

Acts of Faith

A “Cry Freedom” Story

Clive Gilson



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For Bec & Emmie

It was only the thought that I had to say my goodbyes to the students at the Middle East University in London that got me out of bed that morning. Every single sinew in my body ached and my head was a mess of misfiring synaptic squibs. It hurt just to roll over and squint at the alarm clock. My stomach complained violently about the abuse of the previous night, the moment I struggled into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Starting the morning with a raging thirst but being unable to keep anything down is hardly a recipe conducive to fond farewells. The light in the bathroom spun stars across my eyes as I stood under the shower and let hot water cascade off my head and shoulders for a full twenty minutes.

One way or another I managed to dress. I even managed a mug of coffee and, keeping a nervous inner watch on the rumblings down below, I decided that I needed some fresh air. The morning was bright and blue, and there was already a haze building on the narrow city horizon at the end of the street. I needed to feel the muggy freshness of the city morning on my skin, before I could contemplate getting into another stuffy car for the trip to the university. It suddenly became vividly and urgently clear to me that absolutely nothing else would do. I needed a few minutes out of doors, even though the streets were already filling with the atmospheric fug of mechanised urban life and that almost feral nervousness that accompanies armed occupation.

I left the flat, while my erstwhile expatriate friend, Usman, finished his breakfast of hot buttered toast and thick, sweet coffee. My drunken companion of the night before had woken up with a slight fuzziness of the head but with no other visible signs of the harm that we had done to ourselves, at least none that he would admit to. I was too confused by the basic requirements of breathing and walking to notice that Usman was possibly being too damned bright and breezy. The compelling urge to taste fresh air meant that I walked down to the front door some fifteen minutes before our car was due to pick us up.

Beyond the heavy wooden portcullis that locked us up safely in the dead hours of the night there was a short series of portico steps

leading down to the open pavement. I took a fresh refill of hot coffee with me and under an all too rare burning London sky in July I sat down on the second step. I nursed my drink in both hands for some minutes, with my sunglasses pressed tightly against the bridge of my nose, and tried to focus on the coming day. From where I was sitting I could just make out one of the local police check-points towards the far end of the street, manned as usual by two armed officers. They were too far away to make out faces, but they looked relaxed as they both smoked, leaning against a wall of sandbags while they watched the rush hour traffic on the Warwick Road. My home for the best part of this last year had been in Earls Court.

Cars and motorbikes nosed their way towards the main arterial avenues of the capital just as they did every morning despite the random nature of the threat hanging in the air at every street corner. Shirt-sleeved men carrying bags and briefcases walked slowly along the street, sweat stains already appearing under their arms and in the smalls of their backs. I tried to compose an elegantly witty adieu for my students but the words would not take shape in my head. I supposed that I would have to busk it, that a suitable way of saying thank you to them would come to me nearer the time.

I remember feeling again the absolute fatigue that had overcome me on my trip back to my home in Beirut at the end of May. I decided to risk my first cigarette of the day, feeling tightness, a closing up of my airways on the first drag. I coughed solidly, drew down a second lungful of smoke, and started to feel better. Caffeine and nicotine. I made a mental note to buy a litre of something cold and fizzy in the university shop before I started my classes.

Sitting in the sunshine, warming my bones, feeling the prickly crawl of perspiration on the skin around my neck, I thought again about the missing Levantine souls. The latest victim was a banker. Reports said that he was in his mid-thirties, an executive type specialising in the financing of major capital projects in derelict countries like England, a man who might know my father. They say that wherever you are in the world you are never more than seven people away from someone you know. It seemed somehow

bizarre that I might be linked to any one of the sweating workers walking past these steps by some vagary of mass acquaintance.

The kidnapped banker was taken in broad daylight from the heart of London's financial district, right under the noses of the authorities, leaving pools of black and bloody stickiness surrounding his dead bodyguards. I knew now that the fantasy of my year as an aid worker was done with, and that the madly persuasive force of my self-deluding imagination was spent. My life in desolate, brooding little London was nothing but sheer and utter folly.

