

The Space between Beirut and the Moon: The Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novel

Ahmad Naji Bakhti, BA, MA

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the
same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a novel and a critical thesis. My novel, *The Space between Beirut and the Moon*, follows the story of a young boy's coming of age within the confines of post-civil-war Beirut, around the first decade of the twenty-first century. The protagonist's relationship with his father (a book-hoarding journalist with a penchant for writing eulogies) as well as his relationship with his closest friend (a Druze who is said to worship goats and believe in reincarnation) shape his own character. His experiences vary from the mundane family and school life, to near death experiences as he redefines the space within a turbulent and illusive city. In the critical thesis, my creative work is positioned as a Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel in which a narrator struggles to grow and mature in what I term a 'counter-developmental' society. The thesis argues that the irreverent and poignant brand of humour employed in my novel as well as my use of the unreliable and fragmented narration are facilitated by my choice of language, my largely spatially removed position and my mostly inherited rather than experienced from of trauma. Through humour and unreliable narration, the coming of age narrator of my novel is able to reassert human agency and renegotiate new space within the ever-changing city.

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The Space between Beirut and the Moon

by

A. Naji Bakhti

I heard this theory once that if you toss a newborn into a swimming pool he'll come out the other side kicking. I find that highly improbable. My father, or so I believe, has always been a strong advocate of the theory. Instead of water, however, he chose books. And instead of infants, he chose the entirety of his son and daughter's combined childhoods. In more than one sense, my sister and I have been kicking through books for most of our lives. The idea was that if you expose a child to literature long and hard enough, he'll grow up wanting to be a writer, a critic, an editor or the J.R.R. Tolkien Professor of English Literature and Language at the University of Oxford. Of course, I wanted to be an astronaut.

'Don't be ridiculous,' he'd say, 'who ever heard of an Arab on the moon?'

'I'll be the first one,' I replied once, instead of taking the usual route of trying to look as non-ridiculous as possible, for my father's liking.

'You're flat-footed. They don't allow flat-footed Arabs on the moon,' he remarked casually, his face hidden behind this morning's AlNahar Daily, 'it's illegal.'

'Who said?'

'Jesus-Mohammad-Christ said, that's who,' that was another thing my father would say with unerring regularity. As if Jesus' middle name had always been Mohammad and everyone in the world had thus far simply failed to spot this most obvious truth. One expected nothing less of a Muslim man who had forged an unholy alliance with a Christian woman against the wishes of his now irritated family and his now pissed-off god, whom, one would have thought, must have known in advance and ought to have had ample time to cope.

'How many times have I told you not to dash your son's dreams?' my mother cautioned, as she made her way towards the balcony, cigarette in mouth and all. She was being generous today. Usually, she would spend most of her leisure time in the living room creating a cloud of smoke in front of her and then struggling to make out the images being displayed on the T.V. 'He can do anything he sets his mind to.'

‘Next you’ll be telling him he can walk on water. God knows we have a hard enough time getting from one country to another without being held back for a cavity search. They’ll shove a fucking Hubble telescope, mother and father, up his backside before they let him get on that space shuttle,’ he said.

‘Mother and father’ is a colloquial term used in Lebanon to express the idea of something whole or complete. For instance, the weight of the explosion knocked the man, mother and father, right out of the window, as men in Beirut occasionally are; or the building collapsed, mother and father, to the ground, as buildings in Beirut occasionally do.

A Lesson in Buddhism

When, in school, I was grilled on the subject of my religion by my classmates, I would respond with a shrug as bewildering to my inquisitors as it was to me. I knew that church was for Christians and mosque for Muslims. I knew this because both Christian and church begin with the letters 'C' and 'H', and because both Muslim and Mosque begin with the letters 'M' and 'O', if you should choose to spell Moslem as such, but don't. I knew that the Mosque was the one that smelt of feet on any given day, but particularly on Friday; And not nice nail-polished lady feet either, but thick-skinned and hairy man feet. I knew this because my friend, Mohammad, was Muslim and he smelt of feet on any given day, but particularly on Friday.

Mohammad had devised a game, or so he told us. He hadn't really. All he had done was learn it off of his big brother.

'Christian or Muslim?' he asked one day during break, extending two clenched and clammy fists and imploring me to pick one.

I picked Muslim because, in Arabic, it means peace and, I reasoned, no harm could come of peace. The Arabic word for Christian bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the Arabic word for crocodile, and I was not especially fond of crocodiles at the time.

Mohammad slapped me straight across my left cheek with his clammy right hand and ran. He hid behind the teacher's desk for what seemed like more than ten minutes and I eventually gave up looking for him and forgave him instead. The next day I asked him where he was all afternoon and he said he was hiding behind the teacher's desk for the first ten minutes and had since then found his mother, walked home with her, done his homework, watched 'Boy Meets World', went to sleep, woke up, brushed his teeth, skipped breakfast and walked straight to school.

'Nothing,' he said, before reciting the above activities to me in that same order.

From a distance I observed as Mohammad extended his still clammy fists to an older boy whom I had only known by name. Mohammad then struck the older boy, Boulos, across his right cheek. Boulos made an instinctive gesture as if to react. His arm was half-raised and in pole position to strike when he slowly and gradually began to lower it.

‘You’re Christian, Boulos. You can’t slap back. You see. Those are the rules of the game,’ said Mohammad, smiling triumphantly. ‘I know it’s not fair,’ he continued, ‘don’t blame me. Take it up with your own god.’

It was true that my mother had never made to slap me across the face, and nor had my father for that matter, but it was also true that the sole of her shoe had narrowly missed the tip of my nose and the top of my head on countless different occasions. Of course, on these occasions the sole of my mother’s shoe had long since left my mother’s foot and was making its own pilgrimage from her hand to whichever part of my body it had set out to reach. My mother may have been Christian but her shoe, almost definitely, was not Christian.

‘Am I Muslim or Christian?’ I asked my Christian mother over dinner. The family had been sitting before the TV set, each with a tray on his or her lap, for at least half an hour watching my father’s favorite Comedy Sketch program: ‘Basmeet ElWatan’, which literally translates to ‘The Death of a Nation’, or alternatively, ‘The Smiles of a Nation’, depending on the manner in which one chooses to read the title. The TV set was old with vinyl wood varnish and knobs rather than buttons and my little sister’s nimble fingers rather than a remote control. The story which my parents had upheld thus far was that either my sister or I had hidden the remote control somewhere within the house when we were very young and forgotten about it. They had searched for the remote countless times before, of course, and were eventually forced to concede that it was lost forever. We, my sister and I, had to pay the price for our mistake by getting up to change the channel every time one of our parents decided they didn’t like the program they were watching. As I was almost twice my sister’s age at the time, it often fell to her to change the channel.

‘Technically, neither,’ my father replied absent-mindedly, drawing a stern look from my mother and failing to notice both her stern look and my concerned expression.

‘Both, Adam,’ my mother said, seeking to reassure me in some way.

‘Yes but if I had to pick one, which would it be?’ I asked again.

‘I heard Buddhism is alright. Try that,’ my father said, smiling and winking to himself.

‘How many times have I told you not to confuse your son?’ my mother remarked.

‘I’m only laying out his options in front of him, darling,’ he replied.

The conversation then went in the direction of Buddhism and how they, the Buddhists, worship a short, fat and bald man, who looked remarkably like my uncle Nasser and who had spent most of his days naked and attempting to lift himself off the ground without the effort of moving his legs. He sounded, to me, like a more obese version of Jesus but without the long and fair hair and the glimmering blue eyes.

‘Glimmering blue eyes? Where do you think Jesus was born? Sweden?’ my father interjected, now turning his attention away from the TV set for the first time in the conversation.

‘Australia,’ my sister replied with an air of authority which belied her tender age of six.

‘Why Australia, fara?’ my father asked tugging at one of her pony tails playfully. Only my father called my sister ‘fara’. It means mouse.

‘Why not?’ she said, adjusting her ponytail.

The general consensus was that, as god would not have consciously and willingly overseen the evolution of the kangaroo, he must’ve turned his back on Australia for a good few thousand years and so could not have sent his own son to that overgrown island two-thousand or so years ago. The only link my sister and I could find between Jesus and Australia, years later, would be Mel Gibson, an Australian actor and director, who directed the movie ‘Passion of the Christ’. My sister maintains, to this day, that her answer was prophetic.

‘He was born in the middle east. He was probably tanned, had a long black beard, thick black eyebrows and dark black eyes,’ my father said, running his thumb and index finger over his thick, black moustache, ‘like Binladen.’

A week or so later, as he dropped me off to school, my father leaned over and explained that there were quite a few advantages to being a child of a ‘mixed marriage’, chief amongst them the ability to switch back and forth between both religions at one’s own convenience. By that point, Mohammad’s game had spread and most children, Muslim and Christian, had been slapped across their cheek at least once. Whenever we saw two of our classmates chasing one another during recess we knew that they were both Muslim and that the one being chased had just slapped his chaser straight across the face. The Christian boys, as you would expect, did not like this game very much, but none of

them slapped back or chased their aggressor because they were Christian and Christians must turn the other cheek, or so Mohammad, and countless other Muslim boys, had told them.

‘I want to play again,’ I told Mohammad who shrugged his shoulders and extended his arms to reveal both his clenched and clammy fists.

‘Muslim or Christian?’

‘Christian,’ I said smiling.

‘I thought you said you were Muslim.’

‘I did. But I changed my mind. My mum’s Christian. I can do that,’ I replied, victoriously.

Mohammad slapped me across the face and stood there laughing with four or five other Muslim boys, all of whom had latched themselves onto Mohammad ever since he’d introduced his now popular game to the playground. I did not wait for Mohammad to finish his laugh before reaching over and slapping him with the back of my hand across his right cheek as hard as I could.

‘That’s not how it works,’ he said, ‘You’re Christian, you can’t slap back. Ask your god.’

I asked him, I thought, and he said its fine by him if I go back to being a Muslim for the next few minutes. But I didn’t say it. I didn’t say anything. I slapped Mohammad again and again. The fourth slap knocked him off his feet. He made a helpless effort to punch back as he fell to the floor, swinging his fist in the general direction of my face. I pinned him to the floor and began to punch his face wildly. I imagined that he was an alien life form which I had come across in one of my journeys to outer space, whose sole aim was to spread a disease that would divide the entire human race into tiny little groups of men and women who fought endlessly amongst themselves and achieved progress only sporadically. None of his newly acquired friends came to his aid and they were joined by more spectators, mostly young Christian boys who were led to the scene by the mere smell of retribution.

As I sat there in the principal’s office thinking about what I’d done, my mother and father were escorted to the leather chairs either side of the one I had been occupying for the best part of an hour.

‘Sit, they’re not just for decoration, you know,’ the principal, Ms. Iman, said, tapping one of the leather chairs on its back and looking up at my father.

My father does not take too kindly to being told what to do by anyone, especially marginally younger women, and would likely have been much more cooperative throughout the remainder of the meeting had she, the principal, politely asked him to please take a seat without tapping any one of the leather chairs on the back and without making a remark about their function in an office. I was glad she had done both.

‘Are you happy about what you’ve done, Adam?’ asked the principal, leaning forward and staring me intently in the eye.

She was one of those women who had once been startlingly beautiful but who’d since deliberately taken the decision to cut her hair short, develop myopia and age a few years in order to be taken more seriously.

‘Yes,’ I replied, knowing that it was perhaps not the answer she was looking for.

‘You see, the boy shows no remorse,’ she said, addressing my parents and filling them in on the details of the incident.

‘It seems to me that my son was involved in a fight with another boy. Now where is that other boy?’ my father inquired.

‘Your son broke his nose. He’s in the hospital,’ she replied, raising her right eyebrow.

‘That hardly seems fair.’

‘What, that your son broke the boy’s nose? Or that the boy is receiving medical treatment at the hospital?’

‘My son’s arms are covered with little scratches which, clearly, have been left unattended,’ my father said, putting both his hands on the desk before him and adjusting his seating position, ‘This boy fights like a little girl.’

I chuckled and received a stern look from both my mother and the principal who evidently thought that neither my father’s remark was funny nor I entitled to laugh at it. I looked at my arm and noticed the tiny scratches for the first time. They hurt more now that I was aware of them. A tear must’ve escaped me as both of their expressions soon softened.

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ the principal asked, looking straight at me.

Ms. Iman’s what-do-you-want-to-be-when-you-grow-up lecture was infamous throughout the school. There was not a student summoned into her office who had not been on the receiving end of one. It went something like this: what do you want to be when you grow up? A doctor/ engineer/ lawyer/ business man/ teacher. And do you think doctors/ engineers/ lawyers/ business men/teachers punch one another in the face? No. Exactly, now apologize to your classmate.

To say that it is inherently flawed is an understatement. That the moral fiber of a human being is essentially tied to his occupation is ridiculous. Even as eleven year olds, we were well aware of that.

‘An astronaut,’ I replied.

‘An astronaut?’ she repeated, turning over to look at my mother who shrugged her shoulders and smiled politely, ‘whoever heard of an Arab on the moon?’

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father slap his forehead audibly with the palm of his right hand, then slap his right hand with the palm of his left one.

‘The point is you shouldn’t resort to violence every time someone insults your religion. It’s why the entire country has gone to the dogs. Is that clear?’ asked the principal.

‘Yes, Ms. Iman,’ I replied, occupying myself with the elaborate pattern of the Persian carpet on the floor.

‘Hold on. You’ve had a student spreading sectarianism around the school for the past month and you’re concerned that my son has found an unorthodox way of putting an end to it?’ my father asked.

‘Unorthodox? It’s completely orthodox, Mr. Najjar, that’s the problem,’ she said, somewhat impatiently, ‘this is not the first time your son has been involved in acts of indiscipline, or blasphemy for that matter. Just last week, he asked the Civic Studies teacher whether Jesus Christ existed in the same way that Santa Clause did.’

‘Well, with all due respect Ms. Iman, what the hell was Jesus Christ doing in a Civic Studies class at a secular school anyway?’ my father asked.

‘Calm down,’ my mother said, nudging her husband in the ribs.

‘And a month or so ago – tell your father what you said about the prophet,’ she demanded, addressing me and completely ignoring my father’s question.

‘I asked the Arabic teacher whether, after commanding Mohammad to read, god then smacked him on the back of the head with the Koran, like you did to me with Oliver Twist,’ I said, staring bluntly at my father.

‘In all honesty son, if Mohammad was anything like you, then god must’ve done, yes,’ he replied.

‘I will not have blasphemy in my office,’ said Ms. Iman.

‘Do you know who I am, Ms. Iman?’ my father had just invoked the quintessential Lebanese statement which often preceded an indisputable declaration of war between two mostly rational adults.

It doesn’t matter if you’re a second rate citizen living from paycheck to paycheck, with a modest background, no ancestors to speak of and earning barely enough money to feed your eight hungry children, in Lebanon you will ask this question of anyone who rubs you the wrong way and wait for them to ask you it back.

‘Do you know who I am, Mr. Najjar?’

Of course, neither of them knew who the other really was. Neither of them really cared to find out. My mother, suspecting as much, stood up, apologized to Ms. Iman, told her that I would be severely punished at home and asked for Mohammad’s mother’s phone number so that she may call her and apologize personally. I don’t know what my mother said, but I never heard from Mohammad or his mother again.

When we got home my parents sent me straight to my room to think about what I’d done. A few minutes later my father opened my bedroom door, walked in and locked it behind him.

‘Your mother and I agreed that the only way to punish you is this,’ he said, holding his black leather belt in his right hand.

‘But I didn’t,’ I began to object and stopped as soon as I saw my father’s index finger being placed firmly on his lips.

‘Jump and scream,’ he whispered, deliberately missing me and landing hard lashes on the bed sheets.

‘Never be afraid to fight for what you believe in, or defend those with less courage or intellect than yourself,’ my father said, lashing furiously at the bed, ‘but always stop short of breaking your opponent’s nose. You know you’ve gone astray – scream – when there’s blood involved.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, bouncing as high as I could and screaming over his words.

‘Stop that’s enough, stop,’ my mother implored, banging on the bedroom door.

‘Do not hesitate to blaspheme if religion happens to stand in the way of truth or knowledge, but do not do so intentionally to provoke others,’ he continued, inciting me to shout louder with his left hand, ‘apologize – louder – to those whom you have wronged, but never wait long enough to be told to do it by others. It takes the gloss off of the apology.’

‘Open this door right now or so help me god, I will burst through it,’ my mother shouted.

For a moment, my father stood before me panting and trying to catch his breath; then he unlocked the door, swung it open and walked past my mother without saying another word.

Aljahiz and Monsieur Mermier

Not too many men are fond of the time their father almost ended their life. It would be a sad tale to tell had my life actually ended, and I, in all likelihood, would not be the one to tell it. As it so happened, I survived.

Once, I asked my father if he could give me his copy of 'The Miserly', a book by the Arab philosopher Aljahiz, which was probably collecting dust somewhere around the house. He gave me a ten thousand Lira note instead and told me to go buy my own version before hiding his head behind the AlNahar daily. He was looking to see if they had published the article he'd sent in the week before. Such was the chaos which engulfed the house that when my father declared a book lost, no one bothered to look for it.

All I knew about Aljahiz was that his tragic and untimely death had come about when an entire library of his own books fell on top of him one night and crushed him to death. It was how we'd all imagined my father would go, looking for a book to read and then suddenly being overwhelmed by a number of them launching themselves at him.

Many visitors who passed by our home on occasions, would take one glance at the piles of books stacked haphazardly around the house and put them down to my father's insatiable thirst for knowledge. It was not, however, my father's insatiable thirst for knowledge which cost us valuable house space, it was his insatiable thirst for books. I use the word house, loosely. Ours was not a house; it was a small apartment on the sixth floor of an old building in Ras Beirut, just off Hamra Street. The location was ideal, but the apartment itself was designed to fit one or two people at most. Certainly, not four people and an entire library.

When Monsieur Mermier, a Frenchman working for the UN, moved in to the apartment facing our own on the sixth floor, my father jumped at the opportunity to invite him to our home. The Frenchman, he told me, is the pinnacle of cultured and intellectual men. Of course, he might have said the same thing about Englishmen, were we living next door to an Englishman.

'Your home is a sanctuary for literature, Monsieur Najjar,' said Monsieur Mermier, taking a sip of his Turkish coffee.

'And a dumpster for everyone else,' my mother added, offering Monsieur Mermier a tray of Arabic sweets and wiping the smile off my father's face.

After my mother went to sleep, my father took out a bottle of Arak, a slightly stronger version of vodka diluted with water to be just as strong, and offered Monsieur Mermier a few shots. They drank to health and Lebanon and success and new friends and peace and old friends and peace and France and Lebanon and Charles De Gaulle and Jacque Chirac and my great grandfather and good health and Zidane's footballing skills and success and Barthez's bald head and Voltaire and Monsieur Mermier's mother and my grandmother and Lebanon.

Despite him getting along well with my father, I was always mildly suspicious of Monsieur Mermier. For instance, he would regularly sit with one thigh resting completely over the other; it was a manner which I had never seen a man sit before. Most men I knew, including my father, would place one ankle over their knee and sometimes hold it there with their hands. His unusual seating disposition led me to one of two conclusions: either Frenchmen do not have genitals or, more likely, evolution has exclusively granted them the ability to suck their genitals inward, whenever they so choose. Also, he called me 'le petit prince' which I did not like.

By the time I was five, I had grown accustomed to leaping over piles of books to get from one room to the other. Later, I stopped leaping and simply walked over the books as if they were part of the floor, infinite little rectangular tiles each with its own design forming some random grand pattern which made sense only to my father. During my adolescent years, I developed the much more pronounced technique of kicking through the books and landing them halfway across the apartment. But then my adolescent years were one large kick at life, and the books were no exception.

Two large 'towering blocks of literature', as my father often referred to them inspired by Mr. Mermier's comments, stood on either side of the apartment door as you walked in. Occasionally, I would stack the books on the floor over one another in such a way as to emulate a spaceship and pretend I was on my way to the moon. My sister would join in by spreading her little body across the floor and pretending to be a star, with ponytails.

'Grow up,' my father would say every time he passed by my spaceship, which is why I never got to the moon.

Beside the kitchen, there was an entire room which no one apart from the members of my family had ever seen. It consisted of nothing but layer upon layer of old books, which presumably my father had once read. It was locked for most of the time anyway and my father carried the key around in his pocket. Whenever my father wished to find a book which he suspected was inside the room, he would hand my five or six year old sister a flashlight and toss her inside. For the most part, she enjoyed the task until she came across a dead cockroach, or worse, a living one, at which point she would begin to scream and my watchful father would reach across, grab my sister by the shirt and place her on the floor between his legs.

‘They’re harmless, Fara. They’re even smaller than you are,’ my father would say, before taking out a can of Bygone and emptying it inside the room.

I pushed the door open one Tuesday afternoon, having just returned from school, and found my father attempting to slowly pull a single book out from underneath one of his two ‘towering blocks of literature’. The house was unusually empty as my mother and sister were not yet home. He ordered me to stand beneath one of them and support its weight while he made an attempt to withdraw the book. The moment he forcefully tugged at the book, perhaps out of frustration, both columns came tumbling over my head. Though we lived in a small apartment, the ceiling was undoubtedly high and had one of the heavier hardcover volumes of Encyclopedia Americana fallen on my head, some serious injury might have resulted to my skull. None of them did. I would later survive two full-fledged wars and one tiny one which would last for four whole days, but I consider this incident to be the most life threatening, near-death experience I’ve ever been involved in.

I leaped and screamed and swore and cursed and was excused for all I’d done when my father saw that the books had landed on the floor and not on my head. He clutched my shoulder with one hand and kissed the top of my head twice.

‘Not a word of this to your mother,’ he said, as we picked the books up and began to stack them into two perfectly aligned columns.

The Oldsmobile

Ours was an aging, white, second-hand American made car called Barney. The night my father bought it from Payless Car Rental, he took me by the arm and told me all about how he intended to take us for a ride around Beirut in the morning. The next day, he gathered us around him, rubbed his hands together and presented us with the keys to the Nineteen Eighty-Eight Oldsmobile.

My mother muttered something, put out her cigarette and left the room.

The car had been christened Barney by my sister who, having not yet seen the car, decided that it too deserved a name. Though not many people appreciated Barney, the neighbours seemed to agree that the name worked.

My father's choice of cars had been notoriously unpopular. His tendency to buy used cars and, in this instance, overused cars resulted not only in regular visits to the overjoyed mechanic but also the occasional car accident and the increasingly frequent exchange of sharp words between my mother and father. For the most part, they pretended that we could not hear them in the back and, for the most part, we were glad to pretend that we could not. My sister, who at five was not as keen an observer of our silent agreement with our parents, would on occasion stick her head in between the front seats in order to adjust the air conditioning or the radio, at which point my parents would briefly fall silent. They would resume only after the last of my sister's ponytail had withdrawn itself.

The neighbors did not like our car because it was too big and because it would take up too much parking space. My mother did not like it because it was white and would get dirty far too easily, and because my father had bought it without first discussing the matter with her. My sister did not like it because it was infested with little cockroaches that would, frequently, climb up her own little legs, and because it seemed to trigger an argument between my mother and father more often than not. My grandfather did not like it because the only thing worse than an American-made car is a second-hand American-made car and because he had explicitly advised my father not to buy this second-hand American-made car. My father, and the mechanic, were very fond of it.

Whenever my father was asked what he'd seen in this overgrown excuse for a car, he would inevitably come up with a reply to do with luxury.

‘It’s like driving a Limousine,’ my father would say, until my grandfather informed him that driving your own Limousine was very much missing the point of owning one.

It was not long before my father came to view the car as an extension to our home. Soon my sister and I found ourselves sharing the back seat with all manner of paperback and hardcover books each seemingly intent on making it their own with little regard for leg space. The grayish cloth which had served to cover the inner ceiling of the car did so only half-heartedly, creating something of an air pocket between itself and the ceiling and now hung low enough to scrape the head of almost anyone insisting upon sitting fully upright. The remaining side-view mirror was soon knocked off by a speeding motorcyclist and the rearview mirror by my father’s angry swipe at it. Driving Barney, as a result, involved an active effort on my sister’s part who would sit on top of a stack of books, with her back to my father, and inform him of oncoming cars when the occasion called for it. During the months of the winter, water from the rain would find its way through the cracks and seep into the seats. The smell of wet, crumpled old newspapers, which we often placed between ourselves and the damp seats, coupled with that of the seats themselves, and the equally damp books, was to become a constant over the brief but full life of Barney the car.

Every Sunday my father would pack us all, my mother, my sister, myself and the damp literature, into the car and drive us to his father’s house. On the way there, to distract us from the challenges of the car ride, my father would tell us stories about Bilyasho, which is Italian for clown and is spelt: pagliaccio. Bilyasho was a character who also featured heavily in the bedtime stories my father used to tell us. Bilyasho would get himself into all sorts of trouble, and then get himself out of it by pure chance. He never meant anyone any harm, but he always brought it upon those closest to him. All the other characters admonished Bilyasho at the end of each story but then they forgave him and laughed about his latest adventure.

My grandmother would welcome us with a smile and open arms. My grandfather with a nod. He had lost most of his hair and teeth. What little hair he did have, he would make sure to dye brown which he, to my grandmother’s amusement, insisted was his original hair colour; a habit which my father picked up on in his later years. His

remaining teeth too were brown. His penchant for smoking over more years than he cared to count, ensured that they would remain so. My grandfather's smiles were as spare as his teeth and neither was a sight which I ever got used to seeing.

According to my father, the only time my grandfather is supposed to have smiled, prior to that Sunday, was when he won the lottery. My grandmother neither affirms nor denies this; nor does she claim to have seen him smile on their wedding day or on the birth of any of his ten children, especially the last one. Whenever I would ask my father where all the lottery money had gone, he would shrug his shoulders and tell me to ask my grandfather. I never did. My sister who had been privy to this routine exchange, between my father and I, chose not to take part in it, only to observe from the perspective of a five year old.

My grandfather tells the story of how he woke up one morning with his old license plate number ingrained in his mind, how he wrote it down so as not to forget it, how he went around Beirut looking for the ticket with that same number, how he couldn't find it, how he could not find it, how he wished he could, how he sat down at Wimpy Café on Hamra Street for a cup of Lemonade with mint, how he settled for a ticket with a single digit off, how he called on Abou Talal to help carry the briefcase full of cash across Ras Beirut, how Abou Talal had advised him against withdrawing the money all at once, how he ignored him, how hot it was that day, how he could tell because of the large sweat stain across Abou Talal's shirt, how humid, how like Beirut in the summer.

My father tells the story of how his father took him, the eldest, by the arm and told him all about the lottery ticket and his plan to return with a briefcase full of cash, and Abou Talal, how he was instructed not to tell anyone, how he ignored his father's instructions at the earliest opportunity and assembled all three of his brothers and all four of his sisters and his mother, how his father opened the door to find them all awaiting his arrival, how Abou Talal wiped his forehead and how my grandfather smiled.

'Where did all the lottery money go?' asked my sister one Sunday, looking up at my grandfather, as my parents and I made our way past the odd collection of twenty or so assorted relatives standing up to greet us.

My grandfather smiled. My father did too. Everyone else let out a nervous laugh, or pretended not to have heard.

When he first won the lottery, AlNahar ran with an article calling him ‘the man who won whilst the nation lost’. It was the early seventies and Lebanon was on the verge of a civil war that would last for fifteen years. In that time period, my grandfather Adam travelled the world, sometimes disappearing for weeks and months on end but always returning home to his war-torn country, his faithful wife and his steadily increasing number of children. Once, after a particularly long absence, my father asked him why he’d taken so long to come back.

‘Traffic,’ answered grandfather Adam, then he threw my young father the keys to his new Mercedes-Benz. He had driven it all the way from Frankfurt.

In the years after the war, when grandfather Adam’s lottery money had almost run out, he arranged to go on the holy Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, referred to as Hajj. He had, thus far, not been particularly renowned for his religiosity; his casual approach to alcohol, bacon and extramarital sex being some of several reasons why he was not. Grandfather Adam never divulged his motives behind that trip, or any other. My father mused, years later at the funeral, that it was a result of some misplaced urge to express gratitude to someone for those fifteen or so years of joy. It was not lost on my father that gambling too, of which the lottery is a variation, is forbidden in Islam.

Upon returning from Hajj with a black eye, my grandfather is said to have serenaded everyone who had come to congratulate him on a successful pilgrimage with the tale of how he had been involved in a fight at the Stoning of the Devil ritual. A man had stoned him instead of the devil and he had stoned back. It was one of those rare occasions in which he had opened up about his travels at all.

‘Where?’ my sister asked again, still staring at him.

‘Everywhere,’ my grandfather said, leaning over to the sound of a much quieter room.

He placed both his hands on my sister’s shoulders and told her the story of how he woke up one morning with his old license plate number ingrained in his mind, how he wrote it down so as not to forget it, how he went around Beirut looking for the ticket with that same number, how he couldn’t find it, how he wished he could, how he could not find it, how he wished he could, how he sat down at Wimpy Café on Hamra Street for a cup of Lemonade with mint, how he settled for a ticket with a single digit off, how he

called on Abou Talal to help carry the briefcase full of cash across Ras Beirut, how Abou Talal had advised him against withdrawing the money all at once, how he ignored him, how hot it was that day, how he could tell because of the large sweat stain across Abou Talal's shirt, how humid, how like Beirut in the summer.

‘And then?’

And then he told her about how, on his way back with Abou Talal, he had been ambushed by two Christian militiamen who demanded the briefcase, how he had been forced to fling the briefcase as far and as high as he could while he held them off, how the briefcase had burst open in the air, how random people on the street had danced to the tune of paper falling from the sky and how, for a brief moment, it was raining Liras on Hamra Street.

When it was over my grandmother had her head in her hands and my mother was standing over my sister with an arm around her. My father looked at me and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Still driving that piece of shit?’ shouted my grandfather after him, as we made our way past the same odd collection of twenty or so assorted relatives standing up to bid us goodbye.

My parents got into an argument on the way back. They argued about my grandfather, then about my sister then about the car. The fact that my father had managed to park the car almost ten minutes away from the house, for lack of suitably large parking space, further infuriated my mother.

Behind our house which was not a house, there was a garden which was not a garden. It was a parking lot reserved for the tenants of the apartment building; and it was my father who had first dubbed it a garden on account of a single tall Jasmine tree surrounded by a small plot of soil in an ocean of cement. On Independence Day, as my sister approached her fifth birthday, the children in her nursery school were handed young Cedar trees in little pots and told to take them home with them. Upon spotting my sister walk into the house, holding the Cedar tree in one hand and my mother's hand in another, my father scooped her up and carried her to the garden. My mother, my sister and I observed as he dug a small hole in the soil with his hands and planted the Cedar tree right by the Jasmine one. My mother then scolded my father for giving his daughter false hope.

What the children in my sister's nursery school were not told is that Cedar trees are not meant to survive and grow indoors, or anywhere by the coast for that matter, and that the potted plants would soon after proceed to wilt and then die.

'You told the boy he could become an astronaut,' my father said, dusting the soil off his hands and clothes.

'That is different,' my mother replied.

'I'm just giving the tree a fighting chance,' he said, as he rolled down his sleeves.

For a week afterwards, the highlight of my sister's day was checking on the Cedar tree in the garden on her way back from school. It had not grown an inch but it hadn't died either. Then one day Madame Hafez, the landlord and fifth floor neighbor, ripped the plant from the ground and tossed it in the trash can. She was not French but she had insisted upon being called Madame. Her husband Doctor Farhat, who winced every time someone referred to him as Monsieur Hafez, was the old man responsible for planting the Jasmine tree in the then parking lot. In the elevator, he crouched down so that his eyes were level with my sister's and apologized on his absent wife's behalf. She adjusted her ponytail and nodded.

In order to park a car in the parking lot with the single Jasmine tree, one had to squeeze one's car through a narrow passageway which separated the adjacent building from our own. This was not ideal for most of the neighbors even with their German, Asian and French models, but for my father, with his Nineteen Eighty-Eight Oldsmobile, it was impossible. His attempt to force the car through the narrow space between the two buildings is how the first side-view mirror was knocked off. My father continued to pay the obligatory parking fee for a spot which served only to remind him that his car was too big.

'I'll sell it,' my father proclaimed, as we made the rest of our way to the house on foot, 'I'll charge them extra for the literary entertainment.'

'It's not about the car,' my mother said.

'I'm not moving to London to live off your sister's charity,' he said, slamming the steel gate to the building shut.

'Australia, then.'

'God damn Australia,' he shouted, 'and the hour in which it was created.'

A sharp exchange of words in the elevator was soon followed by a sharper exchange of words in the dining room, which in turn was followed by my mother's angry swipe at the stacks of newspapers on the dining room table. The *Alnahars*, *Alhayats*, *Alanwars*, *Alsafirs* and *Aldiars* along with *A History of Arabia*, *Sometimes I Dance*, *Echoes of a Western Word*, *The Druze Revisited*, *My Beirut Then* etc. flew across the room as my mother stormed out of it. My father knocked the remainder of them onto the floor, flung the door open and left the apartment. My sister and I were no longer in the backseat of the car pretending not to listen.

For some time afterwards, my sister and I sat in silence. Then she stood up, launched herself towards the newspapers on the floor and began kicking them, throwing them in the air, leaping, snatching at them as they, now *Liras* and now *Madame Hafez's* non-French face, fell to the floor again. She did this until she could not bear to stand, then she stretched her body across the floor and I stretched mine alongside hers.

Mother and Father

As my sister, my mother and I sat around in a circle crammed inside a single bathroom, my father stood over us, cross armed, listening intently to the sound of bombs going off in the distance. We could measure their proximity, my sister and I, by the intensity of the expression across my father's face. A cringe meant that it would land somewhere else, on someone else's house, on someone else's family. It was when my father looked up that we feared the worst. I could never quite tell whether he would look up expectantly or whether he would do so in order to better hide his facial expression from us. There was also the relatively insignificant fact that when the shelling dragged on for hours the sensation of fear was inevitably replaced by the unbridled urge to go or shit or pee or excrete desperately unwanted wastes. Whenever a bomb went off somewhere very far away, he would look down at us and smile and ask us about school and deadlines and essays and football and literature and such, mindful of our need to go.

It was the war of '67 or '82 or '00 or '06 and Israel and Lebanon were at it again. I, like my father before me and his father before him, was crouched inside the safest room in the house beside my family and hoping to god that no RPG rocket or bomb would land on my home. The last man to hold a gun for war in our family was my great grandfather Samiir who fought for the French army during the mandate. His medals of honour are now a family heirloom, still in possession of my father. Upon winning the war, the French offered my great grandfather the French passport and nationality, which he accepted. For a brief period of time I was an as yet unborn Frenchman, then Lebanon got its independence and my great grandfather opted to burn the French passport in celebration.

On a routine night within the walls of the bathroom, my mother looked over at my father and then at me.

'You're lucky,' she said, as mothers almost inevitably will, 'some writers spend their entire lives looking for inspiration. You're hiding from it in the bathroom.'

I wanted to shout back, to say that I never wanted to be a writer, to ask whether she was suggesting I stand on the balcony and let inspiration and stray bullets hit me in their stride, to exclaim that there was probably infinitely more inspiration in space than there ever would be in a tiny old bathroom in Beirut. But I didn't, because when you're

hiding from death, you worry about him overhearing you saying nasty things to your family, and interfering to stop the brawl.

‘I want to go,’ I said to anyone who would listen.

‘Go where?’ my mother asked.

‘There,’ I said, pointing to the toilet seat.

‘Hold it in, you’re a man,’ my father scowled.

‘I can’t,’ I said, but I did. I held it in for two hours.

‘You can do anything you set your mind to,’ my mother said.

‘But I can’t,’ I said, now almost pleadingly. But I did, I held it in for another hour.

‘Your little sister isn’t nagging as much as you are,’ my father said.

Until finally, after five hours, I let go. No man ever remembers the good old days when he used to shit himself daily, if he did, he would be infinitely more modest.

‘Jesus-Mohammad-Christ,’ my father said, looking at my mother in disbelief, ‘your son just shit himself.’

‘What have you done?’ my mother asked in a whisper.

Once the first tear rolled down my cheek, there was nothing I could do about the rest.

‘I think I’d rather be out there,’ my father said, cringing.

‘Leave him alone,’ my sister shouted, clenching her fists.

‘It’s alright,’ my mother said softly, wiping the tears from her face and mine, ‘it happens.’

A flat-footed Arab astronaut is one thing, but a flat-footed Arab astronaut who once shit himself is an entirely different prospect.

At that moment, my father looked up; both my sister and I ducked in anticipation. It was the closest one yet. We later learned that the bomb had landed on the building adjacent to our own. Our bedroom window had shattered completely and shards of glass could be found on our beds.

When the shelling stopped my mother took out the broom and began to dust the glass off the beds.

‘I just cleaned those windows, you sons of bitches,’ my mother shouted at the top of her voice.

It was an hour or so before we'd tidied up the house and replaced the glass with scotch tape. I put on my best clothes and followed my mother around the apartment, attempting to make myself useful.

My sister and I heard repeated banging coming from the halls so we rushed there in time to see my father's attempt to knock down Monsieur Mermier's door fail miserably.

'He won't answer,' he said, more to himself than to us, 'I've been knocking on his door for the past ten minutes.'

Monsieur Mermier had been dead for more than an hour. The debris from the adjacent building had rebounded into his living room and there was nothing we could have done about it. The neighbors, all of the neighbors from the first floor to the fifth floor, gathered inside Monsieur Mermier's apartment, not that any of them had known him very well while he was still alive. Some of them called the ambulance, some of them mopped the floor, some of them picked up the broken shards of wood and glass and placed them in a pile beside the garbage bin but most of them just stood by the door and cried.

'He was so young,' one large woman said, in between sobs.

'Not that young,' my sister interjected, to the sound of one or two chuckles and a few odd stares.

'Young enough,' the large woman replied.

'Young enough for what?' my sister asked, only to be ignored.

'Was he Muslim or Christian?' inquired the large woman.

'He was French Chafeeka, what do you think?' said a much shorter and stouter woman.

My father grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to the kitchen. He shut the door behind us and locked it. For a moment I thought he was about to take out his black leather belt and lecture me on the importance of restraint and maintaining one's composure. But he didn't. He took out his bottle of Arak and poured us a shot each.

'To Monsieur Mermier,' he said, raising his glass.

Many years later, long after I'd left Lebanon to pursue a higher education in London, my father would write a heartfelt article in AlNahar newspaper. It would be his final article before he retired.

'I curse the country,' he would write, 'I curse the country that bid our children farewell with a smile across its face and told them to never return. I curse the country that presented our children with two alternatives: death or immigration and instructed them to pick between the two. I curse the country that forced its parents to send their children to outer space, or worse Europe, and wave silently from afar. I curse the country that gave our children water but no future, soil but no belief, light but no hope. I curse the country that stripped our children of their parents, and us of them. I curse the country that made fools of us all and led us to believe that we would grow old watching our sons and daughters rise to greater heights amongst their fellow countrymen. I curse the country that robbed me of my afternoon Arak with my son. I curse the country that deprived me of the sight of his wispy beard slowly maturing into one which resembles my own. I curse the country that resigned my wife and I to that comfortable couch in the living room, staring past broken shards of glass into the empty void that is tomorrow. I curse the country, mother and father.'

The Macarena

There is an article which my father wrote several years before I was born and which my mother kept hidden away from the dust in her table of drawers. She showed it to me as soon as she believed I was capable of appreciating it. Every so often I would forget about it, and my mother would produce it again; a little older, a little more fragile but still readable. In it, my father claims that he only wants three things out of life: a book to carry his name, a tree to carry his seed and a child to carry him when he can no longer carry himself.

A car never figured into it. We awoke the morning after Monsieur Mermier's death to find the Oldsmobile riddled with bullets and littered with broken glass and heavily punctured books and newspapers. My father stood before it scratching his ear, first with his thumbnail then with the car keys, and smiling. That was the closest Barney would ever get to a eulogy; my mother shaking her head and lighting cigarettes, my sister and I inspecting the bullet holes and my father scratching his ear.

As the tow truck was too large to squeeze into an already narrow street lined with well-washed cars on either side, Barney stayed. It soon became a landmark, as well as an intermittent home for a brown street cat with a collar, which my father named Ninnette after the porter's wife. Ninnette was a dark-haired, brown-eyed slender woman who wore a gold necklace around her neck and several gold bracelets around her wrist. She smiled back at anyone who did not ignore her.

Residents of the same street would inform the Shawarma deliveryman, and other visitors, that they lived two buildings down from the old, white American. My sister was of the opinion that the street was not too far off being called the White American. It was true that the original Sadat, so called after a former Egyptian president who briefly restored peace under dubious circumstances in the post Jamal Abdel Nasser era only to be assassinated by the Israelis or the Egyptians or God's will, was not a particularly popular name.

The porter, Saeed, who was also Egyptian and who would now and again beat both his sons and their mother, made a habit out of ringing the doorbell early in the morning, newspaper in hand, to ask my father whether today was the day that the white

American would disappear forever. Saeed believed that he could turn a profit by getting my father to sell him the white American for cheap.

‘Any news?’ my father would ask, taking the An-Nahar Daily from Saeed’s hands and sifting through it.

‘Madame Farhat is complaining that the car hasn’t been washed in a while,’ said Saeed one morning in midweek, as my sister and I prepared for school.

‘Then wash it,’ my father replied, still going through the contents of the paper.

‘But there are no windows and too many holes.’

‘Shouldn’t that make it easier?’

‘Yes, Basha.’

‘Basha’ is an Ottoman term which Saeed reserved for any man who was not a porter. It means lord.

‘Anyone moving into that apartment?’ my father asked, nudging his head in the direction of Monsieur Mermier’s old home, without raising it to meet Saeed’s eyes.

‘Monsieur Mermier’s belongings are still in there.’

‘Yes.’

‘I found this book in your American car,’ said Saeed, scratching his chin and producing a tattered book from under his armpit, ‘something about goats and reincarnation, it is a bit damp, but still readable,’ said Saeed, scratching his chin.

‘It is yours. Have it.’

In his early forties, my father developed an interest in the Druze, a peculiar religious minority which exist only in the mountains of Syria and Lebanon. The car, more than our home, contained remnants of that period of time when to my father only, the Druze were all the rage. No one knew very much about the Druze and, it was said, the Druze did not know very much about themselves except that they believed in reincarnation and that they might learn more about their religion in the next life. Those who wrote books about the Druze devoted the vast majority of their books to dispelling myths about the Druze believers and their beliefs. ‘The Druze Story’, for instance, was written by a scholar, Elias Jabra, who had limited knowledge on the matter beyond what his brother had told him. The scholar’s brother had shot and temporarily killed several

members of the Druze community in the War of the Mountain between the Christians and the Druze in the eighties.

One such myth was that the Druze did not eat spinach because a holy goat once slipped on a pile of spinach leaves and broke its neck. Jabra had this to say on the subject: 'Most Druze would tell you that the slip is not the reason they refrained from eating spinach and that goats are, as far as they know, not particularly holy. Some of them would even tell you that they do eat spinach, albeit in the same manner that a Hindu would eat beef, or a Muslim eat pork.'

A rare Druze classmate of mine, Basil, would ask his mother to pack spinach and rice in his lunchbox every day, and every day his mother would. This went on for a month with Basil eating spinach and rice during the break and receiving a dirty look or two in the process. Until, finally, everyone proclaimed Basil a Druze atheist who did not believe in the holy goat.

During the lunar month of Ramadan, while my Muslim classmates fasted, Basil and I ate. While they thirsted, we drank. The Christians ate and drank too, of course. But they did not chew too loudly, nor burp, nor lick their fingers, nor soak their lips in burger sauce or mayonnaise, only their teeth, nor raise their heads to knock back a cold can of Pepsi on a hot sunny afternoon.

When the history teacher asked why Basil and I were not fasting, I said I was a Christian and Basil said he was a Druze. Ms. Bache was a brunette who had dyed her hair blonde because it was turning white. Crow's feet had formed around her eyes which her choice of large, round glasses only served to highlight. She also wore a scarf around her neck at all times. No one knew what exactly was wrong with her neck.

'Are the Druze not supposed to fast?' asked Ms. Bache in class.

Basil pushed out his lower lip and scratched his eyebrow in reply.

That month, Basil and I were invited to our first Iftar, the ceremonial stuffing of one's face at sunset to make up for all the hours of the day spent thinking about hot food and not eating it. It was another Mohammad who had invited us, a short white boy with freckles. His appearance gave away the distinct impression that he was European, despite the fact that no one in his family had ventured outside of Lebanon. Both his mother and father were very much olive-skinned and did not have a single freckle between them. As

adoption is forbidden in Islam, everyone at school ruled this out immediately. They, instead, decided that Mohammad's grandmother was raped by a crusader, a phrase which was often repeated to Mohammad whenever the occasion called for it. Mohammad's family had originated from the south, an area which was historically heavily populated with crusaders. His insistence upon not inviting anyone who had claimed his grandmother was the rape-victim of a crusader to Iftar, reduced his guest list to three Muslims, a half-Christian and a Druze.

I told my parents that I was going to fast on the morning of the Iftar. My father had not yet received his newspaper from Saeed and was sat on the comfortable couch in the living room holding a book entitled *The Druze Revisited*. On one of the bookshelves behind my father, squeezed in between Emily Nasrallah's *Birds of September* and Youssef Saleme's *Yassin Had This to Say*, rested a framed photograph of him wearing his cap and gown and moustache. In the photograph my father is not smiling. A wrinkle parts his forehead and a dimple parts his chin. The photograph was the only one on display in the house. It was coloured and my father's tie was red.

Though my sister was very fond of this photograph, she wasn't allowed to pick it off the shelf because she was too young to carry glass around the house. I had memorized the titles of the two books either side of the photograph as I was often the one to return it to its rightful place after my sister had left her finger prints all over the glass. When my mother caught on to this, she moved the photograph up a couple of shelves.

'I liked it better when you wanted to go to the moon,' said my father, flipping the page.

'I still do,' I said, in an attempt to sound defiant.

'Adam, I have no doubt that you can do anything you set your mind to,' my mother said as she tied my sister's shoelaces, 'but I'm making stuffed zucchini for lunch today.'

'Can I fast too?' asked my sister, looking up at my mother, who in turn glared at my father who in turn glared at me.

'No,' my mother replied.

'Why not?'

'We'll discuss this again when you learn how to tie your own shoelaces.'

‘Why does he get to fast?’ asked my sister, pointing her small finger at me.

‘He won’t last ‘til lunchtime,’ said my father, now momentarily less interested in *The Druze Revisited*.

‘Don’t discourage him,’ my mother said, furrowing her eyebrows.

The doorbell rang and my father opened the door to find Saeed holding the newspaper in one hand and a brown cat in the other.

‘Any news?’ my father asked, taking the An-Nahar Daily from Saeed’s hands and sifting through it.

‘I found this in your car, Basha,’ he said, holding out the cat.

‘Take it back.’

‘Of course, anything else?’

‘Stop beating your wife.’

‘Why, has she said anything?’

‘She doesn’t have to,’ said my father, now reading through his own article.

‘I’ll ask her to keep her voice down.’

My mother insisted upon having a family meal around the dining room table in the afternoon, when my sister and I had arrived from school. This meant that my father and I had to clear the table of the newspapers which had once again found their way onto it. It also meant that my father had to carry one of the foldable balcony chairs into the dining room, as one of the original four dining room chairs had long since lost a leg. He then adjusted the TV set so that he could both see and hear ‘Basmet Elwatan’ from the dining room. The smell of stuffed zucchini had filled the room. After a short-lived argument between my sister and my father over who gets to sit at the head of the table, we eventually found a place for her on my father’s lap. She soon tired of this and resigned herself to the empty seat to his right.

