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Translated from French by Cynthia Hahn and Cheryl Toman

To cite this article: Accad, E., Hahn, C., & Toman, C. (2022). Explosion in Beirut: August 4, 2020. *Al-Raida*, 46(2), 41–50. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2521

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2521>

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Article type: Article

Published online: 4<sup>th</sup> August 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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## Explosion in Beirut: August 4, 2020<sup>1</sup>

Evelyne Accad

Translated from French by Cynthia Hahn and Cheryl Toman

I was on the balcony overlooking the port in Beirut, with my ninety-eight-year-old Aunt Malaké, and with Tiztu, her young Ethiopian caretaker. My nephew Daniel, newly arrived from the U.S., after finishing his firefighter-paramedic training was there too, as well as Johnny, the handyman who does our home repairs. Fortunately, my young friend Joujou had just left for home with her cousin's pretty cushions that she would sell to earn a little pocket money. It was 6 p.m.

We heard some sputtering; a gray smoke was rising, darker and darker, spreading over the port. When it began to reach the balcony, I said to my aunt: It would be best to go inside, and so I sat her down in her favorite armchair, between two windows, protected by a wall. I didn't know then that I was saving her life.

Smoke continued to penetrate the apartment, and I went to close the windows; I began in the kitchen, whose window faced the port. At 6:07 p.m., I was closing another balcony door in the kitchen. I was walking towards the kitchen door that led to the hallway and to the other rooms, when I was suddenly projected forward by the blast, thrown to the floor, head plastered to the ground in the deafening noise. The cries, a still darker smoke, with a piece of aluminum frame and glass shattered into a thousand shards from the window blown in, everything was falling down upon me.

*I am dead...*

Suddenly I recalled my feelings while preparing for my return to Lebanon from Paris. I was gripped with anguish. I had even written my will. I felt so downcast, as if I were moving towards my own death. I had always felt a certain apprehension before returning to Lebanon, and this time it was much stronger. As if it were a foreboding of imminent danger as I was

packing my bags... And there, on the floor, I felt the end of my life of struggle... there would be another bomb, it would be the end... finally, the silence... finally, rest...

*Oumi, get up, Evelyne, oumi Evelyne...* It was Johnny's voice above Tiztu's cries; she was hurt badly, bleeding all over. His voice called me, called out to me. So I am not dead after all. The other bomb has not landed yet...

I crawled through the glass debris littering the floor, my blood hot and salty, dripping everywhere, especially from one eye; it blinds me. My teeth hurt. I have trouble breathing as I sit up...

So I am not dead? *L'éloge du risque* by Anne Dufourmentelle comes to mind.<sup>2</sup> Why there and in that precise moment? I feel heady, with a very strong feeling of victory, a triumph over death. As if drugged by some supernatural power.

I have to stop the bleeding. Along with Tiztu, I hold myself over the sink and we sponge off the thick liquid dripping mainly from our heads. We hold onto each other, hold each other up.

I hear my aunt cry out: she had been thrown onto a stair plank strewn with bits of glass and refuse. The elevators have been destroyed. The doors pulled off their hinges. Twisted aluminum. We are on the eighth floor. My nephew just carried a woman from the floor above, whose legs had been blown off. He comes back to get my aunt who doesn't want to leave. Johnny tells me to collect all the papers, money, and precious items that I have, and to put them into my little carry-on bag. His ear is split. He and my nephew, filming the whole tragedy from another room for his fiancée in the mountains, both survived, enveloped in the thick curtains that sheltered them, like a shroud protecting them from death. My aunt was also shielded by the wall between the two windows that had shattered. By some miracle, projectiles from the living room had passed just over her head. She tells us where to find her money and her papers. She doesn't want my nephew to carry her and he has to force her onto his back to descend the stairs. I hear her crying out that she wants to stay in her house as he goes down the stairs covered with debris and broken glass, my little aunt so thin, bent in two over his back.

I cling to Tiztu and we descend the eight flights of stairs, holding each other up, as blood drips everywhere, upon the glass crunching under our feet. Going down takes an eternity... the

ecstasy of feeling alive...We reach the ground floor, where the doorman's wife is badly hurt, her husband at her side asks us to help them... which hospital can we reach? What should we do? I so badly want to help them but I am helpless to do so. My legs barely keep me upright. I am moving like a zombie. The sky is menacing. I fear there may be other bombs. I am unaware of all the danger we have just experienced. I think that our building is the only one hit. I believe I am alone in the world despite the victims around me.