The selfish arrogance that once upon a time I mistook for some sort of life-purpose under the billboard on Monot Street all those months ago in Beirut now collided with a sudden rush of gut-churning fear. I was truly afraid for the first time in my life. In the rising heat of a July morning on a busy street in London filled with outwardly rational people, I admitted all this to myself for the first time and I felt emotionally sick. I put my coffee mug on the stone step beside me and checked my watch. Five minutes had passed. I wanted to go home right there and then.

There was only one answer to the conundrum of survival in this city and that answer involved poisons and nicotine. I lit another cigarette, breathed the smoke in deeply, and let the panic wash through me. I trembled a little despite the rising heat of the day and the half-digested coffee in my stomach started its slow reflux, but I continued to breathe, letting the nausea float away on repeated, deep exhalations. Usman would be down any second and I could not let him see me like this. We were friends at the edge of the world, descendants of Salah-ad Din's knights, and such a scene would be an act of betrayal, an act of gross boorishness.

A small flight of sparrows flickered across my peripheral vision, rising in a sudden burst from one of the Plane trees that lined the street. I have no recollection of anything suddenly being different in the world, but I do remember being vaguely aware of the birds' chatter as they took wing. I was wrapped up in thoughts of my own morbidity, a process that should be strange and alien to one so young. At that moment, my conscious self was oblivious to its surroundings. The transition between fundamentally opposed states

of being, of switching over between life and death, only takes the briefest of moments.

The car was a Mercedes. It was a dirty beige colour, one of the big boxy types from the seventies, the sort of car that leaves diesel smudges on the fabric of city streets. I remember staring at the driver's side front tyre, which was a white-wall, strangely out of place amid the summer dust and debris of this dilapidated city. Two men got out of the car, one from the front and one from the back. The driver remained seated in the front of the car, the diesel engine idling in the background with a low and insidiously menacing growl. I could make out the silhouette of a fourth man sitting on the traffic side of the back seat.

My first thought was about Usman. Where was he? The agency men were obviously here to pick us up, albeit a little mob-handed and a few minutes early, but I supposed that the agency were taking extra precautions. And then a switch flicked over in my head. I should have moved quickly. I should have jumped back to the door of our house. I should have had a key in my hand. I should have acted like the cool-headed warriors in the films, but I was pathetically and predictably human.

From the front passenger side of the Mercedes the larger, more thick-set of the two men climbed up on to the sill of the open car door and turned his head slowly from side to side, keeping watch. He was a squat but powerful lighthouse of a man illuminating any possible threat to his colleagues from the police at the end of the street or from the glass-eyed passers-by, all of whom seemed to be scurrying along the opposite pavement as fast as their terrified little legs could carry them. I glanced towards the police check-point, thinking to call out, but I saw no one to call to.

The second man now stood in front of me at the foot of the steps leading up to our front door. He was smiling. He looked perfectly at ease with the world, clean-shaven, dark-haired, and easy on the eye, wearing a frayed pair of jeans, clean, white trainers, and a sports jacket over a polo shirt. It was the smile that gave him away, a smile that turned the blood in my veins to Arctic mist. He held his left hand out towards me and spoke Arabic with a soft London drawl.

“Come with me.”

For a second or two, during that last vestigial moment of sanity, I wanted to laugh. I wanted to share the joke. I almost convinced myself that I could tell this stranger to go away, but rationality is a flimsy construct, held together by thin and fragile threads. The scimitar-edged invitation offered no real options other than blank and silent compliance. The man flicked his jacket back with his right hand and I saw the matt black metal of a handgun pushed snugly into the top of his jeans. Too late. I couldn't move. Although the man covered the handle of the gun almost immediately the bulge of its muzzle beneath denim was imprinted on my brain like sunlight behind closed eyelids.

He spoke again, still in his accented Arabic, but this time more urgently. "Get in the car. Now!"

Still I sat there in the sun, dazzled by the brightness of the day and by the brilliance of my assailant's thin, cool smile. He turned once to look at the man on point duty. There was a hand gesture and then a nod. The minder with the bull neck stiffened momentarily, checking the street one last time. Then he walked around the front of the car to the pavement. His colleague trotted up the steps, put his left hand under my shoulder and hauled me upright. My coffee cup tipped over when I caught it with my knee as I squirmed sideways in a vain attempt to wriggle free. I remember the handle of the mug snapping off on the concrete of the lower step when it toppled over the edge.