Though my mother remarked that I did not have to sit with them this time, as I was fasting, she insisted that this was how it was going to be from now on. It wasn’t. The next time we would sit together around the dining room table would be Christmas, and the next time after that would be the following Christmas.

Over lunch, my father told us the story of his mother and how she would starve them during Ramadan.

‘I begged her. I bargained. I said I’ll only have one olive and a piece of flatbread, that’s it,’ he mumbled, ‘she made me fast for an additional hour, just for that.’

Then he asked me if I thought astronauts fasted on their way to the moon. And I said, I don’t know. And my mother said, drop it. And my father said, they probably don’t. And I said, why not. And my father said, because the sun doesn’t set in space. And my mother said, lunch was over. And my father said he wasn’t done. And my mother told him to take out the folding chair to the balcony. And my father kicked the folding chair shut with his heel as he stood up, grabbed it with his right hand, chewed on his last bite of stuffed zucchini and launched the chair out of the balcony and into the air.

The chair hung for a moment, allowing my mother, my sister and I enough time to rush to the balcony and observe it in full flight. It landed on the roof of one of the few remaining Ottoman houses in Beirut, opposite our own building. Madame Hafez owned that house too, but it was inhabited by the grandson of one of the men who had fought for independence from the French. He was an old man who had refused to pay rent for some time. Madame Farhat had decided to wait for him to die rather than enter into a battle about neglected rent payments.

‘I’m proud of you,’ said my mother as she dropped me off at Mohammad’s place.

She said the incident with the flying foldable chair was not about me. She said it was because my father was afraid about confronting the possibility of something.

I leaned against the steel gate to Mohammad’s building. Only a few patches of green remained to indicate that there had ever been any effort made to paint the rusted bars of metal which now guarded the entrance to the battered building.

‘The possibility of what?’ I asked.

Basil and the Muslims were already there, sitting around the dining room table. When the sun finally set, we ate Pizza, from Pizza Hut. Basil told us he was glad the goat hadn’t slipped on Pizza. Mohammad’s mother let out a high-pitched giggle and asked if he would like more. And I laughed.

Mohammad’s mother laid out the prayer mats for us while we were eating and we all stepped onto them as soon as we were done. I imitated the motions: hands on stomach, hands to ears, knees on floor, head against floor and mumbled the words to ‘Our Father which Art in Heaven.’ My maternal grandmother, Teta Mary, had taught me it. I was

afraid to sleep in the dark and glad to have her somewhat course voice by my bedside. When my grandfather fell ill, many years ago, my grandmother made a pact with god. She promised that if he let her husband live for a few more years she would take a cab to Mount Harissa, climb, barefoot, up the long winding stairs leading to the holy statue of Virgin Mary, kneel before it, recite 'Our Father which Art in Heaven' and kiss it. When my grandfather recovered from his heart attack my grandmother left him at the hospital, took a cab to Mount Harissa, climbed, barefoot, up the long winding stairs leading to the holy statue of Virgin Mary, knelt before it, put out her cigarette and kissed it. Then she lit another cigarette and recited the words to 'Our Father which Art in Heaven'.

Basil stood on the prayer mat, hands in his pockets, while the rest of us knelt to the floor. For a moment, we were praying to the spinach-eating, holy-goat-denying, Druze boy from the mountains. Then he decided that divinity was not for him, and found a place for himself on the couch.

'It upsets my stomach,' he said, as Mohammad's mother looked on.

My mother was the first to pick me up. She stood by the door whilst I put on my raincoat and said goodbye to my friends and thanked Mohammad's mother for the Pizza from Pizza Hut.

'He's a lovely boy,' said Mohammad's mother with one hand on my shoulder.

'Thank you.'

'That business with the other Mohammad. The punching and the slapping. I was sorry to hear about it. It was unfortunate,' said Mohammad's mother, pulling out a piece of paper from her pocket, 'we should be sticking together, you know.'

'Yes,' said my mother, squeezing my shoulder.

'I heard your husband had a bit of a confrontation with the principal.'

'You, know. Boys and their pride.'

'My husband was the same before he moved to London for a few years for his studies. He's a lot more patient these days. Like English men, almost.'

'Yes, of course,' said my mother, producing a smile which revealed her lower teeth.

It was a smile normally reserved for my father. It indicated that she was not happy but that she was not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing this. My father's response was to raise an eyebrow, scratch his moustache with his index finger and cough.

'I noticed Adam was a bit off with some of the steps during prayer.'

'Was he?' asked my mother, looking down at me.

'Yes, I could recommend a teacher who would rectify that immediately if you like.'

'I'm not sure that my husband would approve of leaving Adam alone with a stranger.'

'He's a good friend of the family,' said Mohammad's mother as she put the small piece of paper in my coat pocket.

'I think we'll be fine.'

As we made our way back home, my mother took the small piece of paper out from my pocket and tore it to smaller pieces.

'The next time that woman makes you pray in her house, you do the steps to the fucking Macarena,' she said, lighting a cigarette and throwing the torn pieces of paper behind her.

The folding chair was still resting on the Ottoman roof when my mother and I returned. The house was empty but for my sister who was standing on the balcony above the remains of the photograph's broken frame.

'It wasn't me,' she said, 'I swear.'

That night we could hear Saeed shouting, raging, slamming doors shut, breaking glass, cursing god and his son and all the prophets whose names he could recall, and their mothers, and Ninnette. We could hear Ninnette too.

'Are there no men in this building?' her voice coming from the garden.

My father shifted in his seat. My mother put her hand on his forearm.

'Enough,' said my mother.

From that balcony, you could see Ninnette and the folding chair and the Jasmine tree. From the other, you could see the White American and a fraction of the Mediterranean Sea. When there was no electricity in Beirut, as was often the case, you could spot the sun set behind a haphazard collection of war-torn buildings and half-baked

attempts at invincible sky-scrapers, or hear the echoing sound of afternoon prayer or the hoarse voice of the grocer as he pushes his cart down an empty street every Sunday at five: ‘I have carrots, *I have zucchini*, I have vine leaves, *I have zucchini*, I have parsley, *I have zucchini*,’ and once, ‘I have no one, *zucchini*, no one cares, *zucchini*.’

My father never attended a graduation ceremony. When he had completed his courses, he collected his certificate from the secretary’s office. That year the Israeli army made it to the middle of Beirut, on land. He walked home through Hamra Street with his eyes closed and his certificate in his back pocket. He passed Wimpy Café where a Lebanese civilian had stood up, pushed his chair back, pointed his gun at an Israeli general’s head and shot him as he sat there eating his burger. It was Ramadan, the day before Eid. It was hot and my father had not had anything to eat yet. He waited for the sun to set then he sat around the dinner table with his brothers and sisters and his mother, and he ate Couscous. Uncle Nasser asked my father whether he would join him for the customary fireworks. My father shrugged his shoulders. The photograph was my mother’s idea. It was taken a few weeks after my sister was born.

‘What’s going to happen to the folding chair?’ asked my sister, as my father walked us to school.

My father adjusted his newspaper. He produced a Cadbury Fruit and Nut out of his back pocket. It was melted and he had eaten half of it. He split the rest of the chocolate bar between my sister and me.

‘What’s going to happen to the chair?’ asked my sister, licking her fingers.

I spit out the raisins and the nuts. Then my sister spit out the raisins and the nuts.

‘You know that Jasmine tree in the garden,’ said my father, ‘when you are my age, its branches will extend into the balcony and seal everything else from view.’

My sister and I returned home to find that the photograph had been restored to its rightful place on the shelf between Emily Nasrallah’s *Birds of September* and Youssef Saleme’s *Yassin Had This to Say*, and that Barney had disappeared forever. My father told us the story of how it had been applauded on its way out by all the inhabitants of Sadat Street, including Madame Hafez and the old man in the Ottoman house. My mother maintained that no such thing had happened. Not long after that, Ninnette too disappeared

forever. She took her two sons with her, and Saeed started leaving the newspaper on the doorstep as was the norm before Barney had made its temporary home on Sadat Street.

Ninnette, the cat, lingered for a bit, like the smell of the damp literature, where the Oldsmobile had once been.

The Don

Autumn, not Spring, is my mother's favorite season. Quite apart from the fact that the leaves begin to fall or that the clouds take it upon themselves to put the sun in its place, my mother favors autumn because the word itself contains the initials of all four members of our family including her own. When there was nothing to be done, my sister and I would joke about being reunited with our long-lost brother Usama. In the weeks after my grandmother's death, I would often find the AlNahar open to the obituaries page. This I assumed was my mother's way of coping with her mother's death.

Teta's father was told by a witch doctor that her original name, Samiha, would bring bad luck upon the family. It was changed to 'Mariam'. Teta's father died soon after. She kept her new name and her friends at the orphanage referred to her as Mary. Palestine was under British occupation at the time and English names were in vogue.

Fadia, her mother, once brought stuffed Zucchini and Vine leaves to the Catholic orphanage in Haifa for Teta and her sisters. The nuns in charge seized the food and said that they would distribute it equally amongst the girls of the entire orphanage. Teta's response was to start a lawless gang within the orphanage, comprising of her three younger sisters and two other girls. They called themselves the 'Zucchini Bandit' and it all lasted for one night. When, next morning, the nuns found the empty pots under the girls' beds, they chased after them through the rooms of several innocent orphan girls who had been looking forward to a hot plate full of Zucchini and Vine leaves over lunch. Then Teta jumped on one of the beds, leapt through the window and was out of the orphanage. She ran barefoot through the streets of Haifa past a blur of street vendors and olive-trees and shoe-shiners and faces she said she recognized later as those of her children and grandchildren and the familiar sound of bullets and that of waves crashing against the shores of her hometown and steam boats carrying her countrymen from its shores to those of Beirut and she knew that she would not live out her life in that town. She ran until she could no longer stand then she spread her body across the floor next to a church.

She awoke in her mother's arms.

'They were delicious,' said Teta, looking up at her mother.

Her mother was remarried to an Englishman, named David, who died in bed of a heart attack. Some of the neighbors blamed Teta, because they too had heard the witch doctor's words, but most of them knew that the Englishman just could not handle Fadia. Teta had nothing to do with it this time.

To Fadia, there were only ever two countries: Haifa and non-Haifa. And Haifa was the larger of the two. She would live and die there, in the city she knew but could no longer recognize. Teta Mary and my grandfather left everything behind with Fadia. They did not take pictures, only a wooden chest adorned with fragments of seashells which contained some jewelry, official documents and a few items of clothing. It was only going to be for a short while, until things smooth over in Palestine. By the time the steam boat reached the shores of Beirut, they understood that they were never going back.

After my grandfather passed away, Teta was sent to live in Thirleby Road, in Victoria, with my Aunt Sarah and her English husband. They would often lose Teta and find her hours later ambling along the South Bank. She would not get very far but she insisted that if she walked long enough, she could smell the seawater.

I mentioned to her over the phone that I did not want to die in Beirut like Monsieur Mermier and that I wanted to travel to London, on my way to the moon. I said I would visit and bring fresh zucchinis. She said that London is cold and rainy, and that I would not like it anyway.

With both her parents now deceased, and her siblings all living abroad, my mother's ties to Lebanon had been reduced to three.

'I'm an orphan,' she had said after the funeral and perhaps this preoccupation with the obituaries was her way of making sure that she was not alone in being one.

Then I realized that my father too was fond of the obituaries section, mainly because plenty of the articles in there were his. Now in his mid-forties, he found himself losing people he had considered to be pillars of his own little piece of society. He wrote one about Sabah, a renowned singer and actress, who with the aid of plastic surgeons and increasingly younger partners, had fought time admirably and lost on a technicality. The song in which she uttered the lines: 'Where's Mahmoud? Where's Maarouf? Where's

Elias? And where's Hussien?' was meant to speak to the pluralism of the country but was understood instead as a tribute to her former husbands. There was another article about Ibrahim the vagabond who roamed Hamra Street and never asked for money, even declining to take it when it was offered. He had appeared immediately after the war, but no one, including himself, knew from where. It was said that he was a tortured former captive of the Syrian regime or the Israeli Mossad or Iran. When people asked him who he was, he responded by debating the merits of communism versus those of capitalism. In the end, capitalism always won and he said 'it's the worse of two evils'. Then he would pull at his grey beard, in a calm sort of way, and walk away. Once, a barber called him in from the street and gave him a haircut. For weeks no one knew it was him until a news anchor covered the story: 'Ibrahim the vaga-Bond'. Ibrahim died in a rain storm on Hamra Street, the first to hit Beirut in many years. Everyone knew it was him.

I read one about his, and my own, former PE teacher who wore his shorts closer to his nipples than his knees and whose rough beard combined with the absence of hair elsewhere gave the impression of one whose head had been fitted in the wrong side up. Don Amin, my father wrote, would offer one 'well done' a month and occasionally take it back if the recipient were to let him down in the future. The latter part was not true. I was not sure why my father saw it fit to include this minor deviation from the truth.

'It speaks to the essence of the man, who Don Amin was,' said my father.

'What about his Cedars, and his chewing gum?' asked my sister.

'What about it?'

'He was always chewing gum,' she added, 'the only time he wasn't was when he screamed so hard at a boy in class that his gum fell out and the boy pissed himself.'

'Did he pick it back up?' asked my father.

'No, he stepped on it to make his point.'

Don Amin regularly volunteered this piece of advice to his male students: 'Bouncing a basketball is like masturbating, boys, except it's a ball not a stick and no one's watching to see whether you're doing it right.' He sounded like gravel on a dry Thursday afternoon.

The Don scared a number of boys out of puberty for a good few years with that lesson in technique. At the time, I understood it as a thinly veiled criticism of refereeing

standards in the game. Then I came to see it as a critique of religious indoctrination. Recently, I've decided that neither interpretation speaks to the essence of the man.

He began teaching in an Italian school which is where he got the title 'Don'. He started off as a History teacher who stood on tables and attempted to breathe life into dates and names.

'The borders of Lebanon were drawn by French and British children in Crayon on a white piece of cardboard titled the 'Middle East'.'

Then he had a stroke and the doctor said that he had to get out more. He gave up the classroom for a whistle and a pair of trainers. This suited him well. Don Amin would stop other teachers in the hallway, between the lockers, the backpacks and the pimples, to discuss this student's turn of pace or that one's ability to read his or her opponent.

Much of what I knew about Don Amin, I had heard from my father. I saw a lot of Don Amin in him and, in the years ahead, I would recall my father with a chewing gum in his mouth and a whistle hanging around his neck.

My mother wasted no time in picking me up from school. She would stand outside the gates in her hooped, bluish green, sleeveless shirt and loose black pants. She'd swing my back pack onto her shoulders and ask me about my day, my teachers and my grades as we walked home. My father asked about my day too. But he didn't carry my bag and he often arrived an hour or so late.

One Thursday afternoon, I watched the playground slowly empty down to the last student. Even Basil, whose parents were much older than mine and who Don Amin referred to as 'August rain', had I been escorted home by his older brother. Beirut does not know rain in August.

'Is he always this late your father, Gibran the pimp?' asked Don Amin, as he sat down on the ground next to me. The Don called my father Gibran after the renowned early twentieth century Lebanese - American poet and writer, Gibran Khalil Gibran. He called my father pimp because he didn't like it when people were not on time.

'No, Don.'

'Don't cover for him,' he said, attempting to light his cigarette, 'He's a pimp for being late.'

‘Yes, Don,’ I said, now looking at my shoes, black leather with an achingly uncomfortable sole and thin laces.

‘You need new shoes. Proper gym shoes.’

‘My doctor says I have to wear these. For my flat feet.’

‘Nonsense. Who’s your podiatrist?’

‘Dr. Takkoush.’

‘I know him. He was my student. I know his dad too. He was also a doctor. A dick doctor, you know,’ he paused to allow me a giggle, I did and he continued, ‘I went to his clinic several years ago. Couldn’t get it up, you won’t understand now, but remember me when you’re my age. You know what he asked me?’

‘What?’

‘He asked me if I had unresolved issues with my mother. I’m a man in his sixties literally standing there with his dick in his hands and he brings up my mother. God rest her soul,’ said Don Amin, now banging his lighter against the wired fence behind us, ‘Do you have a lighter on you?’

I took out a red lighter which I had hidden away in my Eastpack. My classmates and I had taken to playing with lighters during the break. The game entailed running one’s fingers through the flames without getting them scorched or burnt. It beat getting slapped around by Muslims all over the playground. Basil also used his to light cigarettes.

On the brick wall opposite the wired fence hung a framed portrait of the incumbent president, in a glass casing. A still fresh faced, balding, green-eyed, broad-shouldered man, distinguished for his lack of a moustache or any facial hair whatsoever. He was only the second president to hold office after the civil war, and a former general in the army. He started off as a symbol of a functioning democracy. When he was told that he would have to move into the presidential palace, he refused, citing the palace’s distance from the sea as the sole reason. He was an avid swimmer and his love of Beirut was tied in with his love for the sea. Then he moved in to the presidential palace, overstayed his welcome and grew a moustache.

‘You shouldn’t have that,’ said Don Amin, lighting his Cedars and tucking the lighter away in his shirt pocket, ‘Anyway, the Takkoush boy was teased mercilessly for

being the son of a dick doctor. I fended them off, the kids, as you would expect. But they kept coming back.'

'What happened then?'

'Nothing. The little pimps grew up,' he said, taking a puff of his Cedars like it was a Virginia Slims Menthol 120, 'and their worlds grew up with them.'

My father arrived soon after, his sleeves rolled up, his forehead dripping with sweat and his tie hanging loosely around his light blue shirt collar. Don Amin told him off for being late and for listening to Dr. Takkoush's advice about the black leather shoes.

'Didn't I tell you the story about his father, the dick doctor, and his obsession with mothers?'

He also called my father a pimp and the son of a pimp. He did this while smiling and embracing him. My father kissed the Don's bald head and gave it a light tap. Then Don Amin retold the story of Dr. Takkoush senior and his failed attempt at armchair psychology. The two men talked politics.

'He's a swimmer.'

'Let's hope he doesn't drown.'

They laughed. The Don lit another cigarette and gave me a wink, before returning the lighter to his pocket.

'Your son reminds me of you at his age. Margret Thatcher told me that he wanted to be an astronaut.'

Margret Thatcher was Don Amin's nickname for Ms. Iman. My father placed his hand on my shoulder. He ruffled my hair. He was unaccustomed to doing this and he immediately placed his hand back on my shoulder.

'You know how boys are,' he said, 'They want to fly to the moon before they can drive to the end of the street.'

'The Arab Armstrong,' said Don Amin, now fixing his stare at me, 'God knows we need some inspiration from somewhere.'

My father cracked his joke about NASA shoving a Hubble telescope up my ass before they let me ride a rocket to the moon. Don Amin did not seem to hear him and I basked in the silence which greeted my father's attempt at humor.

'Will you write my name on a moon rock?' he asked, after a minute or so.

I nodded. Aside from the fact that I had not the first clue what Don Amin's full name actually was, I did not understand why anyone would want their name written on a moon rock. But in that moment, I would have written Don Amin's name on my birth certificate if he had asked for it.

'They should call it Camel,' he continued, running his hand through his beard.

'Call what Camel?' asked my father.

'The space rocket. Camel One.'

I laughed because I liked the idea of riding a Camel to the moon. And my father laughed because Arabs and Camels do not belong on the moon.

That night I snuck out of the house and walked for half an hour to Ramlet AlBayda. It was the only public sandy shore left in Beirut. The other bits had been either privatized or wiped out altogether in favor of a Movenpick, a Four Seasons or a Phoenicia. On one side of the Phoenicia stood the St. George Hotel, or what was left of it. The war had been particularly cruel to the St. George, perhaps because it was located at the heart of West Beirut, a predominantly Muslim part of the city. On the other side of the Phoenicia stood an abandoned, shell pocked former Holliday Inn building known for its distinct view overlooking Beirut and, Grandfather Adam swore, parts of Nicosia. It was used during the war as an outpost for snipers. I held my breath, Beirut fell silent, and I heard the towering Holliday Inn building wheeze. And I heard Basil cough and swear.

'Two snipers. One king size bed,' said Basil, elbows dug firmly in the sand and cigarette swinging up and down between his lips.

'A tale about love and war brought to you by the makers of A Room with a View.'

Basil chortled and dropped his Gauloises. He buried it in the sand then took another one out of the packet.

'My father smokes so many of these, he doesn't notice when entire packets go missing. He's a social smoker in the same way that you're an astronaut,' he said, offering me one and lighting his own.

'Later.'

'Yuri Gagarin doesn't smoke.'

‘Who?’

‘The first man to go into outer space. Yuri Gagarin. Russian Soviet.’

‘I want to go to the moon,’ I said, taking the now warmish Almaza from the plastic bag and popping open the bottle cap using Basil’s lighter, ‘tastes like piss.’

Almaza was the national beer before Lebanon was an independent country. There used to be this running ad on Tele Leban which featured the transparent green Almaza bottle on a table with a constantly changing background. It was my first lesson in history. ‘I was here when you got your independence in ‘43, and we celebrated,’ said a deep, reassuring, if slightly patronizing, voice, ‘I was here during the earthquake of ’56, when Georgina Rizk was voted Miss World in ‘71, when you plunged the country into civil war and we hid, and when it was over and we celebrated. Whatever happens, we celebrate.’ Heineken bought it not long after that.

‘Get your own beer and lighter then,’ said Basil, snatching both away from me and taking a sip of Almaza, ‘What’s on the moon anyway?’

‘Not Beirut.’

‘Not anything. It’s a desert. Go to Saudi Arabia.’

This was not the first time a desert had been suggested to me as an alternative to the moon. My father had made a similar suggestion a number of years back, except instead of Saudi Arabia, he chose the Sahara. Basil ran his index finger through the flames of his lighter as we both lay on our backs looking up at the towering skyscrapers behind us. He did this more out of habit than for entertainment purposes.

‘Or Dubai,’ I said.

‘What about Dubai?’

‘It was a desert too, before all the skyscrapers.’

‘You think the moon will be like Dubai?’

‘No. I’m just saying Dubai was a desert.’

‘Listen, habibi, when NASA gives you that application form, lead with this. ‘Dear NASA,’ said Basil, now putting on a voice with a higher pitch than his own, ‘the moon reminds me a bit of Dubai.’”

I flicked a used needle away and spread my arms out. Ramlet ElBayda, or White Sands, was littered with them.

‘I didn’t say that. It’s not a desert.’

‘What then?’

When I closed my eyes, I did not see Armstrong’s moon landing or Sagan’s *Cosmos*, Moore’s *Atlas of the Universe* or Aldrin’s *Reaching for the Moon*. I saw Saint-Exupery’s Sahara Desert with the little prince. I saw Monsieur Mermier on asteroid B-612. I saw him watering the rose, cleaning out the volcanoes, pulling up the baobabs. I saw him holding the prince’s sheep in a box and watching forty-four sunsets in one day.

‘Asteroid B-612,’ I said without looking at him.

I followed a beam of light as it guided boats to the old ports of Beirut, we breathed in the stench of dead fish and listened to the waves wash them ashore. This new lighthouse had been built recently after seaside residents complained that the beam of light from the old one would enter their bedrooms and keep them awake at night. It looked like a rocket. The old lighthouse which was thinner and taller and cloaked in black and white hoops was now too far away from the sea to effectively guide anyone.

Basil lay in the white sands, eyes closed and mouth open. As I pressed my knuckles against the sand, in an attempt to sit up, I heard laughter in between the waves.

‘Mermaids,’ said Basil with one eye now wide open.

Three Christian girls, the crosses around their necks glimmering in the moonlight, walked hand in hand towards us. They kicked at the waves and pushed and pulled at each other. The blonde one lost her balance and fell into the water.

‘You’ve ruined my top, Christabelle,’ she said.

‘Its water. Get over it,’ said Christabelle.

‘She can’t get over it,’ shouted Basil in their direction, ‘its Gucci and Gabbana.’

The third one, who most resembled a mermaid with her wet hair, thin torso and wide hips, laughed with one hand on her mouth.

‘It’s Dolce and Gabbana,’ said the Blonde one, as the three girls approached us.

‘That’s what I said, isn’t it Adam?’

I nodded.

‘Look,’ said Christabelle, ‘they’re little boys.’

In the light of the skyscrapers, the girls looked like women. The youngest of them, the mermaid, would have been about eighteen but even she had the glow of a woman about her as she stood over us.

‘This one is a mute,’ said the Blonde, pointing her finger in my direction.

‘He’s not a mute,’ said the mermaid, smiling, ‘he’s a late bloomer. Look at him.’

‘That’s right, he is’ said the Blonde, ‘you do things at your own pace, don’t you?’

‘I guess,’ I said, now looking straight at them.

‘Look at those eyelashes, Christa,’ said the Blonde, waiving her French manicured nails about, ‘I’d kill to have those eyelashes. And those thick eyebrows.’

‘He’ll make a handsome one, once he grows into that face,’ said the mermaid.

Basil took a sip of the piss warm Almaza and the mermaid snatched the bottle away.

‘It’s bad for you,’ she said, tipping the rest of the beer down her throat.

‘And needles aren’t?’ said Christabelle, laughing through her full lips.

‘This one’s the real heartbreaker, aren’t you?’ said the Blonde, now looking at Basil.

‘There’s only one way to find out,’ said Basil, smiling without revealing his teeth.

All three women laughed at this. He had a knack for saying funny things at the right moment, or else for saying things in a way which made them sound funny at any given moment. The mermaid grabbed Basil by the wrist and led him to the edge of water. She jumped head first into a strong wave as it crashed against the shore, wrenching him forward. She reappeared splashing her tail against the waves and flicking her wet hair behind her, signaling for the girls to join in. They did, even the Blonde. I stood there with my toes dug firmly into the sand. They swam away and I could barely make out their shapes in the moonlight.

‘Christa,’ I shouted, cupping my hands so that my voice would carry further, ‘you’re the most beautiful one.’

Basil dragged himself back to shore, coughing and wheezing. He was still a goat-worshipping mountain boy at heart and the sea did not agree with him.

‘She’s not,’ said Basil, still coughing, ‘What are you on about?’

The phrase 'she's good but she's not mermaid good' became ever-present over the next few weeks. Basil and I randomly compared girls our age, who had no interest in talking to us, to the Mermaid women at Ramlet ElBayda. We would remember details that were not there like the running mascara on the mermaid's face or the wink she gave Basil. We talked about the Blonde's wispy voice and we estimated that she was at least thirty-five because she'd dyed her hair blond and because they must have been partly white before she dyed them and that's why she did. On a school trip to Der ElKamar in the mountains of Lebanon, half an hour away from Beirut, Estelle pinched both of us on our necks. Estelle pointed out that we were being sexist. She had developed this habit early on in life. Her mother had encouraged it at first because she believed it showed character. Then Estelle got very good at it.

'You're just annoyed that we didn't ask you to join us,' said Basil.

'Yes. Who would want to miss out on seeing mermaids?'

'You'd have scared them away with your feminism,' said Basil, and walked off.

I laughed and Estelle pinched my neck again.

Estelle had cheeks which belonged to a fuller face and a stare which belonged to her mother. It said I'm better than you but it's not your fault. She too was French and it seemed, in some terrible way, almost fitting that she and her French mother would move into Monsieur Mermier's old apartment. She said that she had never met her father but that she knew he was Lebanese and handsome in that Mediterranean manner. She showed me the pictures she had of him and I said that he was handsome. Then she showed me pictures of her mother when she was young and I said that she was beautiful, and meant it.

Basil sauntered towards Moussa's Castle and we followed him in. The castle itself was unremarkable. It mostly exhibited old weapons and artillery, some of which were said to have been used by the former princes of Mount Lebanon, like Amir Basheer AlShahab and Amir Fakhereddine AlThani AlMaani. The latter, we were taught at school, had risen to such heights that he challenged the reign of the Ottoman Empire and almost brought the Sultan to his knees. The Ottomans have no record of Fakhereddine.

Historians estimate that he was at best a prince over Der ElKamar and a couple of other neighboring towns and at worst a glorified tax collector.

Ms. Iman walked behind the students and Don Amin led the way alongside an old man with a white beard and frail white hair. When we got to a wax figure of a boy being whipped by his teacher in front of a class full of other wax boys, the old man turned around.

‘This is me,’ he said, pointing his quivering index finger to the wax figure of the boy, ‘I’m Moussa. Welcome to my castle. Any questions?’

He spoke of how it had taken him sixty years to build it single-handedly and how no one believed he could do it.

‘Best sixty years of my life.’

Moussa explained that he had built the castle for the woman he loved and that she had rejected him and went off with a richer man. He told us about his teacher who had whipped him in front of the other boys for drawing a picture of his castle in class instead of focusing on the Math lesson. Then he recounted the story of his trip to his teacher’s house, when he had finished building the castle. All those things he had wanted to say to him, all the images that returned to his mind when he knocked on the door. The teacher had passed away many years before.

‘There’s hope for you yet, Najjar,’ said Don Amin, raising his left eyebrow and chewing on his Chicklets.

‘The opposite of ignorance is not knowledge, boys and girls,’ said Moussa, with a smirk materializing across his face, ‘it is innovation.’

His words were a rehearsed piece of theatre but they were no less genuine for it.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Estelle, gesturing in the direction of another wax boy with his face against the wall in the corner of the class.

‘That’s Moussa’s distant cousin, Mustafa,’ said Don Amin, ‘he wanted to build a skyscraper. It didn’t work out quite so well.’

The next day Don Amin did not show up to class. For a week, Ms. Iman told us that he was in the mountains with his family, because that was where he was from. Then Serene, a Druze girl, gathered us around her during break. She stood beneath the president’s portrait and spoke in a whisper such that those of us at the back heard nothing

and those of us in the front heard nothing because those of us at the back kept asking Serene to raise her voice.

‘There is something you should know,’ she said, with one eye on the door leading to the playground.

‘What?’ asked Basil.

‘It’s about the Don,’ she said, pausing for effect, ‘That story, the teachers and parents and journalists wanted us to know, is not true. He didn’t die of a stroke.’

‘Raise your voice,’ came the voice of a pubescent boy at the back.

The smell of damp socks wafted through the crowd and disappeared once he lowered his arms.

‘How did he die?’ asked Nadia.

‘He died of suicide,’ whispered Serene, whose thick and full eyebrows danced to the rhythm of her speech.

‘Who?’ shouted a girl behind me.

She smelled of Ariel and her mother’s perfume.

‘The don,’ shouted damp socks.

‘You mean he killed himself,’ said Estelle.

‘Yes,’ said Serene, now holding my gaze, ‘He jumped off the rooftop of his building in Rawche.’

The rusty steel fence which surrounded the school was chest high. A security guard whose name everyone knew but had forgot, patrolled the perimeters of the fence. He had a deep voice which he often used to scare us away from the fence or to hold long, and audible, rants about the necessity of fences.

‘Nonsense,’ shouted a Mohammad sitting on the green bench to Serene’s left.

‘How do you know this?’ I asked.

‘The neighbors,’ she said, ‘but you can’t tell anyone.’

‘We won’t,’ said Basil.

‘Did you know that Don Amin jumped off a rooftop?’ I asked my father, as he sat at the dinner table scribbling on a blank piece of paper.

My mother was out visiting Grandmother Mary's grave. At first, it was every other weekend. Then it was once a month. Then it was on Mother's Day. Then it was every other Mother's day.

'I'm writing an article about him now,' he said, without looking up, 'It wasn't a rooftop. It was the Rawche Rock.'

'You could've told me,' I said, standing behind him.

'Why? Do you have a monopoly on dead people?'

'No, but it would've been nice to know.'

'Nice to know that your gym teacher committed suicide?' he asked, holding his pen still for a moment.

'Yes,' I said, refusing to back down.

'I'll tell you when the next one jumps off a building or a rock,' said my father, still writing, 'Don't tell your sister.'

I told my sister.

'Is it true?' asked my sister, tugging at my father's shirt.

'That what?'

'That he killed himself.'

'Who killed himself?' asked my father, postponing the inevitable.

'Don Amin.'

'Who said he killed himself?'

'Adam told me.'

'What are you deaf,' asked my father, putting his pen down and turning to look at me, 'Or just an ass?'

'Don't call him deaf,' said my sister.

'I'll call him whatever I want to call him. He's my son,' said my father, now flicking through the papers in front of him, 'And you're my daughter. Don't tell me what I can and cannot do.'

Your children are not yours. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. Gibran Khalil Gibran said something like that. I knew that quote by heart at the time. Mr. Malik, the Arabic teacher, had drilled it into our heads. And I would've said it. Except Gibran seemed wasted on my father.

‘What are you trying to protect her from?’ I asked my father, now standing to his right with my sister’s head barely visible above the dinner table from the other side.

‘I don’t have to tell you.’

‘A man was blown to pieces next door. You think it will terrify her to find out that her gym teacher threw himself off the balcony?’

‘We live in a country where people die in a variety of ways,’ he said, scratching his chin with the tip of the pen, ‘what would you have me do about it?’

‘Why did he do it?’ I asked, after a moment of silence.

I had believed in the Don in the same way that he had believed in my Camel ride to the moon. It diminished me to know that his words would now have to stand alone without the man who had uttered them. It was a sentiment which, by reading his article, I found my father shared. Or maybe it was one which I had arrived to after reading my father’s article.

‘He was too busy throwing himself off the rock to tell me,’ said my father, crossing a line out.

‘Why did he do it?’ asked my sister, raising her right hand in the air and moving her wrist in such a way that it appeared she was attempting to change the light bulb, ‘It’s stupid. He’s a stupid man. He throws his life away. And poor Monsieur Mermier dies trying to stay alive.’

My sister narrowed her eyes and grew a few centimeters. My father looked at me as if to confirm that the minor growth spurt was not some optical illusion performed by a little girl; then he turned his head towards her.

As she changed the lightbulb, my sister stomped her right foot, each time bringing her little body closer to my father’s. There was my father sitting at the dining room table with his pen in his hand writing an article about a deceased man, and there was my sister doing the traditional Lebanese Dabke. She danced and stomped her feet and twirled her wrist until her little chest pressed against my father’s elbow.

‘It’s not for you to judge the dead, *fara*,’ said my father, placing his hands under her armpits and lifting her onto his lap.

‘Are you going to mention it in the article?’ I asked.

I meant my Camel ride to the moon.

‘Why would I do that?’ asked my father, ‘It doesn’t speak to the essence of the man.’

A smile flickered across my father’s face as he said this. Then, with one hand around my sister, he added, or removed, or modified a line in his article, and I knew then not to ask any more questions.

The official cause of death was a stroke. Don Amin died of a stroke at his home, in his armchair, with his silver whistle hanging around his neck.

In his article about the Don, my father wrote that ‘the words of a dead man echo throughout space because they have lost their source, because they are homeless, orphans and widowers all at once’ and that ‘the great among us leave that empty space behind them which makes their words echo louder’. He never mentioned the actual words themselves except to say that the Don was capable of bestowing a ‘well done’ upon those who had done well.

In my room, I told my sister about the day I beat up Mohammad, the sectarian. I told her about Ms. Iman.

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’

I told her about the pretend whipping I received afterwards.

‘But it seemed so real. I was outside listening,’ said my sister, eyebrows raised.

‘It wasn’t.’

I went into my father’s room, searched for the black leather belt and dragged it behind me into my room. My sister jumped, and I lashed against the bedsheets either side of her.

Every time she landed on the bed she would leap higher and laugh louder.

‘Again!’ she shouted, inciting me to lash the bed sheets harder.

There was a moment when she was so high up in the air that I was sure she would refuse to come down.

‘Come down, darling,’ my mother would say.

‘Come down, *fara*,’ my father would say.

‘Come down, you indiscriminate lump of mass,’ gravity would say.

‘No,’ she would reply, ponytails still rising, ‘not until you apologize.’

We did this for some time, I lashed and she laughed and leapt in the air and her ponytails bounced and twirled, until I landed one of my lashes on her left arm. My sister then clutched her left arm in midair causing her to lose balance and land with her head against the edge of the bed.

My father burst into the room still clutching his pen. He knocked the belt out of my hand, picked up my sister and lifted her over his shoulder.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ asked my father, holding my unconscious sister and kicking the belt under the bed.

I sat in the bright white waiting room at the hospital. I watched as my mother rushed through the door and into the emergency room. I could see my father pacing and angrily gesturing in my direction. I could see my mother grab his wrist and push it downward. I could see my mother kissing my sister and placing her arms around her small body. I could see my mother walk in my direction, crouch beside me and tuck her skirt under her legs.

‘I know you were just playing,’ she said, and I felt my eyes burn and the room blur.

I was six when they brought my sister home from the hospital. My father said ‘she’s your responsibility, Adam’, then he held her two small hands together in his and made her clap.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Your sister is fine.’

‘Yes.’

She was speaking to me as if I were half my age but I didn’t mind. My father stood now cross armed with his back to us, conversing with the doctor and sharing an anecdote or two. I walked past my mother and into the emergency room where my father was.

‘It was an accident,’ I shouted, standing close behind him.

‘Jesus-Mohammad-Christ,’ said father, turning around with force. His elbow smacked against my eyebrow as he did so and warm blood trickled down my eye.

I did not feel the cut on my eyebrow and had I sustained it in the playground, I probably would have ignored it and kept playing. My mother held my head in her arms as the doctor applied Fucidin on my eyebrow. My sister who had cried in intervals up to that point stopped to observe. And a cluster of doctors came in anticipating a brawl of some sort which did not happen. When I blinked tears ran down my cheek, so I stopped blinking.

‘When I die, cry over my dead body,’ said my father. It was a common enough Lebanese expression but it seemed personal under the circumstances.

‘Two kids in one day, Najjar,’ said the doctor, still applying Fucidin to my eyebrow, ‘That’s not very good parenting, even for a Lebanese father.’

Yuri Gagarin

A couple of days later my sister returned from school with her cast signed. She had fractured her wrist too but it took the doctors a while to realize this, as she was crying and would not properly communicate with them. Most of her classmates wrote ‘get well soon’ or ‘you rock’ or ‘ponytail madness’, in English, with a smiley face or heart and a signature underneath. Except for this one kid who wrote the digits ‘112’ and signed it as ‘the police’. This, my father seemed to find more outwardly funny than the best episodes of Basmeet ElWatan.

‘Jesus-Mohammad-Christ,’ he gasped, between laughs, ‘Jesus-Mohammad-Christ.’

My mother did not find this at all amusing and she pressed my sister for details of the boy, or girl, who had done this, as we all sat around the T.V set.

‘What’s his name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘You do. What did he look like?’

My sister held off for more than I expected. Then she came clean and told my mother that it wasn’t a kid at all who had signed her cast but her English teacher, Mr. David Aston. Mr. Aston was a fifty-something Englishman from Southampton with hair parted to the right and eyebrows that stubbornly refused to yield to either side. He would speak very slowly and had come to Beirut in order to reignite his love life or inspire young Lebanese students, or both. He and Don Amin did not get along. The Don called him Mr. Bean, which as far as the Don’s nicknames go, was not particularly his best. Mr. Aston did look a bit like Rowan Atkinson, with his long, lanky arms and gangly figure, but it wouldn’t have made a difference to the Don if he were round and short. To the Don, every Englishman was Mr. Bean and every couple of Americans were Dumb and Dumber.

‘It is funny, a bit, that you think policemen even care about kids getting punished,’ said my father, now standing in front of Mr. Aston’s class, flanked by my mother, my sister and myself and addressing the Englishman.

‘I’m not sure what you’re talking about,’ said Mr. Aston, ‘If you’re referring to the digits on your daughter’s cast, then I think we should go inside.’

We all followed Mr. Aston inside the classroom and my sister sat in her assigned seat.

‘You don’t have to sit there now,’ said my father.

My sister looked at Mr. Aston and he nodded.

‘This is not London,’ said my father. He had the habit of referring to the whole of Great Britain as London which got worse with age. Much later, he would ask me what the weather was like in London while I was making my way across Grafton Street in Dublin. This was not a habit that was exclusive to my father.

‘I am well aware of that,’ said the Englishman, adjusting his necktie, ‘Please take a seat.’ It was a thin, red wool tie that looked as if it had been snipped at the end.

Mr. Malik, the Arabic teacher, paused for a moment by the door on his way from class to his office. My father almost seemed to forget the Englishman and focused his eyes solely on the round, limping figure by the doorway. Mr. Malik nodded and limped on.

‘We’ll stand,’ said my father, as my mother sat down.

‘I’m not accusing anyone of anything, Mr. Najjar.’

‘You think I beat my wife and children,’ said my father, tearing his eyes away from the now empty doorway.

‘Nobody said anything about Mrs. Najjar.’

‘My children then.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ said Mr. Aston, breathing in, ‘It might be best for the children to wait outside.’

‘They stay. Why did you write the police’s number on her cast then?’

‘My concern,’ said Mr. Aston, sneaking a glance at my eyebrow, ‘is for my students’ well-being.’

‘Her well-being is well,’ said my father, ‘end of story.’ He only ended stories early when speaking in English.

‘Mr. Aston, you seem to have misread the situation,’ said my mother, looking calmly at the man, ‘my husband does not beat up the children. And even if he did, the police wouldn’t do anything about it.’

‘I’m sure that is the case. I won’t pretend to know more about Lebanon than the Lebanese.’

‘You’re English, Mr. Aston, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I am,’ he said, pleased to be moving away from the subject.

‘Then why haven’t you gone through the standard procedures for a case like this?’

‘Truth be told, I have,’ said Mr. Aston, now smiling, ‘Ms. Iman kept saying she’d call you in, but she never did.’

My father ran the palm of his hand across his face.

‘I’ll take it from here,’ said Ms. Iman, as Mr. Aston left her office and shut the door behind him.

‘He seems like a good man, if a bit odd,’ said my mother, adjusting her position in the black leather armchair.

My sister and I sat in the center, with my father to my left and my mother at the other end. The office had remained as it had been, down to the patterns on the Persian carpets, except for a new water cooler and a calendar in the shape of a cedar tree behind Ms. Iman’s desk which read: ‘courtesy of Plaza Pharmacy.’

‘He was a pastor before he decided to do this.’

‘I can understand your hesitation in hiring him,’ said my father, leaning back.

I smiled at Ms. Iman. I did not mind being in her office when I was not on trial for blasphemy or thuggery. She smiled back. I expected to be offered a soft drink or Orange juice. I was not.

‘My condolences for the death of Don Amin. I know you two were close,’ said Ms. Iman, ignoring my father’s remarks, ‘I read your article in AnNahar.’

‘Yes,’ said my father, scratching his moustache, ‘thank you.’

‘The two of them look like they’ve been in a car accident,’ said Ms. Iman, pointing to my sister’s state and my eyebrow.

‘We don’t own a car anymore,’ said my sister.

‘The Israelis,’ I said, looking from my mother to my father and back again.

‘The truth is my son and daughter were playing in the bedroom. He unintentionally lashed the belt at her arm and she hit her head against the edge of the bed. Then my husband accidentally elbowed him in the face, around the eyebrow,’ said my mother.

‘Can I have some water?’

‘Do you still want to be an astronaut?’ asked Ms. Iman, smiling again and looking at me through her eyeglasses. She handed me a cold cup of water. Ms. Iman, looked the same, except now she had developed more lines around her eyes and it was harder to tell that she was once also a mermaid.

‘Yes,’ I nodded.

She paused for a long second, and in that my moment I heard her say: ‘And do you think fathers of astronauts elbow them in the face?’

‘How are you getting on in physics and chemistry?’

I shrugged my shoulders and placed my fingers over my eyebrow. I wasn’t getting on at all in physics and chemistry. Our teacher, Mr. Abu Alam, did not have a high opinion of Basil or myself.

‘Do you understand, you two?’ he would ask.

‘Yes.’

‘You understand the soles of my highlander flip-flops. That’s what you understand.’

Occasionally, he would take his highlanders off, for laughs, and wave them at us in class, using them to point to a Lambda on the whiteboard or a Mole on the chalkboard at the other end. Then he would drop them to the floor and flick them the right side up using his toe. It became something of a ritual.

‘If he keeps this up, I’m going to have to ship him back to England,’ said Ms. Iman.

‘Really?’ asked my mother.

‘He’s managed to convince the biology teacher that it is her duty to cover that chapter on evolution, even though it wasn’t included in the official curriculum.’

‘He seems like an alright pastor to me,’ said my father, putting his hands together.

‘He’s not a pastor,’ said Ms. Iman, ‘He’s a teacher.’

The biology teacher, Ms. Mayssa, was a woman on a mission. Like Sabah, she had been married a number of times. The first two died of a stroke and a sniper’s bullet, respectively. The last one was mayor of Jib Janine, a town in the south with a population of nine-thousand. He resigned and left the town in the safe hands of the other eight-thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-nine inhabitants, to live with her in Beirut. When they separated, he went back to Jib Janine and no one heard from him again. The Don called her ‘the black widow’.

‘So you’re saying we’re all monkeys,’ said Basil, before giving me a wink.

‘No, that’s not what I said,’ she replied.

‘We share a common ancestor with monkeys,’ said Estelle, in an attempt to clarify.

‘So you’re saying my grandfather’s a monkey,’ said Basil, giving me another wink.

‘In a sense, yes,’ said Ms. Mayssa, tucking her hair behind her ear. She was older than Ms. Iman, but shorter and whiter, with freckles.

‘Cut it out, Wednesday,’ I whispered. Estelle and I had taken to calling him after that particular day of the week because we all agreed that it always came out of nowhere, like ‘August rain’.

‘Your grandfather may be a monkey, Ms. Mayssa, but mine isn’t,’ said a Mohammad, in the corner.

‘You misunderstand,’ she said.

‘If anyone’s grandfather is a monkey, Mohammad, it’s yours,’ said Basil, turning around to face him.

Mohammad imitated the cry of a sheep. The conversation then went in the direction of grandparents as farm animals, featuring an amalgam of animal sounds. When

the class was quiet, you could hear the hum of the overhead fan. It was synonymous with exams because that was the only time when the class was quiet. Ms. Mayssa leaned against the wall, by the whiteboard. She never used the chalkboard at the other end of the class. The walls were not really walls, they were Gipson boards. We would knock on them and hear someone from the adjacent class knock back, occasionally forming a ballad across the wall.

‘Maybe this was a mistake,’ she said aloud, ‘I did not think this through.’

‘That poor mayor of Jib Janine,’ said Estelle, looking from Basil to me.

‘What’s on that floppy disk, Ms. Mayssa?’ asked Nadine, who looked twice her age.

I expected Basil to make a joke about Mohammad’s floppy disk, but he didn’t. He sat still and narrowed his eyes.

‘Pictures of monkeys,’ said Ms. Mayssa, ‘and humans.’

‘Dear god,’ I said. But in my mind I said Jesus-Mohammad-Christ.

Then Ms. Mayssa displayed the slides of monkeys, apes, humans and everything in between on the whiteboard. For the majority of the slides, I could hear the hum of the overhead fan. The last slide was a picture of the earth from the moon and imprinted upon it were the words of Neil Armstrong: ‘I put my thumb up and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet earth. I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.’

When the slides were over, Ms. Mayssa looked at me. I smiled, meekly.

‘Yu-ri Ga-ga-rin,’ chanted Basil, clapping his hands at every syllable. He was joined by Mohammad who had tired of making animal noises and Estelle who raised her eyebrows as she did so. Soon the entire class was singing Yuri Gagarin’s name. Basil gave me wink.

My father sat on the comfortable couch in the living room watching La Yumal, another comedy sketch show, which translates to ‘Never a Boring Moment’. In the corner of the living room, the paint on the ceiling had begun to peel off again. Every other summer, we would repaint it and it would peel off by winter. My father gave up on the whole matter and resigned himself to the fact that this corner of the ceiling will never fully be painted.

