NEW YEAR’S EVE IN BEIRUT IS NOT A CELEBRATION, BUT A WARZONE

Don't get me wrong. There are no real battles happening on the streets of my city, or anywhere else in Lebanon. Not as far as I can tell.

What I mean is that everyone is fighting for a small piece of control. It might be honking cars stuck in a traffic jam, shoppers rushing to get the last order of lahme at the local butcher, or even me resisting the urge to ignore Mama’s orders and watch the basketball game.

No vaccine means no New Year’s Eve Party.

The threat she gave just before heading into work echoes in my head, my ears already rattled by the car horns that reach me in this crumbling eighth-story apartment.
Lebanese mothers can be as persistent as the plants growing on the concrete outside our apartment building.

My beat-up phone, the steel frame as thin as a credit card, illuminates when I ask it to open the government’s medical records app. The screen displays my name in English, Walid Khoury, as well as lists of vitamins, nutrients, and vaccines, one of which—a mere chickenpox vaccine—bears a red X beside it. My picture sits in a box at the corner. Messy black hair, half-lidded eyes, a bit of stubble under my chin.

The sight of my young, giddy self only annoys me more. Not only do I need to find an open clinic on the busiest night of 2044, but Mama arranged for the nerdy daughter of our neighbors to come along. My former classmate, Mouna Sayed.

Kids used to bully Mouna for always having her nose in a book. We never talked, and I've barely seen her since she got accepted to a private high school. Despite living just one floor up, neither of us ever—

A knock jolts me and I shove my phone into my pocket. I can already imagine Mouna’s crooked teeth, her hair a greasy mess, all those books held tight in her arms.

Yet upon opening the door, both my knees weaken. “M-Mouna?”

Clouds part from the skies behind my neighbor. Rays of sun break through the crumbling stairwell to illuminate short brown curls, the same color of those wide eyes, which hold me still as I wonder how this sixteen-year-old could be the Mouna I grew up with.
“You probably expected me to wait for you,” she says, cracking a wide smile. “It’s better we go now. After all, it is New Year’s.”

Cars zip across the road, both the older electric models and the new luxury brands running on saltwater. Steeling myself, I gesture to Mouna, beginning to cross only to jump back.

Another car roars by, this one older than the rest. The suffocating stench betrays it’s a gas model with one of those decades-old exhausts. My hands tighten into fists, a curse at the edge of my tongue, but the sound of laughter stills me.

My face goes hot as Mouna hurries forward, giggling as she passes.

“Something funny?” I ask, hurrying after her. “That driver almost killed me.”

“Well, they teach you to glance both ways in school,” she muses, hair dancing in the wind. “Of course, you and your friends must have missed that lesson while teasing me.”

I bite my lip at the first words she’s spoken in ten minutes of traversing our neighborhood. According to the government’s medical records app, the nearest clinic is just a block or two away.

Mouna waits at the edge of a cramped alley, freckled cheeks glimmering. Inexplicably, my heart begins racing when she gestures me over. Is it just me or is today unusually warm for winter?

“This is just beautiful,” she says, gesturing into the alley.

A souk stretches down the old cobblestone road. Street vendors pack both sides and, as we pass through, I notice most of the wares are party hats, t-shirts, and other New Year’s themed clothing. That and tables packed with delicious baklava, namoura, and other holiday delights.

While I’m ogling the sweets, the alley narrows. Mouna and I bump shoulders and I lean away.

“Uh...sorry.”
She glances at me, her darker cheekbones lifting, lips curling. “Sorry for what? Come on, the clinic is just ahead!”

She hurries forward and I stumble after her. There’s no reason for this rush, especially not on these cobblestones that feel made to trip reckless wanderers, but I hurry after Mouna. Vendors eye us while she’s carelessly skipping out of the alley, the path emptying into a busy street.

Now I’m truly sweating, but the clinic sits in front of us, sandwiched between two competing pharmacies. We have a joke in Beirut that, if you close your eyes and throw a stone, it will crash right through the window of one of those countless drug stores.

MEDICAL CENTERS ARE MORE DIFFICULT TO COME BY, WHICH EXPLAINS MY SIGH OF RELIEF THAT WE FIND ONE WITHOUT A LINE OUT THE DOOR.

Nearing the edge of the street, one woman screams for her two young children not to stray. Meanwhile, taxis single out tourists among the pedestrians, offering trips to the cedar forests, famous museums, and anywhere that might earn them spare cash to spend on the night’s festivities.

“Spare any tahini?” asks someone, an older woman standing from her balcony above.

Across the street, an even older-looking man answers, “Yalla, let me check!”

The conversation unfolds over us. Mouna shoves her hands in her pockets, taking in the scene as if it’s the first time she’s seeing Beirut. She chuckles and I want to ask her what’s funny. Yet, when she glances over to me, I avert my gaze.

