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LEBANON: A Bullet in a Magazine

We construct a narrative from the disjointed events of our lives. Is the narrative truth or fiction? The fog of war can further blur the line. War nourishes the tendency to embellish and exaggerate, to reinvent and reimagine, just as rotten flesh nourishes maggots. The inhumanity and chaotic destruction of war only reinforces our need to synthesize a coherent story. Out of kindness, memory betrays us. As memory fades, we gain freedom to rewrite history. Coherence of the narrative improves at the cost of its veracity. We distort and embellish a bit, fill in some gaps, omit some actions, and ensure the story proves our behavior conforms to our self-image. My brief encounter with the terror and absurdity of war must be a fictional account, though, as far as I know it all happened.

The polluted Yarkon, flowing lazily through north Tel Aviv, with foul-smelling rumors of war wafting in the faint breeze, provided an inhospitable setting, but Raquel and I managed to eke out a pleasant evening in a rented rowboat on that Saturday evening on June 5th, 1982. A few mosquitos attempted to sabotage our date, but otherwise, it was smooth rowing. We returned to her apartment which she shared with two roommates. Later, around 2:00 am, our sleep was interrupted by the insistent ringing of the phone. It was my roommate who'd finally managed to find Raquel's phone number after rummaging through my desk.

"The army's been stopping by here every half hour," he croaked nervously. "I'll put the guy on the line." I realized the dreaded military mobilization of reservists had been activated. The call-up procedure at the time involved sending a soldier to a dozen or so homes to notify his fellow soldiers where and when to gather. Like a sci-fi character

teleported from a tranquil island to a maelstrom of destruction, I was being plucked from Raquel's apartment and would rematerialize in a battle zone.

"You've got 20 minutes to be at the school," he gruffly instructed me, no doubt irritated I had been so difficult to track down.

I frantically got dressed and said goodbye to Raquel. Did we wonder if that might be our last moment together? Most likely the thought flitted through our minds, but there was no time for reflection. Rather than trepidation about the looming war and possible death, a myriad of irrational worries initially flooded my consciousness. What might be the consequences of arriving late to the gathering point? What if my fellow soldiers had already been picked up? Would I be considered AWOL and end up in military prison?

Sprinting back to my apartment, I also realized I'd be missing my final exams for my second year (of a seven-year program) of medical school. As it turned out, not only would most male students miss those exams, but many of my professors would also be spending exam time in Lebanon. In any case, soon enough, my anxiety about final exams was banished from my mind and replaced by a new set of worries. My roommate's frightened countenance reminded me of the gravity of the situation. He was not an Israeli citizen. In a flash of envy, I realized he'd be keeping abreast of the situation by watching TV in the comfort of our living room.

After packing quickly, I rushed over to the school, to find dozens of fatigues-clad men sprawled on the floor speculating about Arik Sharon's war plans. It was a classic military "hurry up and wait" situation. By the time the bus arrived to pick us up a couple hours later, only the surging adrenaline pumping through our arteries was keeping us awake.

The bus took us to a sizable military base, brimming over with soldiers, where we loaded equipment on a truck that would meet us on the Golan Heights (we'd travel there by bus). For some reason, I was ordered to sign my name as the responsible party for the equipment. Keeping track of all that equipment and ensuring its safe return seemed about as likely as a shelf of fine china escaping any damage from an 8.0 Richter magnitude earthquake, but I figured that was the least of my concerns. We headed up by bus to the Golan where our (APC) armored personnel carrier, known as a "Zelda," would await us. We were in artillery, but were part of a small liaison unit that would travel with the tank brigade and help coordinate artillery fire to smooth the tanks' advance. It was a new unit for all of us, and our exact role seemed to be a bit of an enigma. (In the standing army, my first role had been to help calculate the azimuth setting for the cannon, a role later replaced by computers. Later, I was an operations sergeant, a title that sounds more significant than it was in reality.) Reassuring rumors

that we were merely being sent up to the Golan in case the Syrians entered the war, were interspersed with less encouraging comments, all of which bounced off fatigued faces etched with looks of tension and bewilderment.

