

Waiting for George

George had finally decided to tell his mother what had happened, to give her if only part of the truth she lived every single day to hear.

“The moment I was taken away, the only thing I could think about was you. I knew you never wanted me to leave but you also never wanted me to stay and die fighting either. I wish I had stayed and died fighting. At least you would have known for sure that I was dead. I would have also been sure that I was dead myself.

May 5, 1990. It was ten minutes past 8 p.m. Uncle Joe had gently pressed on the breaks as he got ready to stop at the Syrian army checkpoint, a wooden booth painted in the colors of the Syrian flag on the left side of the road. We were only 100 meters away from the lane that led to Beirut International Airport’s departure hall. The guns of the Lebanese Civil War were soon to go silent but the Syrian occupation was anything but over. Whenever the Syrian army would go home, if ever, this vital checkpoint, keeping a close eye on who left the country, would probably be one of the last to be dismantled.

Joe switched off the radio and turned on the car’s dome light. It was one of those eerily quiet pitch-black Beirut nights. An uncovered glowing light bulb, dangling from one side of the checkpoint’s booth, gave us the only indication that there was someone inside. The soldier’s shadow swayed from one side to the other as our Cadillac’s roaring engine approached the booth. If you ask me, I think the light came from the soldier’s eyes, a deadly stare, as I later discovered, which shone in the dark with a faded white glow, lightening his footsteps as he stepped out of the booth. As our car came to a complete stop, the soldier stood up straight and looked down at us.

The soldier asked us where we were coming from and where we were going. Without moving, he took a quick glance at the back seat to make sure he hadn’t missed someone or something else in the car. He asked Joe to show him what was in the trunk and Joe swiftly obliged. Joe got out of the car, walked towards the trunk, open the lid and pointed at the one brown leather suitcase I was travelling with. The soldier nodded and gestured at Joe to close the trunk and get back in the car, which he did. Joe closed his door, assuming we would be promptly given the green light to head to the airport. Instead, and without saying a word, the soldier pointed to a metallic hut on the right side further down the road. Joe and I understood this meant they wanted to continue the questioning. Joe took a slight right and turned off the car underneath the hut. Another soldier was waiting for us there, and from Joe’s window, asked me to step out of the car and show him my passport. The soldier turned around to my side of the

car and snatched my passport. I stood facing the eastern end of the airport's worn out and empty tarmac. The only functioning lights were set on my plane, the one I was supposed to board in three hours.

Joe remained in the car, afraid to even look at what was going on. After the soldier hastily flipped through my passport, he asked me where I was travelling to and why.

"To Kuwait," I said, "I am an engineer and I will be working there." The soldier didn't seem to care for whatever it was that I did or didn't answer. He continued to absently flip through my passport. Less than a minute later and without even looking at me, he told me that I would be taken for further questioning. Joe was asked to leave and check on me the next morning if he so wished, but wasn't told where to check. Joe looked at me, terrified and confused. I had never seen him so nervous and helpless. He probably knew I had done nothing to deserve this, but struggled to figure out if there had been something that he didn't know about. I could see it in his eyes. He wanted to blame me for anything that could have made the soldiers arrest me, and knew it wasn't the right time to do so, but also knew there was nothing for him to blame me for.

As Joe prepared to get out of the car to ask the soldier for an explanation, two other soldiers had already arrived to the scene. They grabbed me each from one side and shoved me into the back seat of the old black Peugeot in which they had arrived in. The soldier that had first stopped us crossed the road and walked up to Joe, standing right in front of his door to stop him from getting out. That was the last I saw of Uncle Joe. I was blindfolded and squeezed in between the two soldiers that had thrown me into the car. Part of my ears were also covered, but that didn't stop me from hearing the two gun shots fired into the air. Joe must have started arguing with the soldier because after the shots were fired, I heard the roaring of Joe's Cadillac back on. He must have made a fast u-turn right after the checkpoint, onto the highway and back home.

It has taken me years to reconstruct how it all happened, but I think this is about right. Poor Joe, he must have felt as if he took me straight into my own grave, but there is nothing he could have done to stop it. The Syrian army was kidnapping people randomly back then, just as they had been since the beginning of the war, and just as other local militias were doing. We all knew it and by going anywhere, we knew we were taking a risk. All I know is that when they shoved me into that black Peugeot, and after they blindfolded me, the soldier in the driver's seat turned around and violently placed a black plastic bag over my head. He held the bag with both hands and tied the ends right around my neck. I know I frantically shook my head, trying to prevent him from tying the knot, or at least not tying it too tight. The

shaking stopped after the soldier on my right hit my forehead with what was most probably a pistol. I don't think I screamed, I actually don't remember. But I know that I could barely breathe with that plastic back wrapped around my head. When I got over the smell of the sweaty soldiers, the dusty car seats and the taste of blood running down my face from the hit, all I could think about was you.