I should explain a little about the how's and when's and why's, I suppose. In that moment of being hauled upright, so much of what had been – of my life story – flashed through my mind, and yet not a sentence of it could I have uttered, not one single vision could I have I described.

Somewhere in our histories, in the endless looking back that we all indulge in, there is often a tendency to believe that we can identify a point in time or a past action of such simple and singular significance that it allows us to say: that's it – that's the root of it all; that is what this is.

Fundamental truths appeal because they make simple the relationship between cause and effect, action and consequence. Searching for the source of our own headwaters, seeking out the trickling springs that feed the streams and rivers that flow through our lives, is a classical quest that holds at its end that estuarine grandeur of deliverance, that proverbial crock of gold: certainty, the surety of knowing that it is not, ultimately, our fault, that there are reasons and circumstances beyond our control that have made us flow as we have. Certainty is the key to the door of self-delusion.

In the same way that we try to find a firm coastal footing from which to view our historical hinterlands, we seek in the present the undeniable and indefatigable truth that makes sense of where we are and where we appear to be heading. Once delivered to the sea, with our sails set for the prevailing wind, we are relieved that finally we are on course, and although we are aware of the changeable nature of the wind, we believe that we are master of it.

The absolute truth of my being was an illusion. No matter how I defined my source or how well I plotted a course across the rolling oceans, I was fundamentally at fault. Belief in our inevitable fate is a drug that once tasted then draws a person into a lifetime chasing mirages.

Back then, before my kidnapping, at nineteen years of age, growing up in Beirut, and with a memory of events and times so little troubled by the realities of the wider world, I considered none of these things. The glittering lights of university life beckoned to

me beguilingly from beyond the barricades erected around the slow simplicity of my blissfully unaware childhood. Mine was a childhood full of brilliantly-coloured daydreams and half-conquered trees, and although now outwardly I was becoming a man, my inner self still revelled in a world of scabbed knees and grimy, lichen-stained hands.

That last summer at home, with my childish head still resolutely raised to the clouds, I breathed a rarefied atmosphere. Standing on the threshold of manhood I still looked at the world through the apparently immortal and innocent eyes of a stumbling pup. The freshly-budded leaf at the crown of the Turkey Oak in our garden in the Beirut suburb of Jnah represented an empire of possibilities. I had no more awareness of the brittle nature of each leaf's hold on reality than does a sparrow under the distant gaze of the hawk.

The adolescent part of me seemed to know that everything in the world was fresh and full of life, and yet refused to see the consequence of these changing seasons. I used to spend hours sitting on the deeply ridged boughs of my favourite tree, of my boyhood castle in the air, under a warm and mellow Mediterranean sun. Despite the gnawing sense of fear that came from the manhood growing and swelling within me, despite that urgent but terrifying want of life, I convinced myself that there really was nothing to fear. I would never change. The boy would go forth and dazzle the world from the crest of a wave. I was Al-Quam and Jason and Odysseus and Aeneas. My story was destined to be painted in martial colours, colours of triumph and glory second only to those of Salah-ad-Din. Although I had seen autumnal squalls strip the leaves from my fortress tree at the end of every summer for eighteen years, I could not conceive of any form or force of weather that might come and strip fortune from me. I was a naïve boy with a head full of half-formed dreams, and I firmly believed that nothing could ever turn the downy, glossy dark greens of my youth to the dry-brown husks that bleed away life as the sap slowed in my Father's veins.

I was then, as I am now, Marwan Tayeh, but we, the child and the man, have inevitably grown apart. I stood on the threshold of a brave new world. I was nineteen years of age, the son of a middle class banker living in a prosperous gateway city that lies between

the cosmopolitan modernity of the developed world and the awkward, childish brutishness of the old European north-west. My first gloriously immature steps out onto the shore by the ocean have long since been swept away by the winds of change.

That brief memory, that illusive moment of insight was ripped away from me as I felt the bones of my kidnapper's fingers biting into the soft flesh of my armpit. The man had a determined and powerful grip for one who looked so slight and unimposing. Everything happened too quickly to seem real. I felt as though I were looking at the world through a lens or through a cathode ray tube. The volume was set to zero. I did not utter a word.