In the eighties, an RPG rocket had landed in that corner of the living room, tearing through the ceiling as it did so. My father hired a local carpenter, Mehdi, to patch up the ceiling because he was the only man available and willing at the time. To the man's credit, he admitted that he was not a professional and that this would have to be a temporary solution. Mehdi said that he would come back with his cousin to fix the ceiling for good. Mehdi disappeared during the war. He was kidnapped, or killed, or immigrated to Montréal with his wife and son. My father would say that he spent half his life waiting for my mother, and the other half waiting for Mehdi.

'God damn you, Mehdi, wherever you are, and your cousin,' said my father, wiping the plaster off his shoulders, 'and your mother, and your father, and your grandfather and your grandmother and your wife, Ward, and her lover, Majid, and that god awful son of yours, Karim. I hope, to god, he is Majid's.'

My father believed in god most, not when he was in trouble, but when he wanted trouble inflicted upon others.

'Leave the boy out of it,' said my mother, 'It's your own fault for not hiring a professional to begin with.'

'I'm bored,' said my sister.

Basmet ElWatan was not on that night.

'The class chanted my name today,' I told my mother, spotting an opening.

'Why would they do that?' asked my father, still watching La Yumal.

I filled my father in on the details of Ms. Mayssa's class on evolution and her slides of monkeys. Then I told them about the final slide and Ms. Mayssa's Armstrong quote. A war of ants erupted on the TV screen and the noise filled the room. My father got up to adjust the antenna. My sister stood on the dining room chair and held one antenna in different directions while my father fiddled with the other one.

'The American astronaut?' asked my mother.

'Not this again,' said my father, now taking the other antenna from my sister's hand and pushing it backward, 'What's he doing in a class on evolution, anyway?'

'A testament to how far we've come since our tree climbing days,' I said.

I had prepared the answer ahead of time.

'Some people say it didn't actually happen,' said my father.

‘Who?’ asked my sister, now balancing her right arm up on her left one.

‘Some people.’

‘Why would they say that?’

‘Because they believe it, why else?’ said my father, banging his hand against the TV set.

‘It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Something to do with the American flag blowing in the wind.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ I asked.

‘There’s no wind on the moon.’

‘Who said?’

‘Jesus-Mohammad-Christ said, that’s who.’

‘That’s not true,’ said Basil, the next day as he, Estelle and I sat outside class during break.

The portrait of the president hung above us. The glass casing had gone missing. There was a rumor going around that someone had drawn a penis on it. Whoever it was had chosen not to draw a penis on the actual portrait and instead settled for adding the letter ‘F’ before the signature at the bottom which read ‘Art of Metis and Sons’.

‘Of course, it isn’t. The moon landing happened,’ said Estelle, holding *The Prince of Tides* to her chest.

‘Where else do you think America gets its oil?’ asked Basil.

‘Iraq?’ said Estelle.

Estelle’s thumb and index finger twitched as if she were pinching the air.

‘Nonsense.’

‘Why else would they bomb Iraq?’

‘To rid the world of an evil dictator.’

‘Whom they installed in the first place,’ said Estelle, placing her index finger on the dimple in her chin, ‘You’re an idiot.’

‘They made a mistake. And they admitted it, alright. It takes courage to do that.’

‘He even speaks like an American,’ I said.

The sun was out and I could see the sweat under Basil's armpits. Estelle wiped her chest.

'Besides, there were never dinosaurs on the moon to decompose. Where would the oil come from?'

'Aliens,' said Basil, without winking.

Shawki and Estelle

The Arabic teacher whose classes were always the last of the day, often complained that we lacked focus, determination and motivation, holding up two chubby fingers and a thumb. Everything about Mr. Malik was round. His fingers were round, his glasses were round, his face was round, his mouth was round and when he puffed out smoke from his lit cigarette, it too was round. He had fought during the war for the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, a secular party, with a shady past, that ran their own militia. Imprinted on his face was a permanent scowl and his left eye always narrowed more than his right when he was looking at you. We suspected that he was a sniper at one point. Mr. Malik had us memorize entire poems and recite them in class. It was a different poet every week. He would give us the name of the poet and we would go off in search of stanza or two to satisfy him. It was mostly the boys who recited the poems while the girls looked on.

*'O moon of the darkened bedroom
I kissed him once, just once
as he slept, half hoping half fearing he might wake up
O silkssoft moon
his pyjamas held such softness
Ah how I'd like a real live kiss
how I'd like to be offered
what's under the covers'*

Basil stood in front of the class and recited Abu Nawas' Ode to the moon. As he did so, his right eye twitched. I believe he was restraining himself from winking. Mr. Malik had explained that Abu Nawas was an eighth century Arab poet with a knack for the controversial. That was only partially true as Basil pointed out to me on the day.

'He's part Persian. His mother sold him to an Arab. Can you imagine being sold by your own mother to an Arab?' asked Basil.

'No wonder he's a paedophile,' said the white, freckled Mohammad.

'And a drunkard,' added Basil.

'Maybe, he was reaching back to his lost childhood,' said Estelle, 'Trying to find something in those boys that he hadn't found in himself as a child.'

‘Or he just likes little boys,’ said Basil, ‘Look at Round Malik over there, his mother never sold him to an Arab and he can’t keep his eyes off me.’

‘Nothing wrong with looking,’ I said, coughing.

‘Besides you’re hardly a child,’ said Estelle.

‘Good,’ said Mr. Malik, when Basil had finished reciting the poem. Normally, he would ask us to explain the stanza, or ‘put it into context’, before we returned to our seats. He didn’t this time. And Basil stood in his place, unsure of whether to make his way to his desk.

‘I’d like to put the poem into context,’ said Basil.

‘No need,’ said Mr. Malik.

‘I think it’s important.’

I raised my hand.

‘What do you want, Najjar?’

‘I think it’s important too, sir.’

‘Make it brief,’ said Mr. Malik, staring at Basil.

‘Abu Nawas was sold into slavery by his mother. He liked to touch little boys in their private places.’

Basil and I sat in the black leather chairs of Ms. Iman’s office. She hadn’t arrived yet. We had been ushered in by Mr. Malik. I pointed out the Persian carpets.

‘Abu Nawas would have liked these,’ said Basil, nodding his head.

Ms. Iman walked in with her glasses in her hands. It confirmed my theory that she was more beautiful than she allowed herself to be. She put them on.

‘I think we can resolve this without my parents,’ I said, joining my hands together and placing them on my stomach.

She leaned against her desk in front of us. As we gave Ms. Iman our version of events in Mr. Malik’s class, she leaned more heavily on the desk. Her skirt rose above her knees, exposing her thighs.

‘Is that all?’ she asked when we were done.

‘And we all know, Mr. Malik is a paedophile himself,’ said Basil, shrugging his shoulders.

‘I will not allow you to speak of another teacher like that in my office,’ said Ms. Iman, now standing straight.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it,’ said Basil, ‘He just is, that’s all.’

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’

On the off chance that Basil said he wanted to be a lawyer, I could not see Ms. Iman explaining to him that his accusation was slanderous and that he would require more proof to make it with certainty.

‘A good man,’ said Basil, because it didn’t really matter what he said. That was the answer she always heard.

‘And do you think good men go around spreading nasty and harmful rumors about one another?’

‘They’re not rumors if they’re true,’ said Basil.

Ms. Iman told us that we would have to apologize to Mr. Malik for calling him a paedophile, which we had not done to his face up to that point. She called Mr. Malik in and ordered us to stand outside the office while she spoke to him inside. The slamming of lockers and the sound of hundreds of students walking through the hall, prevented us from hearing the conversation inside Ms. Iman’s office.

‘Why did you insist he was a paedophile? She was going to let us off with a warning,’ I said, smacking Basil on the back of the head.

‘Because he is.’

‘You don’t know that for sure.’

‘I do.’

Then we heard Mr. Malik from inside Ms. Iman’s office. The whole school heard him.

‘You would believe those two dipshits outside over the word of one of your instructors?’ shouted Mr. Malik, ‘I never thought you were good enough to be principal. This entire pimp’s school will be remembered as a footnote at the bottom of one of my books.’

‘I didn’t say you are paedophile, Mr. Malik, please compose yourself. I only want you to be aware of the rumors.’

‘I am. Is that all?’

‘The boys are waiting outside for you. They want to apologize.’

Basil and I shared a quick glance.

‘They can stuff their apology,’ he said, as he opened the door. He stormed past us, turned around briefly to give us a round stare then walked on like his legs were two hands of a math compass. The left leg went first then the right leg circled it and so on.

‘He’s either going to eat us or fuck us,’ said Basil.

‘Ms. Iman’s thighs are no match for Ms. Kristina’s,’ said Mohammad, when we told him about Ms. Iman’s rising skirt.

We nodded in agreement. Estelle pinched our necks.

The math teacher was in her early twenties and half Greek. She would often walk in to find the boys in class doing the Zorba. This she laughed off for the first few times then one boy, Youssef, brought a dinner plate to class and broke it against the floor. She sent him to Ms. Iman’s office and the whole thing was called off. After that, the only time she allowed us a brief Zorba was when she mentioned a Greek mathematician in class. Pythagoras was popular for a time.

Ms. Kristina came to class dressed in shorts and a very thin top, even in the winter. She would walk in and start drawing figures on the board. But she did not stand still as she did this. She would move around, twist and turn and by the end of it there would be shapes and geometrical figures of all sizes on the board. A circle would contain about four triangles and three squares, and none of us could tell you how it had happened.

‘Which one is the equilateral triangle again?’ asked Mohammad.

‘The one with the three equal sides, Mohammad, you know this.’

She crossed her legs when one of her students let her down.

‘What about the Isosceles triangle?’

‘Two equal sides,’ said Wael. A tall, thin Christian boy with an ability to calculate large numbers in a short space of time which astounded the teachers.

‘Five-hundred and twelve times six hundred and twenty seven,’ said Basil.

‘Three hundred twenty one thousand and twenty four,’ said Wael.

She uncrossed her legs. Basil led a round of applause. The school had been an all-boys one up until the end of the war. The fairly recent influx of girls was welcome but the girls were still finding their place in what was still a boy’s world.

Mr. Malik’s head popped in. He was holding the doorknob and leaning forward. He asked to speak to Basil and me, privately.

‘You’re going to get it up the ass,’ whispered Mohammad.

‘If we do we’re coming back for you,’ said Basil, ‘and I hope he’s got AIDS.’

Mr. Malik filled his office. It was smaller than Ms. Iman’s. There were no leather armchairs or Persian carpets. There were only books. I could see *Birds of September* and *The Miserly* on the rusting, metal bookshelf to my left. Behind him, pinned to the board was Mahmoud Darwiche’s poem.

‘Write down!

I am an Arab

And my identity card number is fifty thousand

I have eight children

And the ninth will come after a summer

Will you be angry?

...I have a name without a title

Patient in a country

Where people are enraged

My roots

Were entrenched before the birth of time

And before the opening of the eras

Before the pines, and the olive trees

And before the grass grew...

...Write down!

I am an Arab

You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors
 And the land which I cultivated
 Along with my children
 And you left nothing for us
 Except for these rocks...'

Beside that hung what appeared to be a red, spinning swastika. This was not Hitler's; it was the Syrian Social Nationalist Party's. It looked like a disorientated swastika with an identity crisis. It was the emblem of one of the few remaining secular parties in Lebanon, except it did not believe in Lebanon. Its entire dubious existence was based on the idea that Lebanon is a colonial fabrication and that modern day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Cyprus are linked historically and geographically as one. This region was referred to as the fertile crescent. They eventually allied themselves to Hezbollah which muddled their cause further. The juxtaposition of both the poem and the emblem made little sense to the informed observer. At the time, I accepted the board as it was ignorant of the fact that the SSNP had rejected Arab Nationalism, as it had rejected the notion of an independent Lebanon.

'What's your problem, you two?' asked Mr. Malik.

'You want to castrate the poets, sir,' said Basil, 'it's unfair.'

'What does that have to do with your accusation, Abu Mekhi?'

'I'm saying, sir, that the poets were human. They played, they laughed, they drank,' said Basil, 'and they touched children.'

I nudged Basil in the ribs. He did not acknowledge it.

'Are you going to stop this nonsense you two are spreading about me or am I going to have to show you what it means to be a paedophile?' said Mr. Malik, slamming his fist against the desk.

'Yes, sir,' I said. Basil nodded.

'Tell your father I read that article about the Don in AnNahar,' said Mr. Malik, standing up so that the poem and the swastika were hidden behind him, 'Tell him it is dire shit.'

The Don referred to him as 'Comrade', in his presence, on account of the fact that they were both members of the SSNP, and 'piece of shit', in his absence, on account of

the fact that they disagreed about the direction in which it was moving. The Comrade gave us two weeks of detention.

‘I will, sir,’ I said, as Basil and I stood up to leave.

‘Not you, Abu Mekhi,’ said Mr. Malik, ‘You can leave, Najjar.’

Minutes later, Basil appeared by the class door. Ms. Katerina gave him permission to come in. He placed his hand on his buttocks and pretended to limp all the way to his seat. Estelle laughed and was joined by several others in class. Ms. Katrina put her fingers to her lips, then turned around and began to erase the shapes on the board. I asked him why Mr. Malik had told him to stay and he flicked his wrist, mimicking the movement involved in throwing something behind one’s back; as if to say it was already in the past.

Estelle and I walked home together. I had told my mother that our house was not as far as she made it out to seem. I told Estelle we could walk it easily. On the way, she told me that she was going to be alone for the weekend. Estelle’s home remained a mystery to me. She had never invited me in and I had never asked to be invited. The memory of shards of glass and rubble was still fresh. I imagined that she would skip past them every evening on her way to the bedroom, that she would get her socks caught in a splinter of wood or step on a piece of glass and scream ‘Maman!’.

‘She’s a busy woman. Always in conferences. But I’m proud of her,’ she said.

‘I’m proud of my mother too,’ I said.

‘She’s in a conference now. In Marseille.’

‘And what did your father do? Before he left,’ I asked.

‘Nothing. What do dark, brooding Lebanese men do?’

I looked at Estelle. She was whitest in the sun. Her hair glowed. I looked at the hair on her arms. She did not shave or wax them, but they were light and blonde.

‘We apply excessive amounts of gel to our hair until it falls off,’ I said.

She nodded and smiled wistfully.

We stood outside the door of her apartment. It was locked. Estelle couldn’t find her key, she banged against Monsieur Mermier’s old door. I invited her into my house.

My mother was picking up my sister and my father sat on the couch reading a newspaper. Estelle thanked my father for allowing her to wait inside for her mother.

‘When’s she arriving, your mother?’

‘Not until Thursday.’

‘Why don’t you jump from our balcony to yours?’

Estelle looked at me.

‘You’re right,’ said my father, ‘he should jump.’

Estelle, my father and I stood on the balcony. The idea was that I would leap from our balcony to Estelle’s, walk in, unlock the door from the inside and let her in. We heard the Zuchinni man.

‘That’s unusual,’ said my father, ‘he doesn’t normally show up on weekdays.’

‘I really appreciate it,’ said Estelle, smiling.

My father removed his Parker pen from his shirt pocket and drew out the details on a newspaper. It was the sports page. I was to step on the first pile of books, then the second, presumably higher, pile of books and leap from that onto the next balcony. The two balconies were not far apart and an actual leap was unnecessary. My father insisted.

I ran up the first time and slipped on *Echo of Lost Words*. I ran up the second time and slipped on *Daily Matters which No One Cares About*. I started to run up the third time and my mother walked out onto the balcony, still holding my sister’s hand. My father explained the plan.

‘Why don’t you jump?’ asked my mother.

‘I’m an old man,’ said my father.

I looked at my mother, my father, my sister and Estelle, and I ran up for the fourth time. I stepped on *Rainbows in the Desert* then *Contemporary Ink* and landed in Estelle’s balcony.

‘Are you alright?’ asked my mother.

‘Did you break a leg?’ asked my father.

I stood up and dusted my cargo shorts. I had been forced into a roll on the ground to lessen the impact of the landing. My first instinct was to land on my knee with one arm on the other knee, like superheroes often do, or like footballers pose for pictures. Somewhere in midair common sense kicked in and I allowed myself to roll.

I climbed in to Estelle's bedroom from the window. There was not a single shade of pink to be found. The room was neutral. It looked like a hotel room, and I slowed my walk. I wasn't intruding on someone's private space. I could hear the laughter from my house. As I turned to leave her room, I spotted a piece of paper taped to her closet. Written on it, in French and in a Blue marker were the words: 'What would Prince Charming have for occupation if he had not to awaken the Sleeping beauty?'

On her desk lay an open notebook, she had scribbled Basil's name in the margins. I looked for my name. It was not there. I flipped through the notebook. It was not her diary. I glanced across the room. There was no diary.

I ran past the living room where Monsieur Mermier had died. It was unrecognizable. A different TV set, white walls, all new couches. One of them was still covered in nylon. I could not tell you where exactly we had found the body or the glass. I saw the blood in a pool on the floor. Had I ever seen the body? Why had Estelle wanted me to embarrass myself? Did she know that her notebook was open? Did she remember what she had scribbled? What would Monsieur Mermier have thought of her?

'My hero,' said my mother, as I opened the door, and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

'I had the key all along,' said Estelle, as she dug both her hands firmly into her pockets and then held out the key, 'but we thought we'd let you open the door anyway since you went through all that trouble.'

I looked down at my shoes then at her, then walked past my father and into my room. I heard laughter coming from the hallway. I later found out those were Simone De Beauvoir's words taped to the closet. I resolved never to read *The Second Sex*.

Detention went by quicker than we expected. The school was unaccustomed to dishing them out and Basil and I spent the first period with Ms. Kristina and the second with Mr. Malik.

'Maybe it was just a coincidence,' said Basil, pursing his lips.

'No. You know what she's like.'

'A girl.'

‘Sophistique. Chic. French.’

‘Croissant.’

‘Baguette.’

‘Fromage. Tour Eiffel. Champs Elyse. ‘

‘Saint- Exupery. Zidane. Voltaire. Charles De Gaul. Jaques Chirac. Barthez.’

‘Oui.’

‘Better than you and me.’

The math teacher never gave us anything to do. She would sit and correct papers, often leaning forward to decipher this or that student’s handwriting. Basil and I would spend the first hour making up stories about Momo the Child Molester. They were these dark little stories about a failed Child Molester who would follow a child around for weeks only to fall at the final hurdle. Basil was always better at drawing the story out and adding the details. I’d have the last word. They would regularly end with Momo saying something like ‘never mind, he was too old anyway’. But Basil made the stories real, occasionally giving the Child Molester a redeemable feature, though not necessarily profoundly humane or relatable. My favorite was the one in which Momo the Child Molester gets electrocuted trying to molest a child, I do not recall the details of that story, but in the end it turns out Momo was an organ donor. I was irritated at the time because by killing Momo off, Basil had robbed me of my final line. This manifested itself in a heated debate about whether or not anyone would want the organs of a deceased child molester. Basil argued that it could prolong the life of a child, or his parents. I argued that I would not place in my chest the heart of a man who would place his penis in a child. I was confident I was on the right side of this moral dilemma but then Basil noted that we had not yet decided what the epitaph would read. And I had the perfect line.

Mr. Malik gave us assignments to start on in detention and submit in class the next day. I relished the writing, it was reading the work aloud which I struggled adjusting to. The audience consisted of a reluctant Basil and a belligerent Mr. Malik, neither of whom gave the impression of being enamored by my way with words. I soon discovered that an audience of two is the most difficult of all. Any attempt at an Iambic pentameter was met with a nod of approval from Mr. Malik and a shake of the head from Basil. Piss-taking

metaphors which eschewed substance for humor often elicited Basil's trademark wink and bite of the tongue, and Mr. Malik's glare.

'He's doing this on purpose you know,' said Basil, 'putting her in charge first, then stepping in to ruin it. I don't mind seeing his ugly face on any given day. It's the contrast that kills you.'

On the last day of detention, Mr. Malik asked us to write a short essay each entitled 'Why I Write'.

Basil said he did not write at all. He said he only wrote because he was told to. I told him to pretend that he had a reason for writing. He pretended not to hear me.

In class, the next day, Mr. Malik stopped the session ten minutes early, took out my paper and ordered me to stand in front of class and read it. I shook my head. He nodded.

'We don't have all day,' he said, shoving the essay against my chest as I stood in front of class.

I saw a red circle around an empty space at the top center of the page, and the words no title underlined twice above it.

'I write because if I screamed at the top of my voice, my father would lump me with a book entitled *The Life and Times of Antoun Saadeh* by an author named Wahid Saleme,' I said, holding the paper with both hands, 'I write because if I were to whisper in my friend's ear, she would put finer words on a poster and brandish it in my face. I write because voice is measured in decibels and ink in decades. I write because my pen is limited. When I asked it to fly to the moon, it refused. When I asked it again, it insisted that birds fly in the sky, pens write on paper and clouds write in the sky and look like paper. When I asked it for the third time, it dried up and stopped speaking to me. I write because Shawki pushes me to do so.'

Shawk means passion, a deep yearning. The pronunciation of which differs only slightly from that of the Arabic word for thorn, the kind often found in one's side. I looked up at Estelle. Her chin rested on her fist. The class was quiet. I could hear the hum of the overhead fan. Even Basil leaned forward and appeared to be listening closely.

'He said to me once: 'Adam,' I winced, and heard the stuttering laughs, 'He said: 'Writing without shawk, Adam, is like eating without hunger. Tasteless.''

Basil crossed his arms.

‘So I called him Shawki.’

Estelle grinned. Her lips parted wide enough for me to see her canines, and long enough for me to see her wisdom teeth which had not yet pierced their way through her gum. Nor would they for many years.

‘For those of you who do not know Shawki: he is an old man in his early seventies. His beard is white and long. He is small in stature and bald. He stands hunched over behind me whenever I hold a pen in my hand and surveys the white paper in anticipation. He pokes me with his cane and sometimes, he’ll fall over and I have to interrupt my train of thought and pick him up with both hands. But the train doesn’t stop. You ask: ‘Where are you going with my thoughts train?’’

I grimaced at this. Mr. Malik allowed himself a snort.

‘And the train whistles back, cursing you in the process. And as he curses you, he namechecks your father and your mother and your sister and your brother, Ussama, and your generous wife and her miserly neighbor and Madame Hafez and her husband, Monsieur Hafez. And Monsieur Mermier. And your old friend Estelle.’

I looked up at Estelle again. She gave no sign of being taken aback at the mention of her name.

‘I write because I do not know how to paint, or sing or carve or knit or box or play an instrument or chop a tomato or peel a potato or fly to the moon. I write because if I stopped writing, the sun would cease to rise and the animals would cease to breathe and the earth would cease to revolve. Because the earth revolves around the tip of my pencil. I write because I am a militiaman who forgot his RPG at home, and took to the streets armed with an unsharpened pencil which he found in his mother’s purse while he was looking for chewing gum. I write because there are very few verbs and very many pronouns. I write because,’ I read the last paragraph in one breath.

Mr. Malik waived his hand for me to stop.

‘Enough. Return to your seat,’ said Mr. Malik, ‘Give this to your father. Tell him there is more life in this than the dire shit about dead people he hands in to AnNahar on a weekly basis.’

‘Tell him to shove his bachelor’s degree in Arabic Literature up his barely literate backside,’ said my father, after I’d relayed Mr. Malik’s words, ‘but this is good.’

He held my paper up against the light, as if to check if it had been forged. He stared at me again, narrowing his eyes as he did so, his newspaper still on his lap. I held his stare.

‘This is better than good,’ he said.

A couple of weeks later, my father chucked his AnNahar at me in the morning.

‘Two writers in the family now,’ said my mother, smiling.

‘When can I publish an article?’ asked my sister.

I opened the newspaper in front of me. It was large and unwieldy. Two or four sheets fell off.

‘Fold it,’ instructed my father.

I folded the paper. I read my own words on the twelfth page. They were more authoritative, wiser, more assured. I read my name. Adam Najjar. I read the title: ‘I Write Because’.

‘Who chose that?’ I asked.

‘One of the editors. You didn’t title it.’

‘I don’t like it.’

‘Remember to title your stuff then.’

I read the article next to it. ‘To Live in Beirut on a Monday’. I stopped halfway. I reread my article. Mine was better. I smiled.

I took the article with me to class. Mohammad and Wael told every single teacher that I’d had an article published in AnNahar.

‘Waste some time while we wait for the referee’s whistle,’ said Mohammad.

I thought it was a good line, because I was in that frame of mind.

Mr. Abu Alam, read the article, allowed himself a half-smile, and said ‘I didn’t think you had it in you.’

Ms. Mayssa led a round of applause in class. She talked about the importance of believing in oneself and to keep pushing ourselves so that we may one day achieve our dreams. She said the Don would be proud. She didn’t read it.

Ms. Katrina asked me to give her the newspaper. I did. She read the article out loud then cut it out in the shape of a triangle and pinned it to the board.

‘Isosceles,’ said Mohammad.

Ms. Katrina crossed her legs.

Ms. Iman, nodded her head in my direction during break, which she did not normally do.

Mr. Aston asked me to translate the article for him. He said he hoped that he had played some small part in this. I said he had. He said he would like to take this opportunity to thank the class for making him feel at home. I said he was welcome.

‘Terrible title,’ said Mr. Malik, spotting the triangle shaped article pinned to the board.

‘The editors chose it,’ I said.

‘Najjar,’ said Mr. Malik, ‘the boy of the hour. Your turn to recite.’

I walked to the front of the class. I was not aware who the poet was for this week. I looked at my article behind me. Mr. Malik tapped his pen against his desk.

‘Write down!

I am an Arab

And my identity card number is fifty thousand

I have eight children

And the ninth will come after a summer

Will you be angry?’

‘Palestine is lost,’ said Mr. Malik, swinging his hand back as if to slap me, ‘God help all Arabs if you lot are the future.’

Basil laughed for the first time that day. When the bell rang, Mr. Malik called Basil over and they walked to the Arabic teacher’s office together. They appeared to be engaged in a heated debate. Basil was gesturing in exaggerated fashion towards the heavens and Mr. Malik was almost imploring him to maintain his composure. Mr. Malik pointed to his own forehead then placed his index finger on Basil’s forehead. As they turned the corner, Mohammad made the observation that Basil was hobbling as if he too had the legs of a math compass. This was not entirely true but I did not deny it or leap to Basil’s defense.

Several years later, Mr. Malik was asked by one boy in another class if he still had his sniper gun. He said he did. Then he was asked, as a follow up, whether he still rides his motorcycle from the war days. He said he didn't but that he did ride the boy's mother. He was sacked on the same day. The truth is that he would have gotten away with it, but the boy happened to be the son of a member of parliament and his mother, the wife of a member of parliament. Mr. Malik would have known this.

One Sunday in April, Estelle knocked on the door. My mother opened the door. She called my name. I stood on the doorstep. And Estelle stood on the doormat. I didn't ask her to come in. The house smelled of stuffed zucchini.

'Maman found a better job in Paris,' said Estelle, 'she wants us to move there.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow morning. I've never been to Paris.'

'Do you think you'll like it more than Beirut?'

'It is Paris. If I don't, there's something wrong with me.'

I nodded.

'What about your father?'

'Maman says we were never here to find him,' said Estelle, and she told me I was naïve with her eyes, 'I think she just wanted me to carry something of this part of the world with me.'

I nodded.

'When you said Shawki, in the essay, you meant the Don. Didn't you?'

'Will you come back home?'

'Who knows? Maybe. Yes. I will.'

Estelle wiped a tear off her face.

'When I die, cry over my dead body.'

'That's stupid,' she said, 'don't say stupid things. It doesn't suit you.'

I didn't apologize for the article or my outburst. She didn't ask me to. We hadn't spoken for months. She winked at me and opened her arms. I leaned in, she pinched me on the back of my neck. I smelled her. Not Channel or Dior, just Ariel, maybe Persil and Garnier Fructis. Not like Basil. Estelle once said that he was so olive-skinned, you could

taste the olives. He did smell of olives, with a hint of Labneh and some mint and a dash of thyme and sweat.

‘I’ll let you know if I ever spot your father walking down Hamra Street.’

She laughed and I never saw her again.

I would come across five or six men who looked like her father in Beirut. I spotted one in Verdun. He was tall and imposing and he wore a leather coat that extended to his knees. I spotted one on Rawche. He was wearing flip flops and pink shorts and he too was tall, but much skinnier and less imposing. I spotted one on Mar Elias. He wore a suit, not tailored. It was loose and his tie was longer than it should have been. He had a face with no clear outline. I saw one on Mar Mkhael. He was young, younger than the man in the photo would have been at the time. He was drunk and ungroomed. Then I stopped looking.

The Revolution

In Mr. Aston's class, I explained that Estelle had left for Paris. Mr. Aston said that he had not been informed of this. He made a note of it on the attendance sheet in front of him. Mohammad said that I should follow her. Basil said he had known about it. He leaned in closer to my desk and asked me if I had patched things up with Estelle. I shrugged. Mr. Aston turned to Mohammad and told him to shut the window because of the racket outside. It was Friday and afternoon Azan was at its loudest. Mohammad froze. He looked like a goat caught in headlights. Mohammad was the only boy in class who had any facial hair. He had managed to squeeze out a goatee and keep it there for weeks. Basil too could grow something of a moustache but he had chosen not to. Mohammad reached for the window but did not shut it.

Opposite the school stood a Mosque and adjacent to the Mosque stood a church. Every so often, when the Azan rang throughout the streets of Beirut, the church would join in by ringing its bells. The other teachers cited this as an example of the pluralism of Beirut. And the first few times you heard that sound, it was. But only the first few times.

'Mohammad, we haven't got all day,' said Mr. Aston, 'we're covering Gatsby and the American Dream today.'

Nadine looked at Mohammad. Wael looked at Mohammad. And I imagine if Estelle was there, she would have surveyed Mohammad with interest too. Mr. Aston, who had been leaning against the teacher's desk, and supporting his weight with his knuckles, straightened his back. Basil got up and shut the window. It was one of those old roll up windows which had been painted and repainted. The glass bore the effects of the sloppy paint jobs over the years, a white stain here which had turned yellow or a splash of dried paint there with the marks of finger nails running through it. Some long ago student had attempted to reverse the damage done by the reckless painters with their fingernails, but childhood dreams and math lessons had no doubt stood in the way. The rope upon which the entire operation depended was also visible. Basil had only to give the window a little push and the rope took care of the rest.

Mr. Aston gave Basil a nod. He had walked halfway across the classroom with the intention of shutting the window himself, possibly realizing that he had asked too much of the class. For the next hour or so, he talked about Gatsby's green light which 'year by

year recedes before us'. Mr. Aston's passion shone through, he slammed his fists, he clapped his hands, and pointed and wagged his index finger in equal measure. And even as he did so, there was something resigned about his voice which the odd flicker of the eyelids betrayed. I was not, at the time, in the habit of observing too many world leaders in the midst of their stirring speeches. Though I imagined that they must not have sounded too different to Mr. Aston's that day. The only speech which I could recall was Saddam Houssein's during his trial in court, not long before he was sentenced to death.

'I am not here to defend me,' the vicious dictator had said, pointing his index finger in the direction of the judge, 'I am here to defend you.'

Mr. Aston's glimmering blue eyes alternated between Mohammad and Basil for the duration of the session. When he was done, Mr. Aston let his head drop. Basil and Mohammad exchanged glances.

Twelve minutes before the end of class, we heard a bomb go off. It seemed closer than it was. The glass from the three windows shattered and Serene sustained a cut on her forearm. Wael stood on his seat, flailing his arms in the process and the rest of us ducked and covered our heads with our arms. Serene was stunned silent. She gasped at first but she did not cry or shout afterwards. Even her eyebrows had seemed to fail her, flickering inauspiciously then flatlining.

'It's a bomb, habibi, not a mouse,' said Basil, craning his head more than usual to look up at Wael, 'get down from there.'

The politician, and member of parliament, targeted by the car bomb would survive the incident. He would need a walking stick for the remainder of his life, but he would use that stick as a political tool with which to beat his opponents.

Mr. Aston, however, did not handle the car bomb as well as the intended target. He swore loudly then he apologized profusely, then he gestured for the class to remain calm. Moments later, the class door swung open and slammed against one boy's desk. Mr. Aston swore again. The boy's name was Ali and, sensing the opportunity, he swore too.

'Damn the father of that pimp's whore of a bomb,' said Ali.

Ms. Iman's head appeared through the door as she scanned the room for any injuries. Ignoring both Ali and Mr. Aston, she spotted Serene and led her out of the room with one arm around her shoulder.

Mohammad sat upright and eyed Basil. There was such an air of smugness about the former, that when Nadine coughed suddenly, I concluded that she must have choked on it.

'I don't blame you,' said Mohammad the next day after class, running his fingers over his goatee.

'For what?' asked Basil.

'Shutting the window.'

'Why would you blame me for that?'

'You saw what happened. The bomb, the shattered glass, the gash in Serene's arm.'

'You're blaming me for not predicting the future,' said Basil, looking at me and not Mohammad, in disbelief.

We could hear some of the older boys playing football on the make-shift asphalt pitch behind us, and the voice of a short, skinny Egyptian boy who had recently moved to Beirut with his Christian parents. They had found Egypt a bit stifling and chose Lebanon as their place of refuge. Abed was not very good at the sport itself, but had a deceptively deep, strong voice coupled with an Egyptian dialect and was allowed to commentate on the match.

In the late nineties, an Egyptian football commentator by trade, Methat Shalabi, captured the spirit of the World cup for the Arab speaking nations. His voice rang throughout the city like Azan, as everyone in Beirut tuned in to listen to Methat Shalabi commentate on France's annihilation of Brazil in the '98 final. Brazil's capitulation, France's dominance, Ronaldo's despair and Zidane's Marseille roulette. Shalabi immortalized them all.

‘That Algerian boy can play,’ he would say about the star of the French national team, ‘Give him back, Chirac.’

Abed stood in the middle of the make-shift pitch and the older boys just played around him. Pretty soon he found himself a loud speaker and his voice became synonymous with school breaks. He had memorized the name and age of every single boy, and even seemed to know strange, intimate matters about some of them. On one occasion, he debated the merits of the father of a goalkeeper’s decision to take a second wife and whether polygamy is justified in today’s world. The older boys accused him of being the son of an Egyptian intelligence officer and he did not deny it. So they let him speak his mind. He cleared his throat before mentioning the car bomb which had kept a significant number of players off the pitch because their mothers were reluctant to send him to school on the day.

‘We all love our mothers,’ said the Egyptian boy, ‘But sometimes they can be a little bit overbearing.’

‘You shut the window. It blocked out the Azan. The glass broke,’ said Mohammad, ‘You do the math.’

‘So you’re saying god did it?’ asked Wael.

‘Yes,’ said Mohammad, running his fingers over his goatee, ‘but only because our Druze friend shut the window.’

‘I only shut it because you froze up,’ said Basil.

‘I didn’t freeze up. I could have done it if I wanted to.’

‘Habibi, you couldn’t have done shit.’

‘Who the hell is Aston to tell us whether or not we can listen to the Azan?’ said Wael.

‘You’re Christian, Wael,’ I said.

‘It’s the principle.’

‘Surely, *that* should have been a foul,’ rang Abed’s voice through the loudspeaker, ‘This sort of thing happens sometimes when there is no referee.’

‘Six hundred and twenty seven times two hundred and sixty five?’ asked Basil.

‘One hundred sixty six thousand, one hundred and fifty five.’

‘Who made you Druze minister of foreign affairs anyway?’ asked Mohammad.

‘I’m not defending him because he’s foreign, you dumb, ape-descendent, Muslim goat. I’m defending him because he’s not wrong.’

‘I’m the goat? Your mother worships goats. She prays for the goats to protect her son before she goes to bed, every night,’ said Mohammad, ‘and sometimes I answer her prayers.’

Basil shrugged his shoulders at this.

‘What do you do with that Child Molester in his office all the time anyway?’ asked Mohammad.

‘None of your business,’ replied Basil, clenching his fists.

‘That’s alright,’ said Mohammad, placing a hand on Basil’s shoulder, ‘we already know.’

At this Basil launched his fist in the direction of Mohammad’s jaw. He missed and Mohammad landed an uppercut which knocked Basil off his feet and on his back. I kned Mohammad in the stomach but was dragged by the collar from behind before I could do anything else. I was on the floor and Wael had his hands around my throat. I thought about throwing him a particularly large equation to solve, but it seemed unlikely that math was the answer. Someone caught Wael with an arm around his neck and lifted him off me. By the time I got to my feet, I could see boys from all over the playground at each other. The older boys had stopped their game of football and were exchanging blows indiscriminately.

‘Najjar is back to his feet and he scans the pitch for his next target,’ announced Abed, before adding, ‘Najjar’s father is, of course, Muslim and his mother, Christian. He thinks he might be a Buddhist.’

The younger boys reveled in the chaos. One of them, a short curly haired boy with severe dandruff, swung a fist in my direction. His thumb was tucked inside his fist. I shoved him out of the way.

‘Revolution!’ screamed Basil, fist in the air, rushing past me and leaping onto Mohammad who was now sprawled on the ground.

A couple of young boys followed him into battle. One had black hair and black eyes and his nose so protruded from his face that it was almost ahead of Basil. I felt my elbow connect with a chest and I did not turn to see whose.

‘It is *mayhem*, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Abed, still standing in the middle of the pitch untouched, ‘this is not the game we know and love,’ then, ‘Where has that round thing gone off to?’

A few of the girls joined in too, but they only pushed and scratched each other. Serene extended a leg to trip one of the younger boys. Once he was writhing on the floor, she jumped on top of his back and pulled at his fringe. I felt a hand on my shoulder from behind. I ducked and turned. It was Basil. He already had a noticeably swollen lip.

‘I made out with Estelle a couple of times before she left,’ he said, ‘we didn’t tell you because we thought you wouldn’t like it.’

Later, he admitted that he only told me because he was afraid that Abed might announce it into his loudspeaker.

I put my fist through his gut. He sat on the floor and I sat alongside him.

Then we heard the Don’s whistle. The entire playground fell quiet. If anyone could come back from the dead, the Don could. We looked around and saw that it was Ms. Katerina holding the whistle and surveying the playground from atop one of the green benches. The ground remained still and silent, except for Abed who had abandoned his loudspeaker and was now juggling the ball in the center, still unscathed.

The Persian carpet, the Plaza Pharmacy Calendar, the leather armchairs were unchanged. Basil held an icepack to his right cheekbone, his upper lip red and swollen. My neck was covered in Band-Aids. Wael had dug his fingernails in my neck while he was being dragged away. He and Mohammad had joined us too. Wael could only see out of his left eye. Mohammad had escaped lightly. He was bigger than most. Ms. Iman sat behind her desk surrounded by Mr. Abu Alam, Ms. Katerina, Mr. Malik and Abed. The Egyptian commentator was there on account of the fact that he was the only uninvolved, neutral party in the whole playground. Though his stay in Ms. Iman’s office was short-lived.

‘He has to go,’ Mr. Abu Alam said, arms crossed, ‘the Englishman has to go.’

He was wearing shoes, not highlander sandals. He kept a pair of Clarks in his desk drawer for times like these. He did not have socks on.

‘These boys are trouble,’ said Mr. Malik, ‘I’ve been telling you this for a while now. They’ve dragged my reputation and the reputation of this school through the dirt.’

‘They messed up,’ said Ms. Katerina, ‘but Mr. Aston disrespected their religion. What were they supposed to do?’

‘Not beat each other up, Katerina,’ said Mr. Malik, ‘stay out of this if you’re going to make it more complicated than it is.’

‘The Englishman has to go,’ repeated Mr. Abu Alam.

‘I agree,’ said Mohammad.

‘Shut up,’ said Mr. Abu Alam.

‘What about Wael?’ asked Ms. Katerina, crossing her arms.

‘What about him?’ asked Ms. Iman.

She turned her head towards Wael, not Ms. Katerina, as if he were the one making a case for his own innocence.

‘He is a Christian who was defending his Muslim friend’s right to listen to Azan,’ said Ms. Katerina, ‘Shouldn’t we be encouraging this sort of thing?’

‘He had his hands around my throat,’ I said.

‘That’s true,’ said Wael, nodding, ‘I also elbowed a younger boy in the face and poked one of the football boys in the eye.’

He seemed more afraid of being left out of the collective punishment than anything else.

A hint of a smile flashed upon Ms. Iman’s otherwise straight face. She may have found Wael’s willingness to die by the sword admirable or, possibly, amusing.

‘Either way, you can’t blame the entire playground debacle on these four,’ said Ms. Katerina.

‘What do you think, Abed?’ asked Ms. Iman, glancing at the short Egyptian boy, before casting her eyes on the four of us again.

‘I think that a foul is a foul only when the referee blows his whistle. Otherwise, it’s a claim for a foul and that’s not the same,’ said Abed, beaming.

Mr. Malik placed his hand on Abed’s shoulder and guided him to the door, he ushered him outside then slammed it behind him. He mumbled something about not

having time for cryptic, football trivia then crossed his arms and glared at Ms. Iman who promptly took the lead.

‘Who threw the first punch?’ asked Ms. Iman.

‘Mohammad did,’ said Basil.

‘Only because he missed,’ said Mohammad.

‘He called my mother a goat-worshipper.’

‘Isn’t she?’ asked Ms. Iman.

‘That’s not the point.’

‘What about you, Armstrong?’

‘I was defending the goat-worshipper’s son,’ I said.

‘Aren’t you going to call their parents?’ asked Mr. Malik.

‘And have four sets of angry parents with different religious backgrounds in my office?’

‘It could start another civil war,’ said Mr. Abu Alam, with a half-smile.

‘If you learn one thing,’ said Ms. Iman, ‘from your entire experience at school, let it be that it is easier to make another boy bleed than it is to make him think.’

‘I’m not sure I understand what you mean by that,’ said Basil.

‘Me either,’ said Ms. Katerina.

‘You understand my highlander sandals, Abu Mekhi,’ said Mr. Abu Alam.

‘What will we have done, if we raise a generation like the last?’ said Ms. Iman.

‘We are past that now,’ said Mr. Malik.

Ms. Iman suspended all four of us for a week. She also blamed us for drawing a penis on the glass casing of the president’s portrait.

‘Mohammad doesn’t even know what a penis looks like, let alone how to draw one,’ said Basil.

‘Basil’s the expert on penises,’ said Mohammad, which earned both of them an extra week each.

She hadn’t noticed the ‘F-Art of Metis and Sons’. She warned that any more misdemeanors and she would expel us without hesitation. Abed’s skill on the ball earned him the grudging respect of the older boys who allowed him to join their matches from then on. Over the coming weeks, we would hear his voice less frequently and, when we

did, it was often through heavy breath just after he had been subbed off. Eventually, he did the honourable thing by announcing he would resign from commentary for good through the loudspeaker before kicking it halfway across the asphalt pitch. Abed had moved up in the world and he was not going back.

My mother told me that I would sell Chicklets on the streets for five hundred Lebanese liras a packet, and live off the goodwill of others for the rest of my life. My father refused to speak to me for a week. He did not communicate with me through my mother or sister. He went about his daily routine without acknowledging my presence. The first couple of days, I said 'hello', 'thank you' and 'goodnight'. I quickly realized that it didn't matter so I stopped.

On the third morning, I stood outside the bathroom door. I needed to go or shit or pee or excrete desperately unwanted wastes.

'I need to go,' I said.

My father did not reply. I banged on the door with one hand on my crotch.

'I need to go, now.'

The door swung open and my father stood in front of me in his stained white flannel shirt and blue checkered shorts with a green towel around his neck. The smell of Gillette wafted through the door. He still had some shaving cream on some parts of his neck. One half of his face was unshaven. He wiped his mouth with the towel and blinked at me.

I slid through and swung the door shut behind me. I slipped my boxers off and stood over the toilet.

Nothing.

My father kicked the door open and I sprayed the mirrors above the toilet seat with my urine. It was his way of telling me to hurry up. I put my boxers back on and left the bathroom. My father walked back in. I switched off the lights.

'Damn your pimp father to hell,' said my pimp father, 'May he be violated by the son of a pimp's dog.'

I pictured it.

To my young mind, the Pimp seemed an omnipresent power, a divine presence or, at the very least, an astute businessman and wealthy benefactor. This was how I explained away the fact that his name often preceded that of institutions or edifices or people or domesticated animals. It was the Pimp's world and I accepted this early on without much deliberation.

My mother put her arm around my neck and dragged me to the kitchen. I skipped over a puddle of water on the floor by the fridge. She made me a Halloumi sandwich and watched me eat it. Then she made me another one with tomatoes and I ate that one too. She waited until my father had left for work and taken my sister with him to the pimp school.

'Adam, you can't keep doing this,' said my mother, 'you're not like the other kids in your school. Their parents have money. They have lands and companies and property.'

'That's not my fault.'

'No, it's not,' said my mother, leaning against the leaking fridge and crossing her arms, 'It's not your fault that we live in a rented apartment, or that we don't own a car or that your allowance is half that of your classmates. None of it is your fault.'

'Exactly.'

'Your father and I made that decision long ago. We chose your education over a comfortable lifestyle.'

I shrugged my shoulders. When god said: 'let there be light', he meant let there be pimp's light.

'You think you would stand a chance of becoming an astronaut without the best education money can buy in this country?'

Cannonball

When we walked back into school, Wael and I were treated like returning heroes. Basil and Mohammad were still suspended. The younger boys had their own stories about who we were fighting and with what degree of success. One story had it that the four of us had stood up to Mr. Malik and that he'd somehow managed to turn us against one another, using his pedophilia. This story relied heavily on a lack of understanding of the word pedophilia. Another story had it that the four of us planned to sneak into the school at night and draw another penis on the president's portrait, but were caught in the early stages, while fighting over who would take credit for the plan. Even the girls thought we were alright.

'You know I had a crush on you when we were kids,' said Nadine, 'I thought you were so cute with your astronaut dreams and your steely determination. Of course, it's not as cute now, but still beats future third-generation businessman.'

She was forever caressing her eyelashes with her index fingers.

'Thanks,' I said.

'Did anything happen between you and that French girl?'

'Estelle? No.'

'She was a weird one. Between her and the goat-boy you had one hell of a group there.'

I shrugged my shoulders. I was in the kitchen again and my mother was telling me off for being the son of lower-middle-class parents living in a rented apartment and attending an expensive private school. In my mind, I was always eating the Halloumi sandwich while she lectured me. It wasn't true. She'd waited until I'd had my last bite before she spoke.

'Do you want to be my boyfriend?'

'Alright,' I said.

She stuck her tongue down my throat and then held my hand tightly.

Her father was a good surgeon but a failed politician. He owned land and property and, if you count the chauffeur and the housemaids and the cooks on minimum wage, people. I met him a couple of days later when I was invited to Nadine's house in Rabieh.

There were no tall buildings, and stuffy apartments in Rabieh. There were houses and mansions and pools in backyards with bars inside them. I saw a cross on the door of every house and a housemaid cleaning the porch in front of every other one. There were trees which extended into the street and belonged to people because they grew in their backyards. I saw an Aston Martin with a Lebanese license plate and a Porch Cayenne with an American license plate. There were gates and fences with signs that said ‘Do Not Trespass’ or ‘Beware: Dog’, and I thought ‘you’re bluffing’.

The maid, a short elderly woman from Sri Lanka, ushered me to the swimming pool outside. There was nothing special about Nadine’s place, except that they had a balcony overlooking the pool but none overlooking the street and a single Roman column standing by the gate. Nadine threw her bag on the floor and ran upstairs. The Sri Lankan woman picked it up. I stood outside overlooking the pool. It was one of those round ones. There was a trampoline on one side and a swing on the other. Neither had been used much. The trampoline still had remnants of the original packaging on it.

