

WAR LIKE MUSIC

I am born in January. It's a Wednesday afternoon whose brisk winds toss palm tree-tops into inverted umbrellas. Over the weekend, my mom notices that the yellowish spotting on my skin is spreading. She feverishly calls her gynecologist's office. They tell her that infants often look jaundiced and not to worry.

"The whites of her eyes are turning yellow." My mom tirelessly explains, having done her research.

"Her eyes? Bring her in."

The following Monday, my mom brings her barely five-day-old baby into the office, and with one quick examination, they contact the nearest hospital. They take the baby, rush her to the NICU, where a bili light box is being prepped. They try one light, attempting to break down the excess bilirubin in the liver. Two lights are also not strong enough.

They put the baby under the maximum of three bili lights. Four anxiety-ridden days pass. My mom can only stroke my little arm from a hole in the glowing blue incubator. Because the doctors aren't sure of the cause of the intense jaundice, they feed me formula, while my mom pumps and tosses her own milk.

When she comes to pick me up on the fourth day, she has lost so much weight, she is wearing her pre-pregnancy jeans. She grips the arms of the waiting room chairs, alongside my dad, grandparents, and toddler older sister.

"I'm happy to say that she is jaundice-free. Her bilirubin levels are at a normal range." The doctor announces to my nail-biting parents. "She'll be out in a few minutes, as we're finishing up some quick hearing tests before she's discharged."

The promised five-minute test period comes and goes. The doctor is gone for over an hour. When he returns, he seemed wholly unprepared to deliver the news.

"Maya failed the hearing tests we administered. Is this something you've noticed since you brought her home? Does she respond or startle at loud noises?"

My parents look at each other, racking their brains for every moment in the past week. Every bark of the dog, every yelp from their toddler, every laugh and cry and gurgle. They don't know.

"Do you have any personal or family history of hearing impairment?"

My mom shakes her head, as my dad simultaneously answers, “Yes.”

The doctor looks over, surprised.

“Oh, was that a yes?” He confirms.

Baba nods again.

“Were you in close range of machinery, plane engines, or artillery?” He prods.

“Yes.”

“That was a... yes? Which one?” The doctor falters.

“The guns.” Baba speaks plainly.

The doctor doesn’t say anything.

//

At weddings in Lebanon, people used to shoot guns into the air. It’s a means of celebration.

When Baba was seven or eight, there was a big wedding in the village. For three days, there were festivities. It was a casual ordeal, and everybody in the village was invited. The first two days of pre-wedding celebrations were filled with customs, separating genders into different parties, the men at the groom’s house and the women at the bride’s house. The parties would essentially be the same. Wafts of sweet arguileh smoke clouded the dance floor, but a circular dabke would always emerge, with aunts and uncles calling out a zaghrouta¹ at the dancers. The parties lasted all day and into the night.

At the end of the second day, there was a ceremony between the families. Baba sat in a row of chairs, swinging his legs back and forth and watched as the two families embraced. They exchanged smiles with tears and held each other’s faces. Though the sky was dimming, there was an unmatched excitement in the air.

Suddenly, the man sitting next to Baba stood up. Slung across his shoulder was a semi-automatic AK47. Before Baba registered what was happening, the man positioned his gun onto his hip,

¹ “*Lololololeeesh*” A high-pitched ululating sound, most often associated with the Levant region in the Middle East, used to express celebration and joy.

cocking the rifle into the air and released the trigger, sending a cackling waterfall of casings out the other end. In the span of a minute, he had shot thirty bullets into the air. The first of the pops ricocheted off the hollow cement houses and toward the mountains hugging the valley. But, then came the buzzing.

Baba couldn't hear anymore. He walked home, a droning buzz tickling his ears for the following days. He plugged and unplugged his ears, trying to relieve the buzzing, as if he could shock his ears back into hearing. But everything around him remained muted.

Several days after the wedding, sounds slowly returned, and his ears started to normalize. But his hearing was forever altered.

He still knows the man with the gun today and will never forgive him.

//

“Come to the middle, so he can hear you.” My mom says under her breath on a hike through southern California's rolling hills.

I stop walking, seeing that Baba had been craning his neck in my direction. My mom shifts and I take her place, bumping arms with him. I start my story over from the beginning, and watch as his neck relaxes looking out at the fuzzy green hills.

//

When he was very young, Baba had a lot of ear infections.

A woman in the village knew how to heal an aching ear, and so Baba would be sent to her whenever his ears started to hurt again. When he arrived at her house, she would start to heat a small pot of olive oil.

“Can you tilt your head some more, habibi?”

She took Baba's face into her textured hands. She dipped her finger into the warming oil, testing it on the back of her hand. Baba strained his neck, eyes searching for what was going to happen. When she was satisfied with the temperature, she carefully began to pour some down Baba's ear canal.

Olive oil was thought to be soothing and could break down the buildup of earwax. The oil wasn't hot enough to do damage. But after a few minutes, it would need to be taken out. In the absence of a syringe, the woman used the pressure of her own lips.