My nephew Daniel has already seated Aunt Malaké in my battered car, whose windows are broken into a thousand pieces, the roof beaten in, the mirrors torn off. How did he manage to sufficiently clean the place where she had to sit and secure her, my broken little aunt? Later, I see that he has taken the floor carpet to cover the seat and protect us. Along with Tiztu, I sit with difficulty, the glass piercing us and digging into our scraped skin. My nephew manages to get the car started, a miracle! I don't know how he cut through the streets filled with bumper-to-bumper cars and a screaming, waving crowd filled with people carrying their children and elders in their arms or on their backs.

The situation is grave. We learn that the neighboring hospitals have been hit and are destroyed. Which way did Johnny take? Where should we go? My nephew Martin calls Daniel and tells him to drive to a hospital in the mountains not far from our family home. We see Johnny in his own car. His bloody ear needing stitches. He confirms that the best thing to do is to get to the mountains. The extent of the disaster is still unknown. Our phones are hardly working. I don't know how my nephew does it; he zigzags between the cars and finds his way up the mountain. A warm, humid wind whips our faces in the windowless car. I breathe in deeply, happy to be alive, stunned to have survived the catastrophe whose terrible reach we could not yet perceive.

Upon arriving at the hospital emergency room, the long line of wounded awaiting treatment is astonishing. They must have decided I was in really bad shape to push me all the way inside with Tiztu, who became separated from me. As for my aunt, she has disappeared... I am reassured concerning her care later on from Cécile, my niece who had rushed to the emergency room with other family members. Johnny and Daniel tell me that they managed to find me in a corridor where I was being given first aid, in the form of bandages tightly applied to

stop the bleeding. Johnny tells me he's going to a hospital near his home to have his ear stitched. My nephew Daniel is going to take the carry-on bag with him to put it somewhere safe, take a shower, and rest in the house of his fiancée's sister near the hospital. The wounded woman seated in a chair next to me is continuously moaning and complaining. I don't know how to do this... I try desperately to reach friends on my phone, which is not working. Time moves slowly, and I am exhausted.

Why did I think of Anne Dufourmentelle once again? The thought of this psychiatrist, an exceptional woman who taught me so much and whom I miss terribly, gives me strength. Anne's words, "Risk is a projection of one's self into an unknown, new situation, that tears time in two parts: The time before and the new time. There's always a part for chance to play, risk and the loss of a former state to which one cannot return." I am conscious to have entered a stage in my life which is going to shake everything up. My wonderful psychiatrist Dufourmantelle had died in taking this risk to help another. As for me, I have survived... I feel a new dawn emerging from the immense lethargy overtaking me.

Another nephew, Martin, appears with his wife Nadia, who attends to the severely wounded Tiztu. Martin's presence comforts me. I have always appreciated his serious manner, careful words, analysis, and measured engagement. He has the personality of an intellectual, one who is actively engaged, not easily found in academia... I could have had a son like him... He never speaks without good reason and is trustworthy. Nadia, his wife, a very beautiful and also well-reasoned woman, knows several of the hospital's doctors. Before going to see Tiztu, she asks them to take care of me quickly as I am bleeding and very pale. But all the rooms are occupied. Doctors approach me to stitch the wounds of my scalp in the corridor, which is now functioning as a makeshift hospital room; they suture my wounds, without anesthesia. Fortunately, I am numbed by fear and pain. Martin takes pictures. I ask him to put them on Facebook, aware that some will be worried about me... so far from imagining the extent of the worry that my "disappearance" has provoked. Later, when I am able to access my email, I read this:

*"Dear Evelyne,*

*It was 1:37 p.m. my time and thus 8:37 p.m. in Beirut when Barbara finally picked up the phone.*

*An hour or two later. Still nothing. Monique confirms that her messages also were going unanswered. Everyone I knew in Beirut was unaccounted for...except for you. Monique and I decided to look at the Facebook pages of your family members. Actually, I had to do that for us since Monique isn't on Facebook...that was the one time at least that she regretted this decision, I swear.*

*And there it was on your sister-in-law's page. It was confirmed. You were hurt.... but how badly? I took some photos of the Facebook images and sent them to Monique on WhatsApp... I didn't want to discover this all by myself. Monique and I started to freak out because your sister-in-law, Merri Teresa, and your brother Philippe were there, freaking out on Facebook. But the one detail that Monique and I were looking for was missing. We thought it looked pretty bad however. Were you still alive? That was too difficult to ask out loud.*

*Did we really lose you? In a flash? Without even having one last chance to tell you how much we love you, after wasting I don't know how many years now looking for the right word to communicate to you how much you mean to me, how much you mean to us? Just one word, or many words perhaps that I never managed to find?*