Mother, do you remember Ali? The man who knocked on your door some years ago, the same day your daughter told you she was getting married and would move to Canada? The day she begged you to start living with the fact that I may never come back, that I may have already died? The day she begged you to go to Canada with her, and leave Lebanon, a country that had given you nothing but tears and blood, misery and death? I don't know how Ali came to you on that same day. Nor do I know if it was a good thing that he did, to tell you that I was still alive and keep you here, to you, the only person that was still waiting for me. Or maybe you should have just gone with my sister and started a new life, with the hope that if I ever got out alive, I would find you, as my sister used to always tell you. I really don't know, Mother, but I am sorry for everything and would do anything to undo what you went through because of me if I could.

Ali told you the truth and everything he knew or could remember. About the way we met in a damp underground cell in a detention center close to the airport. About the countless times he had heard my torture screams and I had heard his. The time they forced me to put out cigarettes on his body, threatening me with electrical shocks on my private parts if I didn't. He was also forced to do the same on me too and threatened him the same way. On how we had been driven to another detention center on the Lebanese-Syria border and left without food for three days, until we were given pieces of moldy bread and forced to eat them until the last piece. How we were driven to Damascus four days later, 50 blindfolded prisoners cramped into the back of a truck with the smell of cow shit and fertilizers, and thrown into the most feared military intelligence detention center of them all. Had we not met in Beirut before heading to Damascus, I would have never known his name nor would he have known mine, because we were assigned numbers thereafter. Ali was 4387 and I was 4400. I had almost forgotten my own name, except for when you came to see me.

When you dared to go all the way to Damascus looking for me, that was the first time I had heard my name in years. I don't know how long it had been, but I know it had been long enough. When you are underground, Mother, when night is day and day is night, you have no sense of time, everything is the same, time is nothing except for a torture device that keeps you away from the relief of death, because there was nothing that helped me believe that I would make it out alive, except for when you came.

I heard the prison guards call my name and I somehow knew it was mine. I was called to sit in an empty room, its large window overlooking the sitting room that you were welcomed into. I saw you come in, dressed in black and white, sitting with the officer in charge of our floor. They made me watch your visit as if I was watching a movie. They called my name but didn't let me get out to see you, to hug you and kiss you. My mouth was covered with duck tape, my hands cuffed and surrounded by two guards just in case I tried to move. They were polite to you, I know, but they lied to you. They told you I wasn't there. I saw you look around, as if trying to find me, looking for any sign, on the floor, on the ceiling, on the wall, something that would tell you that I was there and prove them wrong, a note, a strand of my hair, anything left behind. They made me watch you in silence, and then joked about how good an actress you could have been and how stupid you had been for thinking you would see your son. There is no George here anyway, I heard them tell you and in a way they were right. I was 4400. When you left, I was whisked away into the torture room and beaten up for the rest of the day. Your visit had been that day's excuse to beat me up...as if they needed an excuse to do so.

We never knew why some of us were released and left in detention, why some of us stayed in one prison or got transferred to another. I got transferred out of Damascus with a group of Lebanese and Palestinians and never saw Ali again. Everything he knew about me, you and our family I had told him throughout the years, whenever the guards let us talk and didn't decide to beat us up for the simple act of talking. He had done the same and I remember most of it still. We had once exchanged small pieces of paper with our addresses, family names and phone numbers written on them. We had agreed that whoever made it out of there first, if ever, would go to the other's family and tell them about their son. I remember how I had found a crumpled piece of paper tucked in a small orifice in our cell. I grabbed it without being seen by the others and hid it in my back pocket. It took Ali another two weeks, maybe more, to find a pen. We were lucky this had happened before I was transferred out of Damascus and before he was released. Otherwise, he would have never been able to come knocking on your door to tell you that I was still alive, at least as far as he knew, right before they transferred me. I wanted you to get some good news after all these years, to know that I was alive, know that I had seen you when you came to visit, know that there was nothing you could do for me, that I was trying to keep myself alive for you, and that I wanted nothing else but to come back home. Or maybe it wasn't such a good idea, maybe you should have just gone to Canada, I really don't know.

You know Mother, I once felt something burning deep inside me when my father died. I felt it was a different kind of pain than the throbbing pain I constantly felt from my unhealed torture wounds, made worse in the humidity of winter nights or when I was simply flogged in the exact same place by the

prison guards over and over again. Father must have surely died of sadness, giving up on the hope of ever seeing his son again. But I thought about you the most, that you were now waiting alone for me, wondering alone about me and suffering alone because of me.

Come to think of it, you shouldn't hear more because I cannot make you suffer more than you already have. I wish you could just forget about all this. Live as if this never happened to your son and maybe even move on. But the one thing I'm sure of and what I want you to know is..." George's voice began to fade away but his lips continued to move. His mother couldn't keep up with his lips to try to at least guess what he was trying to tell her. She threw her hands up and down in the air, angry at what appeared like a deliberate attempt to stop her from hearing what she had been waiting to hear for the past 20 years. She frantically tossed and turned from one side of the bed to the other, until her head hit the bed's solid wooden frame and she woke up from her sleep. She switched on the lamp on the small night stand next to her bed. She looked around, but George still wasn't there...