She anchored her lips to the outside of his ear, as she sucked in the air, lifting the oil and earwax from its previously-dislodged location. She then spit out the oil. Baba shut his eyes, bracing for the awkward moment to be over. When she was done, she sent Baba on his way.

He walked back to his house, plugging and unplugging his ears with his fingers, unsure of the damage she had done.

//

When Baba was seven, he and his older cousin found Baba's dad's rifle stashed away in a closet.

While their parents were talking in the other room, the two boys snuck into the cabinet, struck by the otherworldly appearance of the sleek Russian-grade black tubing of the gun.

"Do you want me to show you how to shoot it?" His cousin asked, a glint appearing in his brown eyes.

Baba nodded.

"I saw my dad put his hand here and pull back here." His cousin grunted with effort, the gun pointed up toward the ceiling of the cabinet. Baba and his cousin crouched down, nudging one of the cabinet's doors closed, blocking the strand of daylight in the room.

Suddenly, there was a click. The safety was off. A deafening punch of air seemed to crack the stale confines of the cabinet. And then it was silent. The rifle clattered to the floor soundlessly, recoiling, pushing ajar the cabinet door.

The boys froze.

In the other other room, the adults got to their feet, startled by the close range of the gun. They made their way to the room where Baba and his cousin still crouched in the closet.

A small hole splintered the wood of the cabinet, the tiniest wisp of smoke lifting from the surface². Baba's father marched over to the cabinet, where the incriminating butt of the rifle emerged from inside.

He swung open the doors, where Baba and his cousin clutched their ears. They watched as Baba's father opened and closed his mouth, furiously pointing to the top of the cabinet and the gun, then back at the boys.

Wide-eyed, Baba and his cousin watched the tirade escape his father's mouth. They couldn't hear anything. A shrill ringing claimed their minds.

//

Once every six months, I find Baba, on his right side, lying on the floor of his bedroom. He holds the wiry end of his glasses in one hand, as he positions his head atop his other arm. A tuft of tissue sticks out the right side of his head like a white hydrangea sprouting from the maze of his ear.

"Dinner will be ready soon," I tell him.

He looks up at me from the ground. "I need a few more minutes."

I move to leave, but I'm compelled to offer my assistance. The downstream effect of his ear trauma and corrective surgery has led to a buildup of earwax, which Baba now solves with a hydrogen peroxide dropper.

"Actually, yes. Can you grab the little bottle from the counter?"

He instructs me to administer three drops. I kneel down and very carefully position the small container over his ear. My other hand rests on his stubbly chin.

"Okay. One... two, three?" I hesitate, "that's all?"

"Yes, thank you." He smiles.

"What does it feel like?"

² My dad doesn't actually remember if there was a bullet loaded in it, and whether that had pierced through the cabinet. He tells it both ways, but in reflection, it's unlikely that his dad would keep a loaded gun in the cabinet. It doesn't really matter for the purposes of this story, because it's the sound that was the damaging part, but it was certainly dangerous.

“What?” He speaks a little louder, then re-adjusts his head, draining out the other side. “Oh, like some sizzling? It’s not too bad. It’s better than what they do in the doctor’s office, with a metal pick.”

//

It’s very un-cool to be safe. And like any other high schooler—while simultaneously acting as if I didn’t care—I did not want to be labeled *un-cool*.

I’m in the standing percussion section of the marching band, also known as the front ensemble, or pit. I am a mallet percussionist, so I play instruments like the xylophone, marimba, and vibraphone. The instruments are far too big to march with, so they’re put on wheels and pushed onto the turf of the football field. I set up my wheeled instrument on the fifty-yard line, stand, play, smile, and exit. And I get the same P.E. credit as the rest of the kids behind me, throwing silk flags, spinning wooden rifles, snapping their horns in the air. But, on Fridays, I become a part of the drumline, leading the football team onto the field, buzz-rolling through the national anthem, and counting off the fight song.

I join the high school marching band a year early, while still in middle school. I am already much smaller than the rest of the kids in high school, having only recently barely crested five feet tall. I’m shy and have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve been playing clarinet alongside my sister since fifth grade and only joined the percussion section by happenstance, thrown into the deep end, with barely a basic knowledge of piano to keep me afloat.

Before my first stint with the drumline, my mom helps me research and buy a pair of earplugs. There are three layers of soft rubber, with a plastic tip, in order to position them in your ear. I borrow an old neck string from a pair of sunglasses, and fit the plastic tips of the earplugs into the rubber ends of the string.

I try them on, skeptically watching myself in the mirror. Sticking straight out of my ears, the stiff material of the braided string makes a giant loop before falling down to my shoulders. It resembles a dystopian mind-controlling headset protruding from my ears.

It looks ridiculous.

I bring the earplugs to the next football game, stuffed into a little plastic case that I tuck into the front pocket of my uniform. I put my drum harness on, then zip my jacket over top of the bulky front. The earplugs are virtually inaccessible. Cool.

