



AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Project

Lien Arits

Home is where I planted my Akidene

About love, migration and freedom of movement

Lien Arits

Me: "Boobs, I imagine you're too busy packing or coping now to have a call. So I just want to tell you that I am so happy this day has come that you can go get 'em. Your freedom and human right to be a citizen.

*At what time is your flight tomorrow?
Also, more important, whenever I can help you with anything remotely, just give me a call. Promise?*

I love you!"

-Ziyad: "Hey love, thank you. I don't think I want to sleep, my flight is early morning but I also don't see the benefit of talking about it at this point as I don't want to delve into how I'm feeling maybe this is why we all forget momentarily how things feel after they're done - we actively avoid acknowledging them..

I met Boobs, my nickname for Ziyad[1], during my studies in Human Rights and Democratisation in the Arab World, at the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth.

[1] Ziad is a pseudonym used to protect the individual's identity for safety reasons.

During a school trip to Chouf, a mountainous area south-east of Beirut, where the largest forest of the magic Cedars of Lebanon provides for clean air above the clouds, Ziyad gave me their shirt when they noticed me shivering from the cold. We had talked a couple of seconds earlier. And now they gave me their shirt? I was surprised by their sweetness. Without a word, I accepted the checked shirt, brown and gray, smelling like a sporty, gender neutral, deodorant. I felt seen by the gesture.

The smell of the pine leaves reminded me of those rituals the priest used to do with incense, when my parents still used to take me to church. I felt small, in that new environment. Surrounded by twenty-some classmates from South Africa to the USA, from Gaza to Barcelona, all strangers, shyly searching for a connection, an invite to a small talk. Above the clouds, in that forest, Ziyad and I planted a seed that would soon develop into a friendship across borders.

I moved to Beirut in the summer of 2021, in between two suffocating covid-pandemic lockdowns, bored of friends and family in my little established life, house and career on track. I left on my way to chase my dream of studying in 'the Middle-East', trying to grasp what makes Arabs flee to Europe. I know they flee from war, political conflict or economic hardship, of course. But, why Europe, full of racism? Is it the proximity, or the fact that Europe generally speaking has higher-income economies? And, how severe should a livelihood become for one to leave home in ways entailing the risk of dying on the way, knowing that the destination country will not welcome you as a child who falls in the arms of their parents after being bullied at school. Rather the opposite. Why do you try to make it to a destination community that will bully you?

Many evenings we spent discussing this dilemma among friends, while sipping Almaza, the Lebanese pils beer, and having late night kaak u jibneh, a typical Lebanese type of bread with melted cheese inside, delivered to Ziyad's door. (It works for breakfast, or as a late night snack.)

Ziyad doesn't have the identification papers that allow you to enter Europe. Their mother is Lebanese, their father is Armenian-Syrian. They don't have Lebanese citizenship, as Lebanese mothers may not pass their nationality on to their children, according to Lebanese nationality law[2]. Ziyad's father missed his citizenship documents to transfer them to his children, for which Ziyad did not have any citizen's rights in Lebanon and is classified as 'stateless'. Because of this law, an estimated amount of 27.000 people are stateless, although they were born in Lebanon.

Today, July 6 2024, he is on his way to get Armenian citizenship. After 27 years of waiting, to avoid military service in Armenia, he took his first plane trip with a laissez-passer, a document for stateless people to travel across internal and external borders. He is on his way to finally see his human right to citizenship and freedom of movement realized. Once he will have the Armenian passport, we will discuss again this dilemma of staying or leaving Lebanon.

Like we do over and over again. Like I also do with my other friends from Lebanon, such as Mariya.

* * *

Me: "Kifik?"

*- Mariya: Habibi ana mnih
I miss you. How's everything? And Joe is he better?*

"All is good. In my free time now I'm working on a project together with fellow alumni of the master's in Lebanon, on climate justice. It keeps me going and feeling useful in this fuckedup world. I have to admit I'm having a hard time allowing myself 'to enjoy life in a Western way, ya3ne by going out for drinks, party, and other privileged things."

[2] <https://sirenassociates.com/country/lebanon/statelessness-a-human-rights-not-political-issue-in-lebanon/>

-Wow the project sounds interesting! any help needed in data analytics lmk. I can understand your standpoint, but don't punish yourself, you are here in this western world for a reason. Advocate for what you believe in but also be gentle with yourself, and give yourself a hug everyday.

It is always good to check in with Mariya. She is the type of friend that fills me with energy and confidence, she feels me from a distance, although we don't hear each other often. She says that is because my star sign is Gemini, and all important people in her life are Gemini, like her sister and her mother. I think it is because we share a sensitivity towards injustice.

Mariya moved to Portugal nine months after we had met, in November 2021, in Akkar, the rough utmost northern part of Lebanon, connecting the country with its neighbor Syria, whose remote villages pass on a smell of bonfires to their visitors who venture into the red zone border-area[3] to absorb the overwhelming autumn colors. She sat next to me on the bus that drove us from Dawra, Beirut to Akkar, a six hour drive. Mariya and I bonded over fresh dates that she brought and generously shared with me, while we discovered our common passion for studying and reflection. That passion for knowledge drove her to migrate to Lisbon for a Master's in Data driven Marketing Intelligence. (Isn't that funny? I moved to her home to find more knowledge. She would go look for more knowledge in Europe). But fairly, it was also the urge to build stability in life that pushed her away from Lebanon, to Portugal.

I just called Mariya, a video call.

"Are you coming?" she asked me, to Lebanon she meant. She knew we had our appointment at the local migration office yesterday. By asking that question, she was actually, indirectly, asking "did he get his papers"?