*And then finally...at midnight my time, 7 a.m. in Beirut...finally three photos of you and a few reassuring words and each word was worth its weight in gold considering the context. Two of the photos showed me the severity of your injuries but one photo especially captured that spark in you, in spite of you being covered in blood, in spite of your shock and fatigue. I'm talking about the photo of you and your nephew, Martin. You really look young in that photo...yes, I'm saying you look young. I was surprised myself. They say such a tragedy ages a person...but I swear to you, look at this photo again and you'll see right away what I am talking about. A certain beauty, a spark coming from an immense victory. I mean it—that's what comes through. You even have a faint smile after all that...not a smile of happiness but of true defiance. You defeated death and much more than that.... I contacted everyone, even at that late hour (or early hour, depending where one was).*

*“Evelyne is alive.”*

*Now, it’s our turn—your friends. We have some pretty high standards to live up to. It’s not our place to ask you to repeat this horror story for the thousandth time to us. You don’t owe us any of the details of what you went through that early evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of August at 6:07 p.m. in Beirut. But we will be there to help you get through this nightmare...and yes, we will be there to listen to you and you can tell us anything you want. You owe us nothing more than that. We will always be there to listen, simply because we love you. But with every day that goes by, I see that you are already on the road to recovery. [...] A palpable anger is present all over Beirut; this is certainly the fundamental reason why you are still here with us now...it’s only just the beginning.*

*With all my love,*

*Cheryl*

\*

My telephone rings, what a miracle! It's my dear friend Roula:

*Evelyne, people are looking for you, calling you, asking how you are...*

*I have survived, dear Roula, I am alive, I can't stop thinking about L'Eloge du Risque by Dufourmentelle. Have you read it?*

*Literature saves us, it's our outlet... you still have so much to give to the world. She tells us that we should all get along: “Don't be afraid to move towards our negative passions: dependence, anguish, sadness, fear, for they are our allies, it's in exploring the borders and regions of these negative passions, it's in confronting them and returning to them that we may spread our wings, including towards joy.” Anne Dufourmantelle tells us to take the risk of loving, of living to finally pull ourselves away from all dependence.<sup>3</sup>*

Roula continues: “Get better, dear Evelyne... I'm going to get in touch with everyone calling me from France and the U.S. to reassure them, to tell them you're doing okay, that you're

even talking about literature... I'll call you back as soon as I've managed to get hold of them because they are so worried about you."

So I am a survivor? For the second time: I have already survived cancer. This is another trial... I'm going to recover in spite of this head streaked in blood, these bits of glass cutting my skin everywhere, the blood running into my eye and blinding me, the pains, the fears, and all the suffering of the people around me... I feel in communion with them, I feel as though I belong even more to this wounded country, torn once again (I was still unaware of the extent of the blast), crushed by all the world's power plays, driven by mafiosi, lords of war transformed into sectarian politicians. I feel a rage toward those who have so badly governed the country.

But I am part of this country's fabric. I carry it in my heart. We will all recover. We will unite above the crowd, the power plays, the marasmus of hatred, the virus aggravating the situation, the crazed murdering of men, a disaster for years in the making. We still have anger, we still have revolt, we have most especially love, compassion, tenderness...

The nurses have come to conduct a scan of my head, and to stitch the skin under my eye. Martin follows them, pushing the wheelchair I have been seated in. His wife Nadia is caring for Tiztu who needs stitches all over. She has already had two hundred sharp sutures in the hallway. Tiztu is courageous.

I'm awaiting the scan in the hallway with others who are wounded. Those who knew my parents and my older brother are talking to me and getting some of the family's news. It's surprising to see the links and knots of friendship among people living in Lebanon over time, connections that endure despite the disorder of the world's chaos. Pains flare up within me. I ask for a sedative, a painkiller. There are none to be found. How will I manage to withstand the stitches in my skin under the eye? I feel discouraged.

The phone rings for the second time, it's Roula: "How are you now, Evelyne? I managed to reach friends and reassure them. They all send their love and wishes for healing. Hang in there, Evelyne, hang in there! We're here for you."

Roula is able to talk to me about Christian, Jean-Christophe, Marc, all the friends she was able to reach, in order to support me while reassuring them. Such a strong chain of friendship has formed within this tragic space and time we're living in...



It's almost midnight and I'm still waiting for the CAT scan. I've got a headache but no one has given me a painkiller yet. Nadia comes back to her husband and asks the staff to find me something for the pain. Finally, I am given an IV of paracetamol, and put through the scanner only to reveal a negative head scan, which is a positive thing: I have no head lesions.

It's after midnight, and there's still a long line of wounded waiting in the hallways for care and tests. My telephone rings; miraculously, the internet has returned and I hear my brother Philippe's voice from the U.S. with his wife Merri Teresa. He's sick with anguish and fear. I can reassure him, tell him that the whole family is around me and supporting me in these moments of pain and tragedy for me and for Lebanon. I feel his affection across the distance.

