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Inshallah

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INSHALLAH

Mary Kay Harrington

The images of Lebanon's bombing last summer mirror so many other cities in the world. We see the results of war and hate: gnarled cars and buildings, the dead wrapped in rugs, the wounded screaming. Devastation, rubble, screams of the left behind, the confused, the angry. I imagined the Lebanese as they dug out from the rubble saying, almost as an incantation, "Inshallah, we will rebuild. Inshallah, we will triumph. Inshallah."

In Lebanon (as in much of the Arab world), the word, "Inshallah," is embedded in many sentences: "God-willing" connotes a fatalistic view of the world, but it's also a shrug of resignation and acceptance—and hope. With the terrible events occurring in the Arab world, "Inshallah," as no other word, seems even more poignant and apt at the present moment.

Two years ago, I was in Beirut at the behest of the U.S. State Department's Educational and Cultural Affairs Office. I arrived three weeks after the former Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated in downtown Beirut. I watched the demonstrations of a million strong, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops and undercover police from Lebanon who Lebanese believed were implicated in the assassination, and I went to the mosque that Hariri built to pay my respects at the place of his internment. The energy at that time stirred all of Lebanon, all people, all religions. My Lebanese friends felt anxiety—and tremendous hope. From this vantage point, two years later, their optimism seemed naïve and even sad.

Although I was in Lebanon for a short time, teaching a series of workshops at Lebanese American University for university lecturers who teach English throughout Beirut, the experiences from those days hold me. The larger war that still threatens to engulf Lebanon, Syria, Iran and all of the Middle East sickens me. At times I wonder if peace is

even a possibility. My small hope is that the personal connections and small kindnesses between humans will finally triumph over the grievances and hate, the bombs and guns. Inshallah.

As an American in Lebanon during a time of crisis, full of strikes and demonstrations, I was welcomed warmly by Muslims and Christians alike. The fifteen-year civil war, ending in 1990, seems distant to us in the U.S.—but when my Muslim and Christian friends drove me around Beirut, both groups pointed out to me the major thoroughfare in downtown Beirut that they called The Green Line, separating the opposing sectors where snipers from both sides did their deadly work, certain that God blessed their righteousness: my friends have not forgotten. I have a number of strong memories from my time there. Travel provides opportunities for the best ambassadorial work, unpaid and genuine.

Most arrangements were made for me by the teachers who participated in the workshops: a walking tour of Roman Beirut with one of my colleagues, an exploration of the ancient city of Sidon—near Israel's border—with a new friend and her husband, an afternoon meal with Lebanese English teachers in Biblos, nestled among Phoenician ruins north of Beirut. Biblos was shelled last summer; the Bay is now filled with an oil slick, bridges and roads to both Biblos and Sidon are gone. My Lebanese friends sent me pictures of these once beautiful places. I did not see them on the evening news.

I felt safe in downtown Beirut. On my second night in the city, on my way to a friend's for dinner, I turned right outside the hotel door, instead of left. I wandered, lost, for an hour. The few street signs are in French, high up on the sides of buildings; no one uses them. I asked for help at a small hotel and was told to cross two main streets straight on and turn left at the giant watch outside of the jewelry store and then right at the rug shop. Left and right are meaningless words when we're practicing another language, and my guide confused the words, "left" and "right." Still, I felt safe walking and asking strangers for help that night: "Can you tell me which direction the Meredian Hotel Commodore is, please?" Needless to say, my Muslim hosts were terrified when I finally found their house, a few blocks to the left of my hotel, not far from Mr. Ali's rug shop, from whom I eventually bought rugs.

On my one day off, a Sunday, friends arranged for a taxi to take me the 85 kilometers east over the mountains into the Bekaa Valley to the Roman ruins of Baalbeck, which was shelled last summer. Now, solely in the power of Hezbollah, those narratives from Baalbeck are the ones I repeat.

My taxi driver, Mohammed III (the third of my friends named "Mohammed"), spoke some English as compared to my Lebanese phrases, so we chatted a bit, and he improved as he practiced. The journey in his late-model yellow Mercedes took about 90 minutes—dirty snow lay on the sides of the road that chilly, almost-spring day.

The Lebanese drive fast and rather dangerously, weaving in and out of lanes, sometimes three cars abreast on two lanes. Because of the unrest, the traffic was light, except for a number of flatbed trucks loaded with Syrian troops who were heading back to their country. There I was, a woman tourist slumped in the backseat of the car, my driver and I with our eyes fixed ahead, passing truck after truck of Syrian soldiers. I took deep breaths.