Before the game, the drumline meets the football team outside the gym, waiting for them to emerge from the locker rooms, still half-dressed in their protective gear, helmets at their sides. My history teacher approaches with the other coaches, all wearing baseball caps despite the sun actively setting. I watch as my history teacher turns into a man. Suddenly his short stature and bearded face shout inspirational words and grunts into a megaphone. The group of boys behind me grunt their enthusiasm in response.

The harness of the snare drum digs into my shoulders. I shift my weight onto one leg, propping the drum onto my knee, relieving the pressure momentarily. Then, the boys are ready. The head coach nods at me, and I click off the start of our cadence. The shaggy-haired boys knock their helmeted heads together, and a wave of adrenaline-filled hoots erupts from behind us as we start to march.

When I'm playing alongside the rest of the drumline, it doesn't seem loud at all. But as we approach the field, people turn away, covering their ears. Usually when people hear loud sounds, like a rimshot on a drum, they startle, often materializing as a blink reflex, partly in surprise at the sound and partly at its volume. When you're the one playing the loud noise though, it doesn't come as much of a surprise.

We approach the mouth of an inflated cougar—the school mascot—and the stands are packed with students and parents, cheering in varying amounts of school spirit. I can't really hear myself think over the deafening sound of the drums behind me and the crowd in front of me. But, I don't need to think too much. I just walk straight.

We play the fight song again, and then we head up the stands with the rest of the band. As we take off our harnesses and set up the drums on their respective stands, my mom comes over to give me a fist bump. Cool.

“Where are your...?” She points to her ears.

I pat my chest, where the little earplugs case sits. Of course, I have no intention to wear them.

She gives me a look that immediately spurs me into action, and I pull the ear plugs from the case, and hang them on my neck. This satisfies her, and she goes back to her seat.

We play several pep tunes, and I chat with my friends. At half-time, my mom comes over again to wish us luck on our halftime performance. She notices that the earplugs still hang from my neck. It's cool to have them, just not to wear them, I tell myself.

“It’s because I can’t hear them shouting the pep tunes. And, it’s hard to hear myself.” I explain, matter-of-factly.

“If you’re not going to wear them on the field, and you’re not going to wear them in the stands, where are you wearing them?” She responds. “You can’t just pick and choose when to keep your ears safe.”

She looks back at where Baba is sitting, talking with other parents. There’s an unspoken, *do you want to end up like him?* lingering.

My bandmates shuffle in the stands around me, lining up for the halftime show. I quickly gather the jacket of my uniform and nod, not meeting her eyes.

This interaction replays itself throughout high-school, and eventually she stops bringing it up. And I stop pretending to wear them. They remain tightly coiled, unused, in the bottom of my band bag.

//

Back in the NICU, the doctor blinks, baffled.

“Eventually I got a skin graft surgery to repair the perforated eardrums. Both of them.” Baba finishes.

“Wow,” the doctor pauses, “Well, there could perhaps be some sort of correlation. But, we won’t know for sure for another six weeks.”

“Six weeks? What—how do we move forward from here?” My mom pleads for answers.

“She can’t be tested again for six weeks, so you’ll need to make an appointment as soon as you can. Until then, try and test her reactions to different stimuli. Her reactions can be confounded, however, with sensing the vibrations of a sound or feeling breath on her cheek.”

//

I sit on a bench overlooking the sea, my attention focused on my outstretched phone.

Over FaceTime, my mom rehashes the stress of those six weeks, the constant testing. A trial of patience and contingency plans and research into learning sign language. Everybody that held me

was involved in the hearing tests, cooing at different pitches, covering their faces so as to not let the air escaping their mouth elicit a reaction.

The appointment with the audiologist had been set for February 14th. My mom had watched as they did preliminary tests in each ear. The doctor didn't say anything, simply writing the measurements on her clipboard.

“When they took you back for the final screenings, I was left alone in the room, staring at the stack of ‘Your Deaf Child.’” My mom’s voice hitches, and I search her face, quiet in her moment of vulnerability. “But, when the audiologist came back with you, she was smiling. She said, ‘I had really expected this appointment to go differently, but Maya is responding as expected to the hearing tests. Her hearing is fine.’ And this huge wave of relief came over me. It was the best Valentine’s Day gift I could have asked for.”

As she tells me this story again, I can’t help but be absolutely present.

A surfer calls out to a buddy, cresting a wave. They glide atop the blue mounds, leaving behind a trail of white bubbles that disappear as the wave folds over on itself, a rumbling crash that races down the shore. Tiny feet of a squirrel pad the ground behind me, and I can hear little toenails scrape the ground. I hear the brakes of a bike—no, two bikes—squeal and skid to a stop. A conversation breaks into laughter, their voices bubbling, falling in and out of each other’s lulls. Finches and white-crowned sparrows swoop and land on spindly branches of bushes, chirping and beating the air. The engine of a small jet approaches, and before I can see it, I hear it shift, its buzzing bouncing off the water. I watch as it bends into the coast, turning toward the mountains.