

EXPATS AT THE SAINT GEORGES HOTEL BAR

Evelyn had been gone from Beirut for three months. All through the winter and into early spring, Tony Robson made sure to include me in the weekly gathering at the Saint Georges with Klein and Timmons whenever he was in town. Robson considered it his remit as Deputy Cultural Attaché and promising young diplomat on the rise to look after lonely expats in Beirut and specifically to cheer me up.

“Any word from Evelyn?” Robson asked as we waited for a share-taxi on the corner of Rue Hamra and Jeanne d’Arc one Sunday evening in April.

“A postcard from London weeks ago, another from Zurich, then nothing.”

“A friend of mine at the Paris Consulate sent me a back-channel cable a few days ago. He thought he’d seen Evelyn with Prince Majid at some reception. The Agency evidently has asked State to keep an eye on him and his friends. All those well-heeled grifters hanging around Magid and his brothers show up at embassy parties and receptions in the company of pretty women of a certain type. He thought Evelyn was in the entourage, but he couldn’t be sure. Probably mistaken.”

“Probably. Maybe she’s gone home to Austin for the barbeque brisket and a cheap Texas divorce.”

Hamra, Beirut’s thoroughfare of high commerce and conspicuous consumption, was uncharacteristically quiet. We’d been waiting for a taxi for half an hour.

“Robert, I’m tired of this shit,” Robson said impatiently. “Why don’t we walk? It’s nice out.”

As soon as he said that, a weathered Mercedes share-taxi came slowly down the street and stopped to pick us up. The frayed interior and sagging seats were evidence of many years on the share-taxi circuit in West Beirut. A green flag bearing the image of a waning moon hung from the rearview mirror. I asked the driver in my passable Arabic to take us to the Saint Georges. He nodded, and we got in.

Although there were hardly any cars on the road, he drove very slowly, taking an unfamiliar, circuitous route, hesitating at each intersection to scan the side streets.

“What is this guy doing? This isn’t the usual share-taxi route. Remind him we’re going to the Saint Georges.”

I tapped the driver on the shoulder and told him loudly in my shaky Arabic we wanted to get to the Hotel.

“Yes,” he said. “The Saint Georges by the Phoenicia. Special for you. Slowly. Slowly.”

Presently, we arrived. I paid the fare and added a generous tip.

As I was getting out, the driver turned and looked at me gravely and said in heavily accented English, the accent of the refugee camps, “Very bad. Very bad.” He held me in a long, unwavering gaze and repeated, “Very bad.”

I gave him another pound note and, in Arabic, wished him, God willing, a fine evening.

WE ENTERED the Saint Georges through its elaborately decorated Art Nouveau doors and found Klein and Timmons in the lobby. Klein had just come from work and still had on his AUB Hospital Director’s blazer. Timmons, in faded jeans and a collarless shirt, wore a sports

jacket cut in the Beirut style by a tailor he knew in Achrafieh as a gesture of compliance with Hotel rules.

Jean Bertolet, the efficient and elegant General Manager of the Hotel for a generation, treated us as favored guests and usually met us ceremoniously at the door. But on this night, he was at the Concierge Desk across the lobby in intense conversation with a group of well-known Lebanese politicians. He wore his dark, stylish blazer, a cornflower in the lapel. He seemed distracted. When he saw us, he excused himself from the group and came over.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Good to see back. I was afraid you might have other obligations this evening."

"Wouldn't miss our Sunday appointment at the Bar," Robson said. "Every time I come to the Saint Georges, I feel like a bureaucrat dispatched from Paris in the last days of *le Empire colonial français* to check on things in the hinterlands."

"I take that as a compliment to our staff," M. Bertolet responded. "We do our best to stimulate the imagination of our guests."

Id come to appreciate the time-worn presence of the Saint Georges and its spectacular setting on the little cove where, on summer days, Lebanese Christian girls from West Beirut lounged in hints of bikinis. Taxi drivers and street vendors lined up on the Corniche to observe the sunbathers and loudly express their assessments.