‘I never had a son,’ said Nadine’s father, Dr. Antoine. He sat on one of the sunbeds and I sat on a chair beside it. He was short with thick rimmed glasses and a moustache. His hair seemed to comb itself. It was unruffled but untouched by a hair brush. He had navy blue shorts on with a pager attached to it.

‘I never had a rich father,’ I said.

It was a line out of Basil’s textbook. Dr. Antoine laughed. He took a sip of his Johnnie Walker.

‘What’ll you have, habibi?’

The Sri Lankan housemaid stood behind him.

‘Almaza,’ I said.

‘Where are you from, Najjar?’

‘Beirut.’

‘Where in Beirut?’

‘West Beirut.’

‘Aren’t you Muslim?’

‘I drink.’

‘Your father doesn’t mind?’

‘No. We drink Arak together sometimes.’

He waved his hand. She disappeared.

‘We don’t have Almaza,’ he said, ‘she’s going to bring you a Corona or a Heineken.’

‘Cannonball!’ Nadine shouted.

It was very American. A more authentic girl would have shouted ‘Yala’.

She ran through the door in a blur. She leapt and clutched her knees in midair, spinning as she did so, then falling back-first into the swimming pool. Warm water splashed against my ankles and Dr. Antoine’s. There were white lines on her shoulders from a different bikini. She already had larger breasts than the rest of the girls in class combined. But she was no Ms. Katerina. She was not even a Ms. Mayssa. Dr. Antoine clapped.

‘I taught her how to do the dive head-first. But she insists on doing this.’

‘Where’s your mother?’ I asked Nadine.

‘She’s in Paris. She runs a business from over there. It’s a clothing line.’

‘That’s what we tell her,’ said Dr. Antoine leaning in and pinching my ear between his index and thumb.

Johnnie Walker traveled through my nostrils.

‘Do you like it?’ asked Nadine.

‘Of course, he likes it.’

‘It’s alright.’

‘Adam wants to be an astronaut,’ said Nadine.

Dr. Antoine laughed.

‘I know your father,’ said Dr. Antoine, ‘he’s the journalist, isn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘He was SSNP for a while in the eighties. He keeps writing about dead people now. Why does he keep writing about dead people?’

‘I’ll ask him.’

‘I liked his earlier work,’ he said taking a sip of his whiskey, ‘It was listing, really, that’s all it was. That was his thing, wasn’t it?’

‘I suppose,’ I said, as I observed Nadine performing a near perfect breast stroke.

‘Like a shopping list, but it made sense. Or it didn’t. I don’t know. But it got you thinking about ideas, not people.’

‘Jump in,’ said Nadine, splashing water in my direction.

‘Living breathing ideas,’ said Dr. Antoine, ‘not dead people.’

The water was fresh and smelled of chlorine and Nadine’s perfume. The Mediterranean was nowhere within sight.

‘I don’t have swimming trunks,’ I said.

‘The *docteur* will lend you some,’ she said.

Her father was French educated, meaning he spoke French as a second language.

‘She thinks it pisses me off when she calls me the *docteur*,’ he said, staring at his daughter, ‘It doesn’t really. I am the *docteur*. I worked hard to earn that title. I did not work nearly as hard to become a father.’

‘Later,’ I said, splashing her with Corona.

‘The newspaper has been shit for years anyway. It used to be the voice of the people. Now it’s the voice of a few capitalists with more money than they know what to do with,’ said Dr. Antoine. He poured himself some more. He spoke as if he wasn’t sitting in front of his own swimming pool in Rabieh.

‘It’s corrupt,’ I said, taking a sip of my Corona, ‘everything’s corrupt.’

I liked pretending to be a rich man who was pretending to be poor.

‘The whole country is corrupt. I should have stayed in London.’

‘You’ve lived in London?’

Nadine floated on her back. She had somehow acquired Ray Bans and they made her look older still.

‘I got my degree from the University of Edinburgh. Best years of my life,’ he said, scratching at the label of the bottle, ‘have you heard the joke about the Saudi Arabian in London?’

‘No.’

‘So this Saudi Arabian student in London writes his father – this was before the internet – and he says ‘Dear Father, I Love my Ferrari. But everyone in London rides trains.’ So his Saudi Father responds with ‘Dear Son, I’ve wired you some money. Go buy yourself a train and stop embarrassing us.’’

He extended his glass and knocked his head back and laughed in the direction of the sun. I did the same. Then we drank. And I had five more Coronas and a sip of the doctor's whiskey.

'Another?' asked the good doctor.

'No more,' I said, but I smiled and took another sip of his whiskey. It was a Jack Daniels or a Johnnie Walker. It did not make sense to me that whiskey would be named after men. It is one of those questions I asked myself just that one time and I never asked again. I asked it of other people after four or five drinks because it seemed like an insightful thing to articulate, but I did not privately turn it over in my head.

'Isn't this better than walking on the moon?'

'It is close enough.'

'I'm breaking up with you,' said Nadine, as she made her way out of the pool. She sat on the edge of the pool first then swung her legs out of the water.

I tilted my head to the left so that another Roman Column stood between the sun and my eyes. There were bullet holes etched across the column, as a result of the civil war.

'Hail Caesar,' I said.

'What?' asked Nadine, wrapping a towel around her waist.

'I understand,' I said, tipping over the rest of a warm Corona I had left by the foot of the chair to try the whiskey.

'I hope you do it,' she said, 'I hope you spend your whole life working hard for it. I hope you become the first Arab to stand on the surface of the moon, all alone and against all the odds. And I hope you look back and realize that it was not worth it in the end.'

I had the urge to wash away the bitter taste of alcohol from my mouth, to bite off half an apple or to shove a vine of grapes down my throat. I swallowed my own saliva and I clicked my tongue and I heard my dry mouth curse Jim and Johnnie and Jack.

'I want to go home,' I said.

'I'll drive you home. I've got to go to the hospital anyway,' hissed the doctor.

Nadine ripped the towel off her body and threw it at her father. Then she turned and walked away. And I swallowed more of my own saliva and observed the bullet-ridden Roman column.

‘That’s enough,’ shouted the doctor after her, launching his glass into the air.

It spun along a vertical axis, overtaking the sun at one point without flipping, before landing in the pool.

His left hand gripped the armrest as he bit his upper lip.

I craned my neck in time to spot the Sri Lankan housemaid bending over to pick the wet bikini off the floor. There behind her was Nadine’s olive, bare backside. On her left butt cheek were two perfectly aligned moles such that if you were to tilt your head to the same side and at a certain angle, you might feel obliged to return the smile. She had walked past the maid towards the door leading into the hallway, now unburdened by the weight of the bikini or the towel or the water.

The doctor drove his grey Mercedes Benz well for a man who had drunk a quarter of a bottle of whisky. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and watched the road ahead and said nothing for the length of the journey.

‘Is this your home?’ he asked, looking out the window.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘we don’t have a swimming pool.’

But I meant to say that from our balcony you could see a fraction of the Mediterranean Sea. When there was no electricity in Beirut, as was often the case, you could spot the sun set behind a haphazard collection of war-torn buildings and half-baked attempts at invincible sky-scrapers, or hear the echoing sound of afternoon prayer or the hoarse voice of the grocer as he pushes his cart down an empty street every Sunday at five: ‘I have carrots, I have zucchini, I have vine leaves, I have zucchini, I have parsley, I have zucchini,’ and once, ‘I have no one, *zucchini*, no one cares, *zucchini*.’ But I didn’t.

‘That’s fine,’ he said, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles, ‘The world isn’t split into people who do own swimming pools and people who do not.’

‘Are you alright?’ I asked.

He removed his foot off the brakes allowing the car to roll slowly. Then he applied his foot to the brakes with a little more force than necessary. I thought I saw him nod, but it could have been the brakes.

‘Thanks for the Corona. And the Jack Daniels,’ I said, as I slammed the car door shut behind me, ‘And the ride.’

‘Johnnie Walker,’ said Dr. Antoine, as he rolled up the window, ‘Pass my regards on to your father for me. Tell him to leave the dead alone.’

The morning Mohammad and Basil returned to school, having served their suspension, I sat in my seat nursing a headache. While my classmates stood up straight beside their desks with the national anthem echoing throughout the school, I pressed the palms of my hands against my ears and placed my forehead on the table. I could still hear the first stanza.

‘All of us! For our Country, for our Glory and Flag!
Our valor and our writings are the envy of the ages.
Our mountain and our valley, they bring forth stalwart men.
And to Perfection we devote our words and labor.’

I felt Basil’s nimble fingers flicking my ear. I waved his hand away. Then I felt another hand, this one meatier, on my shoulder. The sheer weight of the hand resting on my right shoulder made me sit up straight. I looked up to see Mr. Malik with one eyebrow raised and his entire mouth shifted to one side of his face.

He nodded his head and my classmates took their seats.

‘Are you not Lebanese, Najjar?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said. I debated telling him that my father’s grandfather was in fact fleetingly French, and that my maternal grandparents were both Palestinian. I did not.

‘Would you stand up for the Marseilles?’ he asked.

‘No, sir.’

‘Would you stand up to ask god to save the queen?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Is Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles?’ asked Mr. Malik. His words would not have felt out of synch had they been accompanied by music.

‘No, sir,’ I said. I was unsure what he meant by this, but I sensed that there was a rhythm to these questions and I knew not to interrupt the rhythm.

Mr. Malik narrowed his eyes and thinned his lips. As a member of the SNSP, his entire political ambition was to do away with Lebanon.

I shrugged my shoulders. He gave me a slap on the back and hobbled back to his seat. Mr. Malik had a very specific way of standing while the national anthem was being played every morning. He would never place his hand on his heart or pump his chest and belt out the anthem itself. He repeatedly told students off for doing the former and openly showed his disdain for the latter. Instead, he placed his arms firmly by his sides and straightened his neck. He glowered straight ahead but not in a determined sort of way. His eyes betrayed a sorrow, a resigned sense of something lost.

‘His youth?’ ventured Basil, on more than one occasion with the anthem blasting in the background.

‘No, something more concrete,’ I said, believing every word.

‘His hair?’ asked Mohammad.

‘A person, I think.’

‘His barber,’ said Wael.

Mr. Malik sat behind his desk and scratched his nose.

‘Ask not what your country can do for you,’ muttered Mr. Malik, to no one in particular, ‘ask what you can do for your country.’

‘Kennedy,’ said Mohammad, nodding.

‘Gibran Khalil Gibran,’ said Mr. Malik, rolling his eyes without moving his neck, ‘The assassinated bastard stole it.’

This seemed to me at the time an attempt to instill national pride in young, impressionable minds. Had Mr. Malik not proceeded to undermine his good work, I would have settled on that assumption.

‘Our writings are the envy of the ages,’ continued Mr. Malik, now pointing the knuckle of his index finger in my direction, ‘It says so in the anthem.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Ali, failing to spot the hint of irony in Mr. Malik’s voice.

The implication was that the least I, a hungover, disinterested student, could do for my country is to stand up for its national anthem. Mr. Malik did not articulate this because, as a teacher of Arabic literature, he reveled in planting hidden, but not subtle, meanings in his sentences; or because he was a Syrian nationalist.

Mr. Malik then claimed that the whole tune was stolen from the anthem of a failed state in Morocco at the onset of the twentieth century.

With the anthem still ringing in my ears, I flung myself out of the uncomfortable, wooden green chair and burst through the classroom door only to throw up at the feet of the Syrian janitor who had been leaning against the lockers outside class. Audible chuckles and several turned heads greeted my swift reemergence, but nothing would disrupt Mr. Malik's resolve.

That session we were supposed to cover Qays 'Majnun Layla'. The Bedouin poet who so loved a married woman named Layla that he went mad, wandering the desert for years until he was finally found dead by her grave many years later where he had carved some of his verses on stone.

Mr. Malik, however, would tell us all about 'Majnun Layla', on another day. Instead, he instructed us to turn our textbooks to the pages marked 'The Modern Era'. We did this, and he pointed to a text titled 'You Have Your Lebanon and I Have Mine' by Gibran Khalil Gibran.

'Your Lebanon is an arena for men from the West and men from the East.

My Lebanon is a flock of birds fluttering in the early morning as shepherds lead their sheep into the meadow and rising in the evening as farmers return from their fields and vineyards.

You have your Lebanon and its people. I have my Lebanon and its people.

Yours are those whose souls were born in the hospitals of the West; they are as ship without rudder or sail upon a raging sea.... They are strong and eloquent among themselves but weak and dumb among Europeans.'

That is as far as we ever got with the text in class. Mr. Malik never allowed us to find out more about Gibran's Lebanon, he never asked whether we agreed with him or whether we thought he was a bit too sentimental and idealistic. He never asked us about our Lebanon. He asked the janitor whose mop had made its way in and out of the class door repeatedly with the smell of detergents overtaking the room, as the latter listened in on Mr. Malik's impromptu lecture. The barrel-chested janitor mentioned the glorious Cedar tree, then he resumed mopping up the mess for which I was responsible.

Mr. Malik did tell us all about his Lebanon which was not Lebanon at all. He even declared that in most of Khalil Gibran's writings the word 'Lebanon' had replaced the original 'Syria' which Gibran used to denote the region. For the next half an hour, Mr. Malik proceeded to rip the country's fabric to shreds.

'You think Houmous is Lebanese?'

It was on this day that I learned of the myth of Fakheridine: that the Ottoman empire did not have a record of the Lebanese prince who nearly brought it to its knees; that he did not exist at all in his modern incarnation; that old men with white beards tend to let you down that way. Mr. Malik was almost as animated as Mr. Aston had been throughout the Englishman's delivery of his Gatsby lecture. Except Mr. Malik never moved from his chair. He stayed seated for the entire session. He threatened to stand up at one point, having grown tired of sitting, but the act tired him more so he waved a hand contemptuously and pretended to adjust his seating position. When he was done, all that was left was the Cedar tree.

'What's your point?' asked Wael, gripping the edges of the table tightly.

Mr. Malik surveyed the class. Then he looked up at the overhead fan and back down at Wael and sighed.

'Your father is a Phalangist, fascist, isolationist, separatist pimp. Isn't he?'

The Phalangists were a Christian party with its own militia during the civil war in the seventies and eighties. One of the founders of the party had captained the Lebanese football team that went to the Berlin 1936 Olympics held in the Olympiastadion. He wanted to bring that discipline and sense of order back with him to Lebanon, he said. He was not speaking about the football.

The party soon distanced itself from Nazism and played a major role in the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camp massacre, facilitated by the Israeli army, which resulted in thousands of Palestinian casualties.

Women and children were rounded up and brought into the Camille Chamoun Sports City Stadium in Beirut. They were told they would be buried alive within the stadium. Then a bomb went off somewhere close by and the Phalangists and the Palestinians, alike, fled. The stadium itself was flattened by the Israelis. The history of the Phalangists is a history of Stadia.

‘Is he?’ asked Wael.

The swastika in Mr. Malik’s office spun a few times.

When Mr. Malik left class, we read on, each silently in his own seat. Wael had forgotten his book so he stood over me and read Gibran from mine.

‘What will remain of your Lebanon after a century? Do you think the atmosphere will preserve in its pockets the shadows of death and the stench of graves?’

Did he know?

‘I say to you that an olive plant in the hills of Lebanon will outlast all of your deeds and your works; that the wooden plow pulled by the oxen in the crannies of Lebanon is nobler than your dreams and aspirations.’

‘I really thought Houmous was Lebanese,’ said Serene, after the silence had been lifted.

An image of Serene licking Houmous from a spoon crossed my mind. Her tongue was extended, unnecessarily, outside of her mouth and the spoon was held at a certain angle such that instead of bringing the spoon to her mouth she had to lean forward in order to lick the houmous off the spoon.

‘It is,’ said Wael, ‘forget that Syrian nationalist paedophile.’

The Sabra and Chatilla massacre was in retaliation for the assassination of the son of the former football captain. The son, Basheer Gemayel, was the president elect at the time, a young thirty something year old with charisma and oratory skills to rival Hitler’s. It was Habib Shartouni, a member of the SSNP, who had assassinated him.

‘You are accused of killing the President of the Republic of Lebanon,’ said the judge.

‘I killed a Mossad agent,’ said Habib.

Habib then retired to write poetry.

‘Where’s Basil?’ I asked Mohammad who was seated behind me.

Wael, his eyes still rooted to the textbook, pointed in the general direction of the door and mumbled something about Basil having followed the Syrian paedophile out of class. The janitor slammed a black nylon trash bag on the desk in front of me.

Captain Druze

Serene was Druze. She was from the mountains and had the same accent as Basil, except it seemed more tolerable on her. I took her to a pub called the Shipman's Crew. She said she had never been to the pub but that her father knew the bartender well. She said her parents would disown her if they found out she was going out with a Muslim. I said I wasn't a Muslim.

'Christian then,' she said, 'it's all the same. They will disown me.'

There were ropes hanging from one end of the ceiling to the other. Some of them hung low and others had been cut off in places, presumably because they irritated the Captain at some point. There was also a rusty, small anchor on the wall behind the bar. The Captain would touch it on his way to the cash register, or the fridge or the tap.

'Not that either.'

'You're not Druze though, are you?'

'No.'

'Are you at least rich?'

'No,' I said, 'Have you ever had sex?'

'No,' she said, 'You're very straightforward.'

From my seat, at the corner of the dimly lit, small pub, I could see Mr. Aston at the bar. He was looking at an empty drink and I told the Captain to bring him a new one. He was having an Amaretto Sour which was a common enough drink for a teenage Lebanese girl but unusual for a former English pastor.

'I'll bring him a drink when he asks for one,' said the Captain, wiping the table with his dirty cloth. His back was hunched because of a motorcycle accident in his younger days but you couldn't tell because he still managed to tower over most people. 'What are you having?'

'Almaza,' I said, 'two of those.'

'I don't do Almaza, anymore,' said the Captain, 'They were bought by Heineken. The hops is imported from Holland. I have 961 Beer, if you want the local stuff.'

961 is the country code for Lebanon. Dial 961 and a Lebanese phone number and you might get the voice of a man or a woman who will at first speak to you in Arabic with that soft Lebanese dialect, and, if you do not say anything back, they will ask you in

French if you are fluent in French. Stay silent for a little while longer, and they will ask you in English if you would prefer to speak in English. Stay silent long enough, and they will insult you in all three languages, but mainly in Arabic.

The Captain placed the two bottles of 961 on the table and opened the bottle caps. The bottle was dark and the label yellow. Serene slammed the bottom of her 961 bottle against the tip of mine which sent the lager shooting straight up the bottle. I tipped the bottle into my mouth and tried my best to drink most of it. I coughed and a bit of beer spilt onto the table.

‘Nothing like Lebanese hops,’ said Serene.

‘What are you twelve?’ asked the Captain.

‘Something like that,’ she said.

‘These are coasters,’ he said, waving two coasters in my face, ‘use them. The bottle goes on the coaster. The coaster stays on the table.’

‘Aye aye, Captain,’ said Serene. She could turn most things into a joke and her laugh was bright and high but also restrained and rarely, if ever, lasted beyond the time it took her to place a hand over her mouth.

‘You know what your problem is?’ she asked, as I leaned in to kiss her.

‘What?’

‘You’re too eager,’ she said, then she kissed me, ‘you’re an eager little boy. You should be more patient, little astronaut boy.’

‘You know about that?’

‘The whole school knows about that,’ she said, placing a hand on my neck, ‘the Don wouldn’t shut up about it and now Ms. Iman won’t shut up about it either. You’re the boy who won’t grow up. The first Arab astronaut. The eager Arab astronaut.’

I laughed and tried to kiss her again, but she pushed me away with the tip of her fingers.

‘Will you draw my initials on a moon rock so that they can stay there forever?’

‘Why would they stay there forever?’

‘Because there is no wind on the moon. For an aspiring astronaut, you don’t know much about the moon, do you?’

She placed a hand over her mouth, preemptively, and I heard her muffled bright laugh.

‘Did you hear about him and Ms. Mayssa?’ she asked, nudging her head in the direction of the bar, ‘apparently, she left the mayor of Jib Janine to be with him. And now they’ve had a big falling out and he’s not doing very well.’

‘The Captain and the ‘black widow’?’

‘Not the Captain. The Englishman. And don’t call her that,’ she said, as I rubbed the back of my neck, ‘She doesn’t want to move to London with him.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe she still loves the mayor.’

‘Of Jib Janine?’

‘Yes. Or maybe she loves Beirut too much.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘My mother told me.’

‘How does your mother know all this?’

‘The neighbors told her.’

‘How do they know?’

‘Don’t be stupid. The neighbors always know.’

I leaned against the bar and ordered another two cold 961s. The Captain mentioned something about coasters then handed me both.

‘Did you dial 961, sir?’ I said, offering a bottle to Mr. Aston as he sat slouched over.

Mr. Aston said that he does not accept drinks from minors. He said that I should be home, probably in bed. He said he had not dialed 961 because he was in Lebanon and you do not dial the country code when you are in the country.

‘But what if you’re at home and need to call Beirut?’ I asked.

‘Who says I’m not at home here?’ he asked, taking a sip of the 961.

‘Mr. Aston, the Beirut, I said, raising my bottle in the air. Mr. Aston ignored it. Mr. Aston could teach a wingless bird to fly, a finless fish to swim, and a clichéd hack to write. And what’s more he would gladly do it in his free time.

‘Home is where the heart belongs.’

I shook my head and stared into Mr. Aston's blue eyes and the stars stared back at me.

'Is the boy bothering you, David?' asked the Captain.

Serene knocked back the last bit of 961 in her bottle. She shifted in her seat. I gave her a wink and she ignored it. She looked up at the ropes hanging from the ceiling, then she shrugged, then she pursed her lips, then she shrugged again and looked past me and crossed her legs and blew her nose and bit her lip then she gaped down at her bottle and she was lost in it. She did all those things, in some order, before I could open my eyelid. When I did, my eye felt heavy and I picked the crust out with my index finger and rubbed it with my knuckles.

'Home is where the soul settles and memories stay.'

I shook my head again. He squinted, the universe contracted, and gaped down at his bottle and for a moment he was lost in it too.

'I can tell him to go home,' said the Captain.

'First you make friends,' he said, waving the Captain away with his hand and taking another sip of the 961, 'then you make memories with friends, those memories happen in a place, that place develops meaning, and that meaning, given enough time, is home.'

He said this calmly while staring at an old One thousand Lira bill taped to the wall behind the bar.

'What happens when the friends leave?' I asked, now pressing the cold bottle against my eye.

'Then they take a part of home with them.'

'Nonsense,' said the Captain, 'Home is about roots, about history. You don't choose home. You're born into it.'

Then the Captain recited the Mahmoud Darwiche poem in English. It was the line about his roots being 'entrenched before the birth of time, before the opening of the eras, before the pines, and the olive trees and before the grass grew.'

It seemed everyone in the world knew that poem by heart, or had it posted on a board somewhere or their fridge or put in a frame where a photograph of their loved ones used to be.

‘To home,’ I said, raising my bottle in the air again and Mr. Aston did the same. The Captain placed two coasters on the bar in front of us.

With one hand in mine and another over her mouth, Serene led me into the one toilet and closed the door behind us. She began to bang her fists against the door rhythmically and I soon followed.

‘Did you tell him anything I told you?’ she asked, still banging her fists against the door.

‘No.’

We did this for a few minutes, without looking at one another.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘You better not be fucking in there, Najjar,’ shouted the Captain, ‘I know her father. He’s Druze. He’ll chop your dick off and force feed it to the goats, when I tell him about this.’

Serene kept banging her fists against the toilet door and I did the same.

‘Would he?’ I asked Serene.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

She laughed for some time without placing a hand over her mouth. When she stopped laughing, she sat down on the floor, crossing her legs as she did so. Some of her knuckles were bruised and she reached for the toilet paper and wiped the tears from her eyes.

‘With a Druze girl? In the toilet of a pub?’ asked Basil, the next morning outside Mr. Malik’s class, ‘Are you mentally challenged, son?’

The Gauloises which had been moving up and down between his lips now stood still. Basil had developed the irritating habit of calling most men ‘son’.

‘We were just pretending,’ I said, waving the smoke away.

‘Tell me something, son of life. Were you wearing a space helmet while you were doing it? Because maybe that’s what this whole astronaut thing is about. Maybe it is just a sex fetish. Maybe your whole life has been building up to this moment when you and a Druze girl get together in a shitty pub, and you do her from behind with a space helmet on. And that’s it. We never hear about your space dreams ever again.’

‘No. I wasn’t.’

‘Try it. Next time. See how it goes.’

‘Do you think her father will chop my dick off and feed it to the goats?’

‘It has happened before.’

Every so often the news would report an amusing story about a boy in a remote Druze village in the mountains who had had his genitals chopped off for having sexual intercourse with an unmarried Druze girl. The last one to be reported featured the father of the Druze girl in question, grinding the culprit’s penis before feeding it to his goat. The goat was called Ramzi and animal rights groups were outraged that Ramzi had been fed the sinner’s penis. ‘If it is not fit for the girl then it is not fit for the goat,’ was one group’s slogan. No one remembers the boy’s name. The father was never charged or sentenced, the police tended to turn a blind eye when it came to Druze and honour crimes.

‘What’s the point of having a Druze friend, if you can’t make this go away?’ I asked, as Wael walked past flashing the ‘OK’ sign with his fingers.

In Lebanon, the ‘OK’ sign means ‘you’re in trouble’.

‘I’ll take care of it, son.’

Mr. Malik discussed Al Maari in class, a blind, vegetarian, recluse of a poet who was known as a heretic in the golden age of Islam. When I looked over to where Serene would normally sit in class, I found an empty seat, and when I looked back ahead, I saw Mohammad biting his lip to keep himself from laughing out loud.

Halfway through class, I saw a tall, balding thirty-something year old man pacing outside the window. I gestured to Basil who gave me a wink.

Mr. Malik said that Al Maari’s epitaph read: ‘This is what my father has wrought upon me, and I have wrought this upon no one.’

‘What do you think that means, Najjar?’ asked Mr. Malik.

‘That life is hard, sir,’ I responded.

‘Not death?’

‘No, sir.’

The balding man approached me after class and extended his hand. He introduced himself as Serene’s eldest brother, and told me that he wasn’t going to chop my penis off if that was what I was afraid of.

‘We were just pretending.’

‘I know,’ he said, leaning against the wall, ‘But you should be more careful, it is not every day that a man pretends to have sex with a Druze girl and gets to keep his dick.’

‘It won’t happen again,’ I said, with my hands pressed hard against one another.

‘I’m counting on it,’ he said, pulling at his earlobe.

Mr. Malik then burst out of class, his gut hanging over his belt, with Basil close behind him. His forehead seemed to be dripping with sweat and his sleeves were rolled up, as they always were, except that it appeared he had rolled them up with more purpose on this occasion.

‘Don’t touch that boy’s penis,’ shouted Mr. Malik, from across the hallway, pointing his finger straight at Serene’s brother.

‘I wasn’t going to.’

‘You said he was going to chop it off,’ said Mr. Malik still ambling towards us, but turning his head to look at Basil.

‘I assumed he would, wouldn’t you?’ asked Basil.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Mr. Malik, now standing face to face with the much taller man.

‘If I wanted it off, it would already be off.’

‘Where’s Serene?’

‘That’s none of your business,’ said Serene’s brother running his fingers through his beard.

‘Do you know who I am?’ asked Mr. Malik.

‘Do you know who I am?’ asked Serene’s brother.

‘Go near this boy again, and you will have the entire armed militia of the SSNP at your door.’

For a week, I would look at Serene's empty seat then at Basil and receive a shrug of the shoulders. It was the month of Ramadan again. Mohammad was fasting, Wael was eating and Basil was smoking. The portrait of the president had been taken down, he had been ousted after being accused of 'raping Lebanese democracy'. The presidential seat was left vacant and so was the place where the portrait had been.

'You know it is a sin, right?' asked Mohammad, raising an eyebrow and staring up at me from his seat on the wooden green bench.

'What's a sin?' I asked, biting off a chunk of Cadbury Fruit and Nut which I had stored in my back pocket.

'Having sex with an unmarried girl. An unmarried girl from another religion, let's not forget.'

'The problem with you Muslims around Ramadan is that you eat less and talk more,' said Basil, lighting another cigarette.

'Did you know,' said Wael, 'that the moon moves three centimeters away from the earth every year?'

'What's your point?' asked Mohammad.

'What will Muslims do in millions of years when the moon is so far away? Who's going to be able to tell when it is Ramadan and when it isn't.'

'I'm talking about a sin. That doesn't depend on the moon's distance from the earth.'

'He was pretending,' said Wael, turning to look at me, 'he didn't actually have sex with her, did you?'

'Wael's worried he'll be the last virgin standing in the group,' said Basil, giving me a wink, 'when the world ends, habibi, it will just be you and your virgin Mary left.'

I laughed at this and Mohammad did too. I spit out the raisins and nuts. I liked the process of sucking on the chocolate until it melted away in my mouth then spitting the rest out.

'Because you were the king of sex in one of your previous lives, were you Basil?' asked Wael.

‘In this life and the previous ones. Who do you think invented the Kamasutra?’

‘Bullshit. Name one girl you’ve slept with,’ said Wael.

‘Paulina.’

‘Paulina?’

‘Paulina the Polish prostitute.’

‘Paulina?’

‘And Marta.’

‘Who’s Marta?’

‘They call her Marta the Moldavian man-eater.’

‘Is she Moldavian?’

‘No.’

‘How will you confront your creator about all of this?’ said Mohamad, resting his chin on his hand.

‘I’ll say I used protection.’

Ms. Iman came walking towards us with her hands in her pockets. She nodded her head in the direction of the other boys and placed her arm around my shoulders. Wael gave me the ‘OK’ sign. She looked at me without saying a word, then ushered me forward.

‘I know that you and Serene, the Druze girl, are friends,’ she began, as we walked away from everyone within earshot, ‘have you spoken to her recently at all?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Do you know if she will be returning to school?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Did she say anything before leaving?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘I know that this is a difficult time for you too. If you need to talk,’ said Ms. Iman.

I could see Mr. Malik looking at his feet, as we passed him by. He was standing outside his class, cross armed, listening closely to a conversation, not ours. I waved to him and he nodded his head. When I saw him next in class, I waved to him and he nodded again. Even after he was sacked for his remark in class about riding a student’s mother as

opposed to his old motorbike, I spotted him hobbling along on Hamra Street a few times, left leg first then right leg encircling it, and I waved and he nodded.

‘Are you going to call in my parents?’ I asked.

‘Do you want me to?’

‘No.’

Ms. Katerina walked over to Mr. Malik. I smiled at her and she smiled back. She did not seem to acknowledge Ms. Iman. I wondered if in the morning she would lay on her back and put her legs up and pull her jeans on to her waist with gravity on her side, or if she would roll the pair of jeans up and then slip her legs through one after the other. I wondered if she prepared her clothes the night before and put them on a chair next to her bed so that she can get up and throw them on in the morning. I wondered if she took her bra off before she went to bed, or if someone took it off for her.

‘The truth is, we haven’t heard from her or her parents, and we are getting a bit worried,’ Ms. Iman turned on her toes and placed both her hands on my shoulders, ‘You are not a child anymore, and this is a serious matter.’

‘I did not know it would be such a big deal,’ I said, looking over my shoulder.

Ms. Iman laughed, but it wasn’t the polite laugh she had reserved for the Don’s occasional crack or the punctual laugh which indicated she had seen or heard enough of a student or even the emergency laugh which she had in place in case anyone accused her of not having a sense of humor. The laugh was loud and unrestrained, not unlike Serene’s in the toilet of the Shipman’s Crew. She removed her glasses and wiped them with her top, then she scrubbed her eyes with her knuckles and she put her right hand on my neck.

‘The Don used to say that the two biggest deals in the region today are sex and religion, and unfortunately for us, they don’t get along very well,’ said Ms. Iman, taking a step back and pursing her lips, ‘but I don’t have to tell you that, do I?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Will you be attempting to contact her?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Do you still want to be an astronaut?’

‘No,’ I said, then ‘Maybe.’

My mother paced back and forth. My father sat on the comfortable couch looking at the floor, the answer to all his problems lay perhaps in one of the books scattered across the living room, in that undecipherable grand pattern which he alone could make sense of. As it turned out, Ms. Iman had called my parents. My mother glared at me then resumed her pacing. This concerned my father who then suggested that she read a book.

‘I don’t want to read a book. Your son is going to ruin his life,’ she said, still standing.

‘He can do whatever he wants with his life,’ said my father, now unfolding his newspaper which had been tucked under his arm up to that point.

‘You’re going to sit there and read your own article.’

‘What can I do? ‘Your children are not yours, they are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself.’ Gibran Khalil Gibran once said that,’ said my father, his face hidden behind the newspaper.

I clenched my jaw.

‘He almost got his genitals chopped off.’

‘It’s all part of his grand plan. Somehow this is all part of the road to becoming an astronaut. Isn’t it, son? That’s why he punches people, lashes his sister with my belt, and has pretend sex in public toilets. He’s plotting his way to space,’ he said, peaking his head above the newspaper to glare at me.

‘I’m plotting my way to space,’ I said.

‘Not everything is a joke,’ said my mother.

My father got up and walked to the dinner table. He grabbed a book and threw it in my direction. It was entitled *Steps in Space*. He had folded one page down the middle. I opened the book to that page as I dropped back into the comfortable couch.

Printed there were the names of the twelve men who had made it to the moon.

‘Do you understand?’ he said.

‘Understand what?’

‘Read the names aloud.’

‘Armstrong, Aldrin, Conrad, Bean, Shepard,’ I stopped and looked up at my mother.

‘Go on,’ barked my father.

‘Mitchell, Scott, Irwin, Young, Duke, Cernan, Schmitt.’

‘What do they all have in common?’ he asked, leaning in.

‘They’re all astronauts.’

‘They’re all American,’ said my father, and the edge of his mouth twitched.

‘Astronauts don’t ride to the moon on the back of rockets,’ he continued, ‘they ride to the moon on the back of nations.’

My father took a bow and people threw flowers and the curtains closed, and there was applause.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ asked my mother.

‘He needs to grow up. That’s his problem. Stop pretending. And grow up.’

On these occasions, it occurred to me, that my father might have believed in adulthood as a separate state of being, that he bought deeply into the notion that adults lead distinct lives from their childhood selves, that to grow is not to build on your childhood but to cast it aside in favor of the person you were always supposed to become. And that this person was never an astronaut.

‘He can do anything he sets his mind to.’

‘No. That’s the problem. You’ve made him think he can walk on water and now he wants to walk on the moon,’ he said, pausing to scratch his moustache.

‘I don’t want to walk on water. I just want to walk on the moon,’ I said, closing the book forcefully.

‘Become a teacher. And teach about going to the moon. Become a writer. Write about going to the moon.’

‘I don’t want to write about astronauts going to the moon. I want to be one.’

‘Write in first-person then.’

Serene showed up to class a month later. Ramadan was over by then. Mr. Aston had not been to any of his classes for a week. When Ms. Iman said he had gone back to London, the general assumption was that he had passed away, like the Don. It turned out he had in fact left for Southampton. He had had enough of Beirut, packed his belongings and

walked away. Ms Mayssa cried in the middle of another power point presentation, and Nadine placed an arm around her.

Serene walked in to Ms. Katerina's class late. She sat down and looked straight ahead. When Ms. Katerina saw her, she stopped drawing the circle on the board. Then she looked around as if to make sure that no one in class scares Serene off. Basil raised his hand.

'Do you have a question, Basil?' asked Ms. Katerina.

'Five hundred and twenty five times one thousand six hundred and twenty two?'

'Eight hundred fifty five thousand five hundred fifty five,' said Wael.

'That is incorrect, I think,' said Ms. Katerina, taking out her calculator.

'I was distracted,' said Wael.

Serene smiled in my direction, after class. Mohammad said I should go talk to her and Basil slipped a condom in my back pocket.

'It is olive flavored, found it in my father's wallet,' said Basil, before giving me a pat on the back, 'He's stopped smoking so now I'm stealing these instead.'

I walked over to Serene, grabbed her by the arm and walked her into the nearest empty classroom I could find. There were chairs on top of desks and broken overhead projectors on the floor. The lights were off and the room smelled of tuna sandwiches in aluminum foil and rotten apples. There was no whiteboard, and only one chalkboard. Pictures of famous men throughout history were taped to the walls featuring one of Einstein with his tongue out and another of Gandhi in his glasses and a Gibran Khalil Gibran self-portrait. There was also a picture of the former president and someone had given him a beard to go along with his moustache. And stapled, haphazardly, atop a picture of Stephen Hawking in his wheelchair was a recent one of Sabah. Estelle will have stapled that, I thought. She'll have stumbled upon this classroom years before, found this offensive to women and stapled a picture of Sabah somewhere just to make her point.

'Did he jump off the Rawche rock?' I asked.

'The Don?'

'The Englishman.'

'No,' she said, licking her lips, 'not unless there is a Rawche rock in Southampton.'

‘Where have you been?’ I asked, still holding on to Serene’s arm.

‘I wanted to contact you but I couldn’t,’ she said.

I nodded. Serene’s face looked more round and so did her breasts. I could still see her dimples but they were less pronounced and her eyebrows, too, seemed lighter.

‘Stop staring at them,’ she said, putting her hands over her eyebrows.

‘My friend gave me this,’ I said, taking the condom out of my back pocket, ‘it is olive flavored.’

Serene grabbed the condom from my hand, ripped open the green wrapper and threw it onto the floor.

‘It is lime flavored, your friend is an idiot,’ she said, ‘open your mouth.’

I did and she placed the condom on my tongue. It tasted of rubber and lime.

‘Did they beat you?’ I asked, moving the condom around in my mouth.

‘Don’t be silly. Would it worry you if I said they had?’ she asked, tracing her right eyebrow with her index finger and thumb.

I nodded again. I surveyed the room: Shakespeare, Lincoln or Washington, Mahmoud Darwiche, Aristotle or Socrates or Plato, Dali and Mozart or Picasso and Beethoven, one of them was an artist and the other was a musician, Martin Luther King Jr., Pele with his right hand aloft, and Sabah. There was no Neil Armstrong or Yuri Gagarin.

‘What would you have done about it?’ she asked, ‘if I said that my father had beaten me.’

‘Beat someone up.’

The condom had lost its flavor.

‘I heard you begged my brother not to beat you up,’ she said, laughing before quickly placing a hand over her mouth.

I gazed out through the dusty window glass. There was a Jasmine tree not far off and a green gate and a brown cat having a stroll and not a Druze within sight.

I spit the lime-flavored condom onto the floor.

She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. It was a small peck, nothing more. She smelled of sweat and the insides of a pencil case when you leave the pencil shavings in for too long.

‘You like to pretend you’re tough, don’t you?’

Basil and I went to the Shipman’s Crew that night. We drank two bottles of 961, not Almaza, each then we gathered the empty bottles and walked out. Basil launched the first bottle through the window shattering the glass, then I did the same with the second bottle and so on.

‘You sons of bitches, you cowards, you Israeli pieces of shit,’ he shouted.

‘Fuck your 961 and your Lebanese hops and your fake ship,’ shouted Basil, as we ran away.

‘And your coasters,’ I added.

‘And your coasters,’ repeated Basil.

The Captain chased us, at full speed, feet slamming against the ground, fists clenched, head held high and back arched forwards.

‘My hops were entrenched before the birth of time,’ I shouted back, catching my breath and looking firmly ahead, ‘before the opening of the eras, before the pines, and the olive trees and before the grass grew.’

We ran past the Wimpy Café, except the sign now read Vero Moda, and you could not smell the coffee anymore. We ran past Piccadilly Cinema and a poster with the line ‘Roger Moore as James Bond in *For Your Eyes Only*’ which featured an enlarged pair of bare legs, a woman’s, spread wide with miniature Moore standing between them in a suit, pointing a gun and looking overwhelmed. We ran past a large portrait of Sabah drawn across the entire length of a building adorned in bullet holes on Hamra Street. She was young and blonde and smiled down approvingly at passing cars, entirely unaware that she was a piece of art not life. We ran past a blur of thick, thin wires and naked wires, dancing from the roof of one shell-pocked building with its dried-up balcony plants and exterior, double foldable French wooden shutters onto the next shell-pocked building with its dried-up balcony plants and exterior, double foldable French wooden shutters and holes big enough for birds to build nests inside them; until we ran out of breath and the wires ran out of roof and so hung off the ledge of the last roof of the last building in Ras Beirut. And when we looked back we could not see the Captain and he could not see us

and we did not know where to go from there because we thought he would get on his motorcycle and catch us or call the police or my father or Basil's but he did not.

Basil swung his olive-skinned and hairy arm around my neck, and laughed. He never wore a watch. He never asked me for the time of day nor accused me of tardiness except when he was in a foul mood and it suited him to do so. He slowed down his run and I slowed down mine then we sat on the edge of the pavement. I could feel a pain in my side and I breathed in the moist air of Hamra Street.

'You should start shaving properly,' he said, 'Your face looks like a radish field.'

Above us was one of those electric ad boards which had been installed by the mayor of Beirut after someone from the ad company had bribed him into doing so. It shined a light on the street and the pavement and several nearby residential apartments and their assorted laundry. The second or third ad displayed a cold bottle of Almaza in the sand with luggage resting beside it and the Mediterranean in the background, as it always was.

'Open your doors,' it read, 'They're coming back.'

That summer Almaza ran an ad featuring teary eyed mothers talking about their sons and daughters, working or studying abroad. It showed brothers missing their sisters, girlfriends pining for their boyfriends, or friends reminiscing about the absent member of the gang and how it was not the same without him. But it was alright because they were coming back in the summer, and they would all share an Almaza and that was fine. It was fine.

'She's over there in London freezing her ass off,' said one girl, in her yellow bikini stretched out on the sand, 'she belongs here with me.'

'I miss you, son, don't forget us,' said one mother in the ad, 'come back home, don't deprive me of that face.'

'He was just here,' said the father, 'he only left five days ago.'

Basil leant back and rested his weight on his elbows, like we were still at Ramlet Elbayda. He placed his hands beneath his back and thrust his hips forward. He looked like he was about to give birth.

'If you had to worship one animal though,' he said, looking up at a tourism ad for some far eastern country featuring elephants, 'just one. Which one would it be?'

‘The goat,’ I said, smiling.

‘I’m serious,’ said Basil, his eyes wide open and glued to the ad.

I turned over all the farm animals in my head and none of them seemed majestic enough. I thought of the jungle, but I had never seen an elephant or a bear up close, nor did I aspire to. Also, from the pictures and images on TV, the elephant seemed to me too disinterested in the affairs of man, or anything else for that matter. For various, largely inexplicable, reasons, I would grow to dislike elephants deeply. Perhaps it is the way their trunks arch backwards when they bathe themselves in a pose reminiscent of a lady in distress or maybe it is the sound the trunk emits which deigns to scream for attention. They are arrogant, self-indulgent creatures, I reasoned, and I have no time for them. Insects, I ruled out altogether on account of the fact that I could not bring myself to worship an animal whose entire survival was subject to a can of Bygon. Tigers and lions seemed too cruel, seals too sluggish and eagles too opportunistic. When at last I settled upon the whale because it is big and a rare sight, Basil had, like the elephant, lost interest.

‘You?’ I asked, now locking my fingers and placing my elbows on my crouched knees.

‘The goat,’ said Basil and I did not ask him if he was serious.

It was still dark when I returned home. The light had not yet snuck in through the grey, plastic shutters and bathed the dusty books. Basil and I spent the entire night lying on the pavement and looking up at the ads. Almaza, Pantene, Ras El Abed, Garnier Fructis, Wassim’s Hair Salon. One of us would make an animal sound and the other would choke on his Almaza, and wait for his opportunity to exact revenge. There was no power, apart from the odd private generator in select buildings and ad boards. As I stumbled down the middle of the starlit, empty road, a couple of barren street lamps adjusted their posture momentarily and saluted my footsteps without lighting them. For the most part, they stood repentantly by the side of the road. One of them leaned forward as if permanently on the verge of whispering a secret into the ear of an oncoming pedestrian. From the first-floor balcony of a dwarfed building which bore the strain of rain and wind, but also intense sun, hung a water soaked cardboard sign. It read ‘urgent: waitresses needed.’ An

aging man with a gruff beard and two stumps for legs sat on a cardboard box beneath the house with the scarlet shutters and swung his stumps first left then right then around and back again. I waved to him as the soft rain began to descend on our heads alone. He coughed out phlegm and continued swinging his stumps. Sabah's voice emanated from the brothel and rang through Hamra; she was most alive at night.

I was greeted with a gust of smoke as I eased the door to the apartment open. I had expected to find a still and fragile silence. A single spot of light burned bright. I reached for it with my fingers but it appeared to fade as soon as I did so. I made my way blindly through the darkness and the undying fog of war towards the ethereal light. There I found my mother and her cigarette. I blinked and my eyes were both dry and wet. She did not acknowledge my presence at first. She looked through me, as if I were part of the fog which might blur her vision but not impede it.

She did not ask me why I had just walked in or where I had been. She smiled a half smile and said that she had reminded herself of Yvonne. Yvonne was an elderly disabled woman who had lived across from my grandparents' house and lost her teeth to age, and her children to war. She sat on her balcony and smoked her way through the night, and the rest of the war. The light from Yvonne's eternal cigarette was a source of comfort to my mother who could see it through her bedroom window, even as the gunshots intensified.

'We should have left,' stammered my mother, between one puff of her cigarette and the next.

'Where to?'

'We were very close,' she said, 'we were very close. After the first one then after the second one, then in a couple of years when they're both older. Stubborn old goat.'

Having had enough of goats, and other animal sounds, for one night, I began to retreat in the hope that my absence would go unnoticed.

A rustle sounded from amongst the books. I swerved and squinted but could not make out any shapes, apart from those of the bookshelves and the books themselves.

'Haneen?' asked my mother, straining her neck.

That is what my parents called one another when they thought we were not there or could not hear them. In the moment, I believe my mother thought I was not there or perhaps the smoke had become so dense that it shielded me from view once again.

Lebanese terms of endearment included 'hayete' or 'habibi', which meant life or love respectively. But 'haneen' was different. It meant a nostalgia of some kind, a sorrowful longing, often for the past, but also for a person.

There was no reply.

Andalusia and the Moors

Alana was not Druze. I asked her. Alana was Canadian. She said she was Canadian and believed it. Her parents were both Lebanese and she had lived in Montréal for three or four years. She moved with her mother to Verdun Street. Her father would visit them a few times a year.

When I asked her if she was Muslim or Christian, she said again that she was Canadian. Then I asked her what her nationality was. She stared right through me and I never mentioned her nationality or her religion again.

Basil and I signed up to work as summer camp monitors. He said he knew someone on the inside who could get us the job and all we really had to do was make sure that a few kids don't drown at the beach and then get them home safe to their parents at the end of the day. Alana had had the same idea.

'I used to babysit my cousins all the time, in Montréal,' she said.

Alana looked bronze by the time she started working for the Octopus Summer Camp. This covered her in freckles. Her canines protruded visibly and she allowed them to be seen only when her dark eyes smiled too. Otherwise, her lower lip, which was thick and full, hid them well.

Waist deep in sea water and with one of Don Amin's trademark whistles hanging around my neck, I watched as Alana lifted a three-year-old onto her back and ordered the rest of the children to follow her into the sea. She needn't have said a word, that day they would have followed her to the moon, or to Gibraltar at least.

'Oh my warriors, whither would you flee? Behind you is the sea, before you, the enemy.'

Tariq Bin Ziyad's immortal words did not feel out of place coming from her round lips. Alana could have reconquered Andalusia for the Moors with an army of children and a three-year-old on her back. I was sure of it.

At Janna Beach Resort, she placed both her hands on my shoulders and tried to drown me. As I was standing in the sea and we were still in the shallow end, this did not work. Then she ordered the children to drown me, and they ran towards me, a wave of onrushing five year olds kicking through sand and shallow waters to try and drown me.

