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Myriam Sfeir

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Corresponding author: Myriam Sfeir

Author contact: myriam.sfeir@lau.edu.lb

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Personal Reflection: No One Was Spared

Myriam Sfeir

That day, I left the office earlier than usual because I was supposed to visit the Mar Charbel monastery with a friend. It was a Tuesday, around 4:30 p.m., and the traffic was endless. We decided to cancel the trip and go to Gemmayze for a coffee. We walked down one of the busiest roads in one of the busiest neighborhoods of Beirut and decided to sit in a café called Ginette. Ginette has a beautiful outdoor patio, but the further you move indoors, the more cafeteria-like it becomes. It was too hot to sit outside, so we headed for the first indoor table that overlooked the street. We were told we couldn't sit at the table we had selected because social distancing rules were in place; moving past another table that was occupied, we were forced to move inward to the fourth table. We were a bit disappointed with our seats, but we complied. We settled for our assigned table and decided we would move as soon as the family occupying the other table in the café left.

We started catching up and called another friend to join us. The discussion we were having was centered around the sordid situation in the country, why we should or shouldn't leave Lebanon, the Bisri Dam project and its detrimental environmental consequences, and other issues. I recall holding the newspaper supplement issued by The Legal Agenda, a local organization, and, after much deliberation, I announced that "if the Dam project is executed, I am definitely packing my bags and leaving." While immersed in our heated debate, we briefly noticed that the better table had opened up, but our discussion distracted us.

Then, at 6:04 p.m., all hell broke loose. In a split second, we heard a roaring, wind-like sound that rattled the whole area. Its force was unmeasurable, something I have never experienced. We were thrown off our chairs, all three of us scattered in different directions as if we were weightless.

What was that?! I thought, as a huge storm of dust engulfed us. I stood up and, seeing nothing, looked for my bag and checked my phone. I had no cellphone service, and the dust was

clouding my vision. The café was hit hard. It was totally destroyed. There was rubble everywhere, glass everywhere, debris everywhere, screams coming out of the kitchen. We started mumbling to each other. What was that? A gas leak that led to an explosion in the kitchen? An explosion? A car bomb? I helped my friends stand up and thanked God we didn't move tables. I felt immense relief that we were the only customers in the café, while the only other customers, a family, had left several minutes earlier.

I was the first to step out of the café and inspect what was happening. I was treading on glass, concrete, and aluminum. The first thing I saw was massive destruction and a burned car. I rushed back in affirming that it was a car bomb. I assumed someone was assassinated, a car bomb that was meant to be a political assassination. I saw bloodied faces everywhere, people were scattered on the floor bleeding, or running with blood dripping everywhere. I was about to faint. I couldn't stand the sight of blood. I went to get my two friends. We needed to get out. I was oblivious to the screams coming out of the kitchen: There was no way we could go into the kitchen because shattered glass and aluminum panels were blocking our access. I didn't want to go in, anyway. I was scared of what I might see.

We started walking in the exact same street that only two hours earlier had been bustling with life. Each step we took made us realize the magnitude of the blast; it was bigger than we thought. I scanned the street and there was destruction everywhere: pools of blood, shattered glass, door frames blown out in each and every shop and house, ceilings hanging by a thread, ready to fall any minute. It was pure chaos. People were running, yelling, crying and mumbling in shock, and parents were running to take their injured kids to a nearby hospital. There were more pools of blood, the whole street was covered with blood, as if it had been painted in red. Every single parked car we saw had been destroyed, and all the buildings were heavily damaged. It was like a scene out of a movie: Utter destruction, people crying, blood, blood, and more blood.

