

# DO THEY KNOW HOW MUCH WE HURT? \*

by Najla Said\*\*

how do i even start this? how do i write about my beirut? my heartbreak, my home, my safety, my loss. again.

i suppose i just start.

i have experienced true terror a handful of times. the first was in 1983. the first time i evacuated beirut. we had gone to visit my jiddo emile, my teta hilda, as we did every summer. just after we arrived, the airport was shut down, israeli soldiers were everywhere, the mountains were filling with smoke. we spent the next week in the staircase of our building as shells fell around us. wadie was almost hit by shrapnel. daddy was in switzerland. he knew we were in danger. i had no idea he wasn't with us because he was palestinian. i didn't understand. although i was born in 1974, i never knew about the war until the summer of 82 -- the first summer we didn't go. the summer we spent in illinois. i did cartwheels in the living room trying to get mommy and daddy's attention. but all they did was watch the news and eat nuts and look worried. i wish i'd known how my mommy's heart was breaking. i know now.

we got on the boat and fled to cyprus leaving my family behind. the boat was filled

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\*\* Najla Said is a founding member of Nibras, the Arab-American theatre collective, whose inaugural production, Sajjil (Record) won best ensemble production at the 2002 New York International Fringe Festival. Najla is an actress, comedian, and writer whose work has appeared in such publications as Mizna, an Arab-American Literary Journal, and HEEB magazine. She trained at The Shakespeare Lab at the Public Theatre and The Actors Center in New York, and graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University with a degree in comparative literature and a certificate in Theatre and Dance. This spring she won ecstatic reviews for her starring role in the Seattle Repertory Theatre's presentation of Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire. She can be reached through [najlasaid@gmail.com](mailto:najlasaid@gmail.com)

with pilgrims going to mecca. i didn't know what they were. i didn't understand. i didn't know muslim or christian or jew. i didn't know anything. i knew fear and i knew confusion. i knew the sound of bombs. an inexplicable sound if you haven't felt it before, for it is a sound you feel and not a sound you hear. it is TERRIFYING. your body shakes. you feel helpless and you cry, that's what happens. no sound effect can really replicate what it feels like when they're real. i never thought id hear that sound again.

i went into my mommy's bed the night before we left. i was scared. the balcony door was open because there was no ac, no electricity. as the curtains fluttered behind me i shivered and shook in my non-existent sleep. i felt the breeze behind my back and knew for certain the bombs would get me as i lay there vulnerable. but i was frozen in terror. shivering and shaking, teeth chattering. i wanted to move to the other side, switch places with mommy, have her wrap her arms around me and keep me safe-- but then she would feel the bombs on her back, i reasoned, and she would die. i cant lose mommy, i thought. id rather die than lose mommy. i'm so so so scared.

i wrote about that experience and it got me into princeton. wadie, my brother, did too. i didn't see beirut again till 1992.

i was 18. it was awful, destroyed. where were the beaches, the fruits the vegetables the clean water, the fun, the bikinis the people the joy? i remember feeling like i had walked into a cobweb ridden home, frozen in time. i cried.

each year after, though, i went back. it got better and better. it became home again. all the things i loved: the cucumbers and apricots and watermelon and sunshine and beaches and laughter and love and warmth and family and perseverance and resilience and strength and beauty and joy. they were there, and they continued to come back, along

with the people who had fled, stronger than ever, year after year.

the most wonderful summer ever was twenty years after the scary escape. in 2003: mommy daddy me wadie, his wife jennifer. all of us were in beirut laughing playing fighting eating drinking beaching -- being a family. back home.

my parents originally fell in love in beirut. in the late 60s/early70s. in fact, daddy who is so so so revered as a "great arab," actually rediscovered the middle east he had lost as a child through lebanon, through mommy, who is, as i love to say, 3000% lebanese.

and so we buried daddy there, 4 months later. in brummana, in the mountains next to jiddo's home. in the quaker family cemetery.

that's where he wanted to be.

it was terror that came back to me when daddy died, and, oddly, beautifully, it was lebanon that saved me from it. it was the same quaking shaking shivering feeling i had had in the bed with mommy 20 years earlier. when jenn walked into my bedroom and said we were going "to go say goodbye" i fell to the ground with the same feeling i had then, in beirut, in 83 -- convulsing shaking crying gasping.

but the beauty was that when daddy died lebanon became what i had. all i had. my safety security my home my family my everything. my good times my laughter my healing my wholeness my fun. my roots. my security... that's the only word i can write.

and now this summer. evacuated again. throwing up shaking fearing hurting crying. again.

and again the feeling i keep having is that terror. that terror that i had twice before.

the feeling that it is gone, its over.

you summon your courage, your optimism, your humor--the things that people love you for--you decide that tomorrow beirut will be back, that you will see daddy again (oh how i kept turning my brain away from thoughts of him when he died. it was too difficult to fathom the reality) the idea that you will never see something or someone you love again is unbelievably terrifying when you know really? that its over its gone and its getting worse every day.

and now i'm here in an internet cafe in damascus.

and what now?

this is what i think of when i think of arab terror. my terror. our terror. do people know how much we hurt too?