

## Glitter Ghost Town

Diana Abou Abbas

To cite this article: Abou Abbas, D. (2022). Glitter ghost town. *Al-Raida*, 46(2), 89-93. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2527

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2527>

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Corresponding author: Diana Abou Abbas

Author contact: [al-raida@lau.edu.lb](mailto:al-raida@lau.edu.lb)

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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## Glitter Ghost Town<sup>1</sup>

Diana Abou Abbas

I sat under the window on that Tuesday evening. It was my 3<sup>rd</sup> day being couch-ridden with an upset stomach, watching *Grey's Anatomy* for the umpteenth time (Cristina Yang episodes only) when the window behind me opened and pulled back closed. I was puzzled. I looked at my partner who had just woken up from a nap, and we wondered if it was an explosion. Anyone who witnessed the Lebanese war and its explosions, or any other neighboring war for that matter, is unfortunately trained to identify explosions. Before we could learn any news, I suddenly heard a loud boom and found myself on the floor with one arm around my partner, and another around the cat, while glass rained down on us. Before we could understand what that was, I felt a sudden surge of wind and held on tighter to my partner. I heard glass shatter around while I thought that our home was being destroyed...What are we going to do... Why is Achrafieh being targeted...There are no targets here...As I saw the cat jump away, I heard a loud boom and saw the front door blow open. The panic. Our panic focused on the cat. We thought he ran outside the apartment. He is a tripawd. And he is precious with a gentle character. I ran after him while my partner called his name before I heard "put on your shoes!" That's when I noticed I was running barefoot on the broken glass. As I put on my shoes, I felt pieces of glass dig into my soles, but I had to find the cat.

When an explosion happens, the "positive pressure" moves fast from the original point of the explosion, violently tearing down whatever stands in its way. The positive pressure of the first explosion opened the window behind me.

But then, the "negative pressure," which is the vacuum or suction effect that we feel, comes swooping back in the opposite direction, finishing off whatever was left untouched. The "negative pressure" is what closed the window behind me and triggered the memory of an explosion from my lived experience.

Wails and screams followed. Glass crashed to the ground.

The cat was found hiding his tiny head behind the hamper, leaving his body exposed.

How miserable it is for you to be trained to act post explosion:

1. Secure the vulnerable.
2. Call your loved ones before the networks crash.
3. Pack the valuables.

And because you are a *Grey's Anatomy* addict you remember that people high on adrenaline are not aware of their injuries. So in the midst of our panic, we took off our clothes in the corridor, which is hardly the most romantic spot in the house, to check that we weren't running around with any protruding shards of glass. We weren't.

Days later, the negative pressure had left the streets shimmering with broken glass that appeared to shine beautifully in the sun, had it not been for the mass murder behind it. It marked the assassination of a city and its people, culture, and history. Those windowpanes held memories of birthdays and Sunday lunches you spent with your chosen family. They retained your laughter and the secrets you shared with your mother but had kept from your father. If only those windows had burst into glitter instead of shards of death and pain and mutilation.

Many left their homes. Some for a period of time, like I did, others left them for good. Some others left this world completely.

Whole neighborhoods are left semi-standing like toothless mouths and hollowed out bodies, as if they remain in shock over witnessing the terror that changed the lives of hundreds of thousands, and emotionally crippled the rest of the population.

Much has changed about Beirut. As you enter the city from the North, nausea creeps up on you at the sight of the destruction, and your heart starts breaking as soon as you pass by the fire department of Platoon 5 in Karantina. If you continue to the city's southern outskirts, you will reach the airport, where all the broken hearts and their unyielding tears are heading, never to return to their birth city. Beirut suddenly becomes like your ex-lover, the one that made you grow, but was so toxic that you were left with no choice but to walk away from her. You will leave her, but you will secretly keep all your memories of her. The coaster from the Gemmayze

bar. The Marsa condom pocket from Valentine's Day, minus the condom. The bloodied t-shirt you were wearing when you helped put that stranger on a motorcycle to be taken to a hospital...

Motorcycles are a nuisance in Beirut. They are like flies on a hot and humid summer day. They break the law, go against traffic, surprise you from every corner, drive in motorcades and terrify children and adults alike at night, in times of the world cup, or imminent war. The pests of this city saved its people from certain deaths that day. As roads were blocked by debris and abandoned cars, motorcycles were the only way to get the injured to a hospital. That is one of the reasons why you will keep all your memories of her and hide them from your future wife.

I find myself vacillating between wanting to laugh hysterically and weeping and wailing. You will not understand why Middle Eastern women wail the way they do until tragedy hits you. Madame Om on Pasteur Street in the blue building overlooking the port has been destroyed. The wall and balcony collapsed leaving a gaping hole. No one was there, no one was hurt. The old neighbor who lived above and complained about the loud music passed away the previous year. Now we know how lucky he was.

A portrait of Om Kolthoum, the pride of the Arabs, sits exposed to the outside.

*"The lady now has a direct sea view."*

*"The queer-friendly bar has 'come-out' to the world!"*

My thoughts make me giggle. Then I remember.

I think of Gemma, and Arianna, and Vartan, and the many more children who watched their parents die in front of them. I want to wail. They are now my children. The dead are my family. The innocent, the old, the hopeful, the unsuspecting, the curious who watched the smoke rise from behind their windows, the ones who had fled other infernos to seek refuge in this one.

I beg my partner to go out, so we can see our friends. I need people and alcohol. I hadn't seen my friends in five months, as I had built my cocoon on my blue L-shaped couch since March

13<sup>th</sup>. I now hold the title of Miss Physical Distancing & Quarantine 2020. We go. I get drunk on two glasses of wine. I have reached the epitome of my downfall as a social butterfly. I am now a cheap date. I throw away my Corona Queen sash and sing in the car.

Three days later, a friend who was at the gathering suspected a Covid-19 infection. The WhatsApp group panics. I want to laugh hysterically.

She tests negative.

I dust off my Corona Queen sash and wear it again.

The media coverage is as nauseating as the sight of the crumpled Forum de Beyrouth. The #BeirutBlast! How many interns did it take you to change that lightbulb? Is your alliteration along with the crimson smoke going to make the explosion more poetic? Is the death of 200 people, 6,000 wounded, and 60,000 destroyed homes not enough to catch your editor's attention? How about "non-nuclear mass murder results in deadly destruction of Beirut's beautiful buildings." Is that poetic enough for you and your titles?

Haik-u.

Rima Jabbour, Nurse Administrator at the American University of Beirut Medical Center, described the scene at the hospital as a war zone and wondered why all those people had perished: "For what? To rise again? I don't want to rise again."

Today I hang my resilience on the wall the same way I hung my bra a few years back. As Charles Aznavour says : « *Il faut savoir quitter la table quand l'amour est desservi.* » In this city, I survived irresponsible drunken behavior, break-ups, cancer, and character assassination, but I do not feel I can survive this heartache.

I cannot unsee the remaining windowpanes, hanging by a thread, folded like papers on the carcasses of fancy buildings, like abandoned sheets from the scripts of the lives of their

inhabitants, forever interrupted. I am folding my cards. How many times are you supposed to rise from your ashes? There comes a time when every Phoenix must retire.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This testimony was collected and originally published by the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut.