we left for Beirut, the first cracks appeared and, as cracks generally do, started to spread.

"*Passeports.*"

The customs official nodded indifferently at us; the overhead fluorescent lighting did his complexion no favors.

We'd arrived at the port of Jounieh after sunset, some twenty kilometers miles up the coast from Beirut, which meant crossing the Green Line in the dark, if we were to keep to our plan to reach West Beirut that night. But now we were actually here, on this cusp of a war zone, and, what had seemed a fine plan in Cyprus, now appeared alarming. How much safer—more sensible, I put it to Mac—to stay overnight in Jounieh and brave the Green Line by daylight the next day.

But Mac was determined to spend our first night in this new post at the Commodore Hotel, the unofficial headquarters of the Beirut press corps. He'd even telexed ahead to his old friend Martin Sawyer before we left Cyprus, to expect us in time for happy hour. I tried pointing out that if there really were such a thing at the Commodore, it surely would've come and gone while we waited to go through customs.

Our queue moved with the haste of a watched pot, much to Mac's exasperation. To my own embarrassment, he fidgeted and sighed heavily, each noisy puff of air expelled in the hope of

pushing things forward. Instead, we only drew stares from fellow passengers, mostly Lebanese, who, having stoically borne the rough sea crossing, were unperturbed by a lengthy wait on land.

"*Passeports, s'il vous plait*," the sallow customs man repeated, when, finally, we reached the barrier.

I handed mine to Mac, and he presented them both with a flourish, and indeed, the sight of our covers seemed to animate the official's impassive features. Foreigners were hardly flooding into Lebanon.

"American, I see, Mister..." He rifled through the pages of Mac's passport.

"McCauley," Mac supplied. "Barrett McCauley."

"Barrett *George* McCauley," the official corrected, peering closely at the colorful array of exotic visa stamps and entry permits that served as effectively as any travelogue in summing up the past few years of Mac's life. "You have many countries here. This is first time in Lebanon?"

His manner was chatty, informal, a host welcoming guests at a party.

"That's right." Mac's tone was equally affable, though I sensed him tensing up at a potential conversational delay.

"Hello, lady."

My turn. He looked curiously from me to my passport picture and back again, trying to reconcile the tired, anxious face before him with the untroubled one affixed to the page.

"This photograph from long ago, yes?"

"Not really. Last year."

"You much more old-looking now."

"Thank you."

But we both smiled.

"You have good journey?"

"It took longer than I expected."

"I think weather is not so very fine," he apologized sincerely, as if failing in his social obligation.

"Is it always so cold?" I shivered, despite a fleecy sweater and woolen pea coat.Beside me, Mac shifted his weight from one leg to the other as though in agreement, but frustration rather than cold prompted it, for he also leaned over and groaned softly, near my ear, "Shut *up*, Lara."

"Yes, always, in winter, lady." For a moment, the official looked downcast, then brightened as he added, "but is possible to make skiing on Mount Lebanon, if you like." He gestured expansively, as if the mountain were his to give.

"Hear that, Mac? You can ski here."

"Of course I heard, I'm standing right here, listening to you waste another hour."

The official looked at Mac in surprise.

"What's your hurry, Mister? You a spy?" He smiled, a big, wide smile this time, revealing teeth surprisingly white.

"I'm a journalist." The smile Mac returned was artificial, a thin, disapproving line, his lips remaining closed so that only his annoyance showed.

"Same thing, no?" The man laughed.

"Not at all. That's insulting."

"Why, you don't like CIA? All Americans are CIA." He laughed again.

"That's not funny." Mac looked around angrily to see if anyone was listening. "You could get us killed."

"Calm down, Mister, just having fun." He flipped open Mac's passport again. "Okay. *Journaliste.* Same word in French. In Arabic...*sahafi*.You know this word?"

"I do now." Mac glared at him.

"Mac," I said warningly. But his patience had expired.

"No offense," he said in a way guaranteed to convey it, "but could we skip the language lesson and move this process along? We still have to cross the Green Line tonight."

The atmosphere changed in an instant. No longer guests. Gatecrashers.

By way of reply, the official summoned a nearby guard, with an M16 strapped across his chest, who appraised us coldly while the customs official spoke rapidly in Arabic.

With the barrel of his rifle, the guard pointed at a table against the wall, about twenty feet away, and motioned us to follow. Mac mumbled "shit" under his breath as he picked up his portable typewriter and nudged me forward with his shoulder bag. I needed no prodding to do as instructed.

The guard smacked the table with the open palm of his hand to indicate where to put our belongings. Without a word, he strolled off, around the corner, out of sight.

We looked at each other helplessly. No one came to take his place, and no one came to tell us what to do. Back at the barrier, the customs official, busy with other arrivals, ignored us.

Mac was spitting with indignation. "This is a total mind-fuck. Who do they think they are? I'm an American journalist. They can't do this to me."

I tried to calm him, but I was pretty sure they could. Ten minutes passed, then twenty, ticking uselessly by, while the sky darkened. The

room emptied. The last of the passengers from our boat completed passport and customs checks. We watched the customs man lock up his stamp and inkpad and disappear behind a partition.

"What do you think they'll do?" I asked Mac.

"They can't do anything. We're fucking *Americans*. I'm going to call the embassy and the Foreign Ministry about this crap. They'll be sorry they tried to jerk me around."

Mac raged on, and I stopped listening. Eventually he fell silent. Really, there was nothing else to do.

The guard with the M16 finally returned, accompanied by a tall, slender man, who, judging from his demeanor, the stripes on his sleeve, and the high-gloss of his shoes, was a commander.