The Phoenicia Hotel across the street was more upscale, but it lacked the charm and intimacy of the Saint Georges, with its dark, spacious, wood-paneled lobby, polished mahogany floors, and faded Persian carpets of richly intricate design. Since the early days of the French Mandate, it had served as the watering hole for Arab politicians in or out of office, Gulf sheiks, Lebanese power-brokers, Europeans of dubious reputation, and self-identified journalists with murky ties to intelligence agencies.

The Saint Georges was exempt from whatever turmoil was happening outside its doors, the ideal retreat for expats, an observation post, uninvolved, like Switzerland during the War.

At this hour, small groups of men huddled in leather club chairs

at tables around the room and in the alcoves, speaking in low, urgent voices. I recognized a prominent Lebanese businessman in conversation with a high-ranking Cabinet officer, almost certainly exchanging views about Lebanon's position in the world over tiny cups of Turkish coffee. Impending crises facing the country outside the Hotel doors were usually of little interest to them. Political refugees from one Arab country or another, their faces drawn with defeat, were almost certainly plotting their triumphant return to power, their plans punctuated by the ceaseless clicking of worry beads.

Two middle-aged Americans in short-sleeved dress shirts and crewcuts seated at a low table in the middle of the lobby were engaged in a vigorous conversation with a wealthy Saudi merchant said to have access to the Royal family. I'd seen these Americans at the Zahrat al-Sharq Hotel in Riyadh or others like them. They would drop into the Kingdom for a few days and pitch remarkable, once-in-a-lifetime, guaranteed-to-make-you-rich-beyond-measure market opportunities to smiling, listless Saudis. The deals were seldom consummated, but the Saudi businessmen seemed to enjoy the attention.

WE HEADED FOR THE BAR. There were two: the Grill Room and the Club Room. The large, bright, cheerful Grill Room had a long, polished mahogany bar, a dozen tables, and comfortable leather club chairs. It attracted casual visitors and tourists. Beyond it was the smaller, dark, more intimate Club Room reserved for private parties and favored customers. M. Bertolet reserved a table for us in the Club Room on Sunday evenings.

We lingered in the Grill long enough for a drink at the long bar. For many years, even before Jean Bertolet came to Beirut, the barman was Ali, a small, ebony, conspiratorial Nubian once in the service of the late, lamented King Farouk. He was a master in concocting potent rum cocktails, gin tonics to ward off the fevers, and perfect martinis.

I had a Scotch and listened to Ali placidly whisper the latest rumors of war and revolution in the Maghreb. Soon, we moved into

the dimly lit, smoky Club Room and our usual table in the corner. For weeks, we had been carrying on a discussion of the defects of Arab society. I trotted out my experience of the week's frustrations in dealing with Levantine bureaucrats. Klein defended Lebanon's unique social compact and its rules of behavior. Robson provided political and historical context. Timmons listened in bemused silence.

They knew Evelyn was no longer in Beirut but avoided asking about the circumstances. Robson, nearing the end of his posting in Beirut, was now acting Cultural Attaché, with upgraded housing, a spacious apartment on Rue Kennedy near the AUB campus. He would soon return to Washington for a year or two at State. Klein, still single, was closing in on a young, high-spirited British girl, the daughter of the British Ambassador. He was in good spirits.

Ali brought a second round of drinks to our table: Scotch for Timmons and me, Ali's martini for Robson, and an Amstel for Klein. We were aware of Timmons' weeks-long travels in the Kingdom and the Gulf, but we didn't inquire into their purpose. He always came back with carefully curated stories to entertain us, full of irony and a knowing detachment. He always omitted some details, which gave his tales a constructive, protective ambiguity. Each time he returned to Beirut, he seemed harder, more contained, and more remote. He'd been back in Beirut for a week. We were glad he'd joined us at the Saint Georges.

"YOU SEEM CHEERFUL," Robson said to Timmons,

"Yes. It's been a good day." He emptied his glass and signaled Ali for another scotch.