'Put far from you the disgrace from which you flee in dreams, and attack this monarch who has left his strongly fortified city to meet you.'

This did not work either.

Also, as she was making her way through to help them out, one of the five year olds managed to unhook her bikini top. She was able to hold onto it and prevent the waves from carrying it away, but not before I and a number of five year olds got to admire her silicon filled breasts.

'Do not believe that I desire to incite you to face dangers which I shall refuse to share with you.'

She told them off and I laughed. Then she laughed and I told them off.

Alana explained that Basil had made a bet with her, worth Fifty thousand Lebanese Liras, that she could not drown me. She said she would give me half of them if I pretended to drown. I said I did not want half of them. She said she would give me all of them. And I said I did not want all of them. Then she said she would give me another peak at her breasts because she saw how much I enjoyed the first one. She said she needed to get them tanned anyway and that she did not mind a Muslim Lebanese boy perverting over them while she did. I said I was not Muslim. She said she did not care.

We swam as far away from the shore as we could. I looked back and the children were little dots in the distance and Basil was a slightly bigger dot, and it was winking. Alana unhooked her bikini top, closed her eyes and floated on her back, allowing the sun to kiss her breasts. And I stared at her breasts, unashamedly. I stared at them for so long that I could see them start to turn into a different shade of bronze. I mentioned this to her.

'You would know,' she said, 'you've been staring at them for twenty minutes.'

Alana said that I should be an astronaut if that is what I wanted to be. I said I was not so sure anymore. I said that I wanted to be but that if I was not, it would be alright too. She said she had always wanted to be Canadian and now she was.

'Never give up on your dream,' she said.

The oil from the Israeli warships had severely damaged aquatic life along Lebanese shores. We had been instructed not to allow the children to swim for more than one hour a day in the sea. Alana and I ignored this. The sea was littered with empty bags

of Fantasia chips and glass Pepsi bottles, and we reasoned that a bit of oil could not have done too much more harm.

‘What about you?’ I asked.

She wore a gold necklace around her neck. There was no Hilal or cross attached to it.

‘I don’t want to be an astronaut,’ she said, eyes still closed, ‘it must be the loneliest feeling in the world. Why would you do that to yourself?’

‘Perspective,’ I said.

I plunged my head underwater then slowly emerged so that my nose rose barely above the warm water.

‘Whose?’

I let the salty water be sucked into my gaping mouth, then I spit it out. My eyes were now level with her breasts and I could see the children walking in behind them and coming out the other side. There was a miniature version of myself in space gear landing on her chest, floating past the little spot on her left breast, around the first nipple, into the cavernous valley in between, all the while gaining momentum, then bursting furiously uphill to plant the American flag on her right nipple. It was always the stars and stripes that were synonymous with achievement, with overcoming adversity, with a sense of accomplishment, with the act of marking success by planting a flag on a mountain top, or a moon or a nipple.

‘You won’t be able to achieve your dreams if you spend your whole life in Beirut,’ she said.

‘I know.’

Behind me was Cyprus, and behind Cyprus was Sicily and behind that was Valencia, and in between all of them and Beirut was the salty water of the Mediterranean, and me. And Alana.

‘Not much sun in Montreal?’ I asked.

Alana told me about a little girl in the summer camp who pitied her because she had lived in the West.

‘It’s so sad,’ the little girl had proclaimed.

‘Why?’ I asked Alana.

‘Because the sun always sets in the west,’ said Alana, ‘she thinks I could only see sunsets in Montreal.’

The sun hovered above the horizon.

‘It is a city for the summer and not much else,’ she said, now opening her eyes and craning her neck to look at me, ‘but it is alright in the summer, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. It is,’ I said, nodding my head and, squinting to protect my eyes from the sun.

To the casual human observer, I was giving a drowning girl mouth to mouth resuscitation. I was breathing air into her lungs. I was saving a life. I was fighting, railing against death and the mild, gentle waves of the Mediterranean. To Alana, I was giving her a kiss on the lips, at first a soft peck then a deeper more inquisitive exploration of the inner workings of her moist mouth. To the oil-sodden fish, I was in the way.

‘When do you think you’ll be able to grow a full beard?’ she asked, removing her hand from the side of my face.

I shrugged my shoulders. I looked at Alana, half expecting her to morph into one of the mermaids. She did not.

Alana morphed into a grown woman, in her fifties dressed in a pantsuit like the one Hilary Clinton or Angela Merkel would wear, with bags under her eyes, and glasses on her nose and wrinkles across her face and that clear sense of self that women in pantsuits sometimes appear to project, that unrelenting air of determination, of sheer resolve.

I helped her put her purple bikini top back on then we swam back to the shallow bit. She jumped on top of me and, at first, I let her weight drag me down. I lowered my body so that my shoulders were level with the water.

Alana gave me a gentle push in order to remind me of our agreement but I did not budge. Then she gave me another gentle push to remind me of the fact that she had upheld her end of the bargain. Then she put her knee through the back of my head and I fell face forward into the salty water. The children cheered and Alana raised her right arm in the air. They called her name and she blew them kisses and they skipped up and down the sand, celebrating the conquest.

I stayed in the water for a bit afterwards. I looked at the sun, without blinking, until I had tears in my eyes. In the distance, I saw a whale. It was blueish white and not very big. I only saw it for a second. I might have only seen the tail. I plunged my head into the water again, then walked back to shore. Basil extended the palm of his hand and I reached for my wallet, which I had tucked neatly under my blue towel, and gave him two twenty thousand Lebanese Lira notes and told him I would cover the rest later.

Basil's dark black hair seemed to turn slightly red in the sunlight. I also told him that I had seen a small whale in the sea. He said he had seen a goat.

'I'm serious,' I said, throwing myself onto the blue, sand covered towel.

He said there are no whales in the Mediterranean.

There are.

On the bus, as we made our way back, Basil slapped one of the children across the face. The boy's name was Mostafa and he was the son of a Saudi Arabian Sheikh and a former Miss Lebanon who was his third, or fourth wife. It was a hot summer's day and Basil had sat on the back of the bus for most of the journey while Alana and I sat in the front. The Nissan bus fell silent, the balding bus driver, Abu Adnan, brought it to halt and turned around to look back at me. The bus was white with blue stripes on either side and stickers of octopi or octopuses or octopodes randomly plastered around it.

'Do you know whose son that boy is?' said Abu Adnan, wagging his finger in my direction, 'Get your man under control or that Sheikh will buy the summer camp, the bus and all the octopuses in the sea, and grind all of it into Tahini.'

There were always sweat stains across his chest and under his armpits but he smelt of gardenia because he would buy a lei of gardenia every morning off a street vendor and wear it for the whole day. Abu Adnan would bargain with the street vendor, usually a boy of about ten or eleven, for five minutes, then he would agree to the initial price.

When Alana and I turned around, we realized what had happened. Mostafa was crying, the bus was silent and Basil was staring at him, bearing his teeth with his fists clenched and his feet apart. I clutched a fistful of Basil's hair, from the back of his head and pulled him to the front of the bus. He resisted at first then he let me drag him, without

much of a fuss. Alana comforted Mostafa who had stopped crying at this point and was staring at Basil across the length of the bus, looking to extract his revenge.

‘My father’s been having an affair,’ said Basil, shrugging his shoulders and lighting a cigarette.

‘How do you know?’

‘I was trying to steal a condom and some extra cash for Marta from his wallet, and I found this girl’s picture. She looks barely older than I am.’

Basil pulled out a small picture of a young woman from his back pocket. The picture itself was worn out. The woman was a brunette with olive eyes and olive skin and olive everything else. She was smiling tastefully in the picture. It was one of those smiles that do not involve teeth, which some women can pull off with a sparkle of the eyes and a quiver of the lips.

I took the picture from his hand and held it up against the light. It did not change, and I was not sure why I had done that.

‘Maybe it is just a picture of a girl he likes to masturbate to,’ I said.

‘No,’ he said, snatching the picture from my hand, ‘it is too real for that.’

‘Mostafa, ya, Mostafa, ana baheback, ya Mostafa,’ sang Alana, with her arm wrapped around Mostafa, ‘Chérie je t’aime, chérie je t’adore, como la salsa del Pomodoro.’

‘Mostafa’ is a multilingual song, popular in the middle-east, and eventually Europe, in the fifties and sixties and sung originally by a Lebanese-Palestinian singer. It features Arabic, French and Italian amongst other languages. Mainly, it spoke of one man’s love for another, Mostafa, which rivalled his own love for tomato sauce.

‘Maybe that’s his daughter,’ I said, taking a puff of his cigarette and coughing.

‘That’s worse, isn’t it?’ said Basil, ‘What if I’d ended up sleeping with her by accident or something?’

‘No chance, habibi,’ I said, and we heard Abu Adnan knock his head back and let out a hearty laugh, ‘besides, I thought you liked the eastern European types.’

Abu Adnan reached back and snatched the photograph from Basil’s hand. The bus wobbled and Alana told Abu Adnan to keep his eyes on the road.

‘That’s not his daughter,’ said Abu Adnan, one eye on the picture and the other on the road, ‘I’m telling you. Listen to Abu Adnan. Abu Adnan knows.’

‘Your father is probably having an affair too,’ he said, running his hands through his still wet hair. Basil had always had the slick, jet black hair of the Arab princes. It was oily and dark and did not seem to care about the terrible state of the world, or the fact that you have not been feeling well lately, or that just last week you thought about ending your own life, but did not. This wasn’t because you could not bear the thought of never seeing that dark, oily, jet black hair, again. That would be giving it too much credit. But it crossed your mind. And, in any case, he would lose most of his hair before he was thirty-five. And he would claim that yours will start to fall off too, eventually.

‘Just because yours is?’

‘You don’t get it, son of life. This is what middle aged Arab men do. They get married, have children then have affairs,’ he said, a raw smirk now carving its way across his face, ‘and one day, you and I, we’ll have our own affairs.’

‘I’ve been loyal to my wives for twenty two years,’ said Abu Adnan, returning the picture.

‘How many do you have, Abu Adnan?’ asked Basil.

‘Three,’ said Abu Adnan, ‘possibly four by the end of the month, if god wills it.’

‘Won’t your father notice that you’ve taken that out of his wallet?’ I asked, flicking the picture in Basil’s hand with my middle finger.

He shrugged his shoulders and tucked the picture back into his pocket.

‘The bastard can go do one,’ said Basil, flicking the cigarette bud out the window.

‘No, you can go do one, you bastard,’ shouted Mostafa from across the bus, in his shrill voice, now standing on the seat and shaking furiously with one clenched fist raised in the air and one finger pointing straight at his aggressor. Alana held him by the waist so that he does not fall forward, but she did not attempt to pull him down.

‘Do-one, do-one,’ chanted Alana pumping her fist in the air, and the kids willingly followed her lead.

Basil looked at me and I thought he would give me a wink but he did not. He sighed, so I looked out the window, I watched a family of four on a motorbike go past us and listened to Abu Adnan mumble the words to ‘Mustafa’.

Basil, Alana, and I stood outside the former Miss Lebanon's flat. It was in The Tower of Dreams overlooking the sea. The Tower of Dreams, as the name suggested, was reserved for the wealthiest of Beirut's elite. The tower was made entirely out of glass and reflected the sky. My grandfather would no doubt have asserted that every balcony overlooked Nicosia. Mostafa rang the doorbell and when his mother answered he put his arms around her waist and rested his head against her stomach.

The former Miss Lebanon was in her late thirties at this point. She looked like she could reenter the competition tomorrow and, from certain camera angles, beat the entitled twenty somethings to the crown. She wore a permanent wince which suited her face in the way that sand suits the desert, and no bra which suited her just as much.

Basil apologized for slapping Mostafa across the face. Miss Lebanon slapped Mostafa across the face.

'What did he do wrong?' she asked, lifting her revealing night gown in order to scratch the back of her thigh.

She dragged Mostafa by the collar and raised her hand as if to strike. Basil and Alana looked like they were in a private competition between them to see who could mimic the former Miss Lebanon's wince more accurately.

'Nothing,' said Basil, 'it was entirely my fault. He didn't do anything.'

'He must have done something,' she said, and she slapped him again.

Mostafa started crying and this time Alana could not bring herself to sing and the only refrain we could hear was the sound of Basil saying 'sorry' every time Miss Lebanon smacked Mostafa across the face.

Um Kalthum

‘Compliments of my adulterous pimp of a father,’ said Basil, chucking a green, German condom at me.

‘Olives?’

‘Lime, would you believe,’ said Basil, running his hands through his patchy black beard, ‘Who wants a lime flavored condom?’

We stood outside Candlelight, a former bomb shelter turned brothel, not too far off Bliss Street which was parallel to Hamra Street and only a short walk away.

‘Think of Um Kalthum’s songs,’ said Basil, as we walked down the dark stairs, ‘you’ll get the best lay if you think of Um Kalthum’s songs. They can’t stand that look on a young man’s face. They’ll want to ride it right out of you.’

Um Kalthum was a revered, semi-blind Egyptian singer, prominent in the fifties and sixties. She wore thick sunglasses on stage and held a handkerchief in one hand at all times. She was celebrated for her ability to bring her audience to tears and for the length of her songs which often stretched to anywhere between sixty to ninety minutes, depending on her creative mood.

‘Ask for Svetlana, she’s good with first timers,’ he continued, placing a hand on my shoulder, ‘or Ilulia, or Oksana or Anastasiya. They’re all alright. But don’t ask for Natalya. You can’t handle Natalya.’

First, you walked down a dark, damp stairway. The steps seemed to crumble beneath your feet. You worried about it cracking open and swallowing you whole. Then you went through a red bar. The walls were red, but so was the light and the skin on the bartender’s face. His name was Waleed or Tony, and he was never your friend. The bar smelled of your grandfather’s cigar and that cologne, he once bought from a street vendor who swore on his son’s life that it was an original Brut. You sat there and you expected a watered down whisky. You asked for an Almaza, almost remorsefully, then you switched to Jack Daniels and coke and the red bartender handed you a Something on the rocks and you took it, and another, and another, and another. You felt like you were very far away from home. Then you asked for Ilulia because you liked the name and Tony or Waleed gave you Svetlana and you took her. And in the background, the whole time, you could hear Ziad Rahbani, the voice of the war generation.

I am not blasphemous. But hunger is blasphemous. I am not blasphemous. But disease is blasphemous. I am not blasphemous. But poverty is blasphemous. I am not blasphemous. But degradation is blasphemous, and humiliation is blasphemous.

I reached for my glass of whiskey. Waleed swatted my hand away and placed his hand over the glass.

‘Are you stupid?’ he said, ‘It’s just ice, I haven’t poured the whiskey in yet.’

Basil shook his head.

And what would you have me do with all these blasphemous things that I have inside me?

‘She’s about as old as my wife, Waleed,’ said a heavy man whose beard and brows were both white, as he barged past Basil to get to the bar.

He had emerged from behind ragged curtains which were left partially opened. The blonde, naked woman behind the curtains reached for the covers. She was not his wife’s age.

And if you pray on Friday or pray on Sunday and preach for the rest of the week, they say that makes you devout and me, blasphemous. And what would you have me do with all these blasphemous things that I have inside me?

‘How old is your wife, Mr. Saba?’ asked Waleed, handing the bearded man a Something on the rocks.

‘That’s none of your business,’ said Mr. Saba, putting his hands through his chest hair.

‘Have you slept with her yet?’

‘My wife?’

‘The prostitute.’

‘No, and I do not intend to,’ said Mr. Saba.

‘I can make other arrangements, but I’m not sure you know what you’re missing,’ said Waleed, rubbing his right eyelid with his index and middle fingers, ‘She used to work in Byblos before the war. Slept with Frank Sinatra, once, when he came to Lebanon in the seventies.’

This was a lie which only Mr. Sabra would have believed. Waleed even rolled his eyes as he uttered the words. Sinatra had in fact enjoyed a dinner by the sea at the Old

Fishing Club in Byblos around the early sixties. He was soon barred from entering Lebanon, however, for his 'moral and material support of the state of Israel.' His records and films were also banned, though this went unnoticed by the Lebanese. The week after the ban was instigated, one of his films was showing in the now defunct Piccadilly Cinema on Hamra Street.

'Just for you, Waleed, and just this one time,' said Mr. Saba, knocking back his drink and marching back in behind the curtains.

I wondered what Estelle would have made of this place, what she would look like now, if her father had stumbled into her life, if her mother had come back from that conference, if she still remembered me and Basil and Beirut.

'Na miru i smert' krasna,' whispered Basil in my ear.

He blew smoke in my face. The barstool underneath him creaked and my eyes itched. I suppressed a cough.

'What's that?'

'With company, even death loses its sting,' he said, placing an arm around my shoulders, 'it's a Russian proverb. Say it to the girl when you go into the room.'

'Why?'

'She'll love it.'

The room was not exactly a room, it was two walls and curtains. There was plaster hanging from the ceiling and the walls were made of the same material used to separate the classes from one another at school, except there was no one knocking on the walls in an attempt to create a ballad from across the wall. Instead of doors, there were velvet curtains through which you could hear the exaggerated moans of women who faked pleasure for a living, and the not indiscernible grunts of men who would pay for it.

Svetlana was in her early twenties, a brunette who had dyed her hair blonde. Her lips were thin and so were her eyebrows. She gave the impression overall of one who had very little of everything, except for her cheeks. They seemed to belong to a fuller face and to have simply stumbled onto this one and decided that they might as well stay there, possibly out of pity.

'You're a boy,' she said, walking past me to open the curtains, 'He's a boy, Waleed.'

‘And you’re a girl,’ shouted Waleed from behind the bar.

‘You’re going to make me sleep with a little boy?’ she shouted back.

‘You don’t want him? I’ll give him to Natalya.’

‘No,’ she said, closing the curtains, ‘we’re good.’

‘What’s cheeks in Russian?’ I asked, sitting on the side of the worn out bed.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ she said, ‘I’m from east Beirut. Why?’

‘I like your cheeks.’

‘You pay prostitutes in money,’ she said, opening the palm of her hand, ‘not compliments.’

I knew this. I did not mind her calling me a little boy. That was almost playful. It was the cliché, I minded.

The cliché served to emphasize the well-trodden path I had found myself taking: ‘money not compliments.’

Svetlana’s breasts were smaller than Alana’s and when I placed my hands over them, they disappeared. I worried that she might swat my hands away in the same way that Waleed had, but she did not. Stretch marks had carved their way around her waist and I traced them with my fingers. She kissed my neck, she undid my belt and she unbuttoned my shirt and then she folded them and placed them by the edge of the bed.

‘This will be over in a couple of minutes at most, probably less,’ she said, ‘and then you’ll regret having wrinkled your shirt for nothing.’

I lay on my back and she sat on top of me and I observed the peeling plaster hanging from the ceiling. Looking up at her breasts, I realized that I preferred them this way. I feared that had they been any bigger, I might have felt overwhelmed by them; or that they might have clumsily shielded my view of her staring up disinterestedly at the ceiling.

It was a cold damp place. I tucked my thumbs inside my fists which I often did whenever there was nothing else to protect me from the cold.

‘You’re not hard,’ she said.

I looked down. I was not. I looked down again for effect.

‘No,’ I said.

I apologized.

‘I’m not doing what you’re thinking,’ she said, smiling, ‘it’ll cost you a bit more.’
She had a habit of not closing her mouth when she was done speaking.

‘No. It’s not that.’

‘A blowjob, I meant.’

‘I understand.’

‘Are you afraid?’

‘Of you?’

‘You can’t pin this on me,’ she said.

‘I wasn’t.’

She kissed my forehead and I kissed the tip of her nose. She rubbed my earlobes with her fingers and exhaled heavily into my left ear.

I thought about Alana and Serene and Nadine and Estelle, and I thought about the mermaids and then I thought about Um Kalthum.

My Sweetheart, the night and its sky, and its stars and its moon, keeping me awake, and you and me. We are all in love, together. And Love stays up all night, quenching our thirst for happiness, and drinking to our happiness. So let us live in the eye of the night, the eye of the night. And let us tell the sun to come on over, to come on over, in a year’s time. Not before. Because what is life? But a night like tonight. A night like a thousand and one nights, a thousand and one nights, a thousand and one nights, a thousand and one nights, a thousand and one nights, a thousand and one nights.

I wondered how Um Kalthum could make that song last for sixty minutes.

‘In Ukraine,’ she said, putting on a vague eastern European accent, ‘when you kiss someone on the nose, it means you’ll be unfaithful to them.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘That’s alright,’ she said, dropping the accent, ‘I wasn’t expecting you to be faithful to me.’

‘Do you kiss everyone’s forehead?’

Svetlana had dimples.

‘You were singing,’ she said, throwing herself onto her back beside me.

‘Was I?’

‘A thousand and one nights,’ she said, revealing her dimples again. The dimple on the right side of her cheek knew what it wanted from life. It was there to create a dividing line between the edge of Svetlana’s mouth and her right earlobe. The left dimple was weak, it lacked a certain resolve, a determination to see out its task, to make its mark, to carve out a place for itself on the eastern Beirut girl’s face.

Svetlana’s eyes had watered. I apologized for my voice.

She told me that her father would play his cassette tapes of Um Kalthum every morning with his Turkish Coffee. I presumed her father had died in the war. I was right.

‘My mother, god rest her soul, she swore that he died holding me in his hairy arms, as we hid in the narrow corridor of our house in Ashrafiyeh,’ she said, wiping the mascara off her cheeks.

I wanted to kill Basil.

‘I had no idea,’ I said.

‘He didn’t die cradling me,’ she said, ‘He died fighting for the Phalangists or the Lebanese forces or whatever you call them.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Are you a Phalangist?’

‘No.’

‘Are you Muslim or Christian?’ she asked, now resting on her elbow and propping her head up with her hand.

Hair fell onto her shoulders. I shrugged mine.

‘Druze,’ I said.

‘Another goat-worshipper.’

‘A reincarnated one.’

She scratched her nose and bit her tongue.

‘Did you know my father in a previous life?’ she said, her dimples now making their way across her cheeks.

‘A tanned man with dark black eyes and a moustache?’

She nodded and her eyes watered once more. I apologized again. I wanted to murder Basil, then watch him in the process of being reincarnated then murder him again.

A brawl of some sort erupted behind the curtains. We heard a lot of shouting, then the unmistakable sound of air escaping the lungs as a fist connected with a stomach, or a knuckle with a nose, or an elbow with a jaw.

Svetlana said that it happens every night. Some idiot refuses to pay for the girls' services and Waleed and his friends beat him until he coughs up the money, or blood, whichever comes first.

I apologized for my singing voice again and she told me it was terrible.

'Will you be coming back here?' she asked, now resting on her side.

'Yes. I'll ask for Svetlana.'

'I might be Natalya, next time.'

Svetlana, or Natalya, or Syblia, or Iluilia explained that the eastern European names belonged to the rooms not the girls. Natalya was the most experienced on the night, Svetlana was the second most experienced and so on until Syblia.

'What is your real name?'

She threw her loose velvet dress on.

'What's yours?' she said, as she opened the curtains.

'Adam,' I said, unfolding my wrinkled shirt.

'I'm Eve,' she said, giggling and shrugging her shoulders as she did so.

She extended her arm towards me. I shook her hand. Her mouth hung open.

I heard Ziad again, but he was in a better mood this time.

She's living on her own without you, and without your love, boy. Stop going on about your love, boy, the whole country is laughing behind your back. You love her, alright, so you love her. We know, you love her. But she, with or without you, is living fine, and, frankly, she couldn't give a toss. What in god's name did you get yourself into? She couldn't care less about you and your dark, steely eyes. And you know what, she's probably not the first one either. They don't understand you, no one understands you.

Or maybe I heard Sabah, or Fairuz, or Um Kalthum, or Abdel Halim Hafez. Or Frank Sinatra.

'Then Svetlana will have to do.'

Basil sat on the pavement outside Candlelight with a tissue rolled up both his nostrils and a cut on his lip and a swollen, blue left eye. The streetlight was weak and it took half a minute for my eyes to adjust.

‘Where the fuck were you?’ he asked.

‘Inside,’ I said, grabbing his head with both hands and tilting it back to get a better view of the damage to his face.

He slapped my hands away, and spit blood onto the pavement.

‘I always make them punch my bottom lip open first,’ he said, running his blood stained hand through his hair, ‘that way when I suck on the blood and spit it out, they think I’ve had enough.’

‘Why don’t you just give them the money and save yourself the beating?’

‘My adulterous bastard of a father doesn’t store his cash in his wallet anymore,’ he said, taking out the Kleenex in his nostrils and letting the blood trickle down to his chin, ‘I think he caught on after the missing picture.’

Right beside Candlelight stood an old bakery, soon it would open its doors and the smell of Manouche and cheese and thyme and olive oil would overtake that of alcohol.

‘Why didn’t he confront you about the money you stole then?’ I asked, placing my hands in my pockets.

‘The pimp’s afraid I’ll tell my mother about the girl in the picture if he confronts me about it,’ he said, reaching into his own back pocket and producing the picture, ‘I’m dead certain he’s having an affair after this.’

The photograph was smeared with his blood now. He raised it up in the air, holding it between his thumb and index, then he gave it a flick with his middle finger and let it drop onto the pavement. I took a Kleenex paper out of my pocket and wiped his chin, then I gave him another for his nose.

‘All those Gauloises, all those olive, lime flavored condoms, all that cash, and the pimp notices when I take a picture of a girl he is fucking from his wallet,’ said Basil, through his red teeth.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? I could have paid for you.’

‘I only pay them occasionally, you know. Just so they remember that I am a paying customer. Sometimes I have the money, but I don’t pay because I feel like I’ve earned a free round or two.’

‘And they let you back in?’

‘I keep them guessing,’ he said, ‘They like it.’

And I think he gave me a wink but I could not be sure because his eye was swollen, and there was no way of telling because he could have been wincing or just resting his eye.

‘Do you want to go back in?’

Basil extended his arm towards me, and I dragged him upwards. His short blue sleeve fell back to reveal a tattoo of the spinning swastika of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party on his biceps. It was fresh and red and stuck out, as if it were about to leap out of his left arm and spin wildly out of control. He leaned against a dusty old BMW M3. It was an eighties model and there were leaves around each tire. Someone had written ‘wash me’ on the red hood of the car through the dust.

‘What for?’

‘Don’t you want revenge? You’re Druze,’ I said, giving him a wink, ‘That’s what you’re all about.’

‘In the next life, son of life. I’ve had enough of this place for one lifetime,’ said Basil, now reaching for his Gouloises and placing one between his lips. It glistened with blood.

‘What’s that about?’ I asked, flicking my head in the direction of the tattoo.

‘Nothing,’ he said, pulling his sleeve down, ‘it’s the ‘whirlwind’.’

He chucked his transparent green lighter at my chest. I caught it and lit his cigarette for him. I had not held a lighter since Don Amin confiscated mine that day when my father was late to pick me up from school. The act felt natural. I instinctively knew what to do. I imagined that this was how old militiamen must feel when handed a gun.

‘It’s that spinning swastika on the board in Momo the paedophile’s office,’ I said, ‘Isn’t it?’

‘It’s the emblem of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party,’ said Basil, without flinching, ‘the ‘whirlwind’.’

‘It’s the paedophile’s swastika,’ I said.

I held his gaze for some time as he took a puff of his cigarette.

‘It’s not a swastika,’ he said, bearing his left arm with the cigarette dangling between the index and middle fingers of his right hand, ‘Look here, it’s a combination of the Muslim Crescent and the Christian Cross.’

I could not see it.

‘What about the Druze?’

‘They’re in there somewhere,’ he continued, ‘the four arms each stand for one of the party’s virtues: freedom, duty, discipline and power.’

He attempted to trace the spinning swastika with his index finger, but the tattoo was still sore. He winced and dropped his cigarette. I picked it up, took a puff and gave it back to him. Basil covered the spinning swastika with the palm of his hand.

Looking back now, I am reminded of the old Druze saying, which I was unaware of at the time: ‘That which shields is that which is shielded. And that which is shielded is that which shields. The former is the latter and the latter is the former. There is no difference between them.’

‘Since when are you a fan of duty and discipline?’ I asked, still coughing and slipping the lighter into my back pocket.

Basil’s mouth widened. I took this to be a smile. He tapped the hood of the dirty BMW gently. I rested my foot against the front tire, then I leaned forward and placed my forearms on my knee; and he told me that the SSNP was everything he and I have been looking for. He said that they were a secular party that did not care about who you are or where you come from. He said that they did not care about ‘advancing the dogmas’ of this religious sect or that, unlike all the other political parties in Lebanon. He said that they were not Sunni or Shiite or Catholic or Druze or Maronite or Orthodox.

‘They’re not Lebanese, either,’ I said, reaching for his cigarette and taking another puff.

His mouth widened again. This time I did not take it to be a smile.

‘They are,’ he said, ‘they just believe in something greater than Lebanon.’

He said that the SSNP also believed in youth.

‘This,’ he said, pointing to the tattoo on his biceps, ‘was designed at the American University of Beirut by students, like you and me, in secret.’

I asked him where he had learned all this and he said ‘Mr. Malik’. Not Momo or the paedophile or Momo the paedophile. Just ‘Mr. Malik’.

Then he gave me a light slap across the face.

‘How was Svetlana?’ he asked.

Opposite Candlelight stood half a building. It was under construction and would rise to twenty four floors when complete. ‘Luxury Furnished apartments for Rent’ read the large white sign. The future inhabitants of that luxury building would not take too kindly to having a brothel just across the street.

‘Did you know about her Um-Kalthum-loving father being shot in the war?’

I glimpsed a smirk and crossed my arms. He told me that I had to establish a connection. Sex is not the same without a connection. He knew I could not do it, so he did it for me. He said he had distracted Waleed and the pimps for me, and told me what I needed to know, so that I would have more time with her to establish that connection. Did I?

‘No,’ I said.

Candlelight would become Tasty and Tasty would become Two Cups and Two Cups would become Starlight, which was audacious and witty and older generations would boast about understanding the reference.

‘How would you rate her on a scale of one to a thousand and one nights?’ he asked

‘You could hear me singing.’

‘The whole brothel could hear you singing. I think some people living next to the mosque two streets down could hear you singing,’ he said, placing a hand on my shoulder, ‘Um Kalthoum was turning in her grave.’

A Rip in Space and Time

When I asked my father if he was having an affair, he said ‘no’. And when I asked him again, he said he was not. When I asked him for the third time, he said he would say he was if it meant I would stop asking him about it. I did not say anything. And he said he was.

‘With whom?’ asked my sister, as she sat on the comfortable couch eating her share of Bonjus vanilla ice-cream.

The two towering blocks of literature by the door had remained there undisturbed, but beside them and in front of the bookshelves, a wall of old books had been accumulating all along. At first, no one had realized what was happening apart from my father. No one believed that it was even conceivable. And by the time we caught on, the wall was already half way up and there was very little we could do about it except avoid running into to it so that we did not have to deal with the rubble.

The wall stood between the bookshelves and the rest of the hallway and seemed to have been erected to shield the bookshelves from the outside world, or to keep them from ever venturing out into it. It was like the Berlin wall, except instead of the Soviets on the Eastern side, we had books. And instead of Checkpoint Charlie, we had three or four gaps in the wall through which my father would slip his hand and reach for his intended reading. Now and then, he would come up with the wrong book and chuck it back over the wall.

‘Madame Hafez.’

‘Since when?’

‘Jesus-Mohammad-Christ. Since the incident with the cedar tree.’

‘You’re a terrible human being,’ said my sister.

‘What’s the matter with you two?’ he asked, his face hidden behind his Annahar Daily.

My sister said that she would never again climb into the room stacked with books, that he can get his own books and that she was too big now anyway.

Every man suspects his father of having had an affair. Some have pictures of younger women or condom wrappers or an unforgiving memory, others have an uncomfortable glance or an ill-timed clearing of the throat or a cough.

My father's affair with books culminated in a publishing house. The publishing house was an idea which had weighed on his mind for several years but it was not before, what I took to be, his midlife crisis that he felt confident in going through with it. He called it Ninnette Publishing House. The logo was the silhouette of a cat with a tail which resembled a question mark and his first client was Madame Hafez. Madame Hafez was now almost an octogenarian of Armenian descent. Her first name, I learned that day, was Lusine, and her real last name was Sarkissian. Her choice of Hafez was a name she'd used to shield herself from the hostility she perceived she might face in west Beirut. She had resided alone in Bourj Hammoud, the Armenian quarter in Beirut, prior to marrying the doctor and moving in with him.

Before that, however, Lusine had traveled the Middle East. Her parents had been forced out of their homes due to the Armenian genocide in Turkey around the onset of the twentieth century. She had lived in Baghdad with her parents before the gulf war, Mosul with her first husband before the Iraq war, and Aleppo, with her sister, long before the Arab spring and the Syrian war and ISIS.

'I've written a book about my life, Mr. Najjar,' said Lusine, pointing her arthritis plagued finger in the direction of my father's heart, 'and I want you to publish it.'

My father had insisted upon the whole family accompanying him to the first meeting. He promised us zucchini and vine leaves at, my mother's favorite restaurant, Socrates afterwards.

'It would show that I'm a family man,' he said, 'this business is all about impressions.'

It did not seem to matter that Madame Hafez was the landlord and neighbor, that she had lived a single floor below our own for nearly two decades or so, and that whatever impression she had had about my father, she would have formulated some time ago.

Madame Hafez, or Lusine, offered me a plate of Arabic sweets. I said I did not really like Arabic sweets. She produced a Fruit and Nut Cadbury from a drawer in the living room side table. The doctor had passed away two years ago and Madame Hafez was now living with her sister again who had moved in with her recently from Aleppo. Madame Hafez's sister said she did not feel safe in Syria any more. She said that age had

not dimmed her ability to smell a brewing war from afar. She spent her days and nights in bed, except when she felt obliged to attend to the garden/ parking lot at the bottom of the building. Lately, Madame Hafez had taken on those gardening duties due to her sister's failing health.

The chandelier was decorated with what appeared to be crystal and hung low from the ceiling. The rest of the furniture did not go with the chandelier and made it look even more impressive than it might have otherwise been.

'Have you titled the book yet?' asked my father, sipping his Turkish coffee.

My sister and I sat either side of my parents. I placed my finger through the crochets on the couch's armrest.

'I have not finished writing it yet,' said Madame Hafez, who now had more white hair than grey, 'I thought about titling it: *Sykes-Picot and I*.'

'How about something more straight forward like *From Armenia to Lebanon*?'

'That is possible.'

'Or how about *Through the Middle East*?'

'That is possible, too.'

'Or how about *Wars and Cities of the Middle East*?'

'No,' said Madame Hafez.

My father spoke at length about how vital a book like this is, how it will change the world, how this is exactly the kind of story that literature has been lacking of late. Madame Hafez nodded along, the water in her sea blue eyes responding to the windswept charm of my father's barren words. She may have even smiled at one point. Then my father explained that as he did not yet have the capital to invest in the book, she would have to fund the publication of the book herself but that he would ensure she got a fair portion of the earnings in return. Madame Hafez said she had some gardening to do and walked us to the elevator.

'What kind of human being are you?' asked my sister, as my mother, father and I stood in the old elevator opposite Madame Hafez.

The elevator had a Vintage Otis wooden scissor gate which one had to close manually. The mirror was rusted around the edges and foggy, but it didn't matter because the light was too dim for the mirror to be of use.

‘Excuse me?’ asked Madame Hafez.

‘Who uproots a tree that a girl planted in the ground and throws it in the bin?’ asked my sister.

There are rare instances when a wronged child speaks and you see the rip in space and time, the affronted adult emerge and the words flow from the coarser lips. If you should happen to miss the rip in space and time, observe the adults in the room. They will squirm. And once the rip in space and time takes place, reality very briefly takes on an unstable form.

‘I did no such thing,’ said Madame Hafez, squirming.

‘It wasn’t me,’ said a young Lusine.

She had two sets of glasses on her at all times. One hung from her neck and another rested on her nose. She was forever removing a pair of glasses to place the other pair on.

‘It was a tree given to her by the school on Independence Day, a few years ago,’ said my mother, ‘I don’t expect you would remember this.’

‘You’re lying,’ shouted a little brunette girl who resembled my mother, her teeth a pearly white not yet stained with nicotine.

‘What kind of tree was it?’ asked Madam Hafez.

‘What tree?’ asked young Lusine.

‘A Cedar tree and you killed it,’ said my sister.

‘That’s enough,’ said my father who had his arm around my sister.

‘I don’t want to play anymore,’ said my young father, his face no longer jowly, his eyes bright and unsaddled with bags, his moustache gone.

‘Who ever planted that tree there, killed it. I merely cleaned up the mess that was left behind,’ said Madame Hafez.

‘It was him. I’m telling you. It was him,’ said young Lusine.

My sister looked up at my father, who placed both his hands on her shoulders.

‘You don’t know that it would have died,’ he said, now staring at Madame Hafez.

‘Cedar trees do not belong by the coast. They belong in the mountains,’ said Madame Hafez staring back, ‘Have you ever seen a Cedar tree in Beirut?’

‘It would have been the first one,’ said my father.

‘It would have been the first one,’ said my young father, fists clenched, eyebrows furled, teeth grating.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Mr. Najjar. You’re a grown man. It would have died and you know it.’

‘Surely, you could have let her find this out for herself,’ said my father.

‘That’s enough,’ said my mother.

‘It is not my job to teach your children life lessons,’ replied Madame Hafez as the elevator arrived to the ground floor.

My father reached for the Vintage Otis wooden scissor gate and slammed it open. Madame Hafez stood aside and my father stomped his way out without saying another word.

‘Everything alright, Basha?’ asked Saeed, who was standing by the entrance to the building in his flip flops.

‘Do you have Cedar trees in Egypt, Saeed?’ asked my father.

‘We do not, Basha. I think it is too hot in Egypt for Cedars.’

‘But do you think that if you really wanted to, you could grow one?’

‘I hear there is snow in Dubai now. You can go and ski there, if you really wanted to. So I don’t see why not.’

My father turned on his heel and smiled in the direction of Madame Hafez who was still making her way out of the elevator, while my mother held the door for her. He opened his arms as if he had just pulled an absolute rabbit out of a hat, as if there was a judge sitting where an old lady was climbing out of an elevator, as if there was a jury lined up on the stairway behind him, as if out there, past the green gate which led into the building, there were cameramen and camerawomen and reporters jostling to get a glimpse of the man who had proven to the world that Cedar trees, that *Cedrus libani*, could, if one really wanted them to, be grown in Beirut.

‘But I would not go to Dubai to ski,’ added Saeed, ‘I would not go to Dubai at all.’

Wars and Cities of the Middle East was never published. And *Through the Middle East* was never published. And *From Armenia to Lebanon* was never published. And, perhaps above all, *Sykes-Picot and I* was never published.

The day Mohammad came in to school after his father had disappeared was a memorable one, in that the teachers mostly did not know how to behave. It happened a day after that rip in space and time within the walls of the elevator. I wondered whether his disappearance was an unintended byproduct of that tear in the very fabric of the universe, but Mohammad explained that his father had not disappeared at all.

‘He was kidnapped,’ said Mohammad.

‘From his bed?’ asked Basil.

‘It was a targeted operation.’

Ms. Mayssa offered her condolences, to which Mohammad replied that he thought his father was still alive. Ms. Mayssa then took back her condolences.

‘The Don was right about this one,’ said Mohammad, as she left the class.

Mr. Abu Alam pretended that the whole kidnapping had not taken place, and Mohammad burst into tears in the middle of the former’s explanation of relativity. It was not even on the syllabus for that term but I suspect he believed that Einstein’s theory of relativity would prove enough of a distraction for the day.

Mr. Malik singled Mohammad out and asked him to recite a poem written by Al Mutanabbi, an egomaniacal, tenth century Arab poet who pretended to be a prophet. He later recanted his claim but the name ‘Mutanabbi’, which means ‘the self-proclaimed prophet’, stuck. Under the circumstances, Mohammad did what can only be described as an admirable job. He walked up to the front of the class and stood by Mr. Malik’s desk. He looked at Mr. Malik who nodded then mouthed the words ‘go on’ without uttering another word.

At first it was incoherent blubbling, and Basil swore he heard him stumble over the words ‘I want my father’. Then Mohammad straightened his back and treated us to his own summation of Al Mutanabbi’s greatest hits. The structure made little sense and whole poems were reduced to one or two verses, he even modified certain words and arguably added substance.

‘I am he whose literature is seen by the blind. And whose words are heard by the deaf.’

The steed, the night and the desert know me. As do the sword, the spear, the paper and the pen.'

The class fell quiet again and you could hear the overhead fan humming its approval.

'Man does not obtain all that he wishes. The winds take the ships where they do not desire to go.

If you see the lion's teeth displayed, do not think that the lion is smiling – or frowning either.'

Nadine and Wael led a round of applause, Basil and I joined in half-heartedly and so did the rest of the class. Mr. Malik shook his head and waved Mohammad back to his seat. Mohammad bit his lip and raised his eyebrows. He could not believe his luck; Mr. Malik had let that massacre of a recitation slide.

According to Mohammad, a helicopter had descended onto the roof of their building in the middle of the night. A group of armed men had burst through the door and led his father out of there.

'They spoke Hebrew,' he said, during break, as he spread himself along the green wooden bench under the acorn tree.

There had not been a president for so long that the school simply opted to paint over where the portrait once stood.

'So not the SSNP then?' asked Basil.

'This is not funny,' said Mohammad, looking up at us with his hand now resting on his forehead.

Wael smacked Basil across the back of the head.

'Are all Syrian Nationalists idiots,' asked Wael, 'Or is it just you?'

The incident had been all over the news featuring Mohammad's mother wailing and Mohammad standing in the background looking perplexed, almost like he was about to recite one of Mr. Malik's poems. His father was a namesake of the leader of Hezbollah at the time. This, for some bizarre reason had been enough to puzzle the Israelis and rush the Mossad into an operation which ended with them in possession of a fairly jovial and clean shaven man. The nation had been caught between a mood of comic disbelief and one of concern for the fate of the unfortunate namesake.

‘What’s in a name?’ the news anchor on LBC had begun the report, raising an eyebrow, ‘A lot, apparently.’

I wondered what Mr. Aston would have made of that appropriation.

The only self-evident piece of information available, was that the someone from the Israeli side had committed a mishap. This made the Israelis the butt of a joke for a couple of weeks.

‘An Israeli walked into an Electronics store to buy a coloured TV,’ said Basil, pausing to look over his shoulder, ‘When the owner asked him which TV he would like. He said ‘the orange one’.’

Even Mohammad laughed timidly at that.

‘Do you think they’ll return him?’ I asked.

‘Return him?’ asked Mohammad, in a raised pitch, ‘Like he was a shoe that did not fit.’

Basil leaned in and muttered his assessment of the situation in my ear; it was to do with Mohammad being a bit too dramatic, even for a boy whose father had just been kidnapped by the Mossad.

Ms. Iman, who seemed to know where she would find us, walked straight in between Basil and myself and sat on the green bench by Mohammad’s head. He hesitated at first, his body stiffened and his hand gripped the edge of the bench. Basil and I both stood over Ms. Iman, hands in our pockets, with Wael behind us.

Ms. Iman put her hand on Mohammad’s forehead without saying a word. Emboldened by this, Mohammad rested his head on her lap and turned his neck so that he was now facing her Bordeaux shirt. And he sobbed. He sobbed like a man, not a boy. At one point his knee slammed hard against the back of the bench but he did not acknowledge this at all. Every passerby would have seen Mohammad that day, his head buried in Ms. Iman’s lap, his chest heaving, his shoulders shivering, his body shaking, his voice cracking.

Ms. Iman pursed her lips and for some time said nothing. She looked at the three of us and the edge of her mouth dipped.

‘Maybe he should have stayed at home,’ said Wael, resting his elbows on mine and Basil’s shoulders.

Wael was so tall that he sometimes had to duck when Mr. Abu Alam aimed his famous Highlanders at us in class. The trajectory of the physics teacher's flying Highlanders was spot on when it came to narrowly, but purposefully, missing most of us. Wael, however, quickly found that he was an exception, a statistical anomaly.

'It happens,' said Ms. Iman, stroking his hair.

She might have meant the sobbing or the kidnapping. I was back in the bathroom hiding from the bombs.

This encouraged Mohammad who took his sobbing to a more pronounced level.

'Now he's definitely milking it,' said Basil, nudging me in the ribs and squeezing the udders of an invisible cow.

Wael smacked the both of us across the back of the head before I could protest.

For the first week, no one heard anything about Mr. Nasrallah. Ms. Mayssa refrained from reoffering her condolences and classes carried on as usual. During break, Basil and I speculated that the whole scenario was an elaborate ploy devised by Mohammad's father as a means of escape. We did this away from Wael and Mohammad because we did not want to appear callous.

'He'll have called the Israelis up and begged them to kidnap him,' said Basil, but he did not laugh.

Then on a Wednesday, in the second week, Mohammad did not come to school. We later learned that another helicopter had landed on the roof of their building and dropped a seemingly disorientated Mr. Nasrallah. He staggered into the front door and Mohammad who had slept in the living room by the door, with his mother, rushed to open it.

The jovial man was no longer so clean shaven.

'He did not know where he was at first,' said Mohammad, in the morning just outside class, 'He shouted something about fucking the mother of the next man who lays a finger on him.'

The man's lip was swollen.

'Was he badly bruised?' asked Wael, placing his hands on his waist.

'Not at all,' said Mohammad, 'once he realized it was me who was hugging him. He calmed down.'

Mohammad chewed his gum thoroughly then he tossed it in the air and swung his foot at it but missed. He winced.

Mr. Nasrallah was in his mid-sixties now but he stayed up that night telling them how tiresome this whole trip had been and repeating that there truly is no place like home. It was as if he had been to London on a business trip. He refused to do any interviews and when one TV reporter would not leave, he told her that he could arrange for her to be picked up by the Israelis from her place if she really insisted on an interview.

‘He must be Mossad,’ whispered Basil in my ear, ‘How else do you explain him waltzing back into the country like nothing happened?’

Basil and my father sat opposite one another at the dinner table, between them were stacks of books including one titled *God, Arab Nationalism and the Leader*. I sat on the comfortable couch in the living room. This was the only time they spoke at length. Up to that point, my father would acknowledge Basil by giving him a nod and asking how his father was doing and never stopping to hear the answer. I could see them clearly but they would have had to crane their necks to look at me. A wall of books towered over Basil. It was a business meeting and I was there only to moderate. Basil had come up to me after Ms. Shahab’s math class. The board was devoid of shapes. There were only numbers and radical signs and ‘unknowns’ symbolized by an X or Y.

‘Remind me to get Wael to go over all of this again later,’ said Basil, ‘Numbers make about as much sense as politics in the Middle East.’

He had become good at interweaving subjects which had seemingly little in common with one another. I suspected that this was Mr. Malik’s influence but I did not make this known. Basil went on to explain that Mr. Malik had written a book about the political state of the region and that our mutual Arabic teacher’s wish was for my father to publish it.

‘A revolutionary book,’ Basil described it.

It has occurred to me since that Basil was the first literary agent I had ever met, though I was not familiar with the term at the time. I never read the book. I held the

manuscript in my hands that day and it seemed heavy enough to start a revolution. When I looked at my father's face, I saw that it would not.

'It is bland,' my father said, leaning closer to Basil, 'It is repetitive Pan-Syrian-light bullshit repackaged to fit the social nationalist agenda of today.'

'That's not true,' whispered Basil through gritted teeth. They were already yellow and stained.

'Worst of all is he hasn't said anything that Antoun Saadeh himself didn't say sixty years ago,' said my father, flipping through the manuscript but barely touching the pages, 'It's the worst kind of plagiarism. The kind that doesn't know it is plagiarism until someone else points it out.'