"I demand to speak to the U.S. embassy," Mac insisted, as they approached.

The commander ignored him. He eyed our possessions on the table with suspicion, his gaze falling upon Mac's hard-shell Olivetti on the table. He picked up the typewriter, gingerly, by the handle, and held it out toward Mac.

"What is this?" he growled.

I flinched; Mac stood firm.

"It's a typewriter."

The commander stared hard at Mac, while his fingers slowly opened. The typewriter hit the floor with a crash and the hard-shell cover broke off, bouncing on the floor a few feet away.

"Oops," the commander said flatly.

"Why'd you do that?" Mac demanded angrily.

The commander was already walking away. We scrambled to collect the broken plastic pieces, while the guard watched. Then, he nodded curtly toward the exit door. Apparently, we were free to go.

As we left the building, the customs official, the first man we'd talked to, poked his head out the door after us, a host bidding farewell.

"Goodbye, lady."

I started to turn around but Mac grabbed my arm and propelled me toward the waiting taxi his friend Martin had sent for us.

"Oh, and Mister," the man called out, "be very careful in Lebanon."

"Stupid son of a bitch," Mac muttered, as we climbed in. But his head was turned, so only I heard him.

TWO

THE DRIVE FROM Jounieh to East Beirut along the coastal highway was surprisingly quick, hardly time to assimilate the jumble of images of this city, its alien architecture and people, glimpsed at shutter-speed through the smoke-tinted windows of our taxi.

We had to stop twice, at checkpoints manned by Phalangists, the Christian militiamen, unnerving in their severe haircuts and uniforms, but the driver assured Mac it was routine. The first time there was just a quick exchange of words with the driver—and barely a look at us—before waving the taxi through.

We were not so lucky the second time. Five or six cars in front of us slowed down and came to a halt near the Green Line. We were too far back to see much except the taillights of our predecessors.

"What's happening?" Mac asked.

The driver seemed less certain this time. He rolled down his window to decipher the chaotic sounds that rushed in with the bitter, cold air—people talking loudly in Arabic, some shouting, car doors opening and slamming shut.

"Maybe look for Moslems," he said, eventually.

"And if they find some?" I couldn't help but ask.

The driver looked at me.

"Maybe nothing."

"Or maybe...?"

"Maybe kidnap. Exchange for Christian prisoners on West Side."

He let it sink in.

"Or maybe..." His voice trailed off meaningfully, as he drew his finger across his throat.

Up ahead, a couple of cars started their engines and drove off. At the same time, a group of men in military fatigues appeared in our headlights and surrounded the car directly in front of us, about ten feet away. One of the men broke away and came toward us, waving his arms and yelling at the driver to switch off the car lights, and roll up the window, or at least I assume that's what he said, for that's what the driver quickly did.

The frightening scene unfolding before us seemed unreal, even at the time, akin to watching a grainy, crackling, old-fashioned newsreel, with a muted soundtrack and only a Spielbergian touch of color here and there, flickering in the half-light of the moon, as we huddled together in the taxi, literally a captive audience. The soldiers yanked a man from the driver's seat, and he struggled frantically, before one of the soldiers whacked him to the ground with a rifle butt. From the passenger side, a woman emerged, a child in her arms, and I started to cry out, in horror, but Mac put his hand across my mouth and whispered fiercely, "be quiet" and wouldn't take his hand away until it was clear I would. The soldiers closed in on them then, blocking our view, one gestured back at us to move on.

"*Yalla*," the driver breathed, almost to himself. Let's go.

As we passed by, I glimpsed the woman through the soldiers. An instant only, long enough to see her back was to us, with the bewildered oval of the little boy's face perched atop her shoulder, a black-and-white snapshot of fear.

"Can't we do something? Can't we help them?" I leaned forward to plead, though I already knew the answer.

"Just go!" Mac ordered the driver, pushing me back against the seat.

As he spoke, we heard shots. Maybe they came from a different direction altogether. I didn't ask.

Mac broke the silence after a few minutes, his voice shaky and defensive.

"There's nothing we can do about it. Surely you realize that."

I looked away first and tried not to cry. My second lesson in as many hours. Trouble could erupt at any moment here, a dormant volcano awaiting a cue. When it did, just hope to hell you weren't in its path.

Shortly, we reached the Green Line, where we would cross to the west side of the city, our taxi gliding swiftly, silently, a barge on the River Styx, into the dark, deserted cavern of Beirut's ruined port. The journey was tense; the driver uncommunicative now. Mac hoarded his thoughts, as I did my own, afraid and queasy. It seemed to take forever. It was all I could do to keep the cheese sandwich I'd eaten on the boat at lunchtime from making an unauthorized re-appearance.

Finally, we spilled out onto the other side, racing through the streets of West Beirut, where the night shadows were alive with men and guns. Eternity abruptly ended as we pulled up in front of the Commodore Hotel.

It was unimpressive at first sight—a boxy, nondescript building. It was just another second-tier hotel until the international press

corps gradually took it over after Lebanon's civil war broke out in earnest, in the mid-1970s.

We entered its dimly-lit bar that night tentatively, unsure whether Mac's friend would still be there, when a voice called out of the crowd.

"Hey Mac, buddy, over here." Martin Sawyer. Stocky, outgoing, American as Budweiser. Mac knew him well from Vietnam, where his work for a wire service won several prestigious national awards and a promotion to Beirut bureau chief.

"Guys, this is Barrett McCauley—Mac." Martin stood up and scraped his barstool aside so Mac could get a better look around.

A thin, weary-looking middle-aged man seated at the curved bar offered a bony hand, "*Ahlan wah sahlan*. Welcome. Ian Fretwell, London Telegram."