They man-handled me into the back of the car, where I was pushed down into the rear foot well with my head buried between the feet of the third kidnapper, the one who had remained seated in the vehicle. He covered my prone body with an old tartan rug. I was facing the rear of the front seat and I felt the fabric bulge against my nose as the minder sat down heavily on old, rusting springs. I could smell human sweat and oil and that earthy mould redolent of wet winter boots on cloth. Doors slammed. The car pulled away from the curb.

Surely, I thought, the police will stop us, and just as quickly I realised what a catastrophe that would be. I felt hard metal on the back of my neck as a now familiar voice spat out fitful, stilted Arabic.

“You know who we are?”

I gagged on the smell of oil.

“You Persian?” continued my interrogator in broken Arabic.

My head began to clear a little. Maybe this is a chance, I thought, maybe there is a way out. They clearly had no idea who I was and I began to wonder whether they had any specific goal in mind other than the kidnapping of a foreigner, one of the sons of the great enemy. Their assumption was that I was Persian.

I pulled the rug away from my face and lifted my head a little, speaking in English rather than Arabic. I wanted to establish contact, to show them that I could make the effort, that I was not one those arrogant oil men so often vilified in London graffiti or the more extreme sectarian pamphlets.

“No,” I said, trying to sound strong and calm. “I’m Lebanese, not Persian, Lebanese.”

I tried to twist round to face the two men in the back of the car and I had to raise myself up to lift my torso over the transmission tunnel. A punch. I gasped as I took a fully weighted fist to the ribs.

“Stay down,” he hissed into my half-turned face.

I slumped back down, winded, with my back arched over the transmission tunnel. I started to cry and tried to catch my breath to stem the childish tears. I felt as though I were six-years-old and yet again standing in front of my glowering father. I shook the vision off and slithered round a little more so that I could see the man who had just hit me. The car blanket slipped from my face and through the back window of the car I could see blue sky. Through the side window I could just see the tops of buildings skimming past. I could feel every bump in the road, my body shifting to left and right as the car twisted and turned through these unknown, topsy-turvy London streets.

The man who had remained seated in the car all the while, leaned forward and looked down at me. I could sense a moment of confusion amongst my captors. My answer, my claim to be Lebanese, seemed to have thrown an element of doubt into the perfect equation of my abduction. I smelled a heavily applied dose of cheap aftershave. A small bead of sweat dripped from my second interrogator’s neck onto my chin as he looked down at me.

“Do you like the Saud?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, trying to hold his gaze, trying to impress on him through the simplicity of my answer that I was not his target.

“Do you believe in the Caliphate?” he asked, unsmiling.

I had to think for a moment before answering. It was an impossible question to answer truthfully. The answer was implicit in my faith and in my history.

“No,” I lied, adding again, “I’m Lebanese” as if this simple statement of nationality would explain everything. I felt sick inside, believing for a moment that my denial of such a simple truth would damn me forever, but the truth of my terror was a much simpler thing right then than my faith. Underneath the soiled car rug I urinated involuntarily.

For a couple of seconds, as this man and I looked into each other’s eyes, I grabbed wildly at the possibility that the car would stop. I tried to believe in that moment with all of my heart. I willed

it to happen. They must set me free with some embarrassed explanation about mistaken identity. I could almost picture the faces of my family as I recounted the story again and again over dinner in the not too distant future.

My optimism was short lived. The man pulled the tartan car blanket back up over my face. I felt his foot move from under my back and then, as I lay there blinded by the blanket, he slammed his heel down on to my chest.

“Shut the fuck up. Don’t move again,” he shouted at me and barked an order to the driver.

We twisted and crawled through the rush hour traffic for what seemed like hours but was probably no more than fifteen or twenty minutes. I lost all sense of direction, but tried desperately to use basic reasoning to track our progress and as a way of keeping my sanity. The bridges into the south London camps were closed. We were hardly likely to be heading into the city with its network of check-points, cameras and armed policemen. Given the general political state of this benighted little island, cutting north would make the journey overly long and complex. We had to be heading west, back out by the airport, and then how far? I was a day away from travelling home, from flying away from the troubles, and here I was passing the very airport terminals where another of my flat mates, Ibrahim, had been working. I felt the first black hand of absolute despair grip my heart.

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