Antoun Saadeh was the founder of the SSNP. His life was spent between exile and imprisonment. Eventually, he was hanged for treason after launching the armed 'First Renaissance Revolution' against the Lebanese government.

'It will start a revolution,' said Basil, gasping for air.

After Saadeh was hanged, the SSNP responded by assassinating the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Lebanon.

Basil held my father's stare. It was the longest I had seen Basil go without winking or smiling or sighing or puffing at his Guilloise.

I was unsure whether he had in fact read the manuscript or sat for a summary which Mr. Malik would have been more than glad to provide.

'This book wouldn't start a fire if I held it to a flame,' said my father, 'let alone a revolution.'

My father played the role of disgruntled publisher well. Had his intention been to lower the agent's demands he would have succeeded but Basil had long ago relented. He had offered that Mr. Malik pay for the costs of publication in return for the name and logo of the publishing house as well as half the earnings.

'But we are the *Sons of Life*,' said Basil and I looked around because I did not see the words come out of his mouth.

This last phrase was how Saadeh had referred to members of his party. Sons of Life. And he dubbed all the ideologies which he opposed as the 'forces of darkness'. These forces included but were not limited to: feudalism, Christian separatism, Islamic

fundamentalism, Zionism and, time permitting, colonialism. There was always a lot more darkness than life.

‘Why does Malik want me to publish it, anyway?’ asked my father, looking up.

Bits of the ceiling now resembled that of Candlelight. The plaster had been peeling and neglected for several winters. There was even a single path which the dripping water had drawn for itself extending from the ceiling to the floor.

‘The Don liked you and Mr. Malik respected the Don,’ said Basil, ‘he heard that you were now in the business of publishing books. He wanted this to be a joint venture.’

An ephemeral smile sauntered through my father’s face without pausing to acknowledge Basil’s words. So far my father had failed to publish two books: the first for lack of funding and the second for lack of content. From the comfortable living room couch, he was prouder of not publishing the second book than he was of not publishing the first.

‘Will you publish it?’ I asked.

It was not the suspense that was killing me. I knew the answer. It was having to watch Basil struggle under the weight of my father’s retorts.

Had Basil asked me whether I believed my father would go along with Mr. Malik’s proposal, I would have persuaded him to find a publisher with a record for publishing books. Mr. Malik and his odd choice of publisher baffled me, but the manner in which he had gone about it: that is manipulating Basil to go through me in order to get to my father, sat well with my perception of the man.

‘Jesus Mohammad Christ,’ said my father, with an unusual, and undue, resolve. This was not the almost intuitively dismissive Jesus Mohammad Christ of old. This one was a different breed.

‘What?’ asked Basil.

‘Listen to me, son,’ said my father, holding Basil’s chin between his thumb and index finger, ‘When you see this man next, run in the other direction. And keep running. He won’t catch you. He’s got a bad leg.’

That my father had felt the need to point out Mr. Malik’s leg struck me as odd, even at the time, before everything else that would happen afterwards. Possibly, my father thought that Basil was so blind to Mr. Malik’s tricks that he would not have noticed his

bad leg. Or maybe he derived a certain pleasure out of noting that this man, whom he disliked, was in some way disadvantaged.

‘You’ve got it all wrong,’ said Basil, pushing my father’s hand away, ‘I volunteered to bring the manuscript to you.’

‘He’s a war relic,’ said my father, ‘He lives for war. The entire party is a war relic.’

‘You’re mistaken,’ said Basil, now shaking, ‘I’m telling him.’

He stood up and made to reach for the manuscript but my father banged his fist twice in quick succession against the stacked pieces of paper. The first time his fist connected with the manuscript it rose as if insulted by the gesture and a few papers were sent flying across the room. The second time was more final and the towering blocks of literature by the door threatened to tumble.

‘He’s a pimp,’ said my father, looking Basil straight in the eyes, ‘a crippled pimp.’

I never knew why my father so despised Mr. Malik. He never disclosed this to me or to anyone for that matter, so far as I know. When I think of the article I wrote soon after the Don’s death and how Mr. Malik used that as a tool with which to insult my father, I feel a measured sense of guilt. Though, I believe the matter was much larger than me and my article. I suspect my father saw in Mr. Malik everything that was wrong with his Lebanon and I suspect Mr. Malik saw in my father everything that was wrong with his.

T-54 and Other Stories

‘How shall I explain my war to you, my son? I am too old to play now but let us start a game of hide and seek. Do you remember that one? Rest your arm against the palm tree there, and your forehead against your arm. Close your eyes, while the war goes to hide, and count aloud: one year, two years, three and, then, fifteen. Where did they go? You want to open your eyes now, but you dare not, because you cannot feel the trunk of the palm tree you once leant against or the promenade on which you stood. And even that little piece of the Mediterranean which you and your friends used to frequent is gone. And now you don’t want to play anymore, and now you shout and now scream and stamp your feet and now you wish you had never closed your eyes. You thought it was just your turn and that it would pass. And now it has.’

My father wrote that article the night after he had walked back home across Hamra Street with his rolled up certificate in his back pocket. He did not know that he would have a son. That night, after Iftar, Uncle Nasser went out for the traditional fireworks to celebrate the end of Ramadan with the boys in the neighborhood. My father remained seated by the dining room table long after the plates had been cleared. He wrote first about love, inspired by Abdel Halim Hafez’s songs, but he said it seemed disingenuous.

Abdel Halim Hafez was an Egyptian actor and singer in the seventies, dubbed the dark-skinned nightingale, and famous for his unique voice and on screen charisma. At the time, my father sported the very same oily haircut: hair parted to the side, with the fringe pushed backwards. When Abdel Halim died, aged forty eight, millions attended his public funeral and four women threw themselves off the balcony.

Then my father wrote about the joy of success, also inspired by one of Abdel Halim’s songs, but that too seemed insincere. Then he turned off the radio, and Abdel Halim fell silent. He listened to the fireworks and he wrote about the war, and he knew that this was his voice, not Abdel Halim’s.

I was in bed when I heard the first few shots being fired. I heard them in my dreams first. I saw them piercing Alana’s half-naked body. I saw her purse her lips and widen her eyes and curse Beirut. She said that this would never have happened in Montréal, as we lay in the sand.

My mother said they were fireworks. She reached for the volume control of the TV set and turned the knob down. My father did not say anything. He looked up at the ceiling, or through it. My sister, who came running into the living room after me, said she did not think they were fireworks. It did not sound like joy, it sounded like anger.

Armed militiamen from the militant Hezbollah had taken to the streets backed by the SSNP and Amal with their AK-47s and RPGs. Opposing parties, the Future Movement and the Lebanese forces, had formed their own token militias too and armed them hastily but they stood very little chance. The army also gave it a go. Soldiers in tanks made it to the middle of Hamra Street in an attempt to try and diffuse the situation. After the first couple of hours, it became abundantly clear that this tactic was not going to yield any results. The soldiers abandoned their T-54s and left to go home to their families.

Amal means hope.

In the beginning, it was dark and no one said a word. Then from the dark came the voice of my father.

‘Where the hell is the goddam candle?’

The electricity was cut off and then the water and eventually after days we had very little toothpaste, or toilet paper, or Head and Shoulders. My father had dandruff and he had passed it on to me.

My mother and sister initially sat on the edge of the bathtub, I leaned against the toilet seat and my father stood over us, cross-armed, listening intently to the sound of gunfire and RPG rockets being launched in the distance. When a bomb went off somewhere very far away, he did not look down at us and smile, like he used to, and ask us about school and deadlines and essays and football and literature and such. He grimaced, he scratched his moustache, he expanded his chest then he retracted it and, once, he sighed and the sigh went on for a couple of minutes.

My sister reached for her toothpaste above the sink and offered it to my father. The rest of us had run out of Colgate, but my sister had her own tube of Crest. She had insisted upon this some time ago because she liked the old commercial with the Crest-coated egg immersed in a cup of acid. The Crest-coated egg did not dissolve, as opposed to the other one, and that was enough to convince my sister that Crest, not Colgate, was the answer to her problems. My father picked it up. It was new, unopened.

‘Where did you get this?’ asked my father.

My sister reached behind the sink and pulled out four or five tubes of Crest.

‘I wondered where they all went so fast,’ said my mother, ‘I was beginning to think you ate them all.’

My mother and father laughed.

There was silence. Gunshots. Silence.

‘You don’t know this, but your father and I almost died before you two were born,’ said my mother.

My mother told us the story of how she and my father almost died before we were born. It was Christmas and they were hiding in the very same bathroom. There was no electricity and no heating.

‘It was the coldest winter I can remember,’ said my mother.

She now had one arm around my sister and one hand on my shoulder. We crouched on the floor and leaned our backs against the white porcelain bathtub and looked up at my father. He was still standing, cross armed. Once or twice, he would rest his elbow against the washing machine or use the door handle to support his weight but he never sat down.

‘I wish it was winter now,’ said my sister, wiping the sweat off her neck.

My mother had filled the bathtub with water. She reached for the hand towel by the sink, dipped it in the bathtub and placed it on my sister’s forehead.

‘It snowed, *fara*,’ said my father.

This was a lie. It had not snowed in Beirut since the sixties according to Grandfather Adam.

My sister resembled a desert wanderer with the wet hand towel on her head and my father’s dirty white flannel shirt which she had turned into her summer dress and refused to take off since the shelling had begun. It smelled of newspaper too and so did the windowless bathroom.

‘An RPG rocket landed on the stairway right outside this house on that night,’ my mother continued.

My mother said that she could not hear anything after the explosion. She said she could feel herself scream out empty words but that she had believed she was dead

because she could not hear her voice or see my father. She had felt his hand on her face. She swatted it away instinctively. Then she felt his hand on her face again. The first thing she heard was him laughing. She asked what he was laughing about.

‘Jesus Mohammad Christ,’ he replied, still laughing.

‘What?’ she said, ‘The ringing is too loud, I can’t hear you.’

‘That’s what you were screaming: ‘Jesus-Mohamad-Christ’,’ he said, with one hand around my mother’s waist, ‘How did you come up with that one?’

She read his lips.

‘I must have been thinking we need all the help we can get.’

‘It worked,’ he said, resting his head against my mother’s shoulder and placing his hand on her stomach.

‘He’s kicking,’ she said, ‘That must have scared him.’

My mother would have a miscarriage later that week.

‘It happens,’ said Teta Mary at the hospital, wiping the tears away from her face and my mother’s.

There was silence again. Gunshots. Silence.

That evening, for the first time, my father told us the story of the real Bilyasho, a boy named Ibrahim Bel Adel who sat two desks behind him at the Italian School in Ras Beirut. Bilyasho was the Don’s nickname for Ibrahim who would show up to class with thick blue-rimmed glasses which complemented his curly red hair and his white, freckled cheeks. Only my father called him Bob. I think he was druze.

Bilyasho would regularly bring Arak to class disguised as water in a small bottle of Soha and pass it around the room until it was empty.

‘He took a chicken, from Abu Ibrahim’s farm, to class and set it loose,’ said my father, arching his back and snorting in a mock attempt to suppress a laugh.

His laugh was the sound of a thousand pieces of paper being ripped at the same time.

One morning, he even shot fireworks through the class window from the playground which caused his classmates so much distress that some of them had to be picked up by their parents.

‘You think this is funny?’ said my father, imitating the Don’s scowl and addressing an invisible Bilyasho, ‘terrifying your classmates into believing their lives are in danger. Do you think this is clever?’

‘No one was hurt,’ said Bilyasho.

‘You’re a clown. An absolute clown. And if you carry on like this, you’ll never amount to anything,’ said the Don, a vein bursting through his forehead and spit spewing from his mouth.

Bilyasho smiled and rested his hand on the Don’s arm.

‘You should learn to take things lightly, Don. You’ll give yourself a stroke if you carry on like this.’ That, according to my father, is what Bilyasho said to the Don in response.

The Don still had curly black hair at the time and he would regularly put his hands through it when feeling frustrated, or if things did not go his way. After he lost his hair, he would run his hands over his bald head but this did not seem to give him any satisfaction.

‘You should learn to take things lightly, Don. You’ll lose your hair if you carry on like this,’ that, when my father retold the story, is what Bilyasho said to the Don in response.

I heard my father tell that story several times to Monsieur Mermier imitators, and to the original Frenchman himself once. After the first ending, the audience pursed their lips, those who knew the Don winced or nodded their heads knowingly and the more pious of them said ‘god rest his soul’. After the second, they laughed quietly, shook their heads and the more pious of them said ‘god rest his soul’. Monsieur Mermier raised his glass of Arak and toasted Bilyasho. The story was always about the Don, never about Bilyasho.

My father placed his hands in his short pockets. It was sage green with stripes of grey. His shoulders arched forwards as if they were supporting the weight of his old schoolbag.

‘We walked back home from school that afternoon in March,’ he said, ‘the pimp snatched my backpack and ran off with it.’

In my father's mind, it was the last time he saw Bilyasho, running ahead with his backpack swinging from side to side. In truth, he would see Bilyasho the next day and the day after that, and almost every day for another two months or so. He admitted as much in his later years. Bilyasho was one of the seventeen thousand Lebanese citizens who disappeared during the civil war. His body was never found and he was never declared dead. Officially, Bilyasho is still alive today and he will live on for many years yet. He will outlive your children and your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren. And if you like you can tell them stories before they go to bed, about Bilyasho, or Pagliaccio or Ibrahim.

My father's backside now hovered over the edge of the toilet seat, the weight of the imaginary schoolbag proving too much for his aging limbs. He soon caught himself in the act and stood up as if the toilet seat had bitten him or else stunned him into an upright position. He shook his head and crossed his arms and furrowed his eyebrows at me.

Silence. A loud explosion.

My mother crossed herself. Then she crossed my sister then she crossed me.

'I'm hungry,' said my sister, leaping into the air as if offended by my mother's sudden bout of piety.

She stomped her feet and I anticipated another Dabke, but she appeared not to have the energy for it, and so she slipped back into my mother's arms. My mother said that she would make us a Halloumi sandwich each.

'When?' asked my sister.

The absence of windows or any natural light into the bathroom blended the days and nights into one. After a heated exchange of gunfire, the city would take a deep breath and hold it in for an hour. My mother cracked the bathroom door open to let the light in.

'Soon.'

'I need to go,' I said.

'Go where?' my mother asked, placing her hand on my moist neck.

'There,' I said, pointing to the toilet seat.

'Not this again,' my father grimaced.

One hand now held his chin in position and the other was tucked firmly under his armpit.

Silence again. Then we heard a scream, it echoed in our ears.

My mother told us about the time when she hid under the bed in her parents' house during the civil war. She told us about the four militiamen who tried to break down the front door, only for Deddi Nabil to open it for them.

'Your grandfather explained that his home is their home,' said my mother, getting up to light another candle, 'He was a charming man, your grandfather, his hair always parted to the right, and that gleaming moustache, and his jawline alone. He never took his suit off except to go to bed.'

My sister edged her small head across the gap left by my mother's warm body and she rested her mane on my lap.

'Your Teta tucked me under the bed and told me not to breathe whatever happens,' continued my mother, 'she had the largest eyes that will ever see you.'

So large were they that you could swim in them, or swim halfway across them and then float on your back out of exhaustion.

Deddi Nabil asked Teta Marry to make the gentlemen some Turkish coffee, which she did. And he asked them if they would like some biscuits, which they did. And they laid their guns aside and they sat down and they had their first cup of coffee, and their second. They asked to use the toilets and my grandfather showed them where it was. Then they asked to search the bedrooms and my grandfather obliged. They opened all the drawers and threw the underwear and socks in the air and flipped the mattresses and removed all the clothes from the closet and cast them onto the floor and stepped on them and emptied the dustbins over them.

'Couldn't find anything,' said the youngest, who must have been about fourteen.

'No Palestinian flags, keychains, kufiyahs? Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

That was when they heard the scream. It was Yvonne's hollow scream; the elderly disabled woman who had lived across from my grandparents' house and lost her teeth to age, and her children to war. That night she lost her life too.

'May she rest in peace,' said Deddi Nabil, crossing himself.

The eldest militiaman, a bearded man with thick black eyebrows and a cut above his upper lip, produced a rotten tomato from his coat pocket and showed it to my grandfather.

‘What is this?’ he asked, holding it centimeters away from my grandfather’s nose.

‘Banadura,’ said Deddi Nabil.

‘Banadura’ means tomato.

‘You’re not Palestinian then?’

‘No, sir. Lebanese. From Tripoli. So was my father and his father before him.’

Had Deddi Nabil opted to say ‘Bandura’ instead, he would likely have been shot where he stood. And so would my grandmother and so would my mother, eventually.

‘Did you check under the bed?’ asked the eldest.

‘No,’ said the youngest.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is it because you’re an idiot?’

There was also a wooden chest adorned with fragments of seashells under the bed, right beside my then fourteen year old mother’s nimble body. It contained official ownership documents with King George’s seal stamped upon them, indicating Deddi Nabil’s right to his father’s house in Haifa. It contained kufiyahs, a flag, several keychains and the keys to the house which he and my grandmother had vacated all those years ago. Also in that seashell-adorned chest was a bottle of Palestinian sand. My grandfather had managed to procure it from some Lebanese merchant in the south. Teta was unsure whether or not the sand was Palestinian, just as she was unsure whether or not she would return home.

The boy looked at the chest then at my mother, who must have been about his age at the time. She told him with her eyes that there was no chest, that he could not live with himself if there was, that it did not contain flags and documents and keychains and kufiyahs, that he was a good guest and good guests do not kill their hosts. Then, without breathing, she took off her gold cross and slipped it to him.

‘Nothing,’ said the young boy, as he climbed out from under the bed, ‘there is nothing under the bed.’

Silence again. Then some more gunfire. It was louder this time, like the militiamen were standing behind us. They were not aiming at anyone in particular. They were firing in the air, at the birds or the clouds or god; not their god, the other god.

Silence. Gunshots. More silence.

My father announced that he would like a Cadbury. The Fruit and Nut Dairy Milk Cadbury bar.

He told us about Grandfather Adam, how he did not see him often but when he did, he would always have a Cadbury Fruit and Nut in his coat pocket. He hated the raisins to begin with but he got used to them and began to appreciate their value when he could afford his own chocolate.

‘It isn’t worth the effort it takes to chew on it without the raisins,’ he said, scratching his chin.

Then my father told us about the time Grandfather Adam took him and his brothers to Ramlet ElBayda for the day. It was a hot summer’s day in June, and the shelling had ceased for days. Grandfather Adam wore his white flannel shirt, blue swimming trunks and fake Ray ban sunglasses. He had not yet won the lottery. He placed his faded green towel on the sand and lay on his back looking sideways at the occasional bikini. A young woman in a white bikini bottom and black top sat on his towel, had some of his Almaza and talked with him until the sun had almost set. Then my father, who had been carrying Uncle Nasser on his shoulders the whole day, dropped him on his head. My grandfather slapped my father so hard that he flew into both his brothers and knocked them over.

On the way back, Grandfather Adam gave my father a Cadbury Fruit and Nut from his pocket. It was melted and hot, but my father lowered Uncle Nasser onto the ground, leaned against the railings by the promenade and savored the Cadbury while gazing across the sea. Grandfather Adam lit a cigarette, and leaned against the railings next to my father.

‘One day the war will end,’ he said, ‘and then we’ll be able to go to the beach every day in the summer.’

‘I’d like that,’ said my father, looking down at his own flip flops.

‘The Don tells me you’re pretty good at this writing nonsense.’

‘Did he?’

‘Just as long as you remember that no matter how good a writer you become, you’ll always be the son of an illiterate mother, and semi-literate father.’

‘I’ll remember.’

Grandfather Adam paused for breath. He looked around at his younger sons, playing hide and seek along the promenade. One leaned against a palm tree and counted until ten and the other hid behind another palm tree. He looked at the thin golden line. He looked at the waves of the Mediterranean, and he heard them too, and he smelled the fish and the rotten towel hanging over his round rock of a shoulder. He ran his hand through his thick black hair. He picked up the faded green towel from his shoulder and swung it around my father’s neck.

‘If something were to ever happen to me,’ he said, lowering his voice and the cigarette from his lips, ‘You would take care of your brothers and sisters, wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said my father, licking the chocolate off the wrapper.

‘And your mother.’

My father nodded.

‘Good man.’

‘Why? Are you planning on having something happen to you?’

‘I’ve never planned for anything in my entire life, son,’ said Grandfather Adam, ‘I think that’s part of the problem.’

My father nodded again.

‘Are you leaving?’

‘No,’ said Grandfather Adam, ‘But if I were to win the lottery for instance, in the future. I might have to leave for a little while.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that’s how it works.’

‘Who said?’

‘Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, said, that’s who,’ said Grandfather Adam, before flicking his cigarette bud into the sea.

‘Who was that woman?’

‘A life guard.’

‘What was she doing sitting on your towel and sipping your Almaza?’ asked my father.

‘Ask another question and I’ll slap the chocolate out of your mouth.’

My grandfather had so much hair gel on his head that the salty water of the Mediterranean stood no chance. The otherwise curly hair remained permanently gelled backwards.

Then my father spit out the raisins and the nuts, and lifted Uncle Nasser onto his shoulders again.

We heard gunshots. And one big explosion some way away.

Silence.

The electricity flickered on. Then the electricity flickered back off. Gunshots.

My mother told us where she had hid the jewelry, this was in case the RPG rocket landed on her but not us. She told us not to tell anyone. She told us about the bank accounts she and my father had set up. She made me repeat the name of the bank and recite the account number.

‘Why are you making him memorize the bank number?’ asked my sister, ‘Where are you going?’

‘Australia, *fara*,’ said my father, tugging at one of her ponytails.

A loud bang made my mother leap up into the air. It was not an RPG rocket, it was the slam of a door, possibly Madame Hafez’s. After the initial fright, we all realized this and began to take up our previous stances. Except for my sister, who remained huddled in a fetal position with her cheek pressed hard against the cold floor.

My father’s voice echoed still and the flame from the candle wavered. It might have been the way the light moved, or her proximity to the candle, but my mother’s eyes narrowed and she fixed them on my father with such ferocity that I was sure she was not above pouring the hot melted wax onto his back.

That was the last year my sister would sport her now trademark ponytails. One night, she appeared in front of the old TV set with the vinyl wood varnish as we sat there watching ‘Basmet ElWatan’, she held her ponytails in one hand and scissors in the other. My parents stopped asking her to get up and change the channel after that.

My father crouched down to my sister's eye level and shaped to say: 'nowhere, *fara*', but he did not.

'Repeat it, again,' said my mother, now standing up and crossing her arms.

'It's not the first time,' said my father, resting his hand on one side of my sister's face.

'My name is Adam Najjar. I am underage. My parents left a bank account in my name, here,' I said automatically, staring at the ceiling.

'Why left?' asked my sister, 'You said you were not going anywhere.'

It was not the sound of bullets or RPG rockets or bombs going off far, far away that frightened me. It was when I could not hear the stories flow from the lips of my mother and father.

'Don't be afraid,' said my mother, reading my mind, 'In a few years, this will be one of those stories which you can tell your children.'

'Then don't make him recite the bank number,' said my sister, eyes held shut.

Silence.

My mother told us the story of Yvonne. Yvonne would sit on the balcony and smoke every day, from morning until late in the afternoon. Then she would take a short nap and resume smoking until late into the night. Most of the time there was no electricity during the war and Yvonne did not have a generator or candles. She had her lighter and her Viceroy's and whatever else happened that evening, you could count on that light from Yvonne's cigarette to shine through the night.

'With all those militiamen around, she was asking to be shot,' said my mother, who had now resumed her position by the bathtub in between my sister and I.

My father stood cross armed once again. He looked up. Nothing happened. He was losing his touch.

'Yvonne had a famous blue, nylon bag with that raw potato inside,' said my mother, biting her lips.

She was out of cigarettes.

The blue, nylon bag was attached to a rope which the elderly woman would lower from her balcony. The function of the raw potato was to prevent the wind from blowing

the bag away. She would not shout or call for anyone. Passersby would toss their change in the nylon bag on their way to somewhere else.

About Abbas, the grocer around the corner, knew exactly what she wanted and when he spotted the bag. He would take the money he required and replace it with a box of cigarettes and a bottle of Soha water and a can of tomato soup, which she would often return.

‘I didn’t ask for this, Abou Abbas,’ she would shout.

‘You didn’t ask for anything, Set Yvonne,’ Abou Abbas would say.

She would regularly throw the tin can of tomato soup out the balcony and Abou Abbas would laugh and say to whoever crossed his path, as he mopped the floor, that he had tried his best. Once, she did not say a word and when Abou Abbas showed up with a mop he did not find tomato soup on the floor.

‘How was the tomato soup, Set Yvonne?’ shouted Abou Abbas.

‘I flushed it down the toilet,’ she said, in her coarse voice.

‘There is no running water, Set Yvonne,’ he said, his hands shielding his eyes from the sun as he looked up, ‘How did you manage that?’

The next day Abou Abbas put another can of tomato soup in the blue, nylon bag alongside the Viceroy and the bottle of Saha and the potato and so it went on until one day he replaced the tomato soup with hot dogs.

‘I don’t have teeth, Abou Abbas.’

‘I don’t have any more tomato soup, Set Yvonne’ he said.

The next day when Yvonne lowered her blue nylon bag, she felt that it was heavier and she struggled to pull it back up. Passersby would drop a pot of yogurt, or tomato soup, or labneh and some would even drop a Cadbury or a Ras El Abed or Zucchini.

‘Yvonne would never have survived in today’s Beirut,’ said my mother, ‘They were better times.’

Gunshots. Silence. More gunshots.

My sister then told us the story of Wahid, a boy in her class who would regularly piss in his pants.

‘Is it because he laughs too hard that he can’t control his bladder?’ asked my mother.

‘No,’ said my sister.

‘Is it because he is scared too easily and can’t control his bladder?’ asked my father.

‘No,’ said my sister.

‘Is it because he is too lazy to walk all the way to the toilet?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said my sister.

‘Why then?’ asked my father, impatiently.

‘I don’t know.’

‘What kind of story is this, *fara*?’ asked my father, as my mother lit another candle and placed it by the bathroom mirror.

‘It’s a story about a boy who pees in his pants.’

‘Where is the beginning, the middle and the end?’

‘He pees in his pants,’ she said.

Silence.

An RPG rocket landed on someone else’s family. Someone else’s home. My father looked up.

‘I know it was you who smashed the Captain’s windows that night,’ said my father, without looking at me.

His hair was as grey as it was black now, especially around the sides, and he had begun to dye his hair brown following in the footsteps of my grandfather Adam. There were permanent bags under his eyes and his eyebrows, once thick and imposing, had thinned and lost their striking charm.

‘It was not,’ I said.

‘That’s a lie,’ he said.

I shook my head.

‘What does it matter now?’

‘It matters,’ he said, scratching his chin, ‘Is my son a coward or not? It matters.’

‘No,’ I said.

I stood up. My father was still taller than me. He did not tower over me anymore but he would still look down at me when he spoke.

‘Life isn’t a fat, old bartender with a motorcycle injury.’

The implication was that life, unlike the fat, battered Captain, would catch up with me. I wanted to smile because I knew it would infuriate my father, but I could not.

‘Why are you bringing this up now?’ asked my mother.

‘Because he has nowhere to go.’

‘I didn’t,’ I began, and I stopped when I saw my father place his index finger over his lips.

‘You don’t want to go to the moon. You never did. You want to run away, that’s all. You want to smash windows and run away and never have to face any consequences.’

He stopped because my sister was crying and because we could hear the gunfire getting closer. My father looked up again but nothing happened.

‘I want to go,’ I said, making a fist with my right hand.

My drenched back arched forwards and began to shake. I made another fist with my left hand in a failed attempt to control it.

‘Don’t mind your father, he’s just blowing off some steam,’ my mother said, then she bit the side of her lip and waved her hand dismissively.

‘Then go, leave,’ he said, ‘show me how you are going to run out onto the street with bullets and RPG rockets whizzing, mother and father, past your ears.’

My mother blocked the door with her body. She did not stand up. She crawled towards the door and placed her body between it and the rest of us.

I squeezed past my father, unbuckled my belt, unbuttoned my denim shorts, undid my zipper, sat on the toilet seat and let go.

No man ever remembers the good old days when he used to shit himself daily, if he did, he would be infinitely more modest.

My mother and sister looked away. My father did not.

He looked straight at me. He did not shout or stomp his feet. He did not say anything to the effect that he would make me wish I was never born, later. He did not take out his black leather belt, or his Arak. He did not even call upon ‘Jesus Mohammad Christ’. He allowed himself a half snigger. He removed the AnNahar from under his arm,

unfolded it, and then offered it to me. We had run out of toilet paper. I took the newspaper and flipped through the pages. It was five days old and, I assume, my father must have read every page twice, particularly the obituaries section. I looked for his article, I knew it was in there.

‘To be Lebanese today is to take small steps home, with one hand on your heart and another firmly planted against the wall. It is to wave to the wars as they pass by, so that you can plan for a tomorrow that is already gone. It is to be jilted by sleep, and consumed by fear over everything and nothing. The world sleeps and wakes, and you float in a permanent state of restlessness between sleep and exhaustion. It is to jump to your feet at the slam of a bathroom door, or clap of thunder in the sky. It is to act natural in unnatural circumstances; neither a hero nor a victim nor a martyr, just ordinary. It is to miss your country when you are in your country, like you miss your children when they are not. It is to dream the same dream, night after night, that, like in the Ziad Rahbani song, ‘our country becomes a country’. And you worry about being arrested on charges of dreaming. It is to wake up every morning as if it were the first and last time, to recount your name and age and account number and walk on coal and fire with the blessings of others ringing in your ear, all the while repeating this phrase to yourself: ‘I am a human being, I am a human being’. It is to know that you are alone, without land or sky or borders and that it is up to you to recreate the republic, every day. It is to pay the heavy price of living and being, and not cower under the weight of it all. It is to learn from time, hollow wisdom and from space, scathing cynicism. It is to reinvent hope, when you know you will have to reinvent it again tomorrow. It is to set up a place for the ‘good old days’ on the comfortable couch next to you, feign a yawn, place your arm around it and say to it: ‘you should visit us more often’.’

When I was done, I wiped my ass with the words of my father.

Gunfire. Silence. More Silence.

My father and I walked past Saeed and onto the main road. Saeed informed us that the corner shop at the end of the street would be open. He said the gunfire had subsided and that he was fairly certain that everyone had gone home because they were tired and because it had rained momentarily. This was odd because we had not heard the rain and because it was May, and it rarely rained in May.

‘You won’t be able to get any bread and the prices will be hiked up a bit, but you can count on Abou Abbas’ shop being open,’ he said, shutting the gate behind us.

My father’s footsteps echoed throughout the hollow street. The smell of dust and gunfire mixed with that of the fresh but feeble rain occupied the air. Black flags and banners featuring the red vortex lined the narrow road on either side. They hung from trees or polls, and across the shattered windshields of looted shops. We marched straight down the middle, avoiding the broken glass along the pavement and altering our course only once to circumvent an abandoned sky blue Nissan Sunny. As yet untrodden German cockroaches scurried around our feet, seemingly lost, daunted by the sudden reemergence of water from the sky.

My father made a fist with his left hand, but not his right, and swung it forward as if to guide his path. The flesh on both sides of his plain gold wedding ring leapt out of his finger and enclosed the ring itself. The ground was littered with empty shells of bullets which had been launched up in the air at no one. I bent down to pick up two or three, always jogging afterwards to catch up with my father’s longer strides.

His stronger right foot sank into the asphalt and the cement. I thought that if I got lost or if I could no longer see his soaked blue shirt out of the corner of my eye or smell that whiff of sweat and newspaper, I would retrace his footprints all the way back to our house.

Outside the corner shop stood a tank. Abou Abbas noted that it took up about as much space as the old White American.

‘How much for a gallon of water, Abou Abbas?’ asked my father.

‘Ten thousand liras,’ said Abou Abbas.

He was around sixty now, with a white moustache and a belly that meant his face was never within reach of anyone else’s.

‘How much for the toilet paper?’ asked my father.

‘Ten thousand liras,’ said Abou Abbas.

‘You’re no better than they are, out there,’ said my father.

‘They’re killing people,’ he said, ‘I’m risking my life to bring you toilet paper. I’m better. Do you want the toilet paper or not?’

‘How much for the Cadbury Fruit and Nut?’

‘Ten thousand liras,’ said Abou Abbas.

‘You’re a thief.’

‘Do you want the Cadbury and the toilet paper or not?’ asked the large vendor.

Two armed militiamen emerged from the abandoned T-54. The tanks had been given to the Lebanese army by the Soviet Union at some point, possibly because they had very little need for models that were in use during the Second World War. The militiamen wore black tops and army trousers and had bandanas hiding their mouths and noses. But you could see their eyes, and that was enough. Each of them had an AK-47 in one hand and an Almaza and a Viceroy in another. The taller one jumped off the tank. The significantly shorter man opted to stay on top of the tank, dangling his legs off the edge.

‘Is this man giving you trouble, Abu Abbas?’ asked the former, looking at the vendor through his light green eyes, ‘Do you want us to teach him a lesson?’

‘No,’ said Abou Abbas, ‘He was just going to buy a Cadbury Fruit and Nut and be on his way.’

‘God speed,’ said my father, placing a hand on the man’s arm. It was the arm that held the gun. A black armband with the red vortex superimposed clung to his biceps.

My father carried the plastic bag with the toilet paper and the gallon of water over his right shoulder, placed the Cadbury in his back pocket and his left hand on my shoulder.

‘I’ve never tried Cadbury,’ said the militiaman, as we turned to walk back home.

‘You wouldn’t like it,’ said my father, squeezing my shoulder.

‘That’s what I used to think about this,’ he said, raising the Almaza as if to make a toast then slipping it under his bandanna to take a sip, ‘Where I come from, we didn’t get these fancy English chocolates. We just had Ras El Abed, and that was it.’

‘Tarboush,’ said my father.

Ras El Abed is a cheap, Lebanese variation on the chocolate teacake. It is a chocolate covered, cream filled treat that has been popular amongst generations of Lebanese children since the fifties. The actual meaning of Ras El Abed is ‘head of a slave’ and when Gandour, the Lebanese chocolate company, tried to launch a marketing campaign to rename Ras El Abed, the Lebanese public simply ignored the whole thing. Tarboush, or Fez, was the proposed alternative, due to its close resemblance in shape to

the traditional Lebanese headwear famously worn by the first prime minister, Riad El Solh. 'Because everyone has tried it on' was the slogan pushed throughout the campaign, as opposed to the implied slogan of the initial name: 'because it is black'.

'What?' asked the militiaman.

'Never mind.'

'I think I'll try some of that English Ras El Abed.'

'Leave it, Adel. We're not here to sample foreign chocolate,' said the short one, still sitting on the tank, 'do your job and let's get out of here.'

'I'll just have one bite,' said Adel.

My father instructed me to reach for the Cadbury Fruit and Nut in his back pocket and offer it to the man. Adel removed his bandana. He looked barely any older than I was.

He took the first bite, he let the chocolate melt in his mouth. He laid his gun against the wall and spit the raisins and nuts out. Then he took a second bite, this time he did not spit anything out. Then he took a third and fourth and fifth and sixth. When he was done he stuffed the wrapper in my father's shirt pocket and he took a sip of his Almaza.

'That was alright,' he said, 'I want more.'

'I don't have more,' said my father, 'Abou Abbas does.'

'Then go in there and get me some more,' said Adel, bringing his nose close enough to my father's so that he could smell the Cadbury.

The former resident of the Ottoman house, which would have been visible at the end of the street, died on the eve of his centenary birthday. Builders and cranes and drilling rigs and ripped jeans and concrete mixers and dust and construction trucks, came and went. In its place now stood a sixteen-story high building with no balconies and double glazed glass where the walls should be. This happened while my father and Adel stared at one another.

The glass was not a good idea. The architect was French-Lebanese. She had never lived in Beirut. Though I am certain that my father would have struggled to launch the foldable chair onto the roof of that glass tower.

Past Adel, you could see a small part of the Mediterranean which was discernable still from our balcony on the sixth floor. It was forever in the background. And past the

Mediterranean, you could see the sun setting. There was a fine golden line now telling the sea not to encroach upon the sky's territory, and telling the sky that it is not as boundless as it might have believed but finite and limited and terminable. And when my father spoke again, the Azan had sounded off and his voice was drowned by that of the Sheikh singing god's praises. It was the loudest I had heard the Azan. As if the Sheikh believed that if he sang louder, if he made more noise, then maybe he could turn god's attention to Beirut, because perhaps the gunfire and RPG rockets were not loud enough and all he needed was a bearded man with an amplifier to make him stand up and take note.

But Adel heard my father because he picked up his gun by the barrel and swung it at him. My father shielded his face with his arms. Adel put his knee through my father's chest which knocked him on his back. My father raised his hand but Adel swung his AK-47 again, this time in the opposite direction, landing a heavy blow above his left eye. Blood dripped down his moustache and he wiped it away with the rolled up sleeve of his oversized blue shirt.

'I am a human being,' mumbled my father, as he rolled on the ground.

I watched Adel swing his AK-47 in the direction of my father's now red stained head. It did not belong in his hand. He knew it, my father knew it, I knew it, Abou Abbas knew it, Mohammad knew it, Jesus knew it and god knew it.

'What's that?'

'I am a human being,' mumbled my father, as he stumbled to his feet, 'I am a human being.'

Except he did not say *human being*, he said *baniedam*. It means son of Adam.

Or maybe he did not. Maybe he said 'you pimp of a militiaman.'. Or maybe he just said 'Jesus Mohammad Christ' and left it at that.

He clutched at Adel's army pants. But he did not look at Adel. His eyes were fixed on the sky. Adel grabbed my father by the collar and dragged him upwards.

Once my father stood upright Adel aimed the back of his gun against his kneecap and the sound of the Azan stopped long enough for me to hear it break.

'Jesus Mohamad Christ,' said my father, clutching his thigh and falling back.

I did not cry. I said something about Cadbury. I sat down and scraped my knees against the melting asphalt. I said I have some or I can get some or that it is not that good.

I wrapped my arms around my knees. I said that I like Ras El Abed more, or that I did not think that raisins or nuts had any business being in a chocolate bar anyway. Cannonball. I said that he should try Swiss chocolate or Belgian chocolate, because that is what chocolate is about. Cannonball. Not Cadbury. Cannonball. Not fucking Cadbury.

‘That’s enough. Respect your elders, boy,’ shouted Abou Abbas, flailing his arms and hobbling out of his shop.

Adel placed the gun between his thighs and slid his unbuttoned shirt off his back to reveal his tattoo of the spinning swastika on his bicep. Even amidst the chaos, I remember thinking that the armband and the banners and the flags had rendered the tattoo redundant.

Adel wrestled the gun out of Abou Abbas’ hands, who had made a symbolic attempt at seizing the weapon, and pushed the grocer’s sizeable frame to the side. Abou Abbas shouted abuse at him, telling him how worthless he was, how he would never amount to anything, how incompetent he had made himself appear and how ignorant and immature it had been of him to beat the blood out of a man for a Cadbury Fruit and Nut.

‘Your grandmother must have been raped by the dumbest fucking crusader of the whole lot,’ I heard myself stutter, as I wiped the snot off my face.

It was a schoolboy retort and my father, who was still looking up expectantly, grimaced and dug his nails into his thigh.

‘Not him,’ shouted the other militiaman when Adel aimed his gun in my direction.

I pressed the palm of my hands against my ears. Adel swiftly pointed the gun at my father instead. Had I not gone to the toilet earlier, I would have wet myself and my father would have cringed and looked Adel straight in the eyes and told him to pull the trigger.

A cockroach slithered past my foot, and with no recourse to bodily fluid or excrement, I instinctively stomped on it with my heel. It was, I had hoped, a sacrifice of some kind so that my life and my father’s would be spared in return for that of the cockroach.

The shorter man pulled at his khaki shirt. Bits of skin protruded from the gaps between the strained buttons. He climbed up into the T-54 and whistled for Adel to follow him. My father groaned through gritted red teeth.

Adel, who was standing over him, leaned in and whispered someone else's words into his ear, and smiled. He, too, had dimples. They resembled Serene's and Svetlana's. His whole face resembled Svetlana, down to the thin lips and eyebrows.

Then he fired his AK-47 in the air and flung his visceral, black army boot through my father's head. My father went limp but he did not die.

I was standing on Westminster bridge watching the fireworks when he died. It was a cold November evening in London, more than a decade later. I still could not grow a beard. I had one arm around a German girl called Lisa, whom I had met two years previous, when I received the call from my mother.

I would tease Lisa about Hitler and she would tease me about Bin Laden. I said Bin Laden was not Lebanese, he was Saudi Arabian, and she said Hitler was not German, he was Austrian. We had that sort of relationship.

At first the doctors thought it was just an infection. When he coughed, they gave him an antibiotic and my sister patted him on the back and my mother made him tea and I spoke to him on the phone and wished him well. I asked him if I should come to Beirut for a visit, and he said he would never forgive me if I did. It was not an infection. It was lung cancer in the end.

I could hear my sister suppressing sobs in the background over the phone.

'What are we going to do with all those books?' asked my mother, her coarse voice cracking.

Over the years, her voice had come to resemble that of Teta Mary. She said it was as if the books had lost their purpose. The ink faded and the paper hardened and the covers discarded their colour and assumed more somber attire instead.

In his final few days, he was put into an induced coma. The doctors said it was the humane thing to do. My mother placed the phone against his ear. Talk to him, she told me. I stayed silent throughout until I heard my mother's voice again.

'Adam,' she whispered, 'What did you say?'

She said he was weeping in his sleep. It sounded like a line out of the very many eulogies he had written over the years.

'Weeping?'

‘Tears hanging off the edge of his moustache,’ she said, ‘I can’t explain it.’

She explained that his head was propped up with pillows because the doctors were afraid that he might choke on his own fluids.

I squinted to shield my eyes from the cold and buried my nose behind my thick, hoary scarf. Lisa had both arms wrapped around my waist and her sharp chin resting on my chest. Her long brown hair smelled of coconut oil. She bit her chapped lips, and though she did not speak, vapor escaped her mouth. It was her idea to watch the fireworks from Westminster bridge. I had been pacing the flat in Battersea, which was not a sea at all, waiting for the news from Beirut when she announced that I needed a change of scenery. I use the word flat loosely. Ours was not a flat, it was a small, fraying house of which we had rented the top floor.

‘I’ll call you back,’ I said.

I tucked the phone into my coat pocket.

Just below the pupil in her right eye, Lisa had a little black spot which almost resembled another eye. It stared at me even when she was not. It held my gaze at any given moment and for as long as necessary

‘I’m sorry, Leibling,’ said Lisa, and she kissed my neck and she pulled tightly at my waist coat.

Her nasal voice was forever on the verge of erupting into sincere but inappropriate laughter.

The fireworks were launched into the air, above the River Thames, but soon hid behind the fog and the clouds. We watched the clouds and heard the explosions and felt the rain as it fell on our unfettered heads.

The Goat

Abou Abbas' voice seemed to come from across the sea at first. I heard it, like I had heard the first few gunshots days earlier, in a state of semi consciousness within which only the sounds were real but not the images. Abou Abbas had carried my unconscious father over his shoulder and into the backseat of his car. He drove us to the hospital in his rusty old Honda Civic hatchback which he had painted himself and you could tell because he had not done a very good job of it. The original colour was blue but it was painted silver, all over including the side view mirrors and the tail lights. The blue exposed itself through the silver. A large arabesque sticker spread across the top of the windshield read: 'There is no god but God.'

The Honda only had two doors. Abou Abbas shoved my silent father into the car while I adjusted the front seats and held the door open. I sat in the front next to Abou Abbas so that we could spread my father's body across the backseat.

'I will step on the pedal and take my foot off for nothing,' warned Abou Abbas, adjusting the steering wheel, 'do you understand?'

I nodded. On the other side of the street, a cat lay in a puddle of its own blood. He placed his hand on the back of my neck.

'One hundred and eighty kilometers per hour. Checkpoint or no checkpoint,' he said, handing me a pistol which he had tucked under his belt, 'barrier or no barrier. I drive, and if anyone tries to stop us, you shoot. Do you understand?'

I nodded. I placed the pistol on the dashboard. There was pubic hair stuck to the barrel of the gun. Abou Abbas shook his head. I grasped it tight with both hands. It was warm and smelled of sweat.

'Keep your head down. Our lives are not cheap, son. Do you understand?'

Abou Abbas talked nearly the whole way through, he did not stop to breathe or bite his lip and he did not puncture his speech with laughter or a sigh or two.

'This is why the country has gone to the dogs, you see,' he said, taking one hand off the wheel to roll down the window, 'People like this. They make the country what it is – Duck, son, duck. Our lives are not cheap – And people like you, they leave. And why wouldn't you? If the Queen of England had need for a grocer like me, I'd be in London selling Ras El Abed and toilet paper to Sean Connery and Paul McCartney. You know, I

once had tickets to go see McCartney in Dubai. This was after his Beatles days. After John died. What was the name of the fourth one? I could never remember. It was when I was still working as a Cab driver. I wasn't always a grocer. Sometimes, I think to myself, I think, Abou Abbas, you should have left when you were younger. You should have sought asylum. And why not? I could have said, I've pissed off Hezbollah or the Syrians, by kissing some Israeli ass. Who would care? I would know it wasn't true. I could live with that. With being a traitor. Or I could say I pissed off the Israeli's because I helped the Syrians, but I doubt they would take too kindly to that at the British embassy. Imagine that. Can you imagine that? Young Abou Abbas, at the British embassy. Asking the British to hide him from the Israeli's? Or the Americans? They would call your Uncle Sharon on the phone and say 'we've got something that belongs to you, you want to send someone to pick him up'? Imagine that. And the Israelis would say: 'Abou Abbas, that bastard, he cost us Beirut, we could have had Beirut if it weren't for Abou Abbas' because they would not want to sound incompetent in front of the Americans or the British. And your Uncle Abou Abbas, he would spend fifteen, twenty years in prison until some reporter from somewhere finds out about my story, or Angelina Jolie might find out about me and my conditions. She would say something about this being a violation of human rights, and I would be out and I'd come back here to open a grocery shop right here. Right where it is, right now, except I'd be a different man. A different man to the man I am today. And maybe I wouldn't be Abou Abbas, because I wouldn't have had the time to marry Em Abbas, and father Abbas. But that is alright, because I would be a hero. Wouldn't I? A hero for trying to run away. I find the world often works like that. It confuses you about things you thought were clear and pure and obvious. Don't you? I do, anyway. I do.'

'I do,' I said, as Abou Abbas drove into a ditch in the road, then out of it and into another one. He went over speed bumps as if their entire purpose was to give the Honda some elevation. My father appeared undisturbed by the turbulence.

'I'll tell you, for instance,' continued Abou Abbas, as the Honda shook violently and he lit a Cedars with one hand on the steering wheel, 'there was this man who lived on my street when I was growing up. He was a handsome man, old enough to be married and old enough to be divorced, but sane enough to have done neither. Which was odd because

in general, he was nuts. Crazy, I tell you. Whenever he asked for money, the adults would ignore him, you know, tell him go away. I didn't know why. My parents, god rest their souls, were generous people, to everyone except this man. Then my friends and I were playing hide and seek once on the street, we must've been about ten, and we saw him. It turns out, he had a habit of putting the money he had collected down the sewer hole every day at five in the afternoon. That was why the adults ignored him. He thought he was saving them. He thought he had an entire life's worth of savings down the sewer hole. And in fairness, he probably did. My friends and I kept giving him Liras just to watch him drop them down the same sewer hole, every day at five. And all this is fine and well, you know, but that is not the point of the story. The point is, pretty soon, people started speculating. They must've thought: no one is that crazy, no one is that nuts. It must be an act. And you know what? They said he was Mossad, a traitor. Because if I were Mossad, that is what I'd want to be doing all day, you know. Collecting money from kids and then dropping it down the sewer hole. But I knew he wasn't Mossad. I knew it. That smile. That was clear and pure and obvious. Then one day he just did not show up at five in the afternoon. For the next few days, I kept dropping those Liras into the same sewer hole for him. But it wasn't the same, you know. I didn't believe in the sewer hole, like he did. Maybe, he was a Mossad traitor, maybe I am, maybe you are. Are you?'