"Nice to meet you, Ian."

"And this is Victor de Lara, from EFFE, you know, the Spanish news agency, and that, of course, is the famous Coco," Martin said, pointing at a round, mustached man poking pretzels through the bars of a bird cage in a corner near the door. Inside, the large, gloomy-looking parrot nibbled more out of boredom than hunger.

"Hey, Coco, incoming!" Martin called. The mustached man gave a friendly little wave but the bird ignored everyone. "Sorry, Mac, guess he's not in the mood. He also does the first few bars of Beethoven's Fifth. Never mind. You know Boz Whitfield from the Beeb, don't you?"

They shook hands, as Martin continued the introductions. Mac took up a position, leaning against the bar, his back to me, as I seated myself on a stool next to him. The overall effect, though unintended, obscured my presence.

"You remember Nils Erik Engelstoft and behind you over there is Doug from CBS and Kifner from the Times." Mac nodded reciprocal acknowledgements.

"Mac's replacing Roger Schuster, you know," Martin announced to the assemblage. There was a general murmur of sympathy.

"Poor Roger," Fretwell shook his head morosely. "So ironic…"

"Yeah, yeah, poor old Shu," Martin concurred hurriedly, moving the conversation along lest it shipwreck on this depressing, clearly much-reviewed topic. "So. Barrett McCauley in the Lebanon."

"Couldn't dodge the bullet this time," Mac grinned.

"Well sonny boy, what a fiefdom you've inherited…Schuster's flat on the Corniche...Nadia and Abdel Farid...and, of course, Thomas here, Beirut's finest fixer."

Martin pronounced Thomas' name with a heavy, fake Eastern European accent — Tow-*maas*—and mimed theatrically in his direction.

From his seat, Thomas started to protest, but Martin overrode him, clapping him on the back and whispering, in a jokey voice, "Next round on you Warkowski," before turning back to Mac.

"In addition to your own august publication, Thomas here also works for that Polish rag you need five shots of vodka to pronounce. But he's good, Mac...want to interview the Russian ambassador?"

"What?" Boz Whitfield put in. "He doesn't talk to anyone."

"True, except the other Commies," Martin considered. "Yep, not even Thomas and he's half-Polski. But he can get you just about anyone else."

"Martin," Thomas tried again. Too politely, lost in the swell of Martin's exuberance.

"Plus—and this is key, Mac—an exchange rate you haven't seen since the fall of Saigon, my friend. Hello, expense account heaven! For two Linda Ronstadt tapes and twenty bucks, he'll get your accountant knocked off if he questions it." Martin aimed his fingers and pulled an imaginary trigger.

Mac was silent throughout. Now, he raised an eyebrow at Thomas. "Really?" He asked, coolly.

"Of course not. Martin's insane," Thomas said, with a smile. "Nobody listens to Linda Ronstadt anymore. It's Emmy Lou Harris now."

Everyone laughed, except Mac, who lit a cigarette instead.

"I didn't mean Linda Rondstadt, I meant you." Mac exhaled slowly. "No offense, pal, but I never heard of you."

He spoke mildly enough, but the challenge hung in the air. In Mac's defense, you should understand Abdel Farid, the driver, and Nadia, the translator, came with the territory. They were the backbone of the magazine's Beirut bureau. That, we knew. But this, astonishingly, was the first we'd heard of Thomas.

Tow-*maas*. On the magazine payroll?

"It wasn't a formal arrangement with Roger," Thomas spoke with a slight accent that didn't sound Polish. He was a bit of a mess, really—his hair too long, his trousers inexpertly pressed, cheap brown shoes that had seen better days. But his features were drawn with patrician grace and, when he smiled at Mac, his dark eyes were shiny and eager to please.

"So your 'arrangement' is with New York then?" A frown flickered across Mac's face.

"Oh, no," Thomas explained hastily. "I had no retainer, nothing like that. I billed Roger for the stories as we went along. That's all.

No, no obligation. Martin is too kind, he overstates my importance."

Thomas made what can only be described as a formal, little bow. "Of course, if you need help, Barrett, I am at your service."

"Yeah, sure, I'll keep it in mind," Mac said noncommittally, before turning away to ask Fretwell about a mutual friend at the Telegram.

Mac didn't like surprises and Thomas undeniably was one, pressed upon him before he'd even had a chance to get his bearings. Whether that explained his instantaneous dislike, or whether Thomas simply rubbed him the wrong way, I knew Mac well enough to know this hard, first impression would likely stick.

As for me, not a word had come my way. My presence simply hadn't registered, half-hidden as I was behind Mac. Thomas was first to notice.

"And you are…?"

"That's my wife." Mac answered before I could.

"Ah," Thomas said, in a slightly mocking tone I'd soon learn was out of character for him, "She doesn't speak?"

"Lara," I announced, louder than intended, and at once, everyone seemed to be tuning me in, like a fiddly new channel on a shortwave radio that required extra effort to hear properly. I cleared my throat. "Well, Larissa, actually. But most people call me Lara."

This was what I hated about going someplace new with Mac. Establishing credentials. Reserved by nature, I found this excruciatingly awkward, like a blind date or a job interview. It was all about comparing resumes and information about previous postings, discovering mutual acquaintances, exchanging war stories—the journalistic equivalence of a dog marking territory. Mac rose

with vigor to each fresh challenge, part of the necessary and familiar journalistic mating ritual he had performed in countless bars and press clubs since he first went to Vietnam in the late 60s as a young magazine writer.