Tanks and other vehicles stretched unendingly along the roads of the northern border and the Golan. This massive call up dwarfed any scenes depicted in war movies I'd ever seen. The normally scenic landscape of the north had been infested with a scourge of identical-looking, dull-green military vehicles, filling the air with a stench of grease and diesel, and with the ominous rumbling of hundreds of predatory, metallic monsters, biding their time before lashing out at mortals obstructing their path. With oppressive clarity, I realized each of us was just another bullet in a submachine gun's magazine. Our individuality had been subsumed by wartime's needs. Full-scale war had not been inevitable in my view, but I was no longer an entity entitled to views. Did I want to be here? Nobody cared about my personal wishes, goals or aspirations. I was just one more infinitesimal tool to be utilized as Defense Minister Arik Sharon saw fit in implementing his grandiose, military strategy in Lebanon.

Upon arrival, we found our officer and the APC, but we also found it to be fully staffed with a crew from the standing army and fully loaded with equipment. To this day I have no explanation for this double-staffing. The absurdity of war provided cover for such inexplicable lapses in the expected, logical flow of the world. Perhaps, from the vantage point of high-ranking war planners, such redundancy made eminent sense, but as the redundant individuals, we were rendered mystified. Our lieutenant offered no clarification, but advised us to search for our truck with the equipment and meet him at a certain location, perhaps hoping he'd figure out how to fit two crews in one vehicle in the interim. By that time the rumors had turned more sinister in flavor, suggesting we were headed to attack the Syrians, not just the PLO.

Incredibly, amidst that clogged labyrinth of military vehicles, we did find our truck and woke up the exhausted driver. Unfortunately, none of us had paid attention to the route we'd traversed and we had no clue how to return to our officer and the fully-manned APC. Of all people, I, known for my utter lack of a sense of direction, was "volunteered" to direct the driver, and, not surprisingly, set us off on the wrong track from the very first fork in the mountain road. By sheer luck, we eventually did reach our arranged rendezvous point, only to be informed by one of our brigade's majors that our officer with his crew had already entered Lebanon. The major took advantage of the situation by commandeering our truck (with us in it) for his personal use. Eventually, he ordered the driver to take us into Lebanon though we had not yet even received ammunition for our M-16 rifles. The ammunition would have been supplied by our unit, but we were basically lost orphans at this point. He later left us at a base on the

border, reassuring us he'd find a solution for our predicament. When next seen, eight hours later, however, he feigned ignorance of our plight and harshly reprimanded us for sitting around and waiting. The thought of just returning to the base in the center of Israel was quickly dismissed by our group. Somehow the atmosphere of war was contagious and it seemed incomprehensible that we would just drive back and go home. Additionally, without official permission, we feared we'd be charged with desertion.