'No,' I said.

The Honda backfired. I fired my pistol in the air, twice. The bullets pierced the roof of the car.

'What the fuck are you doing with that, son?'

Abou Abbas had kept his foot against the pedal even as he turned his head towards me.

'I thought we were under attack,' I shouted back.

'Give it here,' he said, extending the palm of his dry hand.

I fired two more shots through the roof of the Honda.

'Keep your head down, son. Our lives are not cheap,' said Abou Abbas, taking a sharp breath for the first time and retracting his hand, 'Would you ever consider it, though?'

'Consider what?'

‘Joining the Mossad.’

We could hear gunshots echoing throughout the deserted street. They were louder than the roar of Abou Abbas’ Honda Civic but distant. He leaned forward and dug his foot in and placed both hands on the steering wheel. There was more purpose in his driving, a more focused intent. It had stopped raining and militiamen were done with their smoke break.

‘No,’ I said.

‘That certainty,’ he said, ‘that is the certainty of youth. It will desert you. And then what will you do?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘Exactly.’

I placed my head between the front seats in order to get a better look at my father. The fact that he was still breathing was of little comfort to me. It was not until I heard him curse Abou Abbas and his driving skills at the hospital that I knew he would live. The car shot forwards and I realized that I had been inadvertently pointing my gun at Abou Abbas. He had not uttered a word for fear that I might pull the trigger in response. I sat back and resumed pointing the gun at the roof of the car. Abou Abbas remained silent for the rest of the drive to the hospital.

As my father was being carried off into the emergency room, Abou Abbas put his hand on my neck and pulled me closer to him.

‘It wasn’t a coincidence,’ he whispered, ‘That boy Adel was outside my shop waiting for your father. He knew your father would come at some point and he waited there for several days. Someone from the SSNP wanted to teach him a lesson.’

I tried to tell my father. But Jesus Mohammad Christ said never to mention it again.

Abou Abbas later complained that he was finding it very hard to wash the blood off the back seat and that the bullet holes in the roof were leaking water into it. He hinted at this every time my father passed by his shop until finally my father relented and bought it from him. Abou Abbas claimed that he had only wanted my father to pay for it to be properly cleaned and patched up, but my father insisted that Abou Abbas was looking to

get rid of his Honda and that my father's blood, and my bullet holes, were the perfect excuse. My sister dubbed it 'the Muslim car.'

Abou Abbas drove me back home. I shook his hand. He gave me a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the shoulder and followed me up the stairs. There had been no electricity for the entire day. And the phone lines were dead. I walked into the apartment. My mother stood behind the door, right beside the two towering blocks of literature, and my sister was crouched on the floor leaning against the wall. My mother wrapped her arms around me and kissed my chest and neck and cheeks. I made my way towards the kitchen.

'Where's your father?' she asked, noticing Abou Abbas still panting his way towards the door.

I laid out the flat bread on the kitchen table and I began slicing the halloumi. I placed the pistol by the halloumi.

'Adam. Where's your father?' she said, her voice now high pitched and her breath short.

She clutched the back of my shirt and pulled at it with a firm grip. I lost my balance momentarily then steadied my knife hand.

'He is fine, Mrs. Najjar,' said Abou Abbas, laying a still blood stained hand on her shoulder, 'He is a strong man, your husband.'

I sliced my finger. She shoved me aside and took the knife from my hand and continued slicing the Halloumi.

'I knew it. Did I know it? I knew it,' she told the cheese, slicing away at it with force, 'I said we should leave, years ago.'

Then she made me a sandwich and I sat down on the remaining foldable kitchen chair. I wiped the blood on my pants. My mother handed me a towel. I wiped my pants then my hands then my face with the towel. I wrapped the damp towel around my thumb. She watched me eat the Halloumi sandwich, all the while shaking her leg. And Abou Abbas watched me eat it too, as he filled my mother in on the vague details. My sister hid behind Abu Abbas which was not hard. She stared at my now blood smeared face and he turned his attention to the pistol.

‘It’s not my place,’ he kept saying, in between the fragments of his newfangled story, ‘it’s not my place.’

It was in that same rusted old Honda civic, a couple of years after my father had taken the beating from the militiamen, that Basil announced he would soon make his way to Syria to join the revolution. My mother had placed a navy-blue table cloth with a sprinkle of smiling suns on the back seat to cover the blood stains. My father had not bothered with patching up the bullet holes. Damp books and soggy newspapers soon found their way onto the back seat. I had my foot on the brakes and was willing the red light to turn green. Traffic lights had always been more of a suggestion in Beirut. I could hear the honking behind us.

‘Some of us have things to do,’ shouted the cab driver in the nineteen seventy something Mercedes model.

His cigarette hand dangled outside the window and was reflected in the side view mirror.

To our right was the large, green campus of the American University of Beirut and to our left was the Mediterranean. The campus was perhaps the only green spot left in Beirut. All four windows were rolled down and Basil’s shirt had turned from beige to charcoal gray. The Air conditioning in the Honda had long since ceased to work.

‘You and whose army?’ I asked, but I already knew the answer.

‘The SSNP,’ he said.

‘You can’t be serious,’ I said, the car spluttered.

‘Put your foot through that gas pedal,’ shouted the cab driver, now sticking his head out the window, ‘may you bury your mother.’

This last wish expressed by the mustached cab driver was not a curse, it was a pleasantry. It implied that he hoped I would live long enough to bury my own mother; and that he trusted I would step on the gas pedal long before that eventuality.

‘I have been for a while now,’ said Basil, falling silent for a moment, ‘this is our chance to stop talking about a unified Syria and do something about it.’

‘Is that what he told you?’

Basil let out a sigh. He gazed out the window at the Mediterranean. We could smell the dead fish and some living ones too.

As we drove north alongside the sea, the sparkle of lights from the houses in the mountains blended in with the stars, forming clusters which seemed to float just above Beirut and fade into the light at sunrise.

My father would point those mountains out as my sister and I sat in the backseat of the Oldsmobile complaining about the density of the books and the smell of the damp, rotten newspapers. He started off with the white tops of Mount Sanine and Tanourine, which had both been trademarked for brands of bottled water. Then he would squint, reach out with his right hand and point out Rim and Sohat and Nestle and Perrier, which were brands of bottled water too but not mountains.

I sped past the red light.

‘Mr. Malik did not have anything to do with that incident involving your father,’ said Basil, without turning.

It was the first time the subject had been broached. Neither he nor Mr. Malik had come to visit my father at the hospital nor had they brought up the ‘revolutionary book’ again. Ms. Iman showed up with a bouquet of flowers on behalf of the school. My sister pulled at the white petals, and proclaimed that they were real not fake despite the lack of smell. Abu Abbas passed by the hospital every other day for a week. Mohammad and his father dropped by with a box of chocolates. Not Cadbury. Wael’s mother, who accompanied him to the hospital, made him write a ‘get well soon’ card which he delivered by hand to my father who whistled and tapped Wael on the back of the head lightly. The Captain made an appearance too and he promised my father his coldest Almaza. He gave me a nod and a transient, wry grin.

‘I don’t doubt it,’ I said, with my eyes still firmly fixed on the road.

I did doubt it.

‘I’m telling you. I know for a fact,’ said Basil, ‘It wasn’t him.’

My father had ordered me never to bring it up to anyone. I never spoke of Adel or the T-54 or Abou Abbas, even to my mother and sister.

I looked in the rearview mirror, the cab driver was gone.

‘You want to get yourself killed,’ I said.

He told me that I was naïve, that Estelle always said I was, that he knew I would not understand, that I was a dreamer not a fighter. He said he had supported my dream, believed in me, even when everyone thought I was ridiculous. He said that just because I would never achieve my dream of becoming an astronaut, it doesn’t mean that he should not try to achieve his own dream. He said at least his dream was realistic, noble, not selfish and unattainable. He said at least he believes he has something to offer.

‘Grow up,’ he said.

He said he was fighting alongside a dictator not *for* him. He said he was fighting the terrorists. He said he was fighting for a cause. The dictator would be next he said. After the terrorists.

‘Seriously, grow up,’ he said.

I found a parallel parking spot by the promenade and had begun to reverse when Basil flung the door open and jumped out of the car in an attempt to help out. The moon was nowhere to be seen.

‘Back, back, back, back, back, back, back, back,’ droned Basil with an admirable consistency.

I hit the curb.

‘Stop,’ said Basil, barely suppressing a laugh.

I laughed too. My laugh was now deeper than his.

‘I saw this in a movie once,’ said Basil. His hand covered his mouth.

His hair had begun to recede but it had lost none of its shine. It was gelled back now. He had grown into a handsome man with a broad jaw and thick lips and eyelids which acted as curtains shielding a precious stone or two. He had also grown a goatee. I asked him if it was ironic; he shrugged his shoulders.

‘Forward,’ said Basil waiving his hands, with the Honda now perfectly placed between the two cars, ‘just a bit more, a bit more, bit more, more.’

I slammed my foot against the gas pedal and the Honda crashed hard into the Chevrolet in front of it. The glove compartment flung open and a batch of cassette tapes, which I was not aware of, fell onto the floor. Basil howled, he lowered his hand from his mouth and knocked his head back. The sound of his laughter was louder and more shrill

than that of the Chevrolet's car alarm. He hopped back in and we found a quieter parking spot.

We leaned against the rusted blue railings, each holding a bottle of Almaza. Basil scratched at the label. There before us again was Gibraltar. Behind us was the Palm tree, the one my uncles had played hide and seek around, or some other Palm tree. It looked young. Younger than the civil war.

Basil lit a Cedars and offered me one. I thought of Yuri Gagarin. Much later, I would come across a little known picture of Gagarin smoking a Papirosa, a cheap Russian cigarette with no filter.

I drank Almaza and smoked Cedars and coughed and spit out phlegm and when I gazed at the sea I could barely make out the Rawche Rock.

'Come with me,' he said, his eyes struggling to make out Nicosia.

'And do what?' I said.

'Fight,' he said.

'I can't see it.'

'Report. Be a journalist,' said Basil, 'remember that article you wrote once. That was alright.'

'There's nothing for me there.'

He leaned back with his left hand on the railing and looked up. Then he swung his right arm and let the bottle slip from his fingers. It flew farther than we both had anticipated and landed so far away in the Mediterranean that two Cypriots reported a UFO that night and twelve Sicilians thought it was the second coming of Jesus Christ and three Spaniards shouted 'Hijo de puta!' and heard the blop as it sank away. Basil turned his head towards me, opening his dark eyes wide as his greasy, oily, royal hair fell onto his face.

'You astronauts,' he said, straining to open another bottle of Almaza for himself using his lighter, 'you see the world and nothing in it.'

He raised an eyebrow and bit his lower lip.

'When do you leave?'

'Not for a while. I'll finish school. Get my diploma first. Mr. Malik says that is important,' he said, 'we start training in the south in a couple of weeks.'

Then he folded up the sleeves of his light pink shirt and I could clearly see the spinning swastika as he strained to open the bottle. Wristbands, both cloth and rubber, hung around his left wrist. No watch.

‘Why don’t you get a tattoo of a cedar tree to go along with that spinning swastika?’ I asked.

‘The cedar tree was chosen by the French colonialists. The first flag of the ‘Lebanese republic’ was the French one with the cedar tree in the middle,’ he said, flicking his unfinished cigarette into the sea and lighting another, ‘And it’s not a spinning swastika. It’s a vortex.’

There is a line in the bible, which Teta Mary would read to me in my younger years, about the righteous man flourishing ‘like the palm tree and growing like a cedar in Lebanon.’

I raised my bottle of Almaza and Basil raised his.

‘It’s a swastika however which way you spin it,’ I said, as the two bottles came together.

‘Were those your words or the words of your father?’ he asked, and he gave me a wink.

‘His,’ I said, dropping the cigarette bud onto the floor and stepping on it.

Basil shook his head then he laughed then he shook his head some more.

‘I think in a previous life your father and I were good friends.’

I imagined the swastika spinning right where I had stood that night by the sea, searching in vain for blonde and blue eyed men and finding only tanned, dark skinned, thick browed, black eyed men staring back at it. Where am I? It would ask.

‘Stay here,’ I said.

‘I’ve made up my mind, son of life,’ he said.

‘Alright.’

‘Good.’

Then I told Basil about Bilyasho. I had never shared my father’s stories with him. I chose the lighter ending.

‘You should learn to take things lightly, Don. You’ll lose your hair if you carry on like this,’ I said.

I put on a high-pitched voice and I blinked repeatedly. It was my best impression of a young boy with red hair and freckles whom I had never met.

‘A Lebanese boy with red hair?’ asked Basil.

Basil turned his back on the Mediterranean and leaned his elbows against the railings. He ran his fingers through his oily hair.

‘Aren’t you afraid?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘Alright.’

‘I could always come back if I wanted to,’ he looked up in that same way my father would look up as we hid from the bullets and the bombs in the bathroom.

‘To life?’

He laughed.

‘To Beirut,’ he said.

Then I started spinning on the spot; I extended my arms out and started whirling like a Sufi.

‘Stop whirling like a Sufi,’ said Basil, with a snort.

I did not know why I was spinning. I did not know much about the Sufis either. I knew that they are a sect of Islam which does a lot of whirling as a form of meditation. This whirling, Mr. Malik had explained, is a means to achieve a higher form of enlightenment, to be in touch with the ‘perfect man’ spiritually.

As I spun, I saw nothing, and if there was a perfect man then I must have missed him or he must have missed me, and I did not know which way to look, for when I looked west onto the sea I worried that he might have drowned on the way; and when I looked east onto Beirut, I worried that he might have been shot because he was in the way, and pretty soon I could not tell east from west nor north from south and I imagined that this was how it must feel like to be perpetually falling into a black hole.

‘What are you doing?’ came the echo of Basil’s voice.

And I knew that Mr. Malik had little to do with Adel’s attack on my father. The tattoo on Adel’s arm, his youthful zest, his lack of education, his inexperience with an AK-47, that other militaman’s unmistakably mountain Druze accent, those were not the hallmarks of the older man’s influence.

When Beirut stopped spinning I saw Basil and his Almaza.

The Astronaut

‘To Syria?’ my father raged, ‘You want to go to Syria?’

He launched the nearest book he could find in my direction. I ducked and it smashed against the shelf in the living room knocking the graduation picture onto the ground and shattering the frame again. It was titled *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora: Representations of Place and Transnational Identity*.

My mother and sister came rushing in. My sister’s hair was almost apologetically curly and she now wore one ponytail instead of two.

‘Your son thinks he is an upper middle class European white boy,’ shouted my father.

‘What?’ asked my mother.

‘He wants to go on an adventure in Syria.’

I explained that I wanted to be a journalist, a reporter. I said I wanted to cover issues that matter.

‘There are plenty of those here,’ said my mother, ‘I did not raise you so that you would go chasing the war.’

I said I wanted to go to Syria, cover the war.

‘Go to Thailand,’ he said, winking to himself, ‘Cover the mistreatment of elephants.’

‘What are you saying?’ she asked, her eyes pleading with mine as she sat down on the ground.

‘They’re majestic creatures,’ he said, ‘They whip them every day. It’s a travesty.’

‘How would you even get there?’

I thought about Mr. Malik. He owed me one.

‘I’m going,’ I said.

Silence. No gunshots. Just silence.

‘It is that Druze boy, isn’t it?’ he howled.

I said that I did not necessarily have to go to Syria at first. I would work my way up through the newspaper then gradually make my way there.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said my sister, scratching her chest, ‘Why are you being stupid?’

‘Go, leave, then,’ he said, ‘show me how you are going to march into a war zone armed with your unsharpened pencil.’

‘I will,’ I said, as I turned my back on him.

My father flung another book towards me. I felt a sharp pain in the back of my shoulder as *The Arab Spring Today* landed with precision. Then he got up and limped past the towering blocks of literature. He reached for a book behind the wall shielding the bookshelves from the outside world. For a while, my sister, my mother and I observed as he struggled to fit his hand through the window of space which he had created for himself. Then the ground shook, my mother and sister ducked and the wall came tumbling down.

He grabbed a falling book in midair and hurled it at my nose, then he reached for another and he aimed that one at my chest. This went on for some time. The wall, the bookshelves, the towers, even the floor came alive. The books leaped out of their place, and launched themselves in all directions. Some books rose out of the ground and smashed against the ceiling and fell back down. Some twirled eastward, others twisted and turned westward. A few of them crashed into one another, their pages interweaving, their covers falling back to release the ink and the paper and that distinct smell of the old: old books, old furniture, old men. The walls collapsed, the room danced, shifted and grew, contracted and expanded, so that I doubt even my father could still make sense of that random grand pattern.

‘Read,’ he barked, spit flying from his mouth.

I dodged *Syria Under Islam*, I skipped past *The Rise of Assad*, I sidestepped *Syria and Iran*, I flinched when *The Cedar Revolution and the Consequences in Syria* flew past my left ear, I winced when *Lebanon Under Occupation* smacked against my ribs, I screamed when *Your Syria and My Lebanon* made contact with my forehead. I sat on the floor and I felt warm blood make its way past my right eyebrow and I shut my right eye and I placed my right hand over my head and I wrapped my left arm around my legs and I heard my mother plead with my father to stop and I heard my sister wrestle a book or two off him. I heard my father order her to stop biting him.

‘Stop biting me, *fara*,’ he exclaimed, struggling to push her aside with his free hand, ‘stop biting me, I said.’

‘That’s enough,’ said my mother, her strength and that of my sister now overwhelming my father.

My father’s moustache remained a curious black, well into his sixties. His hair eventually turned grey then white then, to everyone’s relief, began to fall off. He fought it at first. There was a point when his hair was brown, his moustache black, his stubble white and his eyebrows peppered with grey and I wondered whether he might now wear blue contact lenses in one eye to complete the abstract self-portrait that his face had become. I suggested this to my mother and she giggled and told me not to repeat it to my father because it might hurt his feelings. Then she corrected herself.

‘It might hurt his pride,’ she said.

I walked into my parent’s bedroom one evening, years before Monsieur Mermier moved in to the opposite flat, hoping to find my father sprawled on the bed with his AnNahar shielding his face. I did not. Instead, lying on my father’s nightstand, I found a small diamond shaped plastic box with a protruding sponge on the end of it. Impracticality aside, it looked like it belonged more in a shoe shiner’s tool bag than amongst the toiletries. It was without colour, without odor, without brand. A plain white label read ‘Brown hair’. I lifted the bottle closer to my eye level then against the light. It was unopened. Beneath it was a lottery ticket and beside it was a hastily folded newspaper. I tucked the lottery ticket into my back pocket and left everything else as it was. I saw my father turn over newspapers and books, I saw him crouch on his hands and knees to look under that comfortable couch in the living room, swearing and patting his shirt pocket as he stood up. He glanced at me, acknowledging my now brown hair, but I did not ask what he was looking for and he did not ask if I had seen it.

Initially, I told my father that I wanted to be a journalist, a reporter. And I stopped there. I had learned to time my pauses to perfection.

‘That will do,’ said my father, his voice did not crack nor his eyes tear up. But I saw his chest heave. His words were carried on the back of one long sigh. My father’s sigh was entrenched before the birth of time, before the opening of the eras, before the pines, and the olive trees and before the grass grew. He had held his breath for the

duration of space-time, and now that he had finally exhaled, he appeared smaller, his shoulders less broad, his chest less pronounced, his neck slightly thinner and even his rigid spine gave way.

He did not mention the first Arab astronaut, he did not bring up the space shuttle or the Hubble telescope, he did not berate my flat feet. I imagine it was a peace offering.

Then I said I wanted to cover Syria. I did not really; and not only because Basil was there. I never did. I had every intention of running as far and as fast as possible away from the crack of bullets piercing the air and echo of RPG rockets landing on cement and burnt flesh.

And in any case, there were many practical and logistic problems with my hasty, makeshift plan. For one, I was not sure whether AnNahar would hire me to report in Syria. I was also not sure whether they would have the means to smuggle me into Syria. I expected my father to pinpoint those flaws. He did not.

Had my father not sighed, I suspect he would have found the strength to burst past my mother and sister. But he had sighed. He stopped resisting and my sister slowly unclenched her jaw, releasing his forearm from the grip of her teeth. He dropped *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*. He muttered something, he cursed someone.

There was another rip in time and space, and I saw my father, the moustache-less boy, who had emerged in the elevator momentarily to argue with Madame Hafez. He shook his head, he stomped his feet, he wept then he scrubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

‘Curse this country of pimps and prostitutes,’ said my father, and his voice tailed off, ‘mother and father.’

When he limped towards my huddled figure, he did so calmly, stepping over the hills of now stationary books without looking down. He placed his hands underneath my armpits and he lifted me against the wall. It must have taken every remaining ounce of strength he had, because I offered him no help. That was the closest I remember my father’s face ever being to mine, his flat, flaring nose almost touching my own. His unyielding hair, his thick lips, the dimple parting his chin and that moustache. It was not as full as I had always assumed it was. There were little gaps in between which he had hid

well. I wondered whether, like my sister in her early years, I would fail to recognize him without his moustache.

That night, after my father and sister had gone to bed, my mother and I sat on that comfortable couch in the living room. She made me a Halloumi sandwich and I ate it. Then she made me another with tomatoes and I ate that one too. Then she took out the Arak. It was a tall and thin blue Massaya bottle. She poured me a glass.

‘One third Arak and two thirds water,’ she said, as the Arak turned white, ‘the ice goes in at the end. Never before.’

My mother had lost weight then gained it back then lost it again. Every autumn, her freckles would grow stronger, and fade again in the summer. Her teeth were now stained with nicotine but it did not matter because when she smiled all you could see were her dimples and the way her wide eyes instantly watered, as if mistaking the parting of the lips for a quiver.

We talked about what it would have felt like being in space, we talked about my grandmother, we talked about the weather and we talked about my father but only fleetingly.

‘He’s a human being,’ she said, biting her lip and waving her hand as if she were dismissing a fly.

Then we talked about my Aunt and Uncle in London and she said I should go visit them. As she spoke her freckles danced, now unsure of the season.

‘You won’t like the weather,’ she said, ‘And, you know, it’s not a coastal city.’

‘I know,’ I said, ‘Teta Mary always said that she felt trapped there, like she couldn’t see the end of it.’

‘Just follow the great river out to the coastline.’

The conversation went on past midnight, and by the time we were done, she, cigarette in mouth and all, had managed to turn a short visit into a student visa.

‘You will love it,’ she said, smiling and raising her glass of Massaya, ‘you’ll come back a proper journalist.’

I stayed up until sunrise reading fragments of the books which had been the subject of my father’s rage and made firm contact with my forehead and ribs. I did not mind the unperturbed sweat making its way down my spine. The daylight crept in through

the shutters, past the comfortable couch in the living room and into the hallway as the dust settled on the bookshelves and the piles of books on the floor. The tiles had always been cracked, and the longest one extended from the window in the living room and loosely resembled the shape of Madame Hafez's arthritis plagued index finger. There was a story in there that I never asked about and was never told. I sat on the hard floor coaxing the words out of my unwitting transgressors. In amongst those battered book covers, I came across Basheer Jmayel and his father the football captain, Antoun Saadeh and his forces of darkness, Habib Shartouni and his poetry, Riad El Solh and his Tarboush, the SSNP's decorated history of assassinations, the Phalangists, the Sabra and Chatilla massacre, the Syrian regime, and others.

I looked up from the pages of the books which smelled not of paper but of my father's flesh to see the man himself standing cross-armed listening intently to the sound of pages being turned. His forearms alone were caught in a beam of unusually harsh morning light such that the hairs on the back of them appeared to blur into a black flame.

On our graduation night, I did not see Basil. He had stopped attending classes but I had hoped that he would still make it to the after-party at the private beach resort anyway. Mohammad, Wael and I stretched our lean bodies across the sand. All three of us were dressed in white shirts with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and the buttons undone down to the chest. Mohammad's chest hair protruded through his shirt. He was always a growth spurt ahead of the rest of us. His thin, red tie still hung loosely around his neck and he held a 961 in his hand. I dropped my tie by the bar and decided to leave it there. I had taken a dislike to the checkered pattern and in any case I had borrowed it from my father who was unlikely to miss it.

I balanced an Almaza on my chest, with the label now scratched off, as Wael knocked back the rest of his Beirut Beer, a recent, unimaginative addition to the market. The moon was full and it shined brighter than the spot lights at the beach and louder than the sound of the base emanating from the bar behind us. We owned the shoreline. The pool was theirs and the sea was ours.

Mohammad said that he was definitely in Syria, probably Homs.

‘Who?’

‘The goat-worshipper.’

Wael said that he could imagine Basil riding a goat into battle. Of the four of us, Basil had been the shortest. To Wael, from his elevated point of view, it must have seemed like Basil and the goat were about the same height.

I dug my left hand into the sand.

‘He might find his way back,’ said Mohammad, ‘My father came back when everyone thought he was gone for sure. But I believed.’

‘You cried your heart out on Ms. Iman’s lap in front of the whole school,’ Basil would have said, ‘that wasn’t belief. That was grief.’

I had not had much contact with Basil since that night by the Rawshe Rock. He came to my house once and asked my mother, through the intercom, if I would like to come out and play. My mother laughed at this. I said I was not feeling well and my mother invited him to come up anyway. He declined. My mother insisted.

‘I made stuffed vine leaves and zucchini,’ she said, ‘you must try them. They’re Adam’s favorite.’

‘Another time,’ said Basil, and he must have been relieved that it was my mother and not my father’s voice through the intercom.

I had not confronted him that night. I like to think that, as I steadied myself after my bout of Sufism, I chose not to, that I was being the bigger man, but my reaction afterwards makes that perception difficult to maintain. He must have realized, the way the smile faded from his face, that I had found him out as a thug. For a time, I convinced myself that it was pity not fear that had kept me from confronting Basil, that I was not a coward who would smash windows and run. After all, I told myself, I was speaking to a dead man and it is petty to hold a grudge against a dead man.

‘Where’s your date?’ asked Mohammad, for once looking sideways not upwards at Wael.

Wael’s date was a thirty something year old woman who promptly discarded Wael the moment we arrived at the Pangea beach resort.

‘Where’s your father?’ replied Wael, which was so unlike him that Mohammad ended up snorting his 961 between fits of laughter and coughing.

Wael tipped the last drop of lager down his throat. He reached for my Almaza but I snatched it away and nudged him off with my elbow.

‘It was never going to happen,’ said Wael, sitting up and resting his elbows on his knees.

I exchanged quick, baffled glances with Mohammad. The Muslim pursed his lips and lifted an eyebrow. Wael looked down at the sand between his feet.

‘What?’

‘You becoming an astronaut,’ he continued, ‘I sat down and calculated the odds one night. The chances of you becoming an astronaut are about one in twelve million. And that’s not accounting for the fact that you are an Arab.’

I said that it was in the past now. As he spoke the thud of the base and the whoosh of the waves seemed to blend into one indistinct din.

‘Adam,’ he said, ‘You are more likely to be struck by lightning, twice.’

I knocked my head back and poured the lager into my gaping mouth.

‘You are more likely to win the lottery twice.’

It burned its way down my throat. Mohammad said that astronauts don’t come from warm countries.

The outline of a man carried the outline of woman into the sea. He threw himself into the water or she threw him. Then she ran back up towards the swimming pool, across the sand, with her wet hair flickering in the night light. He stumbled after her, stopping every so often to pull up his heavy pants. The cold bottles soon turned warm and sweat stains swiftly appeared under our armpits.

‘Where are those mermaids you and Basil used to speak of all the time?’ asked Mohammad, lager dripping down his chin and sweat down his forehead.

I shrugged my shoulders. Mohammad did not see this. We heard the dull thud of the base again, glass shattering, and smelled the Sambuca and the vodka but not the good stuff.

‘Another round?’ I asked, pushing my palms against the sand.

I made my way across the bridge which arched over the pool and led straight to the crowded bar. There was no Arak. This was not the place for it. Behind the bottles of Johnnies and Jacks and Jims, there were blue lights and red lights and green lights which shone through the glass and the alcohol and through the back of bartender's head and out of his eyes and into mine. I closed my eyes and gripped the towering white pole which rose straight through a hole in middle of the bridge. It was cold and wet and I pushed my torso and my cheek against it. It parted the stars and I counted forty-one of them. Forty-two with the sun which I knew was there but could not see because it was too dark.

I spotted Nadine amongst the stars and she was with a Christian boy with a cross the size of Dr. Antoine's swimming pool hanging around his neck. I nodded.

Nadine came over and I asked how she was. She said she was fine. She looked fine. I said I was fine too. She did not ask. She said she was glad to see me.

There was a change in her smile which I did not recognize. Not that she smiled. But I imagined that she had, and I still could not recognize it.

'The nose,' I shouted.

'I had an accident,' she said.

'While doing a cannonball?'

'What?' she asked, pretending to lean in but ensuring she kept sufficient space between us.

She wore a loose, silk Bordeaux dress which rose above her knees and would have flapped behind her had there been any wind. Instead it hung from her shoulders and tickled her olive thighs which glistened from the light reflected off the pool and off her champagne glass and my Almaza and the towering pole and the parting stars and off the cross around the Christian boy's neck and the bartender's eyes and mine.

The Christian boy, whose navy-blue tie was still tightly knotted around his thick neck, whispered three words in her ear. What-an-asshole or I-love-you. It could have been either.

Christian boys wore navy-blue ties. Muslim boys wore carpet-red ties. It was an unspoken nationwide agreement.

I pointed my Almaza at the resort pool with the bar in the middle.

'Cannonball,' I said.

My stomach felt heavy with food and beer. I pinched my forearm.

‘What?’

‘Cannonball,’ I shouted.

The bottle flew out of my hand and into the pool. Nadine took two steps back. I wondered whether Dr. Antoine had finally had more whiskey than he could handle and driven the Mercedes into a pole with her in the passenger seat. I wondered whether he had given his daughter an alcohol induced beating. I wondered whether she had slipped on the edge of the pool and busted her nose while attempting a cannonball and he had just stood there and said ‘I taught her how to do the dive head-first. But she insists on doing this.’

‘I can’t hear you the music is too loud,’ she said caressing her eyelashes with her index finger, then, ‘congratulations.’

‘You too.’

It was the same tone with which Ms. Iman had uttered her ‘congratulations’, reserved, almost apologetic. Perhaps both of them had believed at the time that I had lost more than I had gained and they were caught between having to offer their commiserations and their congratulations all at once.

In the distance, Mohammad and Wael stood side by side with their feet in the water staring out into the pitch-black night of the sea. Beirut might as well have burned behind them. Cranes rose into the moonlight and dwarfed the Palm trees beside the escalating Tower of Dreams. The music blasted so deafeningly into the sky that I feared the future residents of the tower would be jolted awake. Wael had his arm around Mohammad’s neck and Mohammad had his arm around Wael’s waist, and their legs were spread apart and their hips thrust forward and their slim fit, striped, black pants pulled down to their knees. And though I could not have heard it that night, there echoed the unmistakable sound of piss coming together with sea water.

‘Nadine,’ I shouted after her, cupping my hands so that my voice would carry further, ‘you deserve better.’

They were halfway across the bridge when they heard my raspy voice. I meant that she deserved better than her father, better than that day by the swimming pool and the roman columns, better than whatever accident which had resulted in the plastic surgery.

The Christian boy did not understand this.

He turned around forcefully and made his way towards me. Nadine held the sleeve of his shirt but he pulled it away. His upper lip thinned and retreated into his mouth as he made his way forward.

‘I was not referring to you, George,’ I said, backing into the waist-high metal railing on one side of the bridge.

His name was not George. This angered him further.

He flicked his floppy hair to the side and seized my creased shirt in one swift move. His teeth came together and it appeared as if he were biting off the head of an ant.

In the time it took for his fist to connect with my eyebrow once more, I realized that it was an easy enough mistake to make. I reasoned that it could be imminently resolved were there enough time to resolve it and had the music not been so loud and the bridge so wet and slippery and my left eye so warm and soaked in blood.

I pushed myself backwards, over the railing and into the gently lit pool. As I fell back, I glanced another star which I believed I had not counted before and I was gripped by the fear that I had made a grave error in failing to account for the twinkle of the stars.

I shook Ms. Iman’s hand coldly and snatched the certificate from her hand, without looking into her eyes. I suspected that she had known about the extent of Mr. Malik’s influence over Basil throughout. She had done nothing and I held that against her for the duration of the ceremony, and for the rest of her life. Mr. Malik resigned himself to the fact that I was never going to speak to him again, though I doubt that it mattered much to him. In the final few months of class, he would repeatedly call out my name for recitation and I would repeatedly ignore it. He did this until the final class of the year.

The first time I ran into Mr. Malik on Hamra street, two weeks after graduation, it was dark and Sabah could barely see the cars beneath her. I did not wave to him and he did not nod. I walked straight past him, picking up the pace as I approached his round, limping figure.

‘I did not make him go,’ he shouted after me, ‘He wanted to go. It was his idea.’

It was not a shout in anger. His voice was calm but loud. After that, I would wave to him and he would nod. Amongst the people you loathe, there are those upon whom you

might wish the most permanent of deaths but not desire to see die, and there are those whom you would desire to see die but wish a speedy recovery. I was never sure to which category Mr. Malik belonged.

Beirut International Airport

Gone were the days when people would have to sit on broken, plastic chairs in a tattered cafeteria awaiting their loved ones to arrive from France or Germany or England or Brazil or Canada or the USA, or lean on rusted rails to wish them a safe journey back to wherever they came from while they smoked their Cedars or Viceroy's or Guloises or Marlborough's. This Cafeteria was bald and new and knowingly charged extortionate prices for a bottle of Tannourine and a croissant. The airport was renamed Rafic Hariri Beirut International Airport after the assassinated prime minister and former millionaire businessman who had, with some personal financial benefit to himself, pushed for the rebuilding of the airport.

My mother stubbed out her Marlborough when news broke that the prime minister had been assassinated only meters away from the defunct St. George Hotel by the Mediterranean. The windows rattled and the books edged forward, and the chandeliers swung and my father cast the newspaper aside and turned on the TV. This was before the Israeli bombardment and Monseieur Mermier and the Don and the white American and Adel. The aftermath of the car bomb was broadcast live. There were burnt, scorched bodies everywhere, cars on fire. The camera man spotted a man ablaze, he was still alive and kicking around trying desperately to put the fire out or kill himself. A reporter rushed past his cameraman, swearing loudly and audibly. He took off his coat and placed it around the burning man and pushed him to the ground.

I was too young to truly understand most of this and my mother covered my eyes with her soft hands at first, then she reached for a tissue paper and began to wipe her own tears.

'He was so young,' said my mother, caressing my four-year-old sister's hair. She had been sleeping for at least an hour, her head resting on my mother's lap and the rest of her small body stretched across that comfortable couch in the living room.

'Not that young,' said my sister.

'Is it back?' my mother asked.

'No,' said my father, running his fingers through my sister's curly hair, and staring into the empty void that is tomorrow.

At the Rafic Harriri Beirut International Airport, there were people dressed in suits running around convincing you that the Phoenicia not the Hilton, that the Movenpick not the Four Seasons, were best in case you still had not reserved a place to stay. And no one mentioned the Holiday Inn or the St. George Hotel. And if you said you were leaving Beirut to live abroad, they rested a hand on your shoulder and said ‘your poor mother, now why would you do that to her?’ because you were not just a customer to them, you were a future customer who would come back home and need a place to stay long after your mother departs. And all the while on loop in the background, you could hear the tune to Fairuz’s songs at her melancholic worst. You did not need the lyrics, or Fairuz’s voice, you knew them both by heart. Your mother made sure of it.

I waved to my mother as I entered passport control dragging my black, second hand, luggage behind me and she waved back and cried. She breathed in through her mouth and blew a kiss and I dropped my handbag, with a green ribbon tightly knotted around the handle, and leant back to catch the kiss. A luggage handler brushed past me pushing five or six trolleys in front of him. He was bald and wore faded blue overalls. I waved to my sister and she waved back, moving only her wrist not her arm. Her ponytails were gone now, and instead she had devoted a large part of her mornings to making sure that her once wild hair was irreversibly straight, undisturbed by the curls which would bounce along as she defied gravity on a springy mattress, on the sixth floor of a small apartment in Ras Beirut, just off Hamra Street. My father nodded and raised a clenched fist in the air. It reminded me of Mostafa on the bus. It meant stay strong, do not let the world change you or if it must then let it be for the better. I thought that is what it meant. It could have meant start a revolution. My father was capable of articulating these things with clenched fists and clenched jaws and black leather belts which lashed against air and freshly made bed sheets. I put my thumb up and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out my mother and father. I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.

The Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novel

Introduction

“In 1994, the Lebanese singer Fairouz sang in Lebanon for the first time since the beginning of the civil war in 1975,” writes Ghenwa Hayek in *Beirut, Imagining the City* (2014): “The concert was sponsored by Solidere, which also chose its venue: Martyrs’ Square in downtown Beirut, a focal site of Solidere’s reconstruction effort and an extremely symbolic space in the Lebanese collective imaginary” (71). Despite being only four at the time, and not meriting my own white plastic chair, I remember being at that concert. The “sea of empty chairs which made up large squares, like block formations of infantry” described by Niqula in Hoda Barakat’s novel *The Tiller of Waters* (1998/ 2001) is vivid in my mind. I can faintly recall, with some trepidation, a young woman’s amplified voice echoing across Martyrs’ square: “there are lost children by the exit”, an announcement which now seems so shamelessly symbolic that I would hesitate to include it in my novel for being too blunt a tool. I cannot remember Fairouz.

The enduring image of Lebanese children lost in the ruinous, haunting space of Downtown Beirut, searching for their parents or a way out, has remained with me since my own childhood. It is one which recurs in my novel, in an indirect manner which I shall elaborate upon in this thesis, and seeps into the notion of a coming of age novel set in post-war Beirut. The setting of my novel, for reasons I shall elaborate upon later in this thesis, is not the much altered centre of the city (Downtown) but rather the more multicultural and diverse Ras Beirut.¹ Through my choice of setting and employment of the unreliable, fragmented narration of a coming of age narrator, I, as a spatially and linguistically removed writer (writing a novel in the UK in English), am able to renegotiate space within the changing city. My creative work is positioned as a Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel in which a narrator struggles to grow and mature in what I term a “counter-developmental” society.

The first chapter of this thesis looks at the changing spaces within Beirut as well as other relevant trends in what I term the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel. It attempts to find a common thread which runs through the subgenre and paves the way for

¹ Ras Beirut is located west of the Downtown area. It literally means the “head or tip” of Beirut.

my discussion of my novel in the later chapters. Such trends also include the recurring theme of Beirut's relationship with the West and the use of the unreliable narrator. I have, for reasons elaborated upon in this chapter, opted to study four post-civil-war Lebanese novels, all of which were written within the space of twelve years. These are: Elias Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (1989/ 1994) and *Yalo* (2002/ 2009), Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006) and Barakat's aforementioned *The Tiller of Waters*.

In the second chapter, this thesis discusses the unreliability of narration throughout my own novel and the reasons behind its use. The chapter delves into the city's changing landscape, which is a running theme and part of what renders the narration unreliable. The narrator's susceptibility to stories passed on through generations, and the older narrator's refracted perspective, are also deemed to influence the reliability of the narration throughout. Finally, the sense of trauma, both immediate and inherited, as well as my own position as novelist writing from a geographically and linguistically removed perspective, impact the narration itself.

The last chapter explores the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel's rejection of progress and paradoxical devotion to humanism despite the trauma and atrocities of war. It highlights the role of humour as a coping mechanism which facilitates the embrace of humanism, particularly in my own novel. Furthermore, the chapter argues that the struggle with the war-ravaged and changing space of the city mirrors my protagonist's struggle to integrate within a fragmented, dismembered or "counter-developmental" society.

Throughout my novel, I employ an irreverent but poignant brand of humour which is otherwise scarce if not absent in the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel. The humour as well as my use of the unreliable and fragmented narration are facilitated by my choice of language, my largely spatially removed position and my mostly inherited rather than experienced form of trauma. Through humour and unreliable narration, the coming of age narrator of my novel is able to reassert human agency and renegotiate new space within this particularly mutable and turbulent city.

Chapter One

Broad Trends in the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novels

Before elaborating on my own creative processes, I delineate some relevant trends evident across several post-war Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novels. The destruction and the mutable, illusive nature of the city of Beirut, unreliable narration (reflecting the relationship between space and self), and an exploration of the West are recurring themes in such novels. I give examples here from Elias Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi* and *Yalo*, as well as Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* and Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters*.

The relevance of these novels to me lies in the timeframe in which they were written as well as the subject matter. The above novels were all written in the decade and a half after the end of the Lebanese war (1990). The above novelists deal with the issues which stem from the war through their respective narratives; and they do so having experienced the hardships of war. In the upcoming chapters, I will elaborate upon the importance of cross-generational storytelling in forming a fragmented and often unreliable image of the civil war to the post war generation (myself included). In many ways, these writers who reflected upon the war in its near immediate aftermath are amongst the initial storytellers with regards to the Lebanese war itself. Any writer, such as myself, who was born after the war, and who almost definitely reflects on the cross-generational effects of the war, must in truth be writing back to them.

Writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, sociologist Samir Khalaf states, in his *Heart of Beirut* (2006), that the “city is in the throes, once again, of redefining itself” (19). He goes on to explain that for Beirut, this process of redefinition, recreation and rebuilding is not an entirely new one. In fact, from Ramses II of Ancient Egypt (thirteenth century BC) to the British forces (1941), there have been many conquering armies, as well as natural disasters and civil struggles which have forced the city to rise from the ashes (Khalaf 41). Destroyed by a usurper of the Syrian throne in 140 BC, Beirut later rose to prominence as a Roman Colony from around 64 BC onwards.² In 551, a tidal wave, along with a series of earthquakes, reduced the city to ruins and the

² Historical information about Beirut throughout this thesis is primarily taken from Samir Khalaf's *Heart of Beirut* (2006). Also, see Samir Kassir's *Beirut* (2003/ 2010).

population to a few thousand. Arabs then occupied Beirut for five centuries, after which it was a scene of constant conflict between Crusaders and the Saracens. The Ottoman rule over the city was beset with destruction as well. The Crimean war, in 1772, resulted in a Russian fleet attacking Beirut, followed by a fierce assault in 1841 by the joint forces of Turkey, Austria and England, ending the reign of Mohammad Ali of Egypt. Beirut again was in ruins. The Italians, at war with Turkey in 1912, also launched an attack on the city and the damage wrought by the first and second World Wars is well documented (Khalaf 45). Then there was the fifteen-year Civil War which obliterated large parts of Beirut.³ This brief overview of the history of the city is enough to show that Beirut is a city always in flux, a place more at home on a timeline than a map. The remnants of many of these civilizations lie today in the Bourj, “Beirut’s quintessential central square”, “the heart of Beirut” known affectionately as the “nursery of Homo sapiens” (40).

It is no surprise, therefore, that many Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novels represent Beirut as both ruins and in terms of a constantly changing landscape. In Khoury’s *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, set during the civil war, the narrator emphasizes this notion of a city in motion: “You stay where you are and it travels. Instead of you traveling, the city travels” (46). Later in the novel, in describing the ruinous effects of the war on Beirut, the narrator notes that the city is “being transformed into the Tower of Babel” (111). The reader gets the sense that the city is both in a state of flux as well as a state of disarray.⁴ Ominous statements like “Beirut went up in flames” or “Beirut has been shrouded in night” soon follow (141-142). In *Yalo*, the narrator remarks that “the light was black, draped in the darkness that seeped from the buildings destroyed by the war” and “the shadows of destruction spread over them” (126).

The dark and foreboding prose, which is perhaps to be expected when describing a war-torn city, is noteworthy, but more striking is the dense metaphoricity of the prose. Samira Aghacy argues, in *Writing Beirut* (2015), that “in the context of war and violence,

³ My use of the term “Lebanese Civil War” here is meant to denote the entirety of the violent cycles or episodes which took place on Lebanese soil, intermittently involving foreign (Palestinian, Syrian, Israeli) forces/parties, between 1975 and 1990. In his *From Time to Time* (2016), Samir Khalaf describes it as a “form of self-entrapment” resulting from warring communities’ “dependent relationship with violence and chronic conflict” as well as an overreliance upon “external patrons and foreign brokers” (28).

⁴ The narrator in *The Journey of Little Gandhi* states that the city has changed from “the Switzerland of the East to Hong Kong, to Saigon, to Calcutta, to Sri Lanka... We stayed where we were and the world circled around us” (Khoury 5).

metaphors allow for grasping the incomprehensible violence of the city, and as a result many characters create their own mental maps of the city and perceive them in timeless allegorical qualities where they are regarded as real and conjectured” (16). These characters, or narrators, create a city of the mind (Rushdie 10). As such, due to the violence of the war and the wreckage it left behind, we now have a Beirut that not only changes with time, but within the minds of its inhabitants, both fictional and real. The protagonist, in *Yalo*, believes that a wild dog devoured his friend, “one of those that roamed the streets and that the fighters amused themselves by shooting at on the line that separated Beirut from Beirut” (Khoury 128). The narrator speaks here specifically of the so-called Green Line separating East and West Beirut during the war, but in metaphorical terms there is a nod towards the many versions of Beirut, both real and imagined.⁵ Khoury’s fictional Beirut, for instance, is a “dirty and ruinous locale” and the narrator is “frustrated with the city” (Aghacy 17).

Aghacy also quotes Jonathan Raban who explores the concept of a “soft city” of the mind as opposed to the “hard city” of asphalt and cement, which “await[s] the imprint of [an] identity” and invites one to “remake it, to consolidate it into a shape that he can live with” (Aghacy 16). In *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, the narrator seems to acknowledge the many historical layers of the city by noting the “strange world hiding underneath the crust of Beirut” (Khoury 44). In essence, Khoury hints at exploring the “soft city” beneath the external crust, as well as the historical iterations of the city mentioned above. Salman Rushdie touches upon the subject in his *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) arguing that writers, especially exiled ones, “create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10). Writers attempting to recreate a city significantly altered by war, or in Rushdie’s case by time and distance, engage in this process of producing what he terms “imaginative truth” (10).

⁵ Michael Davie states that “the first two years of the war also saw the creation of the “Green Line” (a term borrowed from Israeli military mapping vocabulary), the demarcation line between the main opposing militias. This no-man’s land slowly widened and spread thanks to military action, became overgrown with vegetation, then extended to the city’s suburbs then to the ridges and valleys overlooking Beirut. Beirut city centre was part of the demarcation line and was closed off, its businesses and ministries looted, its buildings transformed into military positions, its civilian population forced out” (Davie, “A Post-War Urban Geography of Beirut”).

This process of recreating an “imaginative truth” in literature lends itself to an unreliability of narration. An “imagined” truth is an incomplete truth, a falsehood not so much as a result of intention but, rather, necessity and circumstance. In his essay “The Memory of the City”, Khoury states that in a “city systematically ravaged by civil war, the only space left for memory is literature” (139). Khoury’s remarks are particularly true in the case of Beirut, in which history books, like the decimated Downtown area, are “blank”. That is to say, neither the new Downtown architecture of Solidere, nor contemporary history books, contain much in the way of memory of the recent past. Moreover, Rushdie adds that “one of the simplest truths about memories is that many of them will be false” (24). The story we as readers receive, as a consequence, is partly false or fragmented or, at times, even contradictory. The fictional city itself is not an accurate representation and cannot be relied upon as such.