"We liberated a hostage today. My friends in the Deuxième Bureau wanted help to recover a young college student who'd just been kidnapped. He was grabbed from his sports car in front of Saint Joseph University. The Deuxième Bureau doesn't reckon it was political. They think commerce. A gang of low-level criminals saw this kid

driving around West Beirut in his Mercedes SL. Nice car. They thought he'd bring a very generous ransom.

"But these jaboneys didn't do their homework. They didn't know who this kid's family was. He is a Sursock, a grandson. I am told that old Emile Sursock called Raymond Eddé, who called the Prime Minister, who called Col. Haddad, chief of the Deuxième Bureau, who called me. I've trained quite a few of the men in the elite security unit, the Red Berets. Tough guys. Col. Haddad asked me to review their plan for a quick hostage liberation mission. I made a few suggestions, which he accepted, and he asked me to come along. So I did.

"The Deuxième Bureau had past dealings with this gang. They knew they operated in Dahiyeh. So yesterday, they sent a couple of Red Berets over there, big, tough guys, who gently persuaded some local shopkeepers to identify the apartment the gang was using, and we planned the extraction operation.

"The Red Berets went in fast and overwhelmed the four poor bastards holding the Sursock kid. It turned out they were holding three other hostages in the flat. Quite a busy criminal enterprise. Haddad's men swarmed in, and the gang gave up immediately. Well, two resisted briefly. No fuss, really. Crisp. In short, today, we freed three hostages and a very frightened young Sursock. Very satisfying."

Timmons drank his Scotch and waved at Ali for another.

"The Deuxième Bureau gave the two surviving kidnapers to the kid's father. He has plans for them. In Beirut, there are rules. The gang didn't follow the most important rule of criminal commerce in Beirut: don't kidnap anyone from certain families. They broke the rules, and they paid the price. Word will get around. Beirut rules are both unspoken and iron-clad."

"You're uncommonly chatty today," Robson said.

"Yeah. Well, all told, a satisfying day. Don't get all that many in Beirut."

Klein asked, "How is young Sursock doing?"

"Not well. He won't get over this for a long time. The Red Berets debriefed him after they got him out. The kid made every mistake.

He tried to make friends. Tried to negotiate and pay the ransom. They laughed at him, and then they beat him up.

"Klein, I do not wish this on you, but if you ever get taken hostage here or anywhere, remember these things. First, don't understand their language or pretend not to. Make them speak your language. This gives you an advantage. Second, be dumb. Really stupid. Act like you have a mental defect. This will frustrate the kidnappers.

"Get to know their routines and look for a chance to escape, though escape is usually pretty remote unless you're in the hands of amateurs, low-level criminals like these guys were. And, if you're there for a long time, you will be extremely bored. You need some way to keep alert when there's no input. I'd try to create an alternate world in my mind, as detailed as possible, strain your mind to, I don't know, live in your memories. Anyway, that's how they train us to act in such situations.

"Watch yourself out there. Don't get kidnapped. It's a bummer."

Klein and I nursed our drinks.

A PLUMP ENGLISHMAN wearing a leather bomber jacket with authentic RAF patches strolled into the Club Room from the Grill carrying a glass of lager. I recognized him from Riyadh, Mike Jameson, the Brit who ran a private garage to repair broken trucks and looked after the hundreds of cars in the Royal motor pool on the side.

He saw us and strolled over to our table. He knew Klein and Timmons, and I introduced him to Tony Robson. I asked if he was still working in Riyadh. Yes, he said, but there had been a lot of changes since Faisal became King, and now that he was dead, everything had become very uncertain. He'd closed up his shop, and he said he was on his way back to London. He pulled up a chair, sat down, and, uninvited, joined the conversation.

"You heard about King Faisal. Shot by one of the princes, a nephew, Faisal bin something, think of that. Bit of a stink. Closed down Riyadh. Closed down the whole Kingdom. Bob's your uncle."

He went on, holding forth in a loud, grating voice.