We drove through small, poor towns with beautiful names; I asked Mohammed to pronounce them for me: Falougha, Dahr El Daidar, Ablah, Chtoura. At Chtoura, he pointed east and said with a chuckle, "This way Damascus," and then pointing north, "This way Baalbeck. Which you want to go?" As we entered the long, narrow, fertile valley, cosmopolitan Beirut seemed far away. Along the highway were banners with pictures of Sheik Nasrallah and flags of Hezbollah, as well as the Cedar of Lebanon flag. Nasrallah, a hero to many Lebanese, joined the Shiite militia, Amal, in the Bekaa valley in the late 1970s after escaping from Saddam Hussein's secret police in Iraq.

We were stopped repeatedly, the military checkpoints—both Lebanese and Syrian—sprinkled liberally along the highway. The soldiers peered into our car, at Mohammed, then at me, their guns ready. Mohammed would slow down, act cool, almost stopping as he waved, nodded, then drove on. I held my breath each time. Finally, I asked him why these posts were positioned in the middle of the roadway. "Are they to intimidate, to scare people? Are they looking for something?" I asked. His face clouded, and, when he tried to explain and couldn't, I realized that these checkpoints had been along the highway for years. No one questioned them. A given—like Friday night bumper-to-bumper traffic in L.A.

Mohammed shrugged.

We reached Baalbeck, named "The City of the Sun" by the Romans and situated on major historic trade routes between north and south, and east and west. The Roman ruins in the city center rival any I've seen. In 1922, French scholars began a restoration project there.

Mohammed took me to the gate of the ruins. I heard the microphones from the Mosque calling the devout to prayer. He left, telling me he was going to the Mosque. I was alone; no other tourists around. An old man with a cane came up to me, offering to be my guide for \$17. His English was perfect, and he was a fine tour guide. We talked and walked, as he pointed out the massive, well-preserved temples of Jupiter, Bacchus, Venus, Mercury, the sacrificial altars and the magnificent columns.

My guide showed me the best vantage points for taking photographs; he asked about my home in California, pleased to know that our climate and Beirut's was similar. I told him about a small housing development in my hometown, named "Little Beirut" because of the white architecture and the hillside position. He tripped on a stone, dug it up

with his cane, and handed it to me. “A souvenir from Baalbak,” he offered. I declined. To him, it was just another old stone, the place full of them. My Western conscience told me not to take any artifact, even a stone. Did I offend, I wonder?

Although I was fascinated by the ruins, a part of me wondered where Mohammad was and what I would do if I could not find his car where we had left it. My guide and I began to walk back to the gate. He waved his arms to the silent, holy place, saying, “First the Romans, then many others, the Ottomans, the French. Now the Syrians.” His shrug told me that he had the long view of history—a necessary attitude—that he may live in this place a while longer, Inshallah, until another victor.

We said our farewells and I walked toward the parking lot, happy to see the Mercedes. Some store keepers sat in front of their shop nearby in those ubiquitous white plastic chairs. They chatted with me about California in quite good English, gave me some lemonade, and assured me that Mohammed was praying still at the Mosque. At last, Mohammed arrived, apologizing profusely for keeping me waiting, “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

I told Mohammed that I would like to visit my new friends’ shops. He nodded and walked with me. I felt protected. We followed the men into their cramped, tourist-empty shop, filled with rugs, jewelry, pottery from the ruins—ostensibly authentic. The shopkeepers and I, by that time, knew each other’s brief histories, and they hospitably offered us small cups of Turkish coffee, carefully made on the small wood stove in the middle of the shop. It tasted delicious, sweet and strong on that cold afternoon, smelling of cardamom and cinnamon and mystery. I was content. We stood with them, drinking coffee and talking for a while, and then, of course, I bought some trinkets from them. They were delighted since I’m sure that my purchase was the only one of the day.

Mohammed and I chatted on the way back to Beirut, about Turkish coffee and bad, weak American coffee (mine, I confessed, oversweet and creamed), about our children and our families. He received a cell phone call inviting him to his sisters’ house for dinner in Southern Beirut—a typical family get together throughout most of the world. I thought of his family as I watched the bombing of Southern Beirut last summer.

When we reached Beirut in late afternoon, he double-parked on a busy street outside of a shop and disappeared—for a very long time. I thought that he was buying food to take to his sister’s. After about twenty minutes he appeared at my car window. With both hands, he offered me a kilo of Turkish coffee, still warm from the grinding, the scent of its freshly ground beans curling up to me. He bowed and said, “When you get back to California, Inshallah, drink this Turkish coffee, think of Lebanon—and think of me.”

And I do. ☺