In the middle of the night, a member of a supply convoy from the brigade to which our unit belonged, peered into our truck bed and alerted us that we were crossing the border into Lebanon. We didn't really belong in a supply convoy, but at least it belonged to our brigade so we decided to join them in hopes of locating our officer. By that time, we at least had been given magazines of bullets for our guns. However, instead of transferring to an armored personnel carrier, we remained in an open truck, which had been meant only to deliver our equipment to the Golan. Our driver, offered no complaint, though he had expected to be driving back home to Tel Aviv after his delivery. Our farcical role in Operation Peace for Galilee (later some would refer to it as "Israel's Vietnam") had begun in earnest. No customs officers inspected our passports at this border crossing. No one inquired as to whether the purpose of our trip was business or pleasure. We passed within view of the hilltop Beaufort Crusader fortress, which soon would be, or perhaps had already been, captured, from the PLO by the Golani Brigade in a battle that turned out to be far more deadly than anticipated. We passed through a village where the locals threw rice and flowers at us, celebrating our arrival, or pretending to do so. Perhaps they were genuinely pleased with our invasion as it was chasing the PLO out of Yasser Arafat's "Fatahland"—a state within a state. The PLO had mistreated them and provoked their hatred. We expected support from the Christians of Lebanon. The Christian SLA—South Lebanese Army—under Saad Haddad's leadership, had been fighting for some time with Israeli assistance. But the welcome by these Shiite Muslims was unexpected indeed. Later we reached Nabatieh, a sizable town, in southern Lebanon. Many houses had been destroyed (by us? By the PLO?), but, here too, the streets were filled with townspeople waving white flags and smiling at us. Evidently, these Shiite Muslims had been no friends of the PLO. Later on, of course, the fallout of this unnecessary and absurd war would include the spawning of Hezbollah from among the Shiite population. Thus far, we hadn't participated in, or even directly, observed any fighting, but we heard the constant jarring sound of explosions in the distance. I wondered how Raquel and my family were faring, but, of course, had no way to communicate with them. Many of my friends must have been called up for duty as well. I hoped this disjointed nightmare would end and we'd all meet to share war stories soon.

As our convoy inched along the next day (none of us had the faintest idea where we were headed or why; bullets in a magazine don't need to know such matters), the deafening roar of two Syrian MiG fighter jets startled us. They seemed to be mere meters above the ground. I didn't even realize they were Syrian jets (we assumed the Israeli Air Force's overwhelming domination of the skies meant we faced no danger from the air) until an officer shouted at us to scatter and fire at the planes. Of course the jets were gone by the time we started that process. They dropped no bombs on us, but we heard the explosions from beyond a nearby hill, and felt the shockwaves transmitted by the ground to our sweaty feet. However, we then had to face the possibility the jets would return our way. The purpose of scattering our vehicles was to avoid presenting a conveniently concentrated target for the Syrian pilots. The purpose of firing at the planes was justified by the slight chance we could hit the bullseye of the pilot's head as he zipped by so close overhead, but I suspect it was more likely carried out to prevent a sense of utter helplessness, as we waited for the sky to play Russian roulette with us. Our only real hope, were they to return, was that they would again choose to obliterate some other target. I realized the greatest jeopardy in that moment could be from the "friendly fire" of panicked soldiers as we were now part of a logistics convoy, not a battle-ready elite infantry unit. I kept one eye out for a MiG and one eye out for panicking comrades-in-arms. Indeed, several shots were fired inadvertently, but, thankfully, no one was hit and the planes never returned.

We drove along narrow, winding, dirt roads up steep mountain inclines easily navigated by the other armored vehicles, but barely passable for our truck, and we were at risk of getting stuck on many occasions. Our driver, a noncombat soldier, kept his cool and sense of humor. There were four others in our unit. Meron, a disheveled, history professor in his late 30s from Hebrew University whose leftist, pro-peace commentary I agreed with, but could not articulate nearly as well as he did. He often lost me when he digressed to commentaries about the fine points of arguments postulated by politicians who had last served in the Knesset 10 years ago. I agreed that such a full-scale war was unnecessary and avoidable. Prime Minister Begin later tried to justify Israel's "war of choice," but war initiated by choice is an inane concept. Yuval, the businessman from Tel Aviv also shared his pro-peace ideas or didn't bother to counter them. His somewhat smug and haughty attitude soon evaporated as he recognized his business acumen was as useless now as Meron's history lessons. An Iranian immigrant-Yitzhak, insisted, likely correctly, that he'd been misassigned to our unit. He had planned to request a release from duty from our officer. His state of panic remained constant until our return back to Israel. His wide-eyed stare, perpetual terrorized countenance and whining voice made us all pity him, and

