

Letter from Beirut

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IT HAS BEEN RAINING ALL WEEK, persistent drizzle unlike the brief downpours that are more typical of Beirut. The city is slumbering. I am staying with my parents. My father goes out less often. My mother is snuggled under the blankets. She hopes the war won't happen. The kettle is boiling like a purring cat. The house is quiet. Rain is the soporific of cities.

A man strapped with dynamite walks into the HSBC bank in Hamra Street. Terrified staff hand over the money without delay. The robber then declares that he has stormed the bank to protest at the impending invasion of Iraq. The bank is widely known as the British Bank. The Minister of Interior arrives on the scene and negotiates. A few minutes later, the robber releases his hostages in return for a press conference. The Minister of Interior takes the opportunity to explain to journalists the robber's motivations. The robber is later found to be deranged. Anti-colonialism has gone berserk. Conspiracy theorists claim that the robbery has been staged to make the Minister of Interior look good.

Alexander Downer beams on television for five memorable seconds. There is every chance, says Downer, that the war will start on Thursday. My brother-in-law asks me how come our 'plump Minister of Exterior' knows. I say Australia is part of the Coalition. He asks me how many soldiers Australia is contributing. I say two thousand. He bursts out laughing. He thinks it's a joke.

A friend of mine says he has come up with the ideal scenario for the war: the Americans swiftly invade; the Iraqis resist so hard that the Americans are soundly defeated; George W. Bush loses the next election; the Iraqi régime, weakened by the American assault, collapses, to be swiftly replaced by a pluralistic system of government modelled on Sweden. I compliment my friend on his vision. But why all this swiftness, I ask. 'In order to minimise civilian casualties,' he says. I shake my head. The Turks have killed more Kurds than Saddam Hussein ever dreamt of. The Israelis have enough nuclear bombs to kill all the Arabs and Jews of the Middle East. Saddam has a drone airplane incapable of dropping propaganda leaflets on the Kurds. The Americans will liberate the Iraqis whether they like it or not. The Iraqis will be liberated, wishing all the while someone other than the disreputable Americans would do the job.

THE RAIN HAS STOPPED. A soft winter sun shines over the Mediterranean. Snow covers the hills around Beirut. My father is at his office. The kettle is boiling again. My mother is about to go out. She asks me if war will break out after all. I say, undoubtedly. She disagrees. She has a feeling it won't.

The city is overrun with rumours about devil worshippers. They are said to kidnap children, kill them and drink their blood. They listen to certain kinds of music. They dig up corpses and arrange orgies. They take drugs and push each other to suicide. Like your average married couple, I point out to my worried sister. They come, we are told, from all geographical areas and sectarian backgrounds. They cannot, therefore, be used as an excuse for starting a civil war. Parents anxiously watch their children. Tattoos are viewed with suspicion. Minor television clerics reveal that devil worshippers are good at hiding their real identities. They are not the same on the inside as on the outside. Unlike George W. Bush and Alexander Downer. A mother reports her daughter to the police because she found a letter containing references to devil worshipping in the teenager's drawer. The girl claims the letter is a trap she set for her cousin whom she suspects of being a devil worshipper herself. And so it goes. Conspiracy theorists have never had it this good. Lebanese social neuroses are at work. East meets West in Lebanon every day, and the middle classes spend much energy consuming Western products while weeding out undesired aspects of Western culture, from open homosexuality, to drugs and rap music, all of which is described as un-Lebanese behaviour. Not unlike the un-Australianness of some Australian crimes. The Minister of Interior goes on television to reassure the Lebanese that the rumours are false and that parents should watch out. Australia's Minister of Exterior performs the same logical acrobatics that his British counterpart has shown himself capable of a few days earlier. Hence: the French threat of vetoing war made war more likely, and the Iraqis did not prove that they had no weapons of mass destruction. I have always been told that using two negatives in a sentence is to be avoided. It takes a war to make me understand how serious the problem is. Does the Australian Exterior include the British Interior or are Australians really British on the inside, albeit with a built-in time delay?

Up to seventy individuals suspected of devil worshipping have been investigated throughout Lebanon, but only a dozen have been detained. The General Prosecutor says he cannot charge someone just because he wears ugly tattoos on his shoulders. And why not, says our neighbour. Alexander Downer has a strange look on his face. My parents' maid thinks twice before going out. I tell her Beirut is one of the safest cities I have ever been to. She giggles and probably thinks I am a fool. A poet publishes an article in a major daily addressed to God himself. If God is as good as He claims, how come He has created George W. Bush? Religious and political leaders in the conservative city of Tripoli are outraged. God should not be addressed in those terms, they insist. The next day the newspaper is banned from Tripoli. I go to the American University of Beirut. Given the latest turn in fashion, lecturers can now tell the colour of the underpants of many of their students. Other students wear headscarves, and I cannot tell the colour of their hair. Anti-war marches happen each day. Some classes are suspended. My parents' maid is still worried. I check the rates of sexual crimes on the

Interpol website. In 2000 you were nine times more likely to be sexually assaulted in Australia than in Lebanon.

WAR HAS STARTED. Lebanon is dealing with a new deluge and its aftermath. It has rained non-stop for days. Landslides and drowned villages. Emergency procedures are activated. The army is called out. Severed heads and amputated limbs on Al Jazeera. The Arab street is boiling. My mother asks me to turn off the kettle. Thank God for Al Jazeera. My father is channel-hopping. My mother calls my sister on the phone to find out how long the war will last and whether parsley can be used with curry. The Americans complain about Al Jazeera. They see the expression of anti-Western sentiment as anti-democratic. How convincing. Thank God for Al Jazeera. Does it outweigh George W. Bush? We'll find out on Judgment Day. But will God be judged, and by whom? If things keep going this way, perhaps by Bush? I won't be going to Tripoli soon. A bomb explodes at a McDonalds restaurant in Dawra on the main road to Tripoli. Small bombs have been going off occasionally at American-brand food outlets at night, leaving no casualties. This one is different. A Bali-style set-up, with one bomb inside and one outside, and the two are not the same. A few grams of explosives in the toilet to be followed by fifty kilograms of TNT in the car park. But the delay mechanism of the big one did not function. Alexander Downer fails to repeat Jack Straw's speech from three days ago. Edward Said speaks to a packed amphitheatre. He has grown a beard and looks like a tired Che Guevara. He is as eloquent as ever, despite his leukaemia. He wants us to save Humanism from the onslaught of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. On which side is Donald Rumsfeld, I wonder. Conspiracy theorists are interviewed by Al Jazeera. Osama bin Laden's recruitment officers are said to be having a field day with more converts than Iraqi POWs. History is in the making — a guaranteed supply of corpses for the next fifty years.

I take a stroll in the beautifully restored old city of Beirut. Dark thoughts keep me company. Will all this be destroyed again? War does not seem to have affected the Lebanese economy. The underclass — foreign workers from Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and Syria — is as over-exploited as ever. The old construction sites are still abandoned by their bankrupt owners. Valet parking is thriving, still absorbing a good portion of the workforce. Child beggars are active at major road junctions and entertainment centres. The trendy restaurants of Monot are packed. The nightclubs are preparing for the evening. The streets are full of potential devil worshippers.

I walk home after sunset. I savour the hushed liveliness of the backstreets, emanating from the charming seven- and eight-storey buildings. This is the Arab street that I know and love — in Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad — and there is nothing revolutionary about it. I get home. Al Jazeera says the Arab world is changing. My niece has strained her left ankle. My mother thinks the war is a lie. I am reading Baudrillard. My father wants his tea. Some things will never change.