

*A Mother's Heart*

A short story by *Gabriel Tabbal*

It was a few minutes before dawn, on a cold winter night in the heart of Ashrafieh. Dark reigned supreme on the calm, narrow streets of Gemmayze. A cool breeze brushed through the foliage of the odd trees planted in the middle of the sidewalks, a brief sign of life in the dead of the night. It had stopped raining but drops could still be heard falling onto the storefront tin awnings of closed down, empty bars. This street, once beaming with life and music now showing the faintest vital signs. On the corner of a crossroad in this borderline-comatose boulevard lies an early 20th century traditional Lebanese building. You could immediately tell by its glowing orange terracotta roofing, grandiose arches and beams and iconic tall, brown window shutters.

On the first floor of this heritage building lived Aïda, a middle-aged mother of two. Before it all happened Aïda was turning in her bed, trying to get an hour or two of sleep before she heads to work. She was thinking, one could say she was overthinking – which is the normal amount of thinking for a Lebanese mother. She was thinking about her children, about their welfare, about their future, and about their safety. She was running all kinds of scenarios through her head, trying to figure how she'd get her two sons in university. She was an educated person herself, despite the tough circumstances in the country during her upbringing. She wanted to be an actress, dreaming of red carpets and lively theaters. Ultimately though, she ended up studying journalism because she couldn't make it to the fine arts faculty of the Lebanese University due to the constant barrage of shells she would have had to avoid on her way there.

The war is over now and yet, she still fears for the safety of her children in this country. She thinks, and plans and organizes her thoughts, she counts and calculates, she checks and rechecks, she turns in her bed. She rotates left, she rotates right. She thinks and she thinks and she thinks in the darkness of her unlit room. Her thoughts are interrupted. She senses some trembling. Her bedframe and mattress start moving erratically. She grips onto her sheets frozen in fetal position. A few trinkets fall off of her shelves: a framed, monochrome family picture, withered flowers in a glass vase. She hears a smashing sound. The brown window shutters hit the frame again and again, a loud banging sound can be heard then, nothing.

Left aghast with the loneliness of her interrupted thoughts, she's immediately transported in time tapping into some of her long repressed memories. It was a hot summer afternoon in 2020, the streets of Gemmayze were already bustling with people walking across the boulevard, students and coworkers heading out to one of the many cafés on the sidewalks for happy hour. Aïda had just gotten back home from work. Her eldest son was studying in the living room, the younger was in the kitchen reheating the lunch she had prepared the day before. The old, charming, orange-roofed building looked as good as it ever did; its residents living simple lives

making do with the circumstances of the country. They went on about their day as normal. It's 6:07PM, another bang is heard, and then, nothing.

She replayed the events of the civil war, she remembered the war of 2006, the bus massacre of Ain-El-Remmaneh, for the majority of her life the country was never really at peace, at least *she* never really was at peace. Years of conflict, of bombings, of shootings, of utter destruction played out right there, in the middle of her room. The sounds of banging and clattering really tied in the atmosphere. Right beside her unmade bed she saw her brother getting shot in the leg. His blood went through her white sheets and seeped into the mattress. He was on his way to the bakery to get a couple loaves of bread for the rest of the family. On the night table sat her now deceased father – may he rest in peace – driving his red 1982 BMW 3 Series, his wife on the passenger seat and Aïda along with her two siblings in the back. They were trying to make it out of West Beirut, but they got stopped at a checkpoint. Two large men wearing black ski masks with whiskered beards appeared. Two warning shots were fired in the air. The gas pedals were pressed all the way down, a strong force was felt pushing backwards. Thankfully, they made it out alive.

Her body relaxes, she lies still, in her bed, now damp, sweat running down her back. This reminds her of the delivery of her second son. He was born in 2006, towards the end of the Lebanese war. She remembered her stay at the hospital. Oh what a day that was. The joys of birth, the joys of life intertwined with death, constantly lurking around every corner. How am I to raise a family in this country, in my country; she thought. She could have left the country. She could have made a modest living somewhere in Europe. She could have raised her children in a secure environment. She could have provided them with everything they needed to become honest and successful young adults. And yet, despite all the hardships, she did. She raised two respectable young men, she sent them to school, she took them to football practice, she got them piano lessons. Love allows you to beat all odds.

She hoped for the best for her sons. Both were still sound asleep in the room next door, unbothered by the shaking caused by the earthquake or by her glass vase shattering. She wished for a better Lebanon, the Lebanon of her dreams. A Lebanon where she could grow old and see her children flourish, become successful, get married. A Lebanon where she could see her grandchildren play carefree, running around and misbehaving. A Lebanon where the streets of Gemmayze regain their lifeforce, bustling with life, the air filled with the aroma of traditional Lebanese cuisine. Where the facades of homes are no longer pierced by bullet holes and bombshells. That was the Lebanon of her dreams. All she was dreaming of was peace.

The sun has begun to rise, a faint ray of light makes it past the blinds of Aïda's windows. A strange, calming feeling of inner peace and serenity fills her body. She felt weirdly at ease, saved by the beaming light of the day. She still believed things could get better, with every new

day. The promise of a better Lebanon became tangible, it became materialized with every sunrise. She had never given up and she didn't plan on doing so. With unusual tranquility – considering the circumstances – the mother got up, changed her bed sheets, and made the bed.

She was ready to take on a brand new day, eagerly filled with promise. She got ready for work, put on her clothes, fixed her children a healthy breakfast, woke them up, then got them dressed and ready for school. They walked there all together, they had always done that – the school was a five minute walk – she dropped them off and was on her way. The kids always nagged on their way: they were teenagers, staying up doing god knows what in their room all night long with zero acknowledgement for the consequences of their actions.

Her children were going through the school gates, she stood there admiring them. They were her hope. They were her promise. She was always sentimental but after the events of the other night, she could not contain her emotions. A teardrop ran down her now-wrinkled face. This teardrop, representing years of pent-up, silent worries, stress and fear. She was still shaken from the unexpected run down memory lane she had to go through yesterday. The bell rang. Inside the school, students began lining up in an orderly fashion. Aïda got herself together and was on her way. Another day at the office. Another promise. Hope.

This may not have been the Lebanon of her dreams, in fact, this Lebanon has only been haunting her dreams, and yet Aïda was grateful. This short story is dedicated to every Lebanese mother who has had to raise her children throughout these unfortunate circumstances, to every mother who has cried, to my dear mother, to hoping for a Lebanon where mothers' tears are not spent in vain, to a better Lebanon.