recognize he would be of no use in any moment of peril. He readily admitted this and informed us he had immigrated to Israel as an adult and had had only an abbreviated period of military training. He wasn't even sure he knew how to fire his M16. He was a metalworker, and expected to use these skills during military duty. He had never expected to be in combat. We tried to quiet his nerves throughout our bizarre trip in Lebanon. His eyes radiated the overwhelming fear of an innocent man being led to the gallows. The businessman, history professor and Yitzhak were all middle-aged men. Bentsi, the other guy in our unit, a reserved, sullen factory worker, with a permanent scowl etched on his face, was in his 30s. The driver and I, in our 20s, were the youngest members of this motley crew. We never saw each other again or tried to stay in contact after this shared experience. That's difficult to fathom now, considering we all could have perished together and we all instinctively grasped that our survival could rest in each other's hands. Perhaps, we all preferred to let this story fade from our memories. What if our crew had been the ones to reach our officer's APC first? Would we be on the front line now, rushing headlong toward Beirut? As none of us appeared familiar with our roles in this particular unit, more likely, we'd be returning in body bags by now, or, perhaps, jettisoned along the wayside by the exasperated officer. Southern Lebanon's scenery was achingly beautiful, more mountainous and green than most of Israel. The soil was imbued with a reddish hue as though stained by centuries of bloodshed. There were moments when we could appreciate this beauty. There were also moments of levity and schoolboy antics. We drove slowly through a grove of cherry trees allowing us to pluck the almost-ripe fruit from the trees. Food supplies were dropped off by helicopters at some resting points. No one seemed to be familiar with the acronym for our tiny unit and assumed this odd combination of letters must signify a large body of soldiers. They invariably handed over at least three times the amount of food we actually needed, thus ensuring we had a surfeit of rations. Still, a somber atmosphere prevailed as even the most mundane of activities, such as going to take a shit, could end in death if one wandered off too far, perhaps stumbling upon enemy combatants or surprising one's friends upon returning. Rumor had it that some fool had jokingly uttered an Arabic phrase for "who's there" upon his return from a taking a shit, and had been shot to death on the spot. An absurd way to die if true. Surely, that would not lend itself to creating a satisfyingly coherent war story for the soldier in question or his family: "He was struck down by his fellow soldiers after taking a shit."

Whenever we spotted an officer, we repeated our own pitiful story and inquired how to join our unit. We were usually ignored, but at times we were reassured that our officer was not far ahead of us and we might be reaching him soon. I don't recall us

asking what we would do in that case as there was no room for us in the APC. At one stopping point in the mountains, we settled down to sleep in our truck after being told the convoy would resume its progress (where to none of us knew) the next morning, but in the middle of the night, the businessman awakened us urgently. The convoy, now composed of several different military units was leaving us in the dust. As we didn't really belong to any of the units, no one had bothered to alert us. Quickly, we awakened our driver who sped along the dark, mountain road and managed to catch up with the others. The same sequence of events occurred the next night. One might wonder why we didn't ensure that one of us stayed awake during the night. Surely, there was a guard rotation, but we were not part of it. It was reckless to leave no one awake in our group, but a strange apathy had set in, and discipline during wartime was incredibly lax. I wondered how Israel ever won wars. The only explanation seemed to be that the adversary was even more disorganized. I kept track of the events in a tattered, pocket-sized notepad and the remnant of a pencil which I stored in my pocket. The history professor was amused when he caught me keeping notes in my miniscule diary of sorts. Unfortunately, it has gone missing along with many memories and the hope of a more accurate accounting of my experience.

At some point during our travels, we passed the burnt-out remnants of 20 or so Syrian tanks with burnt corpses strewn about. One corpse, on the other side of the road, appeared to be momentarily frozen in position, kneeling on the ground as though he had simply stumbled and might soon brush himself off and continue running. His right hand clasped the handle of tattered brown suitcase. Had someone arranged him in this posture as a prop, as though to mock the Syrian for running away? Or had he really attempted to escape along with a suitcase more befitting an elderly tourist.