"Larissa—from the Greek, yes?" Thomas eyed me critically for another moment, but before I could reply, was questioning Mac again. "And where are you coming from?"

With exaggerated patience, Mac explained we'd come from Rome, New York before that, and that he, of course, had been in Southeast Asia, in Hong Kong after Vietnam, that he knew not only Martin but several of the other journalists based here.

"And what will you do here, Larissa?" Thomas looked at me.

"Lara," Mac said pointedly.

"Lara." Thomas agreed. Then, to my embarrassment, he picked up my hand and peered at my fingers. "You are perhaps an artist?"

Mac snorted in disbelief and Thomas dropped my hand.

"She's my wife."

This was more than two decades ago, remember, and although Mac was visibly annoyed with Thomas, his remark wasn't meant as dismissively as it sounds in the retelling. For that was how I, too, thought of myself in 1983. Mac's wife. Still, I felt foolishly flattered by Thomas' attention.

"Thank you. Sadly, I have no talent."

"That is difficult to believe," Thomas countered gallantly.

"Believe." A smile, unbidden, escaped.

Could I have stopped there? Looking back, it seems impossible; the almost-Darwinian progression of events that would spring and mutate from this swamp of mindless barroom chitchat was already underway.

So even as Mac looked on disapprovingly, I added, "I'm not sure yet what I'll do here. Who knows, maybe I'll get a job."

I was qualified for nothing, certainly nothing in a war zone, nothing in *Beirut*.

You see it? The loosening of another shackle. Already, I was responding to Thomas' knack of divining a virtue in me where Mac did not, or indeed, where none existed. I found myself ignoring all the danger signs—Mac's raised eyebrow, my own thumping heart—in my wish not to disappoint him.

That first night, drinks segued into a lengthy dinner with Martin and several of the others, and then dinner into more drinks back at the bar. When Mac volunteered what we'd seen at the checkpoint in East Beirut, Martin said "Welcome to Lebanon, folks" and everyone nodded in agreement and offered up similar stories, incidents they'd witnessed or heard about, on both sides of the Green Line. Conversation paused once or twice to gauge the occasional spit of distant gunfire, though all agreed it was a quiet evening by Beirut standards.

The volcano's rim, however, makes an anxious perch, and it was hard to act as nonchalant as our new friends about the turmoil that seethed just outside the oasis of the hotel. It seemed impossible this day had begun with breakfast in Cyprus. Fatigue washed over me. I finally excused myself and retreated to our room on the hotel's seventh floor, leaving Mac in the bar.

The upper floors were always popular, the pretty, young receptionist had told us—further away from the point of impact, in the event of a car bomb. Of course, it wasn't such a smart place to be if the Christians started shelling across the Green Line, she con-

fided cheerfully. When that happened, you couldn't give away an east-facing room on the top two floors. Or a room on the top floor, period.

Our room that night was unremarkable, indistinguishable in memory from any of the countless other hotels I'd visit in years to come. What I do recall clearly, however, is a section of metal drainpipe under the bathroom sink, for that is where I crouched, clutching a dripping toothbrush and shaking with fear, wedged between the toilet and the shiny, white-tiled wall, when the volcano blew.

"Just a small disturbance nearby, nothing serious." The receptionist was reassuring when I crawled out of the bathroom to call the front desk ten minutes later. "Please not to worry."

Our waiting luggage was neatly lined up where the bellman had dropped it. Mac hadn't even called upstairs. For a while, anger and fear lent a manic energy to my unpacking efforts. But shoving the last empty suitcase into the closet, I felt perversely satisfied: I hadn't crumpled at the first sign of seismic activity, after all.

I got into bed and read *Vanity Fair* until my eyes hurt and gullible Amelia Sedley sent me into a fitful sleep, in which explosions rocked the great iron gates of Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies on Chiswick Mall, and a small boy in tears stumbled through the clouds of smoke, looking for his mother and father, while I tried to shout to Thomas to run, run, run.

Mac woke me up when he stumbled into the room an hour later and turned on the light. Had I heard that bomb go off earlier? Probably just a few sticks of dynamite, a reminder from neighborhood militiamen to a nearby café-owner, behind in his protection

payments, he said. Not a big deal.

More important, he enthused, not a single drink was spilled in the Commodore bar when the bomb exploded. Mac described how everyone placed their drinks on the counter, fanning out in one graceful, fluid movement, before pitching themselves to the floor. He hadn't seen anything like it since Saigon. No, better than Saigon—drinks were spilled there.

Mac had never set foot on Lebanese soil until that morning. He knew little about the country or its history and none of its language, but, at least in the Commodore, he was back among his own tribe.

Mac was home.

In this way, I would come to learn, Thomas was Mac's mirror opposite. Fluent in the languages and cultures of other lands, yet at home in none.

Thomas' father was Polish, an engineer working first in South America and later in the United States, for a multinational oil company. His Brazilian mother was a poet who never lived up to the success of a first slender volume, published before Thomas' birth. Because his father's work took the family around the Americas throughout Thomas' early years, he never actually lived in either parent's native country. His mother took Thomas and his brother to see family in Rio every summer; nonetheless the few cousins there remained unfamiliar, unfriendly. Boarding schools in Caracas and Buenos Aires, Dallas and—as his father moved up the corporate chain—Washington, happily opened their doors to him, a paying student who excelled in academics and languages.

He spoke his mother's Portuguese and although he'd only once visited Poland, then under Communist rule, was literate in his father's language, as well. American schooling polished his English, and Argentina and Venezuela bequeathed him yet another tongue. At university, he added Italian, French and Arabic.

