

Excerpt from "Bodyguard in Beirut"

BODYGUARD IN BEIRUT

I cannot recall when it was exactly that I lost my innocence. I guess it all depends on one's definition of innocence. Is it when you first fall and hurt yourself and experience self-inflicted pain? Or is it when you first realise that truth can be interpreted to one's liking? Is it when someone first lies or betrays you? Even if it is your father who promised to play with you but forgets or ignores you because he has the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. I am not talking about the kind of responsibility that people in the western world have the privilege to worry about; like the mortgage or taxes. I am talking about the kind of responsibility that comes with losing your job and assets to a complex war that has no end in sight. It is a responsibility that fathers in Lebanon have etched in the grooves of their foreheads and in the worn ivory of their worry beads. A responsibility to ensure that their family does not go hungry and a responsibility to ensure that their kids are not shot by a stray bullet.

For many, innocence is lost when one realises that one's mother or father are not perfect but are as vulnerable as any mere mortal. For me, innocence was lost when I first saw a man shot in cold blood in the middle of an ordinary street, simply because he wore a crucifix around his neck. It was Beirut and it was 1982. The image is as vivid now as it was 26 years ago when I was 15.

Twenty-Six years earlier

The dishevelled and sweaty man turned towards me as if surprised by my presence. How could he be? I was playing marbles with my brothers a mere ten metres away. The look on his face explained why. It was rage that brought him here, trance-like, interrupted by the noise of his own gun. His face simple to read; frustration, despair and anger with a hint of guilt. A random killing out of revenge. An eye for an eye. Even if that eye was unknown to him or the street to which he lived.

Then came the screams of a soon-to-be widow from a fifth storey balcony and the hurried footsteps down to her beloved groom who lay convulsing on a dusty street; an ordinary street in Beirut. A street filled with old apartment blocks littered with verandahs where laundry hung out to dry. He was happily on the way to market to buy what was to be breakfast for his bride Lena.

Lena at twenty-one years of age is madly in love with Philip. Despite what people in the western world think, arranged marriages in Lebanon are very rare. Couples married out of a deep romantic love, much like is depicted in modern-day Bollywood films. It would start with a smile or a glance at an ice-cream parlour or at the cinemas. Followed by a curious request for his or her name. Which family or which village he or she is from and the hope of finding some connection to see them again. It was all very innocent and only became serious if parents approved the courtship.