"Caught the man right there in the royal palace in Jeddah. Didn't put up much resistance, I heard. Quite a mess. Everyone's wondering what it meant. Maybe it was just him. Some sort of personal dispute, no one's sure, and they're still investigating. Arrested a lot of people. Brought him to Riyadh, and he lost his head in Deera Square. I went down to watch. Quick justice, the Saudis. Have to give them that. I think he was a brother or cousin or something of your friend Prince Majid.

"Never cared for Majid myself. Never trusted him. He was always chasing the expat wives. Came after Penelope but didn't get her. She's back in Kent now. Never took to foreign travel. But she was fond of your friend, that Prince, Majid. I didn't like him, but she did, so we went to some of his parties. Lots of good liquor, expensive. "

"But those parties went on and on. Tired me out. People told me your Prince Majid was important, close to the old King, Saud, the one before Faisal. He left Riyadh. I think King Faisal threw him out. Had to, I guess. He ran the old King Saud's personal guard. He was too close to the old man, so he had to go.

"That Prince Majid had a wonderful car, a Ferrari. Only one in the Kingdom. I serviced it and hired a mechanic from Italy to do the work. For those cars, you need a specialist. When the Prince left, I still had his car in my garage. Stayed there for months, and I bought it from one of his brothers or cousins or something, not the one that shot the King. Sent it back to my garage in London. Drove it once or twice. Fine car. Fast. Expensive. Had some damage. Looked like someone took a shot at it. Bullet hole in the door and a big tear in the leather seat. I bought it for a song."

I thought of the Ferrari. I remembered the night Prince Majid drove me with Evelyn wedged between us to test its speed out on Mecca Road.

"Things have gotten tight in Riyadh since Faisal was killed. Lots more security around. People are suspicious. Time for me to go home.

"Say, there are some rumors going around about something in a working district this afternoon. Have you heard anything?"

Jameson saw a group of Brits come into the Grill Room and didn't wait for an answer.

"My mates are here," he said and left to join the crowd of raucous Brits at the Grill Room bar.

Tony Robson watched him go and said, "Jesus. I have to keep reminding myself they're our allies."

Timmons looked up from his drink and said, "That asshole got the story completely wrong. Prince Faisal bin Musa'id killed King Faisal. He was unstable and alcoholic, and he had a grudge. He had an older brother who was very religious. He hated King Faisal's liberal policies. Led protests against Faisal's reforms. He was arrested by Saudi security and died in jail, under torture, probably.

"His young brother, Faisal, came under the sway of a fanatic Salafi ulema in Unaizah. There are a lot of these young, very religious Saudis who hate the idea of reform. This young Prince Faisal bin Musa'id had a following. It's complicated.

"Oh, it wasn't Prince bin Musa'id that Jameson saw executed in Dereaa Square a few months ago. The Prince is still in jail. His time in the Square is coming soon, but not yet. The poor bugger who lost his head was a Yemini laborer they caught jacking off at Friday prayers. A big mistake.

"There's a struggle going on, likely to get worse. King Faisal was collateral damage. My Saudi friends are tight-lipped about it, but I've heard enough to know it's not over. That asshole Jameson hasn't got a clue. The Embassy doesn't know what's going on either. Robson, you need to get your colleagues to step up their game."

Robson smiled and muttered, "Yes, well. It's Arabia."

"HOW'S YOUR ARABIC COMING ALONG?" Timmons asked, his head cocked at me across the table.

I demonstrated my language skills with a formulaic exchange of greetings and recited the *shahada*. I counted to twenty in my best Nejdī accent. I told him that I'd mastered the Arabic script. I was proud of my Arabic.

"So, basically, nothing. Have you thought about actually studying the language? Could be good for your career."

Timmons finished his Scotch and ordered another.

Tony Robson looked my way and added, "I agree with Timmons. I don't mean to be rude, but you don't strike me as a happy academic. I know you've got a teaching job at the University, but I don't see you spending a lot of time in the library. You're more of an action guy. Since your family responsibilities have recently diminished, sorry about that - I liked Evelyn - maybe you might think about other lines of work.