“Care to cross?” she asks, gesturing toward the street. “Or are you shaken from nearly being killed?”

I open and close my mouth, fumbling for something to say, surprised my usually quick-witted responses are eluding me. It’s probably just the frustration of having to miss the game.

Silently, I step out onto the street between parked cars, watching the traffic. Both shouting neighbors agree to share ingredients and the children finally listen to their mother. Behind, the alleyway souk buzzes with excitement from tourists and residents alike, and that energy must be contagious because I charge forward, boldly crossing the street. No car appears to be coming and—

My heart leaps at the sound of skidding tires and abrupt braking. I freeze, my eyes settling on the truck that, pulling out of its parked space, sits just centimeters away from running me over.

“Are you awake?” asks the driver, face sticking out of the window. “You’re lucky this car has automatic braking!”

Fireworks and Fauda by George Jreije
I stomp my foot, anger forcing out the words I'd been struggling to find with Mouna. "No car can save a bad driver, you hayawan!"

Mouna steps in, gently shoving me toward the sidewalk. The second her fingers graze my sweater, a sense of calm washes over me. Why was I so angry just a second ago? Perhaps I should have been more careful.

Along with the calm comes embarrassment. I keep my gaze down at the ground as, beside me, Mouna remains silent. What does she think of me right now? Then again, why am I so concerned with that? Once I get this vaccine, we'll be back to being neighbors. Nothing more.

"Oh no..."

Mouna's words draw my gaze to the clinic ahead. A Lebanese flag adorns the white walls on one side while the wreaths of the United Nations logo are painted on the other. Above the blue door, a glowing red message flashes bright.

I curse beneath my breath just as a buzz in my pocket compels me to draw out my phone. It's my friends' group chat. Their goofy faces appear beside strings of messages all discussing the fun we'll have tonight. The mischief we can get into.

My chest swells. At least until I scroll down through my messages and find a recent one from Mama.

*Remember habibi, no vaccine means no friends.*

"Hey, are you alright?"

I fumble the phone into my pocket.

"Completely. Why?"

"The color drained from your face for a second there," she says. "Would you like to look for another clinic?"

Raising a brow, I ask, "Another? We came to the nearest one and it didn't work out. Mama will understand, especially now that I have a witness."

That last part I say with a wink. Expecting a giggle, Mouna's lips contort into a frown.

"There are other medical centers in the city," she says.
“Why delay the vaccine when it’s important for your health?”

I tilt my head. Does Mouna not get that I can come back later? Sure, public schools across Lebanon mandate that we get our vaccines by a certain date, but there’s no real punishment for missing deadlines. A note to Mama, or maybe a visit to the principal’s office, at worst.

A memory flashes through my mind. Mouna raising her hand in class, answering questions while some of the kids whispered jokes about her. I’d kept to myself back then. We were always on good terms, though I may have laughed at a joke or two.

“Well, guess you’re going,” she says with a half-hearted grin. “Can you check your phone for the next nearest center? My data would’ve cost a hundred thousand or so Lebanese Pounds, which we couldn’t afford this month.”

At hearing that, I’m stricken by a pang of guilt. Not enough to change my mind, but enough to get me to yank out my phone and draw out the medicine app’s map of clinics in Beirut.

“Why do you even need to visit the medical clinic?” I ask. “Someone like you wouldn't be late for a vaccine.”

“That’s true,” she says. “But I'm low on this medicine I've been taking since I was a kid, and I need a prescription. I've been feeling sick lately.”

My throat tightens, and I briefly glance up. Brown curls drift slightly in the wind, her large eyes fixed on the ground just as mine were moments ago. As if she has any reason to be disappointed. It’s me who’s complaining about missing a basketball game.

A new message lights up my phone screen. Another friend, but I ignore it, instead memorizing the location of the nearest clinic. A green checkmark beside the name means it should be open, but this time I check again to be sure.

“Come on,” I say, surprising myself. “There’s an open clinic about a dozen blocks away, so we have a long walk to make.”

Mouna lifts her head so quickly that I worry she’ll hurt her neck. The waning sunlight shines off her eyes and as she grins wide, I can’t help but do the same. A delivery drone hovers low
overhead, carrying a bouquet of roses that it drops in front of someone’s door.

Swallowing a breath, I collect my strength and I stand up straight. Mouna’s still beaming when I gesture her to follow. “We’ll have to head back through that alley if—”

“No more street crossings for you,” she says, grabbing my arm to stop me. “I have just enough for a taxi ride.”

“The Emirates had all their oil,” says the taxi driver, “but we invested in medicine. Now, see how nobody uses oil and everybody desires our technology? Lebanese doctors used to leave for better opportunities. Now doctors fight to come here.”

