

ONE DAY IN THE SOUTH

by *Nada Awar, Journalist*

The cat trotted across the street to join us on a covered terrace. Rain pattered gently on the canopy above, and the air cooled. I leaned against the balustrade and gazed out at the lush, green valleys of southern Lebanon. On the hills beyond, houses stood empty and shuttered. The fields below us, bathed in diffused light, were waiting untended. The forced exodus had left behind a pervasive quiet that showed the area's beauty to advantage. I crouched down and motioned to the cat. It blinked and stared back at me, then wrapped its tail in a soft hook around its body and waited, too.

Some minutes later, the bombardment began: distant thudding sounds that shocked the stillness. The men carried the camera equipment up the hill across the road, searching for a good spot from which to shoot the rising clouds of smoke on the horizon. The reporter and I waited for them, nibbling on chocolate creams.

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We had driven down from Beirut that morning of April 18th in an aged, green BMW that had "TV-Press" emblazoned all over its body. I sat in the front seat by the driver, and the reporter and her producer sat in the back. The Australian crew had arrived the day before to cover Israel's latest attacks on south Lebanon, code-named "Operation Grapes of Wrath." We sped down the highway, the film crew following in a second car close behind us. I spent much of the drive staring out at the horizon, looking for the Israeli gun-boats they had told us about at the news office earlier. Soon, we noticed a gray, almost imperceptible hump rising from the water. "See?! See?!" we all called out. I handed the reporter a detailed map of Lebanon and tried to point out the areas under fire. The names of more and more villages were constantly being added to the list of bombarded areas broadcast on the radio news.

Between the road and the sea there were banana groves and fields of lemon and orange trees. Their borders were covered with great bushes of yellow daisies, with an occasional red poppy or two standing amongst them. As we approached



The mass grave at Qana in South Lebanon. Most of the victims were women and children.

Sidon the dwindling amount of traffic on the road was noticeable, and by the time we had reached Tyre, the absence of any sign of life was glaring. "A ghost town," murmured the reporter.

I watched as the cameraman filmed a street whose shop windows had been hastily boarded-up. A lone cyclist rode slowly away from the scene. I could hardly believe that this was the same bustling, noisy city I had visited with friends only a few weeks before. We spent the rest of the morning driving through tiny villages further inland, and interviewing some of the few people who had chosen to remain.

"We want only to be allowed to live in peace in our own homes!", they had all said.

There was the young father of half a dozen children, busy skinning the lamb he had just slaughtered, trying to do his best despite dwindling resources. His wife, waving her arms and calling out to us, cried "We will stay on here together, and either live or die together!" On the outskirts of yet another village, we met a unit of Lebanese soldiers, all young and anxious, many lonely and far from home. An army private from Tripoli smiled again and again at me, and finally said, as we were bidding them good-bye, "Come again!". In another village, we met a family of twenty-six people taking shelter in an abandoned garage. The eldest among them, a man in his late fifties, stifled a sob as he tried to describe the humiliation and anger they felt at having been forced to live like this.

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The cat sitting before me on the terrace suddenly perked up its ears and ran away. The film crew returned and we piled into the cars, heading for Tyre. I now know that Qana must have happened as I stood on that terrace falling in love with the south of Lebanon.

The car radio blurted out news of many injured being rushed to hospitals in Tyre. When we reached the Jabel Amel hospital, crowds of people were gathered at its entrance in a state of hysteria. We pushed our way, cameraman and soundman in front, to the emergency section downstairs, and discovered the cause of the chaos.

Dozens of bloodied and broken children, women and elderly people were lying on stretchers on the floor, or were being pushed on trolleys into the operating room. Surrounding the injured were

what seemed like hundreds of able-bodied people pushing, yelling and crying. In one corner, a very old man with a foot suddenly missing was sitting with his back against the wall, quietly vomiting. Someone rushed past me carrying a little girl. Her head lolled dangerously backward, and I noticed that her entire face was gone.

We climbed up the steps to the ground floor and around to its entrance. There, we learned that a UNIFIL base in a village called Qana, at which hundreds of civilians had taken refuge, had been repeatedly hit by Israeli shells. Rushing back to the cars, we made our way to Qana. The drive was not long: fifteen minutes up a twisting mountain road. Ambulances, sirens screaming and tires screeching, flew past us on their way to Tyre. The car swerved around corners, and my heart raced.

There are two things I will never be able to forget about that hour at the UNIFIL base in Qana. The first was beyond my control, but I shall never forgive myself for having done nothing about the second. I remember the smell. I suppose it must have been the stench of human flesh, burnt to black. Incinerated.

I also remember the wails of an elderly woman who had been placed on a doorstep of a building a few meters from the shelter. "Why have you left me alone like this!?", she shrieked. "Why have you left me alone?!". I did not know if she was calling out to God, the authorities or her murdered family. I did not go to her, but instead stood fixed to a spot on the ground, taking temporary comfort in my utter disbelief.

On our way back to Beirut, I began to sneeze. The producer reflexively said "bless you," then added, "not that my blessing can count for much in this world!".

"*Everyone* counts," I replied, and turned to look out at the Mediterranean rushing past us.

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On April 30th, 1996, twelve days after the massacre, the Qana victims were buried in a mass grave a few feet away from the UNIFIL base at which they had sought refuge. All of Lebanon watched, in horror and grief, as plastic covered bundles were taken, one by one, out of the 102 flag-draped coffin and placed gently in the immense common tomb. Women wailed, men shouted, and I stood on a rooftop, saying good-bye.