

Leaving Beirut

Roger Waters

So we left Beirut Willa and I
He headed East to Baghdad and the rest of it
I set out North
I walked the five or six miles to the last of the street lamps
And hunkered in the curb side dusk
Holding out my thumb
In no great hope at the ramshackle procession of home bound traffic
Success!
An ancient Mercedes 'dolmus '
The ubiquitous, Arab, shared taxi drew up
I turned out my pockets and shrugged at the driver
" J'ai pas de l'argent "
" Venez! " A soft voice from the back seat
The driver lent wearily across and pushed open the back door
I stooped to look inside at the two men there
One besuited, bespectacled, moustached, irritated, distant, late
The other, the one who had spoken,
Frail, fifty five-ish, bald, sallow, in a short sleeved pale blue cotton shirt
With one biro in the breast pocket
A clerk maybe, slightly sunken in the seat
"Venez!" He said again, and smiled
"Mais j'ai pas de l'argent"
"Oui, Oui, d'accord, Venez!" Are these the people that we should bomb
Are we so sure they mean us harm
Is this our pleasure, punishment or crime
Is this a mountain that we really want to climb
The road is hard, hard and long
Put down that two by four
This man would never turn you from his door
Oh George! Oh George!
That Texas education must have fucked you up when you were very small
He beckoned with a small arthritic
motion of his hand
Fingers together like a child waving goodbye
The driver put my old Hofner guitar in the boot with my rucksack
And off we went
" Vous etes Francais, monsieur? "
" Non, Anglais "
" Ah! Anglais "
" Est-ce que vous parlais Anglais, Monsieur? "

"Non, je regrette"

And so on

In small talk between strangers, his French alien but correct

Mine halting but eager to please

A lift, after all, is a lift

Late moustache left us brusquely

And some miles later the dolmus slowed at a crossroads lit by a single lightbulb

Swung through a U-turn and stopped in a cloud of dust

I opened the door and got out

But my benefactor made no move to follow

The driver dumped my guitar and rucksack at my feet

And waving away my thanks returned to the boot

Only to reappear with a pair of alloy crutches

Which he leaned against the rear wing of the Mercedes.

He reached into the car and lifted my companion out

Only one leg, the second trouser leg neatly pinned beneath a vacant hip

"Monsieur, si vous voulez, ca sera un honneur pour nous

Si vous venez avec moi a la maison pour manger avec ma femme "When I was 17 my mother, bless her heart,

fulfilled my summer dream

She handed me the keys to the car

We motored down to Paris, fuelled with Dexedrine and booze

Got bust in Antibes by the cops

And fleeced in Naples by the wops

But everyone was kind to us, we were the English dudes

Our dads had helped them win the war

When we all knew what we were fighting for

But now an Englishman abroad is just a US stooge

The bulldog is a poodle snapping round the scoundrel's last refuge"Ma femme", thank God! Monopod but not

queer

The taxi drove off leaving us in the dim light of the swinging bulb

No building in sight

What the hell

"Merci monsieur"

"Bon, Venez!"

His faced creased in pleasure, he set off in front of me

Swinging his leg between the crutches with agonising care

Up the dusty side road into the darkness

After half an hour we'd gone maybe half a mile

When on the right I made out the low profile of a building

He called out in Arabic to announce our arrival

And after some scuffling inside a lamp was lit

And the changing angle of light in the wide crack under the door

Signalled the approach of someone within

The door creaked open and there, holding a biblical looking oil lamp

Stood a squat, moustached woman, stooped smiling up at us

She stood aside to let us in and as she turned
I saw the reason for her stoop
She carried on her back a shocking hump
I nodded and smiled back at her in greeting, fighting for control
The gentleness between the one-legged man and his monstrous wife
Almost too much for me
Is gentleness too much for us
Should gentleness be filed along with empathy
We feel for someone else's child
Every time a smart bomb does its sums and gets it wrong
Someone else's child dies and equities in defence rise
America, America, please hear us when we call
You got hip-hop, be-bop, hustle and bustle
You got Atticus Finch
You got Jane Russell
You got freedom of speech
You got great beaches, wildernesses and malls
Don't let the might, the Christian right, fuck it all up
For you and the rest of the world
They talked excitedly
She went to take his crutches in routine of care
He chiding, gestured
We have a guest
She embarrassed by her faux pas
Took my things and laid them gently in the corner
"Du the?"

We sat on meagre cushions in one corner of the single room
The floor was earth packed hard and by one wall a raised platform
Some six foot by four covered by a simple sheet, the bed
The hunchback busied herself with small copper pots over an open hearth
And brought us tea, hot and sweet
And so to dinner
Flat, unleavened bread, + thin
Cooked in an iron skillet over the open hearth
Then folded and dipped into the soft insides of female sea urchins
My hostess did not eat, I ate her dinner
She would hear of nothing else, I was their guest
And then she retired behind a curtain
And left the men to sit drinking thimbles full of Arak
Carefully poured from a small bottle with a faded label
Soon she reappeared, radiant
Carrying in her arms their pride and joy, their child.
I'd never seen a squint like that

So severe that as one eye looked out the other disappeared behind its nose
Not in my name, Tony, you great war
leader you

Terror is still terror, whosoever gets to frame the rules
History's not written by the vanquished or the damned

Now we are Genghis Khan, Lucretia Borghia, Son of Sam
In 1961 they took this child into their home
I wonder what became of them
In the cauldron that was Lebanon
If I could find them now, could I make amends?
How does the story end? And so to bed, me that is, not them
Of course they slept on the floor behind a curtain
Whilst I lay awake all night on their earthen bed
Then came the dawn and then their quiet stirrings
Careful not to wake the guest
I yawned in great pretence
And took the proffered bowl of water heated up and washed
And sipped my coffee in its tiny cup
And then with much "merci-ing" and bowing and shaking of hands
We left the woman to her chores
And we men made our way back to the crossroads
The painful slowness of our progress accentuated by the brilliant morning light
The dolmus duly reappeared
My host gave me one crutch and leaning on the other
Shook my hand and smiled
"Merci, monsieur," I said
" De rien "
" And merci a votre femme, elle est tres gentille "
Giving up his other crutch
He allowed himself to be folded into the back seat again
"Bon voyage, monsieur," he said
And half bowed as the taxi headed south towards the city
I turned North, my guitar over my shoulder
And the first hot gust of wind
Quickly dried the salt tears from my young cheeks.

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