I heave a sigh as the driver pulls us up to the clinic. The last thirty minutes have been nothing but rambling, and a part of me wishes we’d walked, despite the air-conditioned ride in this noiseless electric car. Trying to channel out the driver’s voice, I focus on landmarks I rarely have the time to visit, from the many bookshops along the Hamra district to the sparkling shores of the Mediterranean ahead.

Meanwhile, Mouna hunches forward, chin in her hands as she listens to the impassioned speech. While wondering what about her makes everyone so comfortable, the driver cuts a sharp turn. Thrown sideways despite the seatbelt, my body bumps into hers and our heads collide so that when we meet, her lips brush my cheek.

“Sorry!” I gasp, quickly pulling away.

Mouna only giggles. “If you wanted a kiss, you should have taken me out for dinner first.”
Before I can argue, the taxi’s abrupt braking jolts us both. We climb out close to the windy coast and I hurry up to a line that’s formed outside the clinic. Mouna stretches her arms while coming to stand behind.

I roll my eyes, but her infectious smile fixes itself on my face again. Checking my phone, just over an hour has passed. The basketball game ended long ago, and I’m surprised at how little I’m bothered by missing it.

Mouna converses with a boy in line with his mother. The child tells her of his favorite cartoon while, as if listening to the Prime Minister himself, she eagerly nods. When the door to the medical center suddenly opens, excitement rises within me, but all we can see from the back of the line is a pair of white coats.

I palm my face, looking up to shout, “Are you serious?”

Others begin to groan and level complaints at the messengers. I step out of line, ready to charge the door and demand my vaccine. Yet when I twist around, Mouna isn’t even paying attention, instead waving goodbye to the boy and his mother.

“How can you not care about what’s happening?” I snap. After our disappointment with the first clinic, that annoying taxi ride, and now this second closure, I’m furious that Mouna doesn’t seem to care. “Did you even need that prescription, or do you just enjoy wasting my time?”

Mouna cups her mouth, lower lip trembling as my words appear to pinch a nerve. Without warning, she turns to run down the street, making for the waterside.

“Where are you going?”

Mouna ignores me and I chase her, fully aware of all the attention I’m drawing, of all the eyes watching as I hurry to catch up to her. She’s quick on her feet, but I’m faster and catch up to her at the edge of the—

I trip over my feet, losing control and watching myself almost tumble onto another intersection. Almost. Mouna turns just in time and catches my full weight, saving me.

We’re standing a block away from the edge of the water, the setting sun casting an orange-pink hue. Mouna’s face is close to mine, her arms wrapped around me, holding me up. My entire body warms despite the cooling sea breeze.

Swallowing, I muster the courage to say what’s been on my mind since she appeared at my door. “I’m sorry about what I said just now, but I’m also sorry about before. The way those
kids treated you in school...I should have said something.”

“How can they be so rude to the doctors?” asks Mouna, and for a moment I wonder if she’s ignoring my question. Then she says, “Thank you for saying that, and for never joining them when they did. But let’s forget the past. It’s New Year’s Eve and, look, how beautiful is the sunset?”

We both are about to gaze out when footsteps approach. “Excuse me?”

We turn to a man in rubber boots approaching. His stench reminds me of the fish market and I almost shoo him away, but Mouna gives him a chance. Trying to be less impulsive, I keep quiet too.

“No.”

“Yes!”

Mouna steps back and raises a brow, having been the one to reject the offer. “Did you not say you had to return home?”

“My friends can wait,” I say. “If it’s okay with you, I feel like watching the sunset.”

The glow of the moon replaces the sun as we travel across Beirut’s coast. Typically, the waters are rougher in the winter, but today they are quiet and empty of other vessels. It’s a silent ride with Mouna. A peaceful one.

It takes longer than the trip in the taxi, but the views dazzle. Brightly lit restaurants, historical churches, brand new mosques, I take it all in while sitting shoulder to shoulder with Mouna. She smiles the whole way to the port.

We thank the boat’s driver, a fisherman, once we arrive. I recognize this spot as where the explosions happened over twenty years ago. Now, it’s a lush park stretching out far into the distance. When we climb out onto the shore, a clinic the size of a mall stands before us, vines sprouting from its balconies and the doors open.
THE UNICEF LEBANON CENTER

We approach the entrance when Mouna stops. Biting her lip, she whispers, “I have a confession. That money I spent on the taxi…it was all I had left. How will we get home?”

She radiates under the moonlight and, recalling the bouquet delivery, I bend to pick a rose from a nearby bush. “We can take our time and walk back. After that, maybe, we could spend New Year’s together too.”

I take one small step closer, offering up the rose. Mouna closes the distance and accepts it, her hand finding mine, our fingers intertwining. The small battles fought across the city no longer matter. My friends, the parties, I forget all of it when she smiles.

“Together,” she says, leading me into the medical clinic.