"We have the language school up in Shemlan, the best in the Middle East. When you complete the spring semester, you could take a course at the language school and learn some proper Arabic. It could open up new opportunities. Come to the Embassy next week, and I'll see if I can get you into the summer program."

"The spy school," Timmons laughed.

"Not a spy school," Robson said. "Serious, intensive language courses for diplomats and soldiers and other interested parties. Just get Robert on his feet and take his mind off things."

"So, Robson," Klein asked, "When did recruitment of spies become part of your remit as a junior diplomat? You are State Department, right, or have you been lying to us."

"Only a suggestion. The Embassy can cover the tuition, and I can find some money in my budget for a small stipend for the summer term. Let Robert try it out."

Tony Robson leaned back and contemplated the coffered ceiling of the Club Room.

"Certain people at the Embassy are interested in your experience in the Kingdom and the friends you made. One of your friends in Riyadh, Wasfi Al-Saadi, spoke to us about you. Think about it. In any case, you'll not be teaching in the summer."

"It's nice to get out of Beirut in the summer," Timmons added. "Get up to the mountains. Cooler there. Besides, Evelyn's gone, and it would give you something to do with your time and avoid the perils of onanism."

Timmons was right. I knew very little Arabic. Giving directions to a taxi driver, ordering shawarma from a street vendor on Hamra, greeting the security guard at the AUB main gate every morning - that I could do. I could joke with the barman at the Normandy Hotel in a mélange of Levantine patois, street Arabic, interspersed with idiomatic French.

In Riyadh, I traded English lessons for informal instruction in conversational Arabic with a minor bureaucrat at the Interior Ministry. Wasfi made the introduction. The bureaucrat's younger brother was a student at a junior college in East Texas, and he wanted to call his brother and impress him with his English.

After three or four months in Riyadh, around the time Evelyn came and we started getting invited to parties at Prince Majid's, I accomplished my first commercial transaction entirely in Arabic, buying a new tire for my VW in the car souq. I practiced for hours in advance until I was sure I could communicate the specs and negotiate the price in a convincing Nejdī dialect. The transaction was successful, and, with growing confidence, I used my skills again to hire a Hadramauti living in a tent next to the Hotel to mount the tire. “

I was proud of my marketplace Arabic, and if the shopkeeper smirked at my halting speech, I didn't take notice. Basking in these achievements, I moved on to memorize the *Al-Fatihah*, which I performed for Wasfi one evening after dinner at the Hotel.

"Very good, my dear," he said. "You impress me. You recite the Holy Quran in *al-arabiyya al-fusha* perfectly - with the accent of Texas."

I lacked the talent for languages. It would take me years of intense training to achieve passable Arabic good enough for my analyst work at the Agency.

"Go take classes with the diplomats and spies in Shemlan," Timmons said, touching his forehead with his glass of Scotch in salute. "You'll get a job that suits you better than teaching. I don't see you growing old in some college library. And you'll have better luck with women. Trust me."

Timmons was right again. I was bored with classrooms, bored

with students, bored with— what was it? — living the life of an observer, forever separated from the world of action. I needed greater engagement. I was uncomfortable with the pose of being a teacher. I was growing painfully aware that I just didn't have the arrogance of appearing to know some subject, any subject, well enough to teach it.

I liked the absence of certainty in Arabia, the feeling that things were always mutable, provisional, and only partially revealed. There were layers upon layers of meaning about everything in Arabia, alliances, history, beliefs, grudges, things I would never fully grasp. With Evelyn gone, I was ready for something new.

There was a lull in our conversation. Timmons broke the silence.

"Robert, you need to visit Mecca tonight. We're all concerned that your dick will fall off from lack of attention. There's a nice girl for you in the street behind the police station in the Burj off the Place des Canons. I've seen her name on the little neon sign above the door to her room — 'Basma.'"