By the time we arrived, Beirut was as much a home as any Thomas had known in his 35 years. He'd lived there longer than anywhere else, arriving on Beirut's doorstep along with the civil war in 1975, innocent as a babe in a basket, fresh from graduate school at Cairo University, with an advanced degree in Arabic Studies. He also carried a bankroll from his father—nearly two thousand dollars, a relative fortune in those times, which had the unintended effect of enabling him to drift away, an ice floe from an arctic shore, further out to sea, until he disappeared entirely from family view.

By the time his funds ran out, he was finding freelance work as a journalist, first for a chain of Brazilian newspapers, and later, Polish ones with, as Martin said, impossible names. Over time, he did come to know the Russian ambassador, and the French, the Swedish, the Libyan—all the diplomats who passed through Beirut's trenches. He knew the aid workers and the academics who came to teach at the universities, knew the Scandinavian army officers from the United Nations peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon, and the ever-changing cast of fellow journalists, the writers and photographers, the TV cameramen and correspondents—the ones who lived here and those who simply slipped in and out of the story, from safer, saner bases in Cairo or Cyprus or London. He knew the Peruvian consul's Lebanese mistress and

the American nurse from an international charity, who divided her favors between a top Palestinian official and a respected journalist from New York. He knew why the Dutch businessman was in trouble back home, knew why a certain British professor drank too much, and who among the TV correspondents snorted their paychecks.

Thomas distinguished between those who approached Beirut as another notch on the career belt and those lured by a genuine love for the Levant, for the Middle East. He knew the foreign community well and equally, the Lebanese host community upon which it depended—the translators, drivers and fixers, the Lebanese journalists who covered their own war with no choice but to live it as well, and, consequently, went about their grim business with little of the fuss and fanfare that accompanied journalists in from other countries.

He knew which Beirut news-seller was Armenian and which was Druze, knew Christian shopkeepers who chose to stay in the west, on the predominantly Moslem side, and Moslem merchants who defied Hezbollah to sell alcohol in their cafes. He knew landlords and warlords, sometimes one and the same; haunted the offices of government bureaucrats; drank endless cups of sweet, thick coffee with politicians and was invited inside the homes and lives of the men and women who kept the city running, even if the electric grid sprang to life for only a few hours each week.

Yes, Thomas knew a lot.

But it seems he forgot the basic law of nature articulated by Newton, that to every action, there is always an opposite and equal reaction. And this would rebound on him, for Lebanon was an

unforgiving place. There were no false steps, only fatal ones. Thomas would tap into forces he couldn't control, with the result that he would become part of the history of the place himself.

THREE

IMAGINE A SCENE that took place seven years before I came to Beirut: it is Friday, June 18, 1976, at 11:00 am in Washington, D.C., and President Gerald R. Ford has summoned his Cabinet for crisis talks at the White House. In New York, where I have yet to meet Mac, Lebanon is just an angry newspaper headline. But three thousand miles and half a world away, Thomas is witnessing its disintegration first-hand. Around him, thousands of Lebanese are dying in ferocious fighting between Christians and Palestinians and Moslems. Proportionately, it is as if two million Americans have died.

Spiking the crisis for Washington is the fact that two days earlier, radical Palestinians kidnapped and shot to death Francis Meloy, the newly-appointed American Ambassador, the embassy's economic officer Robert Waring, and their Lebanese driver, Mohammed Moghrabi.

The ambassador's body was dumped in a Palestinian-controlled sector of West Beirut years before we arrived, and his killers wouldn't come to justice until many years after we were gone and I no longer followed Lebanon's travails, even from afar.

This is important, because they were the first high-profile American casualties of the Lebanese conflict, killed by virtue of

their passports. Another 272 Americans would die while I was there in 1983—most of them U.S. Marines sent to Lebanon as part of a Multi National Force, peacekeepers, on a self-described "mission of presence."

In the course of trying to assemble this picture, I came across an official memorandum of the Washington meeting, declassified and released many years after the event. An evacuation is planned, it reports, but the President says that essential US embassy staff will stay behind and there are about 1,400 other Americans still in Lebanon. His Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, emphasizes it's not clear how many of them will opt to leave. Many have no other home.

"There is no security in Beirut," Mr. Kissinger says. I am with him so far. In that sense, little will have changed by the time we arrive seven years later. He adds, "But none of the responsible groups has any real interest in killing Americans, because if there was, it could be done quite easily at any time. But there are, of course, totally irresponsible elements."

I guess that's the way it looked in Beirut in 1976. Only totally irresponsible elements would kill Americans.

We didn't know that, didn't know quite what we were wading into. But it was about to become a lot harder to differentiate between the "responsible groups" and "totally irresponsible elements." I don't mean the general citizenry, but the warlords and militias loyal to them, an alphabet soup of warriors—PSP, PLO, DFLP, PFLP—multi-strands of fighters plaited together by guns and money and the hatred inherent in longstanding rivalries.

Middle East veterans such as Thomas and Fretwell and Boz—and, by now Martin and most of the others, for new hands quick-

ly become seasoned in war zones—could still distinguish between those considered "responsible" and those not—and distinguish they did. To me, however, it often seemed they were one and the same.

"When the Christians shell the Moslems, it also sends a message to Damascus." Thomas explained patiently, as I waited, for Mac one afternoon. He'd hailed me from across the Commodore lobby, and joined me with apparent pleasure on one of the leather banquettes.

I, in turn, was happy to see Thomas. He stood out in welcome, stark relief against the Commodore's crowd of hard, polished players, though he got on well with most of them. Except for Mac.