[3] According to the Belgian Foreign Affairs Office, the border area between Lebanon and Syria should be avoided under all circumstances.

“Yes. He did! Our family reunion application has been accepted.”

Tears started rolling down her cheeks when I told her he is safe and freed from worries about his residence permit for the coming five years. He is free to move again, across borders. Meanwhile, my tear-stained face was being passed around among Mariya’s extended family, gathered in the kitchen of her mother’s house in Ghazir, half an hour drive from Beirut, almost 400 meters above sea-level. A classic Sunday afternoon ritual among Lebanese Christians.

“So you can come to Lebanon this summer?”, she asked once again, this time more convincing.

Should we? I really want to. But what with the war...

She assured me “the war (between Hezbollah and the IDF) will not happen in summer, Israel cannot afford two fronts and neither can the US, especially not before their elections.

Heartwarmed by her empathy, I told Mariya I felt like calling her rather than someone from my family or Belgian friends. We had informed several among them over a Whatsapp message: ‘Joe got his papers!’, which provoked loads of emojis associated with happiness. But, you likely reply with tears - happy tears - if you have been through the process yourself. The process of proving - that you are a couple, waiting - for an email with a file number, doubting - if you’ve given enough details about your intimate relationship, and hoping - for the best, or just for an honest officer at the foreigners affairs desk who will grant you the right to be with your family. In Belgium, 32,710 third-country nationals received a residence permit for family reasons for the first time in 2021, the year Joe and I met[4]. 32,710 times tears rolling down the cheeks of at least two people, be it happy tears or tears of stress relief. Little did we know back then.

[4] https://www.myria.be/files/Cijfers_Recht_op_een_gezinsleven_2023.pdf

Ziyad and Mariya are only two of the majority of young people in Lebanon trying to leave the country, resulting in a brain drain. As the Arab Youth Survey showed, more than 3 out of 4 of the youth between 18 and 24 wanted to emigrate[5]. And things in Lebanon only got worse since then. According to the Beirut-based Information International research center the number of Lebanese emigrants soared from 17,721 in 2020 to 79,134 in 2021, an increase of 450%.[6]

They take planes with their brains. They leave their hearts behind, in between the tabbouleh cut with devotion by their mothers, and the Friday night shawarma, from now on only enjoyed by those friends who remain behind.

* * *

Joe[7]: "My mom will plant your akidene[8] tree in front of the house today ☺ 3

- Me: heyyyyyy ☺

*It's so nice that you have a tree that you planted in Lebanon
It means so much to me*

*- To me too. 3njad
It's beautiful*

Joe, my love and partner, was not one of those who are wanting or trying to leave when I met him. No single brain cell in his head considered moving abroad. And he was not alone.

[5] <https://beirutpoliticalreview.org/publications/f/youth-unemployment-and-migration-in-lebanon>

[6] <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/stricken-lebanon-endures-3rd-exodus-as-its-people-flee-disaster/>

[7] Joe is a pseudonym used to protect the individual's identity for safety reasons.

[8] Akidene is the Arabic name for a loquat tree. It gives my favorite fruits to be found in Lebanon.

There are other young people determined to stay. Almost one out of four among those between 18 and 24 years old. Although that sounds like a sad minority, many among them are determined to make Lebanon a better place. They start their own business, buy a piece of land to grow their own crops, or stick to the family tradition of cultivating olive trees. Although even the latter is becoming very hard, due to the 'Israeli Defense Force' who send white phosphorus, an incendiary weapon, across the border to the South of Lebanon, destroying not only the trees but also causing soil infertility for decades. They make that simple life just impossible. I hate them.

Thoughts and conversations on the role of the occupier will return in this book, when I reflect on the situation in which Lebanon finds itself today and since the civil war from 1975 and 1990, in which Joe's father had to defend himself against Syrian troops trying to conquer Zahle, Joe's hometown. The same civil war that involved Palestinians from Lebanon. It might sound complicated if you have no prior knowledge about the 'Middle-East'. I will try my best to give you new insights, based on my little knowledge and experience.

But first back to when I met Joe, my love and partner. He had a stubborn wish to stay, which made me fall in love. He made me see the beauty of life in Lebanon. On our first date, I felt butterflies in my stomach, not only for him but also for the country he called 'home'.

It was Joe's long black hair and dark eyes, lit by the stage light of the concert in Ballroom Blitz, near the shore of Beirut port, that caught my attention. (And his cute dance moves, *akid*[9].) He noticed me, but was too shy to close the gap between us on the dance floor. I did not give up. At the end of the evening, after a lot of encouragement from his friends, he asked me for my name and phone number. That is where our love story started.

[9] Akid is Arabic for 'of course'.

Little did Joe and I know that night about our future together, while dancing to the Arab rap texts of The Synaptik (السينابتيك) - that I couldn't get a word of. I was dancing for the first time again since 2020, when covid-measures in Belgium prevented people from sweating on dancefloors. I even went back to the farm where my parents raised me, in a remote area in the North-East of the Limburg province. Joe was dancing for the first time since 2020 too. His hometown friends, all from the Beqaa valley, were celebrating that Joe had reached the liberating feeling he felt that night. He had overcome more challenging obstacles than some curfews and public gathering restrictions. In Lebanon covid was a minor issue in the midst of a popular uprising (thawra[10]) and a financial crisis ignited by a corrupt government.

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[10] The civil protests, popularly known as 'thawra', had started in Lebanon on October 17th 2019.

This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.

The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The previous pages feature one selected example of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.



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