I was in shock, I didn't stop walking, as if I was a robot. I didn't stop, I wanted to get out. I didn't stop to help anyone. All I wanted to do was to flee, to get out of there. There was too much blood and destruction to handle. We had been walking for 10 minutes when a girl approached me asking me if she can use my phone. I hesitated for a split of a second: In times of COVID-19, we were told not to share our phones with anyone. I pushed that thought away and

handed her the phone. She tried to call her mother in vain. All lines were busy, all communication was impossible. When we arrived at Paul, a small restaurant marking the beginning of the main road through Gemmayze, I told my friends I needed to use the bathroom. I could no longer open my eyes, they were too dusty. Each person at Paul had blood on them, and people were screaming. I went into the bathroom and looked at my face in the mirror. I had glass on my lower lip, a tiny piece hanging on my nose, and saw an injury that looked deep on my shoulder. I washed my face to remove the dust from my clouded eyes.

We continued walking. The first person I called was my mother. She is the panicky, anxious type and I needed to reassure her that I was fine. I dialed her number and lied that I was still in the office and that I am ok. Then I called my husband and told him I was safe and was attempting to explain to him what had happened when he told me that all the glass in ABC, the name for a chain of malls around Beirut, was smashed because of an unknown explosion. For a split second, I thought to myself *what was he doing in ABC Achrafieh?* He usually goes to ABC Verdun, which is a couple of steps away from my house and not Ashrafieh, which was closer to Gemmayze, where the explosion had happened. When he confirmed that he was in Verdun, something dawned on me: *Why did the glass get shattered five kilometers away?* It was at that moment that I grasped the magnitude of the explosion. He reassured me that our girls were OK. I thanked God and continued walking robot-like, in a daze.

I received what felt like thousands of calls that day. On each call, I mustered the same response: I was fine, unharmed. I was playing the part well. The more we walked, the more we realized the extent of the damage. The whole city looked like a war zone. Blood everywhere and injured people calling for assistance and help: young, old, children, men, women, migrant workers, foreigners, everyone. We were all in shock. The blast didn't spare anyone.

When we reached the Ring, we were able to find a cab and headed to Ain El-Mreissi to drop my friend who wanted to check on her house. Then, we asked the driver to take us to the AUB Medical Center. The number of injured people we saw on the road made it certain that all hospitals would by now be full of severely injured people, so we opted instead to go to a pharmacy next to the hospital. The pharmacy looked more like an emergency room than a pharmacy: The number of injured people was incredible. The pharmacist who checked my

wound confirmed that the wound on my shoulder was deep and needed stitches. He also told me that I had a deeper one at the back of my neck. It was obvious I needed to go to the hospital. He applied some bandages and told me to go have it sutured. The pharmacist refused to let me pay him for his work.

I arrived home in bloodied clothes to find my two daughters and husband waiting for me. My eldest sobbed uncontrollably while hugging me. We had fought the day before and I knew she was feeling very guilty that something might have happened to me. I went to the bathroom, undressed, and took a shower. I realized I couldn't raise my left arm to wash my dusty hair properly. Once done, I used cotton swabs to clean my ears. Each time, the bud would be bloody. I would later find out from the doctors that this was due to all the tiny pieces of glass that had been embedded in my ears.

It was finally time to go to the hospital. I wore a buttoned shirt. I called a friend whom I had earlier lied to, this time explaining that I was injured, and did she know of a doctor who could look at my wounds. She told me to head to Trad hospital and ask for Dr. Audi. As we were about to leave the house, both our daughters begged me and my husband not to leave them. They hugged us and started crying because they were scared that something would happen to us. They were terrified of staying home alone with our nanny and begged us not to leave them. My husband and I explained that I had to get my wounds treated and reassured them that nothing will happen.

The chaos at the gate of the hospital was indescribable. Injured people everywhere were waiting to be called by a doctor or nurse. Children being consoled by parents, parents hunched over their kids waiting to be treated, bloodied faces, guards trying to calm people, desperately trying to get people to wait in line. After giving the name of the doctor that my friend had recommended, we climbed up to the floor where he was already treating patients. That floor was filled with people waiting for and receiving treatment. I saw bandaged eyes and heads and feet covered in blood. I saw people crying, moaning, nurses rushing and trying to handle the outpouring of patients.

