

THE MACHINE GUN AND THE SHOWER

The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point.

—Gabriel García Márquez
One Hundred Years of Solitude

THE bathroom is one giant shower. A spigot hangs from the middle of the ceiling. The walls and floor are made of pink tile. The toilet and sink are situated against the far wall, adjacent to Richard's room. I have never seen an entire bathroom function as a shower, but I like it. It's convenient. I can shave, wash my hair and bathe without interruption. The hot water feels good after waking to find that my propane heater had run out of gas during the night, leaving the apartment cold and damp. At first the hot water stings my cold skin, but as the bathroom fills with steam, my joints begin to loosen. I can hear Richard in the shower next door. Maybe we will have time to stop for coffee at one of the cafés on Hamra Street before going to the office.

The bathroom shudders with the deafening explosions of a 50mm machine gun. A second burst rattles the mirror and door. I drop to the floor. The gun opens up again. It is so close I can't tell where the shooting is coming from. The pink tiles are laid on the building's concrete block walls. The bathroom is probably as good a place to be in the flat as anywhere with bullets flying, but this is the closest fighting I have heard so far; definitely worth a look. I crawl into the bedroom, still wet and soapy. The carpet burns my skin, especially my groin. Another heavy burp from the 50. I follow the sound. The gun must be in front of the apartment building. I start to crawl toward the kitchen. The ma-

chine gun lets loose a long, hard burst. I stop. Clichés are clichés for a very simple reason—they are generally true. And right now I decide the better part of valor is discretion. I flop over, head back to the bedroom and into a corner next to a large oak armoire across from the bath and curl up naked, knees tucked under my chin.

The 50 keeps chattering out front. I sure would like to know what the hell is going on out there. Suddenly, I catch a glimpse of someone coming through my bedroom veranda door. The figure struggles to disentangle himself from the thin white curtains. For a moment I fear one of the militiamen engaged in the firefight underway outside has decided to take a shortcut through my bedroom. But to my relief, I recognize Richard's profile as he scrambles into the room clad in nothing but a pair of red polka-dot boxer shorts, his cheeks flushed pink, skin pasty white, and his hair dripping shampoo. I howl with laughter.

"I believe I'd get down if I were you," I cough between spasms of laughter.

"What the bloody hell is going on out there?"

"I don't know, but it's worth seeing you climb across my balcony looking like the skinny, water-logged Englishman you are! God, this is one to remember!"

"I was just washing my hair. Didn't have a chance to rinse." Richard smiles and leans against the wall next to me. "Got a cigarette?"



Richard Beeston and I were roommates throughout my stay in Beirut. Tall, thin and blond, he struck me as the quintessential Englishman. I also found him to possess a healthy sense of humor. I enjoyed his company, both at the office and at home, and was glad Peter had suggested we find a place together. Richard came to Lebanon from a newspaper in South Africa. His father was a well-known foreign correspondent for the London Daily Telegraph and Richard had lived in Beirut as a child, when his father had been posted to Lebanon as a Middle East correspondent before the Civil War. Richard Sr.'s career had taken Richard Jr. to Moscow and Washington as well, and like most Englishmen, son followed the career path of father.

At first, while we were apartment hunting, Richard and I shared a room at Peter's flat near the light tower just off the Corniche, next to the sea. Grimsditch usually put up The Star's new arrivals until they could find lodgings of their own. This practice was convenient and cheap and none of the newcomers minded since it gave us an opportunity to adjust