We, ourselves, at times seemed to be on some bizarre tour in the footsteps of the IDF as we did no actual fighting, but mostly slept, ate and drove along with the convoy, while immersing ourselves in the surreal drama surrounding us. One morning we reached a stopover along a mountain road. The view of the distant valley below was mesmerizing. For a moment, it seemed we had reached a peaceful peak in Switzerland. The valley would soon dispel any such illusions. I believe it was the Beqaa Valley, site of a disastrous tank battle in which many Israeli soldiers lost their lives, likely related to an intelligence failure as they drove into a Syrian ambush. However, almost never did any of our small group know exactly where we were. The mountaintop was clearly being used as a major impromptu military headquarters. We gathered that generals and other top brass were on the mountaintop while we pulled to the side of the road a bit below the summit. Was "Raful"—Rafael Eitan, Israel's Chief of Staff, among those ensconced on top of this mountain? A long convoy of tanks soon rumbled by us on its

way to the valley. The heads poking out of the tanks' turrets were those of 19 year-old and 20 year-old kids. The history professor greeted them cheerfully, wished them luck and began lobbing our excess tomatoes to them as a pre-battle treat to munch on. We all joined in until we depleted our tomato supply, and the tank crew members good-naturedly caught the tomatoes, shouted thanks, and bit into them, continuing on their way to their own rendezvous with destiny. For a moment, though, we were all united in a sense of camaraderie and transcendent purpose evoked by mere tomato-throwing. I recall thinking there must be something about war that attracts us. How else to explain that this barbaric and futile activity has persisted despite the progress of humankind over the centuries? Perhaps it is addicting or a welcome respite from the mind-numbing drudgery of everyday life. A man could be a boring municipal bureaucrat one day and transform himself into a modern-day Achilles the next. How often are we offered the chance of becoming a hero in our humdrum daily lives? Perhaps we are just hardwired to destroy those who thwart our desires and goals. Or perhaps it exemplifies our death instinct in action.

Soon, the playful atmosphere was shattered as we heard the distant booms of the tank battle raging below us. It was too far to see clearly what was happening without binoculars which we did not have. At one point, a Syrian tank was hit (of course, in retrospect, I realize it could just as likely have been an Israeli Merkava tank). In any case, its shells began exploding in all directions, including over our heads. None landed on us fortunately. (Interestingly, I have only the vaguest of memories of this event. I would question whether it actually happened, but I base my "facts" on the account of my experience which I wrote in a letter to a friend within a week of returning home from the war, keeping a copy, precisely so that I would have an accurate record of what truly transpired, though not as accurate, perhaps, as the description in my lost pocket notebook. Perhaps it was too scary to retain intact in my memory or perhaps distortions and embellishments occur before events have been committed to memory, or perhaps even 24 hours is enough time to invent exaggerated war stories.)

I do clearly recall another event on that mountainside. A single burst of machine gun fire was directed our way. We loaded our weapons and readied ourselves for a potential assault. We knelt down on either side of our truck facing the mountain's downslope, wearing our camouflaged helmets and flak jackets known in Hebrew as a "shachpatz." My M16 magazine was locked in its chamber; the bolt had been pulled back and had then pushed the first round into the barrel. My finger rested steady on the trigger. The slope was dense with trees and bushes so we could not see who might be creeping toward us. My gaze crossed paths with a fellow soldier kneeling down behind a vehicle next to ours. In that fleeting moment, I perceived a recognition of mortality.