We waited for four hours. When it was my turn, I was asked to sit on a bloody stretcher. There hadn't been time to change the soiled paper. I sat in my bra as the doctor examined me in

the hallway, without a curtain. As the needle penetrated my skin, I started to cry. It was the first time I had cried all day. The doctor immediately asked if I was in pain: I wasn't, in truth. I felt nothing. I was numb. The trauma of what had happened was too much to handle and I couldn't compose myself. I couldn't stop crying. I started remembering the sight of the terrified faces I saw, the gravely injured people, the father running holding an injured daughter, the woman slumped on the street with her chest and hand bleeding. My mind started to race. I was so paralyzed. I felt like I was a spectator in a movie that I was starring in. As the doctor finished, they issued an apology: I would need to get a tetanus shot, but they had run out at the hospital. On our way home, we visited four different pharmacies: They had all run out of tetanus shots. Thankfully, a small pharmacy near our apartment had a tetanus shot available. I took the injection in a semi-secluded section of the pharmacy in view of several employees. I felt like I was undressing in front of a crowd. It was surreal.

I got home, showered again, and sat in bed. Both my girls were hovering around me delicately. The only thought I had that night was how could I have walked the whole street of Gemmayze without helping anyone. How? I always prided myself on my activist spirit, my empathy and my commitment to helping others. Where did those principles disappear? I thought specifically about our waitress at Ginette, Malak. She was amazing, she went out of her way to cater to our needs. Why didn't I check on her before leaving the destroyed café? I heard her screams. I wondered if anyone died in that kitchen area of Ginette. I couldn't sleep. Images kept popping in my head. My left side was too sore. I could hardly move my shoulder. I told myself it was probably a massive bruise from when I fell from my chair.

The next day, I looked up the number of Ginette. I called again and again and again until someone finally answered. I asked about all the personnel that had been working the day before, and the guy on the line reassured me that they were all alive. Some were injured, others unscratched. I asked for Malak's number and called her. She answered and, once she remembered who I was, she started crying. She told me that the reason she was screaming from the kitchen was that she thought *we* were dead. We cried together over the phone and promised to see each other soon. I was so relieved to find out that she was OK. Yet, the guilt of August 4th has still not left me.

That same day, I returned to work, pretending it was business as usual. We had a donor meeting. I knew I was in denial. After the meeting, I spent my day huddled on the couch and then moved to the bed. I unsuccessfully tried to sleep all day. Since August 4th, I have not slept a full night. I am known to be a sound sleeper. My nickname during my university years was “1,2,3” meaning you just needed to count to three and I’d be sound asleep. Now, I don’t sleep. I spend my nights clenching my jaw and grinding my teeth.

The following day, I realized my wounds were hurting more than usual. I removed the bandages: There was a yellow puss. I realized I had forgotten to clean them. I passed by my dermatologist’s office, who offered to take a look. She cleaned my wounds and told me I had to disinfect them every day. I shared with her my inability to move my left shoulder properly and told her I was able to wear only button-up shirts. She advised me to have it x-rayed. She gave me the needed paperwork so I headed to the hospital convinced that there was nothing wrong. The x-ray showed that I had a broken clavicle: I had to wear a sling for eight weeks. Upon returning home, I cried my eyes out one more time. For the past three days, I have been trying to ignore the throbbing pain, trying to make it go away with the help of painkillers, and it was working. However, there was another pain that was impossible to cure. This was the pain of witnessing everything and not doing anything to help. If you looked at me from the outside, I was unscratched. However, on the inside, I was a mess. The images of blood-drenched faces were constantly replaying in my mind. The images of the injured in the waiting area of the hospital, in the hallways, in the pharmacy, on the streets, are the only constants.

On August 4, 2021, at 6:08 p.m., no one was spared. Two years after the Blast, the scars on my shoulder area and back are barely noticeable. The clavicle that took months to mend is 90% healed. However, no smile is wholehearted and no happiness is complete until justice is achieved.