Despite that, I liked Thomas. He was surprisingly easy to talk to, and seemed gratified when asked to draw on his vast reserves of knowledge—years of observation built on a bedrock of fascination, not only with Lebanon, but the Middle East as a whole. Intricacies. Intrigues. Unlike Mac, he didn't ridicule my lack of knowledge. I'd tried the monographs and political science journals lining the shelves in our living room, but found them too dry, too academic. Too hard to concentrate, anyway. I, who often went through two or three or even four books a week, was still stuck on *Vanity Fair* a month after our arrival. The big book of *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzles proved a godsend.

It was Thomas who illuminated my dark Lebanon.

Across the way, a well-dressed Syrian businessman, waiting for his key at the front desk, looked into the eyes of his olive-skinned companion, fingering her absurdly yellow ringlets, stiff with hairspray. I touched my own loose, shoulder-length hair self-consciously and tucked it behind my ears before I realized Thomas

was watching me. He smiled, as if to indicate he understood the gesture was reflexive, not coquettish, then proceeded with his take on the Israelis.

"It's a bit tricky. They support the Christians but are also arming the Druze." The Druze, he'd already explained, adhered to a secretive, mystical offshoot of Islam but didn't consider themselves Moslem, and their blood feud with Lebanon's Maronite Christians unreeled over a hundred years of confessional hatred.

The businessman now steered his lady friend toward the elevator. In teetering heels and a flamboyantly colored dress that clung to ample bosom and bottom, she wiggled all the way, a peroxide Carmen Miranda, minus the fruity headwear. A porter followed, pushing a trolley stacked with Louis Vuitton luggage.

Thomas smiled at the man. "Sorry, Lara. That's Ahmed. A friend. He owns a textile factory just over the Syrian border and sometimes comes here at the weekends."

He switched gears again. The Russians, he said, backed just about everyone, except the Christians—the Syrians, the Druze, other Palestinian factions. Even giving guns now to Hezbollah, the Shiite crazies.

"The Russians want to be on the winning team," he said. "But the Americans are sneaky, too. Great friends with the Christians and the Sunnis, yet they've got to be throwing money at Amal—the mainstream Shiite militia—so it can fight Hezbollah, do their dirty work for them."

Thomas added that Amal's leader, Nabih Berri, had relatives in Detroit, as if that explained everything.

In a way it did. It helped explain why the Shiite driver at the CBS bureau asked Mac to pick up his favorite brand of scotch on

his transit through the airport duty free, his wife and daughters unashamedly attired in western dress, while his neighbor and co-religionist in the Shiite shantytowns in the southern suburbs insisted females in his family enrobe themselves in the head-to-toe black chadors, increasingly seen on the streets of Beirut, a swarm of ravens coming silently to roost.

I hardly ever cooked in our apartment overlooking the sea. That first evening in Beirut proved the prototype for the months that followed, for that was what we did in Beirut when "the situation" as it was euphemistically called, allowed: drinks in the bar at the end of the working day, dinner in the dark, Polynesian-themed restaurant at the back of the hotel, perhaps a nightcap in the bar or coffee in the lobby, before stumbling out to find Abdel Farid waiting patiently in his old yellow Mercedes outside the hotel.

Mac naturally gravitated to those we met the first night, and we came to know them well: Martin was someone with whom Mac was always happy to share a foxhole or a bar tab. Boz Whitfield was an old Middle East hand, and his wife, Jan, the daughter of a British diplomat who'd spent twenty years in the Arab world. Nils Erik Engelstoft reported for a rival newsweekly. An authority on Chaucer, he claimed descent from Danish kings, and often draped a blue blazer as regally across his shoulders as a royal ancestor might have donned a cloak. Nils once famously began a sentence, "In the reign of Gorm the Older," during an argument about the Lebanese civil war and was never allowed to forget it. Amiable, Cuban-born Victor de Lara needed little prompting after a few drinks to recount his long-ago role in the CIA's bungled invasion of the Bay of Pigs.

Along with the others, they were a hodgepodge fraternity, swapping loud tales of real time derring-do in Lebanon, and—often louder—tales about past exploits, particularly about Vietnam, the last great conflict to galvanize the international media, another war fought in barrooms and battlefields. As for myself, I rarely contributed. It was enough to sit and listen, to sip my wine, to soak it all in, as I had so many times before, until time to go home. It was a constituent part of Mac's world and therefore of mine, as well.

❀

For me, it is always 1983 in Beirut, a year frozen in time, mired in failure—that of Lebanon's political leaders, of the policies of well-meaning western governments, and beyond all of that, of my own, deeply personal failure. Everyone lost: I among them.

I simply don't register news about Lebanon now. I ignore articles, change channels, tune out conversations. I'm not even sure which year the civil war officially ended: for me, Lebanon was over long before.

Having said that, a few years back, I caught fragments of a television documentary detailing the rejuvenation of that city I once reluctantly called home and so, without wanting to, I know the Green Line is gone, long removed to the category of urban archaeology, obscured by deconstruction, reconstruction, new construction.

Yet I remember the gash on civilization it once was. The first time I went through the Museum Crossing, I wept—partly out of fear, but mostly because the devastation ripped at my heart. From the start, it seemed I lacked the capacity to see the old, vivacious Beirut beneath it all, the glitter of spirit Mac and his colleagues mined everywhere, culled from the jumbled cityscape like a Lebanese *Where's Wally*—the smuggled shiny red cans of Coca

Cola for sale, despite the Arab boycott, at the smart new deli, Goody's, itself a minor marvel. Fresh caviar at Smith's, the family-run grocery that never seemed to close; the latest French fashions on Hamra Street; the swimming pool open for business at what remained of the otherwise-derelict St. Georges Hotel. All these things, touted as symbols of the defiant Lebanese spirit.

Their anecdotes were packed with dark little lumps of farce, nuggets of pathos, liberally laced with irony, a dense fruitcake of a story—the kidnap victim who demanded, and received, taxi fare home from his kidnappers; the Goody's shoppers, mostly women, who produced pistols from every conceivable hiding place—handbags, garters, waistbands, pockets, holsters—when another shopper shouted "stop thief!" at a pickpocket. Where Mac's crowd applauded the irony of an army of well armed, well-heeled housewives, I felt a bizarre sense of kinship with the unwitting thief.

No, I couldn't get a purchase on the spirit the others embraced so effortlessly. I didn't see it that way at all. I saw only the vast destruction of Lebanon's surface, the shattered buildings, the defaced city. Unlike our circle of Beirut acquaintances, I wore my New York City Police issue bulletproof vest everywhere, at least at the beginning, and, then again towards the end. Mac never wore his, of course—not that I was aware of, anyway.

Because he was so rarely shaken out of a basic belief in his own invincibility, fear in Beirut for Mac was largely anecdotal, anyway: me cowering in the hallway, bulletproof vest, grabbing cigarettes and scotch at the first sound of trouble.

"I told her, it's not here…that gunfire's coming from over by the television station—three miles away!" Mac roared over the evening's libations in the Commodore.

When an RPG hit a nearby office building in the dead of night, catapulting me out of sleep and into near-hysteria, I tried to shake Mac awake.

"So I ask her, 'Are you hurt? Am *I* hurt—did I miss something? The cat? Did it hit our building? So why'd you wake me up?" he reported and everyone laughed. Even me, silly me, scaredy-cat me, afraid of things that went thump and thud and bang in the night. Afraid of .50 caliber machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, silly Lara. Even I laughed, though I wanted to weep.

After regaling the bar with these tales, Mac might add, in a stagey, avuncular aside to me, something along the lines of "Nothing wrong with being scared, Lara. It's nature's way of keeping you on your toes" and pat my hand consolingly. But we both knew he didn't believe it. Nor did the others who now populated our world, much of it newly redefined by the parameters of the Commodore bar.

I couldn't share Mac's delight in having a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean. So much glass worried me, though the French doors were covered with a sticky, transparent film to keep them from shattering in an explosion. Sure, the view was splendid—if you looked straight out to sea—framed by swaying palms on the Corniche. But a glance in either direction quickly spoiled the effect, revealing a mottled periphery where the evidence of war, old and new, belied the more rustic charms of this once-grand avenue. And when the guns of the neighborhood militias fell blessedly silent, the distant boom of dynamite used by Druze fishermen to blast their prey out of the water filled the gap.

There was no peace. There was no quiet. This was Beirut.

"…And the Cairo Agreement was born out of that political stalemate," Thomas was explaining, another evening, as I waited for Mac. "It gave all the parties in Lebanon a face-saving way out."

A dour Lebanese man sitting nearby grunted. His name, I knew, was Hamid, and he ran the Beirut operation for TV Kansai, Japanese TV.

"A suicide letter. Lebanon signed its own death warrant." Hamid said in disgust.

"How?" I no longer worried about sounding stupid.

"The Lebanese allowed the PLO to keep their guns in the refugee camps, and then turned a blind eye when they attacked Israel," Thomas replied.

"Why'd they agree to that?"

"Because they are fools," Hamid said, in low rumble, but he quickly lost interest in our conversation and returned to eavesdropping, quite openly, on the UN peacekeeping officers, one Turkish, one Dutch, on the other side of him.

"The Lebanese had no control over the Palestinians anyway, and the Palestinians agreed to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and its laws," Thomas said.

Fretwell, tired and dishevelled, entered the bar in time to hear the last few words.

"Evening, all. Thomas, you leave that poor girl, alone. Just because she's polite doesn't mean she's interested."

"It's okay. He's on a roll," I said.

Fretwell signalled for a round of drinks.

"Just a wee one, then home. Long day." He gave a small shudder.

"So where were you in this discourse?"

"The Cairo Agreement."

"Right. The next agreement they signed gave the Palestinians virtual autonomy, legitimizing 'Fatah Land,' their mini state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon, and by turns, the Palestinians grew bolder and started using Shiite villages in the south to launch attacks on Israel.

Fretwell's drink was placed before him.

"See where this is heading, Lara?" He sipped gingerly. "Too strong, Marwan. Spare some tonic, please?" The barman obliged.

"You know, Lara, it wasn't a total *fait accompli*." Fretwell said, waving away the bowl of nuts Marwan offered. "When the Israelis hit back at the Shiite villages, the Shiites fled—that's why there're so many Shiite refugees in Beirut now. Half the bloody country came north, creating even more instability. And, of course, giving the Pixies an excuse to visit."

"Pixies?"

"Pixies from Dixie, as the Americans say—the Israelis, from the south. You know, the Israeli invasion last summer, to get rid of the Palestinians." He removed his glasses and wiped them with a dingy handkerchief plucked from his shirt pocket, before settling them back on the bridge of his bony nose.

"Operation Peace for Galilee," Thomas supplied.

"Now there's irony. No peace since the Pixies invaded." Fretwell sighed.

"That's why we had that gloriously colorful evacuation of the PLO fighters last summer, helped along by your countrymen, the United States Marines," Fretwell concluded. "Which brings us to where we are today."

"Which, I would say, is going home time," Mac boomed.