It seemed as though we conveyed to each other a hope that we had lived a full life because any second it might be cruelly snuffed out. We all expected an overwhelming assault by Syrian commandos who had spotted this poorly defended field headquarters. I wished we had some infantrymen in our convoy, but none of us were well trained in confronting an ambush. No doubt, higher up the mountain, the generals had surrounded themselves with capable, elite defenders but we had only ourselves to rely on. It was both one of the most frightening moments of my brief wartime experience and one of the calmest. I have marveled at my tendency to worry excessively over trivial and irrational matters while in that situation of real danger, I maintained a serene composure. Perhaps, endogenous opioids had flooded my bloodstream in response to over-the-top stress. Yitzhak, on the other hand, appeared at risk of a stroke, shaking uncontrollably and moaning softly, unable to quiet the beast of fear. No ambush occurred. Presumably, a stray PLO fighter or Syrian soldier had fired on us. Perhaps he had been startled to realize there was such a concentration of Israeli troops atop this mountain. (Of course, it might also be that one of our fellow soldiers had inadvertently fired a few shots and preferred not to confess to the mistake.)

Later, as the tank battle in the valley below raged on, the corpses of four dead Israeli soldiers arrived. They were wrapped from head to toe in blankets so their faces were not visible. I helped load them on the armored military ambulance that would transport them back to Israel. I had seen cadavers in anatomy class, but picking up these bodies, one of us holding the blanket from each end, feeling the weight of young lives extinguished, hit me like a punch to the gut. I was amazed at how heavy the corpses seemed to be. So much for the popular belief that the body's mass decreases as the "soul" departs the body. Perhaps these were the corpses of four of the guys who had gleefully caught our tomatoes a few hours previously?

Memories get even murkier; time loses its normal flow; events and places merge in odd ways. Somewhere along the way, we saw 4 PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) terrorists who had been taken prisoner. (Of course, in the Middle East, even a word conveys grave political overtones. Should these prisoners be called terrorists or fighters? Or guerrillas? Or combatants? By categorizing people as terrorists, we assign them to a subhuman category which justifies actions we would be hard-pressed to condone if perpetrated against humans. The restraints of morality wither away further as the term "terrorist" expands to include the terrorists' family, acquaintances and community.) They weren't mistreated as far as I could tell, but certainly didn't look too content. I heard stories from others claiming they'd heard of prisoners being beaten to death, but that kind of second-hand information is as reliable as a shuk vendor's claim that he's losing money on a sale. At another stopping point, a few soldiers rashly wandered

off to explore an area beyond our perimeter. They returned with a tremulous, jittery Syrian soldier, whom they were shoving and swatting with their M16 shoulder stocks. Once they got to our makeshift base, an officer took the Syrian and sat him down, tying him to a tree, but reprimanding others with “Haven’t you ever seen a boy before?” Indeed, he appeared to be a young, terrified kid, probably wondering if he’d ever see his friends and family again. The officer made sure to provide him with food. I admired that officer and recognized that in contrast to this soldier’s treatment, if any of us were captured by the Syrians, we’d surely be tortured and likely killed. The PLO had aimed its Katyusha rockets specifically at civilian sites in northern Israel, which is what provided the pretext for this whole war, along with an assassination attempt against Israel’s ambassador to the United Kingdom-Shlomo Argov. Clearly, our adversaries were no saints. The evils of extremist ideology, ultranationalism and fanaticism were on full display on all sides.

One night, as part of a smaller convoy we drove through an eerily silent town in western Lebanon. There were no lights on in the houses; no one peered out the windows. Had they fled? We drove along the street, so slowly it seemed there was plenty of time for a sniper to pick us off. Were they lying in wait for us further down the street? At that moment, I wished we were in our intended armored personnel carrier, rather than sitting in a truck bed covered with canvas.

We were among a rather large concentration of vehicles in crater-like valley. Waiting for Godot or our next meal or the next inexplicable decision to proceed elsewhere to no apparent purpose. Suddenly, the warning rang out. A Syrian MiG was flying our way. We must prepare to be bombed. Drivers dispersed the vehicles and the men scattered themselves. We lay down, submachine guns pointed heavenward, and waited. It’s difficult to explain the tension and fear that accompanied that wait. After all, nothing was actually happening. We were just lying on our backs on a sunny day surrounded by green Lebanese hillsides. The anticipation of looming danger, the realization that one would survive only if the pilot chose to release his bomb elsewhere fed a sense of pure helplessness. Finally, we witnessed a dogfight above us culminating in a puff of smoke. Israeli fighter jets had downed the Syrian MiG before it ever reached us. Once again, we were grateful that the IAF dominated the skies. What must it have been like for the Syrian soldiers facing the onslaught of Israeli bombers constantly?