Martin and his wife bring me to the floor where a very nice ophthalmologist examines my eye, and repairs the damaged skin. This dedicated doctor has been there since the explosion: She returned from a day filled with appointments to care for the wounded, a significant number of whom have lost an eye or their eyesight, which is not my case, she reassures me. She will be there until the very early hours of the morning. What's very touching is that her husband comes to support and accompany her. He is there, ready to support her, to see how to support her in the midst of these wounded people. I can't help but think once more of how courageous people living in Lebanon are, so used to facing hell and high water for so many years now. Why was I born into this country rather than another, and why does this country have to suffer so much? How can a people who are so brave, so intelligent, welcoming and open to others, be persecuted and terrorized to this degree? These are almost the same questions I asked myself during my bout with cancer: Why me? Why not me?

It is two o'clock in the morning and we are packed one on top of the other with the wounded and their families all along the hospital's hallways. More tests are needed. They want to give us Tetanus shots but they are out of stock. We have to wait for the doctor's approval before we can leave. Emmanuel, Saïd and Cécile's son, along with Cécile, came to pick us up after 5 a.m.! Once more, I am touched and impressed by all my family members, young and old, who have come to support me in this hospital where I remained nine long hours in a torn dress, covered with sticky and coagulated blood, bits of glass and blood in my hair and on my body.

This family came together to offer me and my aunt their material, psychological, and spiritual support. I would not have withstood the shock without them and also all the friendly phone calls and expressions of goodwill helped me to overcome this trial. I thank them here...

So many names to recall and to cite: Huguette showered me the following day with her sensitivity, picking the bits of blood-stained glass from my hair, those rebellious clumps that continued to irritate my skin. Alina cared for my wounds: she had to return me to the hospital for more stitches (under anesthesia this time), as my head continued to bleed. Monique, in tears, with Jean-Pierre called me and spoke with all the strength of our long friendship. André and his daughter Rania loaned us their apartment in the mountains where we felt comfortable, welcomed with thoughtfulness and so much kindness; his son, Hadi, sent us a large sum of money for apartment repairs. Georges and Hala were omnipresent, to gather updates and encourage us. Roula with just the right words to help transcend this. Hélène, my marvelous Lebanese cousin; Maria, Eva and Elisabeth, my Swedish friends; Sylvana, reassuring and loving; my ex Jay calling almost daily from the U.S., expressing care and worry; Armanda, Beth, Georges Serra, William and Marie-Cécile, and Ezza calling several times a week asking for updates on me and my aunt; Zohra, Regina, Nicolas and Dina, and Jean-Christophe waiting for me with a warm meal of friendship upon my return; Wafa, Salma, Norma, Janine, John Ireland, Evelyne Lavaux, and Cindy, my most constant and faithful translator, always present though far away; Zohreh; Samira, Jihad and his family; Yves, Manu, Bettina, Evelyne Coco; Cheryl, who wrote me that touching letter included in this piece; Leila my niece and my daughter; Amel, my Tunisian friend ever present in my heart; and so many women from WIF (Women in French) who wrote me to support me and send donations; and NCC (New Covenant Church in Champaign), with their prayers and donations; my sister Jacqueline and her husband Fawzi holding me in constant prayer; my editors in Australia, Spinifex and my editors at L'Harmattan, so touching in their supportive messages; my cousin Nicole and her girlfriend Alexandra who came from Switzerland especially to help...how can I name you all?

How can one not forget a single name when they are so numerous? How can one let any link slip from this chain of friendship across the world, this connection that may allow for humanity's very survival.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published online by *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 2019) as part of the collaboration between *Kohl* and *Al-Raida* entitled "Writing Beirut." The original article can be found here: <https://kohljournal.press/issue-5-3>.

<sup>2</sup> "Risk is proof par excellence of courage and freedom." In homage to Anne Dufourmantelle, from her beautiful interview on *L'Eloge du Risque*: <https://www.femmeactuelle.fr/sante/psycho/anne-dufourmantelle-elogue-du-risque-dignite-courage-hommage-2048822>. Inspired, inspiring, beloved and loving, that's saying too little about Anne Dufourmantelle. Philosopher and psychoanalyst, she died on July 21, 2017, while saving some children from drowning, had, in addition, the rare gift of pairing action with the elegance of her speech. When she published *Eloge du risque* [Manuels Payot], the journalist Danièle Laufer wrote this beautiful interview for the magazine *Prima*.

<sup>3</sup> Dufourmantelle, Anne. *Éloge du Risque*. Payot et Rivages, 2011  
(<https://www.babelio.com/livres/Dufourmantelle-loge-du-risque/253675>)