My husband had arrived. He strode into the bar, a fine cut of man, big and broad-shouldered, his very presence visually overpowering Thomas' long, slender frame and Fretwell's stooped one. Beirut agreed with Mac, as I said. He thrived in the volcanic atmosphere, and while my own inability to rise similarly to the challenge irritated him, he was happy and it showed in our own relationship. His desire had returned, and I have to confess, Mac still had the capacity to thrill me.

"Sorry, I'm late, Lu darling." He kissed me, and gave me a surreptitious squeeze. I squeezed back in the right places and Mac said "Whoa, woman," and I laughed out loud at my own boldness.

"Hey Ian." Mac shook hands with Fretwell, though not with Thomas. He did, however, nod and say "Thomas" in a neutral kind of way, which pleased me as he usually just said "Warkowski." I didn't even mind that he pronounced "Thomas" the American way, which by now sounded rude to my ears. Not that Thomas took offense. No, he gave Mac a friendly smile and said "How are you, Barrett."

But Mac had already turned his attention to Marwan, who, unasked, put a finger of scotch in front of him, which he quickly drained. He slapped some Lebanese pounds on the counter.

"Keep the change, Marwan."

Mac slipped his arm through mine to help lift me off the seat. "Sorry to hit and run, folks, but gotta get this princess home before our coach turns into an RC can."

As we made out way out of the bar, I heard Thomas telling Fretwell, "It's what they drink in the American south. There's also a beverage called Mountain Nectar, as I recall."

"Jeez, that guy never shuts up," Mac said to himself, while I

made a mental note to tell Thomas about Mountain Dew—and Dr. Pepper—next time we met.

Perhaps it was the wine, but I only pretended to scold Mac when he slipped his hand up my skirt and we giggled together like teenagers in the backseat, wondering how much Abdel Farid could see in the rearview mirror, as he drove us home through the streets of Beirut.

Back in the flat, Mac managed to shed all his clothes between the front door and the bedroom but our anticipated pleasure was cut short by a burst of automatic weapons fire outside our building. While Mac quickly recovered, the moment was gone for me and he fell into bed alone, grumbling, while I spent most of the next hour, huddled in the windowless hallway, still fully dressed, with Mac's best bottle of single malt for company, a carton of cigarettes and Graham Greene's *The Comedians*, because I couldn't find *Vanity Fair* in the dark.

"Mac?" I whispered later. "You awake?" I shook his shoulder gently but he just groaned, mumbled, and turned over in his sleep. I crawled into bed beside him, and warmed myself against the unforgiving hump of his back. In the distance, the gun battle still raged, but the sounds were faint enough for sleep.

I couldn't name for you today the councilors who represent the leafy London borough where I live, but I still remember the men who pulled the strings in Lebanon's politics in 1983, who controlled its streets and its gunmen. They formed a roll call central to my daily wellbeing: Gemayel, Jumblatt, Berri, Karami, Franjiyeh—and in the background, the growing sinister influence of Sheik Mohammed Fadlallah, from Hezbollah. These war-

lords—*zuamas*—were themselves usually dependent on masters in other capitals—in Damascus and Baghdad, in Tripoli, Tel Aviv and Teheran, in Peking, as we still called it.

But the real power lay in the hands of those who sculpted and directed policy from Washington and Moscow. Under the cover of civil war, the Cold War played out daily, by proxy, in the streets of Beirut. In capitals around the world, events were taking place, policies shaped, strategies put in place—things of which I knew little, yet would have a direct influence on our lives, in this city under siege from within.

That was the big picture.

The little picture was that, no matter how many times a day we came and went, the gunmen at the end of our street never gave any sign they recognized us. Fine with me. I sought anonymity behind large, dark-lens sunglasses, encased in a bright red plastic frame, which Mac insisted had exactly the reverse effect. He may have been right, but they were mine, and I'd paid an awful lot of money for them in New York the previous summer, when Lebanon was still a place name that hardly figured on my own geo-political map. I suppose they were my own symbol of defiance.

I usually nodded at the gunmen on duty, too intimidated to trot out my two or three words of Arabic. Mac, however, almost always attempted a cheerful conversation.

"*Marhaba*," he'd call out. Hello.

"*Kifak*?" How are you, he'd continue, with a charmingly rueful smile as if to apologize for his atrocious Arabic, but equally sure he'd be forgiven by grace of having tried in the first place. Congeniality through sheer dint of force.

This much-practiced tactic worked wonders with cranky waitresses, recalcitrant store clerks, harrassed flight attendants. But Mac was never rewarded for his efforts in Beirut. The gunmen always waved us through—tensely, when things were tense; lazily, when they were not.

The day might come when that would change, of course, but for now, we were inconsequential, anonymous in the daily census of violence.

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Ambassador Francis Meloy arrived in Beirut in April 1976. Killed on the way to present his credentials to the Lebanese president in June, his death achieved the kind of distinction no one seeks: the shortest time served in a post of any American chief of mission since Benjamin Franklin was appointed the first U.S. representative overseas in 1778.

His driver, Mohammed Moghrabi was one of Lebanon's unsung heroes, all but forgotten today except to family and friends. And to the group of American and Lebanese journalists he rescued from the Hotel St. Georges, trapped by fierce fighting there early in the civil war. "Go get those guys," he was told and he did. Imagine.

It would be eighteen more years and four more Presidents, before two men were finally arrested for these crimes. Unusually, for Lebanon, where so many went unpunished, they were tried, found guilty and sentenced to die.

Two years later—twenty years after the killings—a Lebanese appeals court overturned the convictions, under a 1990 amnesty for political crimes committed during Lebanon's civil war.

There is no such amnesty in my heart for Thomas' killers.