One day, a week after entering Lebanon, we finally obtained permission from a high-ranking officer in our brigade to head back to Israel as we could not locate or join our own officer. We still had to wait until a few supply trucks were ready to return so that we wouldn’t drive home alone in our own truck. I’m unsure how we found our way back to Metulla. As far as I can recall (for what that’s worth) we had no map

or communication radio. We drove through some small villages, ill-prepared for any confrontation as, once again, there were no infantry troops in our midst, but mostly logistics troops with limited combat training. As we approached the Israeli border, we encountered more and more Israeli troops. Yitzhak the metalworker sat glued to his rifle, in his state of nearly incessant panic, but each time we passed Israeli troops, he became excited and shouted encouragement to those headed north deeper into Lebanon. When we finally crossed the border into Israel, we witnessed Yitzhak's abrupt metamorphosis from tremulous rabbit to dancing bear. He sang out praises to God. It didn't seem to cross his mind to question why this God of his put him through this week of gratuitous torture; rather, he only praised Him for his release. His joy was contagious as he finally found a way to help the rest of us by bringing smiles to our faces. I called Raquel and my parents. In retrospect, probably, the ringing phone at that hour (it was very late at night by then) caused their anxiety to spike. In my relief and happiness about being back, I recited with incongruous lightheartedness some of our adventures as though I had returned from some sort of warped summer travel camp.

On our drive back through Israel to our base, we were welcomed as though we were heroes by civilians, who brought us food wherever we stopped and showered us with unearned praises. I felt somewhat of a fraud. True, we had survived our brief sojourn in hell and had reemerged on earth to tell the tale. Perhaps that made us worthy of a few cookies. But what victory had we achieved? I hadn't even fired my weapon during this war. I did, in fact, feel some odd sense of pride and relief that I had gotten through the war without firing a single shot or killing another human being. Our unit had survived, but we had accomplished nothing, had contributed nothing. We were merely unspent bullets in our swashbuckling master's magazine. Our driver, who should have never crossed into Lebanon with his truck, had been the busiest amongst us, maintaining his vehicle, driving along harrowing mountainside paths, making sure we didn't run out of fuel. Operation Peace for Galilee would continue a while longer without us. Though it put a stop to the Katyusha fire at the time, it ultimately pushed peace further away. Fighting for peace, after all, is like fucking for virginity. It had only been a week, but how does one create a coherent narrative out of senseless, surrealistic, absurd chaos? Who would care to hear such a story? A wartime story with no tragedy or heroism, no clear conclusion or message to future generations. Then again, perhaps, not so different from other war stories after all. Is more evidence needed to prove the folly of war?

On the way home, the thought of going directly to purchase a ticket for a flight out of this Middle East chaos surged through my mind more than once. I was flooded with an overpowering resolve never to be a bullet in a magazine on the hips of another megalomaniac, psychopathic, militaristic, right-wing, politician. (Like beating a

dead horse, I've overused this metaphor of the bullet in a magazine, but having seared itself in my consciousness, it seems to demand repetition like a rogue mantra. In Hebrew, "stam ode kadur bemachsanit.") It didn't take long for more mundane worries to overtake me such as wondering how I would concentrate on the final exams now that I was back. Anyway, perhaps running away wasn't the answer. There were plenty of people who agreed that this war could have been avoided. In fact, I don't recall anyone defending it too vehemently. And where is it truly safe? How does one escape the world's dangers? I happened to come across a news article at the time about a family from Quebec. They had become convinced that, in the event of a nuclear war, missiles fired over the North Pole would be likely to strike Quebec, deliberately or inadvertently. They opted to drop out of society, and move to tranquil isolated island far from any potential nuclear war. They had moved to Falkland Islands. This was also the time of the war between England and Argentina over the Falkland Islands aka Las Malvinas. Perhaps any attempt to escape the inhumanity of our species is futile. Nonetheless, my experience in Lebanon did prove to be a primary catalyst driving me to leave Israel several years later.