"Good suggestion," Klein added. "But maybe not Basma. Not sure we have enough penicillin in the Hospital dispensary for your date with Basma."

WE AGREED to visit the Caves du Roi, the lively nightclub on Rue de Phoénicie, and try our luck. Tony Robson called for a car from the Embassy. We waited out in front of the Hotel.

Always on weekends, Jean Bertolet parked his beautiful Ferrari sports car conspicuously on the Saint Georges porte-cochère. He boasted that Enzo Ferrari gave him the keys personally when he picked it up at the factory in Modena. He tested the car on the way to Brindisi, put it on the ferry to Piraeus, and experienced its power on the long drive down E5 from Istanbul across the Anatolian plain. No speed limits in those days. Somehow, he talked his way through Syrian customs, using all his charm as a hotelier.

"Is this like Prince Majid's Ferrari," Klein asked Robson.

"No. Majid's car was a SuperAmerica, custom-built for rich private customers. This is a GTB. Ferrari sold a competition version

and a road version. This one's the version for the road, more refined than the racing model, but still seriously fast. Jean drives it around town and sometimes takes it out to the Hotel his boss owns in Zahle. Jean manages that Hotel, too. He even drives up to Faraya in the snow. He drove it once over to Damascus. But the gas is bad in Syria, bad for the engine. I'm amazed he subjects his car to Beirut traffic. Our friend Monsieur Bertolet is a fearless driver."

We agreed that M. Bertolet's Ferrari was remarkable in its combination of peerless style and the promise of reckless speed. Klein ran his hand over the car's curving rear flank. Timmons, who had driven the car once with Jean's encouragement, stood aloof from our group, arms folded.

A silver Mercedes limousine with tinted windows pulled up to the Hotel. It was trailed by a black van from which two beefy men in gray tracksuits emerged. They walked quickly to the limo and opened the passenger door for a squat, portly Gulf Arab in a thobe with gold-trimmed *mishnah*. A tall, blond, attractive young woman in a tiny miniskirt wiggled out of the car behind him. She placed her hand on his arm, and they walked towards the Hotel entrance with the bodyguards in the lead. We seemed to be in their way.

One bodyguard shouted at Timmons, "*Waakhir!*"

Timmons stood his ground and regarded the man with mild amusement.

"*Waakhir!*" the man shouted again and pushed Timmons hard.

Timmons didn't move.

"*Kess ommak,*" Timmons said calmly.

This infuriated the man, and he took a swing at Timmons. Timmons dodged the blow, kicked the man in his groin, and smashed his forearm into his throat. The man fell heavily to the pavement.

The second bodyguard charged at Timmons, wielding a truncheon. Timmons deftly stepped aside and kicked the man's leg, knocking him off his feet. As the man lay on the pavement, Timmons stomped his heavy boot hard on his chest. The man moaned in pain. Timmons kicked his head, and he stopped moaning.

Timmons turned to the other bodyguard, who was struggling to

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his feet. He caught him with a quick, precise, sharp kick to the face. The man fell back to the ground and did not move. The small Arab and his tall lady companion stepped over the bodies of the two men and scurried into the hotel lobby.

It was over in seconds.

"Jesus, Timmons. Shit," Klein muttered. "You told him to fuck his mom, and then you beat the shit out of him. Jesus."

"Perhaps we'd best go now," said Tony Robson.

The Embassy car pulled up and took us to the Caves du Roi.

THIS WAS the last gathering of the boys in the Club Room bar.

IT WAS LATE SUNDAY EVENING, April 13th, 1975, when we left the Saint Georges Hotel, the jewel of the Minet-el-Hosn tourist district on Jounieh Bay in West Beirut. Earlier that afternoon, not far from the Saint Georges in the Beirut suburb of Ain-al-Rumannah, Christian Phalanges militia ambushed a bus carrying Palestinians from the Chatila refugee camp on a religious retreat, killing twenty-seven men, women, and children.

The Lebanese civil war began.

The Saint Georges would not survive.

The old rules no longer applied.