Tragic news soon followed. My best friend, Richard, had been killed in the Beqaa Valley leaving his pregnant wife a widow. His brigade had rushed north and been ambushed by the Syrians. As it turned out, my brother-in-law's brigade commander had refused that order, demanding his troops be properly equipped, which resulted in a one-day delay, and the sparing of his men's lives. Richard's officer had followed orders. Richard had brought a copy of his brother's wedding invitation, and requested a discharge home so he could attend the wedding celebration later that week. The military withheld the news of Richard's death until the day after his brother's wedding. Apparently, someone took it upon himself or herself to ensure that joy would take precedence over tragedy for that day. Leslie, his wife, was later taken on a trip to the site of this battle along with other bereaved family members. She was informed that a Syrian shell had hit his tank and the soldiers had jumped out only to be mowed down by the Syrian fire. She noticed a flower growing in the spot he had reportedly been struck down. Perhaps, Richard, always the optimistic, lover of life, had left a sign of revival though his body had no life in it. The survivors returned with life in their bodies, but left a wounded part of their souls in the soil of Lebanon. I wondered if one of the corpses I'd helped load onto the military ambulance could have been Richard's. Highly unlikely, especially as I'm not even sure what battle I had witnessed, but even the theoretical possibility remains disconcerting to say the least.

My anger after learning of Richard's death, attending his funeral, shoveling some dirt onto his pine box coffin exploded. I attended an anti-war rally at Kikar Malchei

Israel, in the center of Tel Aviv (later renamed Rabin Square as it was the site of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination after he spoke at a peace rally 13 years later). As the war was still raging and soldiers were still in harm's way, the idea of a protest rally was considered unacceptable by most. (That would change by early July when 100,000 Peace Now demonstrators gathered to protest the war in Lebanon.) But I was furious and joined what seemed like mostly Arab and communist demonstrators. If someone had approached me to request my assistance with a plot to assassinate Arik Sharon, that evening, how would I have replied? I considered him a coldhearted murderer. Sharon was forced to resign as Defense Minister in 1983 after the Israeli government's own Kahan commission determined he bore responsibility for not taking steps to prevent the massacre of Palestinian civilians by Israel's ally, the Lebanese Christian Phalangist militia in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut. Despite that, he would reemerge to become Prime Minister twenty years later.

I wasn't quite done with Lebanon. Like all medical students at the time, I was later sent for training as a medic during my reserve duty. The following year, my month-long reserve duty involved serving as a "doctor's assistant," though there was no doctor, at an outpost in Lebanon. We were only 30-40 men in this hole in the ground on a hilltop. I didn't belong to the unit which was an elite infantry force, but was attached to it as a medic. The local population was far more hostile by then. They no longer threw rice or flowers. Instead they stared at us with poker faces and set roadside explosive devices. I feared I'd need to deal with a mass casualty incident for which I felt ill-prepared. Fortunately, it never happened. My most serious challenge turned out to be a bored soldier playing with matches who dropped a lit match into his eye. Being a medical student, I imagined the worst-case scenarios and discussed an airlift rescue with the officer. He had more sense than me and declined my suggestion. The trip to the outpost and back was harrowing as we knew there was risk of ambush when outside our outpost. I survived this experience too, without serious incident.

My nasty, brutish and short war story is an unremarkable one. You, the reader, as well as I, the writer, would be naïve to believe that this is a factual account, and, yet, every word is true.

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