In *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, we are mostly told the story of Little Gandhi second-hand through short fragments relayed to the narrator via a prostitute by the name of Alice, a less than reliable source. At one point in the story, Alice exclaims “You’ll think I’m lying. Do I lie, my friend?”, inviting the reader to doubt her words (16). The narrator freely admits that “the story has holes” and goes so far as to claim that “all stories have holes” (Khoury 19). The choice of words here, “holes”, is particularly haunting as it evokes the image of the war torn, ruinous Beirut with bullet holes in every building and every street. Just as the story is filled with holes, so too is the city. Khoury’s narrator also reveals the unreliable nature of the story through minor refrains such as “Gandhi wasn’t sure” (23) or “Gandhi didn’t remember” (22). Speaking of Rima, a minor character in one of the interpolating stories, the narrator notes that “Alice didn’t remember her nor did she remember that meeting” (44). Gandhi, discussing a man he trampled over, goes on to say “I may have killed him. I don’t know” (169). The narrator also asks the blunt question: “Did he [Gandhi] really tell her [Alice], or did she make them up and tell them as if they were true?” (13). In so doing, he casts a shadow of unreliability across the stories he is about to tell and leaves the reader with the impression that much of what he is about to relay is either wholly fabricated or only partly true.

Towards the end of Barakat’s second novel *The Tiller of Waters*, which is set soon after the end of the civil war, Niqula makes his way through the by now largely

unfamiliar Downtown Beirut area and observes a concert by someone “bearing the likeness of Fairuz” (Barakat 175). Ghenwa Hayek, in *Beirut, Imagining the City*, describes this passage as “ambiguous, mirage-like; nothing is as it seems” (Hayek 72). She notes that Niqula is disorientated because the city he once knew now appears to have been wiped out. Instead, the annihilated downtown area begins to take on a rural appearance with the abandoned spot allowing for the growth of vegetation and foliage (Barakat 24-25). Hayek also makes the point that the Mediterranean which was familiar to Niqula has been replaced by a sea of plastic chairs, and even Fairuz is a “simulacrum” and “untrustworthy” (72). Once again, we are left with the sense that the narration is somewhat unreliable. Niqula sits in one of the plastic chairs and waits for the concert until nightfall, but nothing happens and no one shows up. His perception of reality, and of the city, is distorted and with it the reliability of the third-person narration.

Khoury’s *Yalo* is a lesson in narrative unreliability. The narration shifts from third person to first person and Yalo’s unreliability shines through in both. Constantly shifting and fragmented versions of the truth, as well as the outright lies and the confusion which accompanies the narrator’s stories, make for a challenging read. The very first line establishes the problematic tone: “Yalo didn’t understand what was happening” (1). At the beginning of the novel, Yalo closes his eyes when faced with the interrogator. He closes himself off from the man whose very profession demands that he separates truth and facts from lies and fiction. In closing his eyes, Yalo’s Beirut “of the mind” begins to take shape, and unreliability soon follows. His versions of events are contradictory. At one point, Yalo admits to the interrogator that his previous story was a lie: “There is no Maria Jalao, sir. I swear she doesn’t exist” (79). Later he reveals his ignorance of the facts to the interrogator: “I don’t know. Really. I don’t know” (79). It becomes clear, fairly quickly, that Yalo, or Daniel as he sometimes refers to himself, suffers from a split personality. This split in personality is a combined result of the war and his unique childhood. The version of events we receive, therefore, renders the facts indecipherable from the fiction.

Arguably, what all three novels share is the sense of a loss of self, disorientation and, as a result, an unreliability of narration. In both *Yalo* and *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, this is signified by the use of mirrors symbolizing a loss of familiarity and

implying a deep and permanent loss of identity. The protagonist's mother, in *Yalo*, stares at herself in the mirror and observes that she cannot see her own reflection. She wakes the protagonist up at night to explain: "I look in the mirror and cannot see my face" and "Gaby's all gone. The mirror's swallowed the picture of my face" (Khoury 54).

The *Einfiählun* school of German philosophers of the late-nineteenth-century explored the notion of the spatial sense of self. They chose the term "Raumgefühl" to delineate "the feeling of space of which the bodily self is the center" (Etlin 1). The act of looking in the mirror in general, and in Gaby's case in particular, is literally that: the process of placing oneself in the center of a space, such that the self is superimposed in the center and the space constitutes the background. Without Gaby's own reflection, all that is left is an empty space and that creates not only a loss of sense of self but also loss of spatial awareness. When the center – that is, the bodily self—appears to be lost, disorientation takes hold. Gaby continues to stare into the mirror regularly and claims that she can only see a white spot, which she interprets as an ominous sign (Khoury 55). Yalo finds his mother's words frightening and cites them as one of the reasons he left Beirut for Paris, demonstrating once again the relationship between sense of self and space (55). Later in the novel, Yalo sees "as if looking into a mirror, how his image broke into tiny slivers" (78). In the final scene of Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters*, Niqula is disoriented, as mentioned earlier, and the whole passage is hallucinatory in nature (Hayek 72). The space around the protagonist, that is the downtown area in which he has spent his entire life, is lost. The war turned it into ruins and with the new project of rebuilding underway, Niqula seems not to recognize it. He sits in one of the plastic chairs, placed there in preparation for a concert, and he cannot apprehend that a concert is taking place around him. Niqula's sense of a familiar space lost and with it his sense of self.

In *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, Alice says "Poor little Gandhi, or poor Abd al-Karim, I don't know why he had two names, as if he were more than one man. He was like a mirror" (Khoury 17). Here Gandhi is seen as two men and the unreliable narration throughout the novel, as discussed earlier, mimics the sense of disorientation which is projected here. Also, and significantly, Gandhi was a shoe-shiner. His job was to polish shoes and "he wanted to turn every shoe into a mirror" (Khoury 152). This repetitive, and seemingly endless, act of polishing a dirty shoe, so that it would reflect his own image

and that of the city, once again, gives the impression of a character not entirely satisfied with his own image and whose struggle with his sense of self is connected in some way to his struggle with the space around him. Another passage which illustrates this relationship between space and self appears in the beginning of the novel: “He found himself sitting in the corner of the room, right where he began. Fear devoured him. He leaned against the wall, and the wall felt like it was about to fall down” (9).

The relationship between the constructs of East and West is one which is constantly explored in the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel.⁶ The fact that the very name “Gandhi” was given to the protagonist by Mr. Davis, an American who worked at the American University of Beirut, is indicative of such a novel’s preoccupation with the West. The historical figure of Mahatma Gandhi is, of course, an Eastern one, however, the significance in this instance lies in the nationality of the conferrer of the title and the preceding reductive adjective of “little”. Little Gandhi is not fond of the name and makes it known that he would prefer to be called Abu Husn, but he is known as Little Gandhi anyway against his wishes. To begin with, Mr Davis, in *The Journey of Little Gandhi* becomes “a real Arab” and in order to authenticate this, claims that he loves “Beirut and fried fish and cauliflower with tahini” (Khoury 37). Soon after, a cab driver runs over his dog. To compound matters, as trembling Mr. Davis bends over his dead dog, the cab driver spits on it, exclaiming “it’s a dog, sir, just a dog” (37). When Gandhi buys Mr. Davis a similar dog, the American man will not take it. Little Gandhi poisons the second dog instead. In the aftermath of the dog’s death, Mr. Davis loses his passion for his work, is disenchanted with Beirut and decides to return to the US. The implication is that, in the West, the dog is seen as a friend worth mourning. The narrator also seems to be making the point that, in the East, the dog’s life is not worth the cab driver’s time.⁷ The contrast in these attitudes towards dogs is also reinforced, in *Yalo*, when it is mentioned that Lebanese fighters amuse themselves by shooting at stray dogs (Khoury 128). The East’s attitudes here are judged in contrast with those of the West. The West, naturally becomes

⁶ See Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Hikayati Sharhun Yatul* (2005); Alexandra Chreiteh’s *Dayman Coca-Cola* (2009)

⁷ Discussing stray dogs, Mahatma Gandhi noted that “there is a regular science of dog-keeping which the people in the West have formulated and perfected. We should learn it from them and devise measures for the solution of our own problem” (412).

the alternative to, and escape from, the East for the characters and narrators of the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel.

In both *Yalo* and *De Niro's Game*, the protagonists leave Beirut for Paris. In the aforementioned novels, we are treated to a reversal of the device used in *The Journey of Little Gandhi*. It is the East which comes to the West, rather than the other way around. The West is seen as an escape from the troubles of the East for both Yalo and Bassam. In *De Niro's Game*, Bassam fantasizes about leaving Beirut and making his way to "Roma". He mentions this to his friend, George, several times throughout the novel. George advises him to go to America instead. The destination itself does not seem to matter, so long as it is in the West and far away from Beirut. This is illustrated by the fact that Bassam ends up in Paris, neither Rome nor America. In Paris, however, "Bassam takes on the persona of the absolute outsider. In a rather obvious and unfortunate reference, he comes to identify with Meursault, the anti-hero of Albert Camus's *L'etranger*. He wanders aimlessly the streets of Paris, carries a gun, beats men, and smashes car windshields" (Hassan 1627). It is made clear that Bassam does not belong in Paris. His dream of escaping Beirut, turns into a nightmare.

Similarly, Yalo sees Paris as an escape. His mother predicts that he will "run away from Beirut" when he grows up (Khoury 55). Indeed, at the first opportunity, Yalo escapes to Paris with Tony. At first Yalo enjoys the French restaurants and wine. Tony then steals the money and leaves Yalo alone. Yalo is reduced to a beggar on the streets of Paris. He laments not heeding his grandfather's advice: "My grandfather urged me not to emigrate. He told me that emigration killed a man's soul and made him feel lost" (Khoury 186). He makes the observation that emigration is the cause of all his woes (Khoury 186). He eventually returns to Beirut and his attempt to escape abroad is deemed a misstep. In all three of the above novels, the experiment of planting a Westerner in the East, or the opposite, proves a failure, suggesting a certain dichotomy is sustained between East and West.

The aforementioned key novels were written throughout a period in which I, as a reader before also becoming a writer, was being exposed to the stories that were to shape my understanding of the Lebanese war. In a sense, these writers are among those who paved the way for a literary dialogue, revolving around the war, which will continue to

span decades and continents. The techniques and themes which they utilized in their novels, as discussed above, were to become key features in the Postwar Spatial Coming of Age novel. In Chapters Two and Three, I illustrate the manner in which my own novel revels in the mutable nature of the city. The narrator of my novel also walks through a changing Beirut. However, in my novel unlike the novels mentioned here, it is mostly a city in the process of being rebuilt as opposed to one that is being destroyed. Furthermore, Chapter Two highlights my narrator's unreliability which stems from his inherited rather than experienced from of trauma portrayed in the aforementioned novels. The narrator of my novel's initial child-like susceptibility to the unreliable stories related to him through older generations as well as his humorous take on events stand in stark contrast to the skeptical and often grave tone of the narrators of Khoury's, Barakat's and Hage's novels.

Chapter Two

Unreliable Narration and the Illusive Space within the City

In the previous chapter, I discussed the unreliability of narration resulting from the disorientation, skepticism and outright lies which manifest themselves in what I call the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel. The unreliability of narration is key to my own novel because it stems, in large part, from the narrator and protagonist's coming of age within the ever-changing space of Beirut. I utilize the technique of the unreliable narrator as a tool with which to renegotiate the space within the city, thereby allowing for the spatialization of time.

Before expanding upon why the unreliability of narration came about in my own novel, I clarify my use of the term. The concept of the "unreliable narrator" is clearly defined in Western literary criticism. In his *Narrative in Fiction and Film* (2000), Lothe argues that the narrator's unreliable narration is notable for his/her "limited knowledge or insight into what he is narrating", "strong personal involvement" and representation of "something that comes into conflict with the system of values that the discourse as a whole represents" (26). In terms of his "limited knowledge" and "personal involvement", my narrator subscribes to the conventional understanding of a Western unreliable narrator (Lothe 26). Specifically, my narrator's fragmented knowledge of the war and his family history, coupled with his deep personal investment in the only city that he has ever known make him largely unreliable. I will discuss both aspects at length in this chapter.

The unreliable narrator's "problematic value-scheme" as well as the deliberate withholding of information are also worthy indicators of narrative unreliability in the traditional sense. The narrator of my own novel, however, does not deliberately withhold information from the reader. Even in the case of the revelation at the end, regarding Basil's role in the father of the narrator's beating, the narrator does not actively seek to blindside the reader. On the contrary, in many situations, he stops the narration in order to further explain or clarify the historical or cultural background. In the first chapter of the novel, he explains the colloquial term "mother and father". The issue of unreliability in my novel, therefore, is more concerned with the quality, or initial source, of the information given to the reader rather than the prospect of it being withheld. Furthermore, at times the narration is fraught with an objectification of women arising from the limited

young male gaze of the narrator himself, which presents us with a “problematic value-scheme” (Rimmon-Kenan 100). While this does render the narration unreliable in some areas of value and reliable in others, the female characters retain a significant amount of agency and outright resist the narrator’s somewhat sexist male perspective.

“Conventionally unreliable narrators,” writes Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands*, “are often a little stupid, less able to work out what’s going on around them than the reader” (23). He goes on to argue that this is not his intention and that Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* (1981) is “neither particularly stupid, nor particularly unaware of what’s happening” (23). In “The Oddness of Julian Barnes and The Sense of an Ending” (2014), Michael Greaney makes the point that “the eureka moment – the moment when a given narrator is triumphantly unmasked as morally or epistemologically faulty – is one that risks reinforcing a decidedly misplaced faith in the robust reliability of our own reading strategies” (237). As Kermode states, “the illusion of the single right reading is no longer possible” (Greaney 238). Without wishing to enter into a discussion of the “reliability of our own reading strategies”, the point which Kermode makes is that this gimmick of the stupid, unreliable narrator providing the reader with the eureka moment is no longer viable. In short, we should not, as Greaney argues, “regard unreliability as the preserve of a delinquent minority of narrators, rather a flaw to which all narrators are prone” (237). The narrator in my novel is not “stupid” and he will not provide the reader with a eureka moment, only brief and fleeting hints to remind the reader to keep a “healthy distrust” and to preserve Milan Kundera’s “wisdom of uncertainty” in the act of reading (Rushdie 25; Greaney 237).

In my novel, I, as a writer, do very little to flag up the unreliability as done in the traditional sense, allowing the reader to make his or her own judgements about the validity or moral fortitude of the stories being told. The reason I have chosen this course of action, or lack of action, is because my aim was to allow all the many narrative stories, however conflicting or absurd they might seem, a chance at being believed, without undermining them as the author. Such, after all, is the case with Beirut: a city, as I illustrated in Chapter One, of conflicting, sometimes absurd micronarratives, all of which are equally ‘true’.

My main interest in narrative unreliability, however, pertains to the narrator's relationship to the city-space he inhabits. In my own novel, I employ narrative unreliability to provide a fragmented account of the protagonist's story. However, I approach the question of unreliability from a slightly different angle than that which characterizes the texts I discuss in Chapter One. I see my approach as being influenced by four different but interrelated factors. The first few chapters are mainly unreliable because of the narrator's age at the time and his susceptibility to the stories surrounding the city which are passed on to him. The adult perspective is being refracted through the narrator's younger perspective on the world. For instance, the early chapter which deals with the Grandfather's supposed lottery win reveals a narrator so awestruck by the tale itself that he misses the more adult issues at stake such as the parents of the narrator's marital problems, the mother's desire to migrate and the overall reckless implausibility of the grandfather's apparent life choices (Bakhti 16). The latter part of the novel is unreliable because of a sense of trauma which dominates the "interior landscape" of the narrator thereby influencing the narration (Caruth 183). The trauma which fragments the interior landscape of the mind mimics the city's own changing landscape; and also impacts the narrator's reliability throughout, as I further expand upon in Chapter Three. Finally, my own position as a writer who is writing both from within and without Beirut, linguistically and geographically, plays a part in shaping the narrative unreliability.

Trauma and the Susceptibility to Cross-Generational Stories

A large part of how we come to learn about the world, as children, is through stories. Cautionary tales, gossip and war stories are regular, and interchangeable, fixtures in Lebanese households. For instance, a story related to me by my parents about acquaintances of theirs who took a shortcut through the Sabra and Shatila Refugee Camp, and never returned, is at once a historical and cautionary tale. I learned about the massacre of Palestinian refugees that took place in the Sabra and Shatila camp in the early eighties; and I learned that it is best not to take shortcuts. An entire generation of Lebanese children who were born after the war came to know about it, and about the old Beirut, through their parents and grandparents' accounts. The absence of a unified, national history book, more than a quarter of century after the civil war ended, has meant

that these subjective and fragmented stories are a major part of the history which we currently possess.⁸

It is by connecting these fragments which are often passed on in non-sequential form, that an image of the past begins to emerge and with it a sense of space and place. The truth about these stories of the past is that they are, at best, unreliable and, at worst, a total fabrication.

In the initial chapters of my novel, the voice seems assured and stable and yet many of the narrator's stories are second-hand. The episode about the Grandfather "winning the lottery", for instance, is an example of a story which has been passed down through the father (Bakhti 16). It is light on detail and is told by the narrator from the perspective of the father who was himself a young man at the time. On another occasion, the narrator is told by his father that the defunct Oldsmobile was finally towed out of the street to a lot of fanfare from the neighbors. The mother denies this. The Don's act of suicide is told to the narrator by his classmate who learned this from the "neighbors". He also comes to know about the love affair between Mr. Aston, the Englishman, and Ms. Maysa, the Biology teacher, through that same classmate. Some of these stories are far-fetched and would seem unlikely, even untrue, but the narrator persists in retelling them, sometimes qualifying them, as in "...stood an abandoned former Holliday In building known for its distinct view overlooking Beirut and, Grandfather Adam *swore*, parts of Nicosia" (Bakhti 43). The Chapter entitled "The Don" begins with several tales about many infamous characters and eccentrics around Beirut, about whom the father allegedly wrote in his articles. These minor anecdotes are retold to the reader very briefly. In these examples, the narrator simply retells stories passed on to him through his father and Grandfather, thereby betraying his "limited knowledge or insight into what he is narrating" and thus indicating unreliability (Lothe 26).

In a sense, the unreliability here is similar to that found in the narration of Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi*. In Khoury's novel, the narrator is retelling stories initially told to him by the prostitute, Alice. Alice disappears later in the novel, and the narrator resorts to collecting information about Gandhi however he can. The narrator is critical of his sources and casts doubt on her stories about Little Gandhi, eventually

⁸ Saree Makdisi notes that Lebanon is a country without an "official history" (Aghacy 22).

claiming that there were holes in her story and asking himself if she might have simply made all of them up (Khoury 19). Furthermore, the narrator is consciously critical of the stories he receives, repeatedly pointing out that they are unreliable. While Khoury's narrator in the above novel chooses to flag the unreliability, the narrator of my novel does little in comparison. The difference between the narrator of my novel and that of Khoury's is the latter's detachment from the unfolding events. Adam, in my novel, by contrast, exhibits "strong personal involvement" which is a characteristic also often ascribed to the unreliable narrator (Lothe 26). He is partial to a particular version of the events and drives the narrative in that direction. By contrast, in *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, the narrator is not a protagonist, though he does interfere in the action on occasion. This is not to imply that the narration in Khoury's novel is any more reliable, far from it: the holes which the narrator admits to, render the narration a possible fabrication in parts. However, the unreliability stems from the narrator's limited knowledge on the subject as opposed to his personal involvement. In my novel, Adam's narration is unreliable on both counts.

An equally apt comparison is one between Hoda Barkat's first person narrator in *The Tiller of Waters* and that of my own novel. Niqula, in *The Tiller of Waters*, notes that "not once have I believed my mother's version of the story", displaying awareness of his mother's penchant for unreliability (Barakat 1). He also mentions that he "helped her create her changing narratives about herself and us" (Barakat 165). In the earlier chapters, the narrator of my own novel, however, holds on to the stories told to him in his childhood. He does not openly question that his grandfather won the lottery, even though it is more likely that he robbed a bank. He often retells stories without casting much doubt on the source, be it, his father, mother, grandfather or classmate. He trusts his elders, to a degree, and persists in spreading their stories. He does not speculate that his father might be having an affair with Ninette, the porter's wife, nor does he point out that his grandfather might simply be a bank-robber rather than a fortunate lottery winner. The reason for this passivity is that as the story is being refracted through the perspective of a child in the earlier scenes, certain layers of a story simply pass him by. He recounts a story the way he was told it, even while the true heart of the story eludes his younger self. Unlike the narrator of *The Journey of Little Gandhi* who behaves like a journalist digging

through unreliable, second-hand stories to find the truth, or Barakat's adult narrator who is (at least retrospectively) conscious of his mother's delusions, the narrator of my novel's perspective, in the early chapters, is being refracted by that of a child who recounts unreliable stories told to him by his elders or his peers. It is the far-fetched, often implausible or absurd, nature of these stories which hints at their unreliability as opposed to the skeptical tone of the narrator in Khoury's or Barakat's novel.

I discovered in the process of writing that while my narrator does not deliberately hide the full story from the reader, he also does not reveal more than he, as a child, would have known about those stories. My choice, as a writer, to allow the stories to go unchallenged is predicated upon my desire to replicate in the reader the state of shell-shock which the younger narrator would have felt at having been bombarded by these dubious stories, at least to a degree.

As the narrator, Adam, begins to mature, so too do the stories he transmits. Up to this point, much of the unreliability can be ascribed to the gullibility and sponge-like quality of a child's mind which accepts the stories about the city and his family, told to him by others. The adult narrator, at this stage, had fed the reader the stories which were refracted through his younger self. Eventually, however, he takes charge of the unreliable stories, wielding them himself and learning to perceive them as his own. For instance, he and Basil formulate stories about the Arabic teacher whom they believe is a pedophile. He exaggerates his encounter with three young women at the beach, describing them as mermaids and admitting to adding details to the story that simply were not true. These are no longer unreliable stories passed on to him, these are his own creations. This issue of unreliability becomes more convoluted as the narrator "pretends" to whip his sister, as his father had done to him. He also "pretends" to have sex with Serene in the toilet of the pub; he pretends he is a rich man while having a drink with Nadine's father by the pool; he pretends to be an astronaut; and, lastly, he pretends to want to be a reporter in Syria. These little episodes are both innocent and deceptive.

These moments of play-acting or pretending hide the truth behind a toilet door, a black leather belt or a glass of whisky, but also reveal it. The narrator of my novel does not purposely withhold information from the reader and his unreliability does not come from any actual attempt to conceal from the reader what the narrator can conceive of

himself. This is in stark contrast to the narrator in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*, in which the key event of the narrator's murder of his best friend, George, is deliberately withheld from the reader until the very end of the novel, long after it had taken place chronologically. Hage offers up clues that all is not well in the narrator's world, and the reader eventually comes to terms with the fact that this young, violent narrator is unreliable, if not entirely unstable. In my novel, the narrator's "pretending" reveals the extent of his personal involvement in the narrative unreliability. He is no longer simply a vessel for unreliable stories with limited knowledge of their context, he now wields the unreliability himself.

In the later stages of my novel, trauma begins to take hold of the narration. In discussing trauma, in his "Notes on Trauma and Community", Erikson defines it generally as a blow to the body or mind which results in an injury or disturbance and that creates a wounding experience (184). This is trauma in its broadest sense. In practical terms, traumatized people "often scan for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages and reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds" (184). The father's reaction to a door slamming, or the debate over whether the bullets were actually fireworks or vice versa, coupled with the narrator's occasional bursts of physical violence, highlight the continuous presence of trauma in the narrator's past as well as the world which surrounds him (Bakhti 151). The narrator's own fabrications, or unreliable stories, begin after the death of Monsieur Mermier and increase in quantity and depth as we approach the core traumatic event of his father's beating at the hands of a militiaman.

Trauma "possess" its victim, it "invades" his/her inner self and "becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape" (Caruth 183). With trauma taking over the inner landscape of the narrator, the narration itself begins to reflect the more pervasively traumatized external landscape of the city. The closer the narration comes to the traumatic event of the beating of the father, the more fragmented the narrative becomes and the less coherent it seems to be (Bakhti 151). The internal landscape, now dominated by trauma, allows for an unreliable narration which mimics the ever-changing, fragmented space of Beirut. I shall return to this point in my discussion of the resulting shift between the narrative level further on in this chapter.

The trauma in my novel, however, is more dispersed and less extreme than in *Yalo*. In the latter, the narrator is tortured and imprisoned by his captor. This coupled with an abusive childhood as well as the traumas of war, results in a character who is unhinged from the very first chapter. In contrast, Adam's narration in my own novel becomes more fragmented and unreliable as the story moves forward from childhood into adulthood. Childhood memories are often the base from which to deal with trauma. On finding the root of the trauma, Erikson argues that "the historian who wants to know where the story starts, like the therapist," and the writer, I would argue, "... will naturally be interested in the beginnings" (Caruth 184). These beginnings are childhood memories in this case, which may be used creatively as coping mechanism or a tool through which to overcome the trauma (Hout 79). The scene in the "Mother and Father" chapter of my novel, in which the father shares a glass of Arak with the young narrator in the aftermath of Monsieur Mermier's death, provides something of a mental refuge for the narrator who attempts to cope with the eventual traumatic event of his father's beating. The narration of my novel is somewhat stable initially, unreliable only because it is essentially the refracted experiences and memories of a child; it soon begins to show cracks building up towards the traumatic childhood events which carry on into adulthood.

Narrating City Space

The issue of trauma as a factor in the unreliability of the narration is intertwined with that of the changing landscape of the city. It is worth noting that the narrator grows up in a post civil war Beirut in which most of the destruction has already taken place. In an interview with Edward Said, conducted by Rushdie and entitled "On Palestinian Identity", the former claims that "an important break from the past occurred then [in the 1982 invasion by the Israeli Army of Beirut during the ongoing Civil war], for people like us, for whom the destruction of Beirut, our Beirut, was the end of an era" (Rushdie 172). The narrator of my novel is not a protagonist who experiences the destruction of a city, he is one who grows with a city and changes with it. Therefore, what he witnesses is a rebirth which is not necessarily positive. The "rebirth" of the city, in this case, also means the eradication of some parts of its past. Soldiere, a real estate holding company tasked with the urban reconstruction of Beirut by the government, was heavily criticized for

failing to preserve much of the old Beirut, such as the old souks, the traffic hub and the red light district (Khalaf 153). Solidere refers to the city centre as “war-torn” which ignores the fact that their bulldozers did half the tearing down (Hayek 71).

With age, Adam’s sense of space is awakened. He observes the city around him as evidenced in the detail with which he starts to describe it. For instance, in the scene in which Adam escapes to the White Sands in order to meet Basil, the narrator notices the old war torn hotels beside the more luxurious newer ones (Bakhti 42). The city changes as he changes. It is a city in flux; and he is a growing boy coming of age, essentially a person in flux. He is recreating a city that is already recreating itself. The split in the city, crucially, is not simply a temporal one. It is not simply a split between old Beirut and new Beirut.

Structurally, Beirut, as a Mediterranean city, is split between the sea and the hinterland with the Downtown area historically acting as a mediating link (Khalaf 134). It is clear throughout my novel that this supposed centre does not feature in Adam’s thoughts. The narrator who was born after the city centre had been flattened, during the civil war, does not acknowledge this space. Robert Fisk describes the postwar Downtown area as a “no man’s land” and Saree Makdisi perceives as “blank” space (Hayek 71). The Beirut which my novel focuses on is the one between Ras Beirut and the sea. It is a setting which deliberately isolates the wreckage and Makdisi’s capitalist-inflicted, and exclusive, “blankness” of the ostensible center of Beirut.

The protagonist never encounters the center because, in his earlier years and throughout the nineties, it is sealed off from the public due to the desolate state of the streets. The center remains somewhat inaccessible as the protagonist matures, due to the rebuilding project undertaken by Solidere. Access to the city center is then blocked by Hezbollah in protest around the mid-noughties, as a result of political tensions.⁹ Even when the downtown area flickered briefly into life intermittently throughout the noughties, it catered mostly towards the elite and managed to exclude the middle and working class. By the time the protagonist is allowed access, he does not recognize the need to interact with it and it no longer occupies, in his mind at least, the center of his

⁹ This refers to a series of anti-government political protests (between 2006 and 2008) led by Hezbollah which included prolonged sit-ins and restricted access to the Downtown area.

home city. Moreover, the symbolic political and religious demarcations of the civil war remained, as illustrated by the aforementioned Hezbollah ‘siege’ as well as the Cedar Revolution which both focused on the downtown Beirut area.¹⁰ Quotidian interaction between members of Beirut’s diverse population was never truly established and so the center became peripheral, which is reflected in Adam’s daily interaction with Beirut in the novel.

This split or gap in the landscape of the city results in a split in narration. The narrative space is cognitively divided in two. To the narrator, the sea is an escape. He runs away at night to drink beer and smoke with his friend by the sea. He swims far out into the sea with a love interest, Alana. The sea also allows him space to further peddle his own exaggerated stories about Alana whom he imagines will reconquer Andalusia, and the three mermaids whom he encounters with Basil. It is by the sea that Adam often indulges in his fantasies about becoming an astronaut. There is, therefore, almost not one but two fictional universes at the same time. The narrative space of the sea, which allows the narrator access to a different world, has a different personal function to that of the hinterland.

To begin with, while writing the first scene by the sea, I was unaware that the sea would become a constant returning point of reference. Having lived by the sea for the majority of my life, I should have known better, but the truth is that it was initially nothing more than an intuitive decision. It was not until the final scene uniting Basil and Adam by the Mediterranean, that I saw the open space of the sea for what it is: something which enables an inner journey for the narrator and a spatialization of time. As Nojgaard puts it “A journey, which can of course take place in inner space, is the expression of a strong spatialization of the experience of time” which is “well suited to expressing the complex problems associated with our realization of ourselves” (Lothe 50). Whenever the narrator is placed before the sea, it is after an extended period of time in which he has grown older. The novel starts – felicitously, in hindsight – with the father’s theory about throwing infants into water and watching them float up. After that, the motif of the sea is returned to at various junctures in the narrator’s life. He repeatedly experiences an inner

¹⁰ In his *Heart of Beirut*, Samir Khalaf writes that the Cedar Revolution (2005), which took place in response to the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, amassed “an astounding million” protesters within the Downtown Beirut area (241).

journey upon encountering the sea, running wild with his imagination. Importantly, the narrator mentions that this space by the sea is shrinking and that the White Sands is the only public sea shore around, with most other spaces having been privatized or taken over by companies. The shrinking of the space through which the narrator can encounter the sea, can also be read here as a metaphor for the shrinking of the time he has left in Beirut. Unfortunately, even the White Sands, or Ramlet ElBayda, is, as of the year 2016, at risk of being turned into a private resort, which provides further insight into the narrator's impression that this space is shrinking around him.

The second part of the city is the hinterland,¹¹ in which the narrator often finds himself in fights, smashing windows, or in danger of being castrated by a member of the Druze community. If the narrator is not in danger of a confrontation with a parent or a teacher or a classmate, or if his life is not threatened by RPG rockets or bomb shells, he is running away with Basil. The episode in which Adam and Basil smash the windows of the pub and run away, through Hamra Street as the Captain chases them, ends with them both sitting on the pavement and looking up at an ad featuring an Almaza in the sand by the sea. The narrator also mentions how grateful he is for the little bit of the Mediterranean he can now see from his balcony, because warlords had torn down the neighboring building blocking the view. The two scenes further emphasize the idea of the sea as being a space of reverie and an escape from the rest of the city, as well as the distinction that the narrator draws imaginatively between the gritty hinterland and the almost surreal seaside.

My running narrator returns us to the concept of Beirut as a city in motion, which as mentioned in my first chapter, is a constant theme in the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel. The "classic post-Flaubertian novelistic activity" of the flâneur normally a young man, who wanders around the city without urgency, observing the details around him and reflecting, has a corollary in my novel which is concerned the young narrator's coming of age within the space of a specific city (Wood 39). However, the narrator of my novel, though he travels through the city and observes the space around him, is not a flâneur, exactly. His is not the calm, sauntering, ambling narration of the "loafer". Rather

¹¹ Khalaf, in *Heart of Beirut*, makes the point that Beirut displays all the manifestations of a dual city: that is, a port and a capital city. He also claims that while the Ottomans focus more on the interior and landward developments, the French were "more oriented towards the harbour" (134).

Adam, the narrator, shows urgency and drive as he for the most part runs, rather than strolls, through Beirut.¹² This is also true of the narrator in *De Niro's Game*, who in the first chapter, climbs onto a motorcycle behind his friend and speeds through Beirut streets describing Beirut with urgency and referring to himself as a “rebel”. Aghacy notes that many narrators in novels set in Beirut “observe the city through rapid glances rather than a fixating gaze in order to avoid any suspicions” (12). The narrator in my novel is meant to reflect the ever changing, unstable, illusive city around him. As Adam runs, the city seems to be in motion as well:

We ran past the Wimpy Café, except the sign now read Vero Moda, and you could not smell the coffee anymore. We ran past Piccadilly Cinema and a poster with the line “Roger Moore as James Bond in For Your Eyes Only” which featured an enlarged pair of bare legs, a woman’s, spread wide with miniature Moore standing between them in a suit, pointing a gun and looking overwhelmed. We ran past a large portrait of Sabah drawn across the entire length of a war ravaged building on Hamra Street. She was young and blonde and smiled down approvingly at passing cars, entirely unaware that she was a piece of art not life. And when we looked back we could not see the Captain and he could not see us and we did not know where to go from there (Bakhti 114).

At first, I believed that this paragraph was a suitably abrupt ending to a scene in which the protagonists had smashed their beer bottles through the windows of the Captain’s pub and run. Upon further reflection, and discussion, I realized that though I had managed to convey the city as temporally in motion, as the narrator ran through it, I had yet to show the narrator’s own temporal leap. As such, I chose to bring the scene back to the narrator and his friend laying on the pavement. At this point in the novel, Basil mentions that Adam should “start shaving properly” because his face “looks like a radish field”, as they both look up at an image of the sea on the billboard (Bakhti 115). I attempted, in this passage, to convey that the narrator too had been travelling spatially and temporally and that the city around him was changing as he was changing.

¹² Speaking of Lebanese novels on war/ post-war Beirut, Aghacy observes that while these works “present a recognizable city with markers ... the emphasis is predominantly on fleeting impressionistic sites rather than palpable ones” (203).

I believe this scene best illustrates my method of choice, internal focalization, in crafting the narrative. As the narrator runs, I, as a writer, am conscious of allowing the reader to see only what he sees. The narrator/ focalizer notices the large mural of Sabah because his father wrote about the legendary figure in an article; he notices the bare female legs in a James Bond poster because he is a lustful teenage boy; he notices the Wimpy Café because of the tales his grandfather and father have told him about it. In his *How Fiction Works* (2008), James Wood remarks that “the artifice lies in the *selection* of detail” (47). Here again, we see a Beirut through the eyes of the focalizer/ narrator only: this is an “imaginary homeland”. Understood in this manner, the title of the Bond film, *For Your Eyes Only*, becomes something of an attempt at meta-humour.

This scene moving through a city which seems to travel through time, lays the foundation for an externally analeptic scene which takes place earlier on in the novel and follows the father through the city of his youth (Bakhti 34). It is this ever-changing landscape of the city which allows for the extensive use of analepsis throughout the novel, pushing the narrative back to the stories of the father and, even, the lottery-winning grandfather.

It is important to mention one last and short note on the choice of Ras Beirut. Ras Beirut, essentially a hill in Beirut overlooking the sea from the inland, is an inimitable setting. There is nowhere, in Beirut or Lebanon, which is quite like it in terms of its diversity of people, beliefs and lifestyles. Despite its location in the West of Beirut, it remained, according to Khalaf in his *From Time to Time* (2016), the only community in Lebanon which did not suffer any violent outbreaks between its co-existing groups (216). Christians, Muslims and Druze went about their business, in the middle of the war, without resorting to discrimination or any form of hostility. The presence of the American University of Beirut as well as other universities and schools in that area, played a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of intellectual and social life in the area. “Both spatially and culturally”, Ras Beirut was considered more receptive to outside communities. Its accommodation and assimilation of Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian and Armenian refugees in the fifties and sixties allowed it to prosper further (Khalaf 214). These were displaced people but they were not refugees for long, and the part they played in building up Ras Beirut is indisputable. This diversity, with all that comes with it in terms of assorted

views, histories and stories, seeps into my novel allowing the narrator to take divergent paths, shifting through stories and reveling in the variety which greeted him. Without Ras Beirut, I would not have been able to take advantage of this microcosm of Lebanon in order to bring to light stories about the Druze, the Armenians or the Palestinians, or to allow my narrator to take advantage of these assorted stories in order to shape his own narrative.

There are many, often contrasting, versions of Beirut discussed here and in previous chapters: Beirut of the heart versus the head, the seaside versus the hinterland, old Beirut versus new Beirut, Jonathan Raban's "soft" Beirut versus hard Beirut, Beirut "of the mind" versus materially existing Beirut and, somewhat reductively, East Beirut versus West Beirut (Aghacy 10, 16; Rushdie 10). All of these different versions, though I simply do not have the space to discuss them in detail, play some part in shaping the narration to varying degrees. They are constantly pulling the narrator in different directions, and he is having to readjust, to try and find his feet in a city that travels around him.¹³ The mutable city's effect on the narrative unreliability is not complete without considering my own position as a writer who is writing from within and without Beirut, in the linguistic, spatial and temporal sense.

Spatial, Temporal and Linguistic Distance

As a Lebanese man writing in English about Beirut, from a spatially removed position, I find myself in good company. Rawi Hage, Rabih Alamedine, Tony Hanania and many other Anglo-Lebanese writers have sat down to write a book set in Beirut and started from left to right. Alameddine argues that spatial and temporal distance is essential for writing about family or home (Hout 13). Though he is correct in saying so, I believe, this very distance also has other effects. One effect which has proven central in my own novel is the perceived unreliability of the narration. As Syrine Hout points out in her *Post War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* (2012), none of these Anglophone Lebanese novels lay claim to being historical or realist fictions. The focus of the narration is not on "narrating the war" or post war events, but rather on "when, how and why selected war-related facts and experiences are remembered and by whom" (Hout 13). This focus on the "how, why

¹³ Aghacy describes Beirut as a palimpsestic city (205).

and by whom” has often made the historical details secondary to the personal story of the narrator and his or her struggle in a post/ war torn country. It allows Lebanese Anglophone writers, and other writers of the diaspora, to take liberties with the actual facts and details. The Post war Anglophone Lebanese writers are not interested in the facts; they are interested in weaving their own worlds (Hout 13). It is as if these writers are saying, in a variation of Gibran Khalil Gibran’s famous quotation, ‘you have your Beirut and I have mine’. Each Beirut belongs to each writer who does with it as he or she likes. These are recreations of Beirut or a Beirut “of the mind” (Rushdie 10).

Hout states that “redefining home” is a hallmark of Lebanese fiction, particularly in the diaspora (13). The redefining of home occurs both theoretically and spatially in my own novel. At one point, Adam teases his English teacher by suggesting that the Englishman may not be feeling at home in Beirut. His suggestion offends the teacher who goes on to teach Adam about the meaning of home to him. Ironically, he does this in a pub, the Englishman’s home away from home, where they both drink Lebanese beer. Adam also toys with the idea of home, house and apartment when discussing his family home which is littered with books and short on space. This notion of redefining home echoes Rushdie’s concept of “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie 10). Rushdie goes on to note that “this [the recreation of imaginary homelands] is why I made my narrator suspect in his narration” (10). Ultimately, in recreating the imaginary homeland of the past, a writer is creating a new homeland, one that never existed outside of the mind, and never will. The unreliability of narration which follows is almost a natural consequence of this. The writer’s vision, in this situation, owes little loyalty to the real city of the past; and the stories which unfold shift in shape and content in order to better suit the ever-illusive imaginary homeland.

The focalizer in my own novel is looking back. His homeland is, to an extent, imaginary because his narration of the events is retrospective. By having the focalizer narrate the events retrospectively, I have robbed him of further reliability. As he tries to remember certain events, his memory falters and he fills in the details with his imagination. The extended scene featuring the three mermaids in the early chapters, as well as that in which he describes a love interest as conqueror of Andalusia, is influenced by the narrator’s recourse to faulty memory. In the episode in which the narrator/

focalizer ventures into a brothel, songs suddenly feature heavily in the narrative. My “selective” and deliberate choice of songs throughout the brothel scene is in this case obvious (Wood 39). The songs themselves speak to the situation the young protagonist finds himself in and the frustration which he must feel. With the narrator looking back, the narration is influenced by the fact that the older narrator feels embarrassed about certain details which the younger protagonist (himself) might have experienced. The former’s attempt to litter the narration with songs is a desire to distance himself from the younger protagonist’s experiences because the memory jars with him. Ultimately though, there is a hint that in distancing himself from the memory-driven, retrospective narration via the use of songs and the imagination, the older narrator does, on some level, subscribe to his father’s ideology that “adults lead distinct lives from their childhood selves, that to grow is not to build on your childhood but to cast it aside in favor of the person you were always supposed to become. And that this person was never an astronaut” (Bakhti 111).

The distance is not only in the tone, but is also often the result of physical distance which is revealed in the narration. In the scene in which the sister is at the hospital, the mother and the father stand over her arguing, and Adam is removed from the action, seemingly observing from afar until his mother approaches him. When he tries to get close to the “action”, he is accidentally elbowed in the face by his father (Bakhti 52). The final chapter in the book also positions Adam standing far away from the family and waving to them. He observes them from a distance and can see them growing smaller.

This, of course, is the end result of a process which started when upon redrafting the chapter, it was put to me that the tone of the narration seems to maintain a constant distance. I realized that I felt strongly about this distant tone but had yet to comprehend the reason it seemed to work well within the narrative. Much of the discussion and feedback throughout revolved around the fact that the narrator will have received a formal education, in the English language, and must therefore have internalized this method of writing/ speaking to create this distant tone within the narrative. The idea of a formal education seemed to make sense but it was not until the final few chapters that I realized, with the help of feedback, why this tone was a crucial part of the story. The narrator’s feeling of embarrassment and inadequacy, of being less than “whole or complete”, manifests itself in the final few chapters as he sits on the ground in the fetal position

unable to protect or aid his father who is being beaten up by the militiamen. The notion of inadequacy, or “incompleteness”, is hinted at in the first few chapters when the narrator admits to being unable to “hold it in” as he struggles to refrain from soiling himself. He then remarks that, after the shelling had stopped, he put on his finest clothing and followed his mother around the house in attempt to make himself useful (Bakhti 24). This feeling of inadequacy, of incompleteness, is the reason as to why the emotionally remote, or detached, narrator revels in the narrative distance which he creates.

This distance is not only attitudinal, but also temporal and spatial, as the older narrator who has long since left Beirut looks back on his youth with a degree of shame (Lothe 35). In her *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (1992), Janet Burroway discusses McPherson’s “Gold Coast” noting that “the attitude of the narrator towards his younger self, and his... self-mocking tone invites us readers to identify with the older, narrating self” (234). I have tried to create a similar impression in my novel, of a narrator, or focalizer, who invites the reader to identify with his older self, casting his younger self as a figure to be observed from a distance. Burroway goes on to state that “only towards the end of the story, when the narrator himself is moved by his memory, does he let us share the emotion of the younger self” (235). The voice of the older narrator, in my novel, wants the reader to identify with him, not the younger, more embarrassing, protagonist or narrator. His voice dominates the narration and casts the younger narrator aside, especially in the earlier passages.

The narrator of my novel keeps this similarly distant narration which begins to show cracks towards the end of the novel. This distance finally collapses into something of a narrative elevator going up and down between the narrative levels in a blur, as the extradiegetic, diegetic and hypodiegetic are intermingled in the bathroom scene of the final few chapters (Lothe 32). At the diegetic level, the family is huddled in the bathroom, hiding away from the shelling and exchanging stories. At the hypodiegetic level, there are stories about the civil war, a boy who soils himself and bedtime story character who turns out to be based on a “real” person, some of which members of the family feature in and some which they do not. The extradiegetic level is the one in which the narrator simply steps back and narrates as if he were almost not a character in the novel: notably, for instance, he does not relate a story of his own even though every other member of the

family does (Bakhti 153). The extradiegetic level is also evident in the hospital and airport scenes when the narrator seems far removed from the action. The intensity of that situation in the bathroom scene, with the shelling dragging on for hours, the electricity cut, and the family huddled around in a small space by candle light (“Campfire-like” setting but with urgency), creates a perfect opportunity for the hectic shift in narrative levels which allows for the attitudinal distance to shrink and enables a more emotional approach to narration throughout the following traumatic chapter in which the father is beaten up by the militiamen (Bakhti 151).

Building on my earlier, and still relevant, discussion of trauma, Erikson notes in his “Notes on Trauma and Community” that when trauma occurs “something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a defense” (Caruth 183). It is at this point in the novel, in the traumatic chapter of the father being beaten up in front of the son’s eyes, that the narrative “barriers” which the narrator had set up, that is the distant tone, breaks down. Instead, the narration becomes much more fragmented but also emotional, the narrator sits in the fetal position, and begins to ramble in a stream of consciousness about mundane details (Bakhti 171). A feeling of “helplessness” washes over him, as illustrated here in his seating disposition, which as Erikson notes is a symptom of trauma (Caruth 184). As soon as he can, when Adam is in the car, the narrator shifts the narrative focus onto Abou Abbas who again lurches into the hypodiegetic narration, relaying a story within a story and taking the heat out of the moment as he drives the father and the narrator to the hospital in his rusty, old car (Bakhti 174). Even so, the narrator is apparently traumatized as is evident in the fact that he fires a bullet through the roof of the car and attempts to make a halloumi sandwich for himself with a gun in his possession and blood on his hands as soon as he enters his home (Bakhti 178). The “feelings of helplessness and a general closing off of the spirit” wash over the narrator,¹⁴ “as the mind tries to insulate itself from harm” (Caruth 184).

¹⁴ Linking back to the earlier discussion on narrative distance, George Simmel attributes detachment and neutrality to the general metropolitan individual, whereas Aghacy argues that the same attitude in Beirut is linked to the war situation in which neutrality and detachment are a self-defense mechanism rather than a natural result of the metropolitan modernity (Aghacy 205).

Out of Language

It is also true that because I am a writer removed spatially, linguistically and temporally from my narrative setting, a certain distance creeps into the narrative as a matter of course. In his essay “Imaginary Homelands”, Rushdie argues that “those of us [writers who are exiles, emigrants or expatriates] who use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in the linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies” (17). The English language becomes more than a tool with which to articulate that struggle between cultures; it is also a manifestation of the struggle itself. In that sense, writing in the English language, rather than my native Arabic, becomes more poignant but also more effective. Arabic does not encapsulate that linguistic struggle which can and does manifest itself when writers who are exiles or emigrants or expatriates use the English language instead. I have found, in the process of writing in the English language, that the ineffability of trauma, including war and loss, are more poignantly expressed in a language which is not my own. Perhaps this is because the use of English instead of the native Arabic is, as Hout notes, liberating (7). More to the point, in resorting to a language which is not my native tongue, I, as a writer, lose a part of the story which cannot be translated or transcribed in anything other than the original language. This sense of loss which permeates the text as a result of my deliberate choice of language, serves to augment the ineffability of trauma, war and the humiliation or helplessness which the focalizer often transmits. For instance, when the narrator tries to explain to the implied English reader that “mother and father” means “whole or complete” in Lebanese Arabic, there is a sense of something incomplete in the narrative. The original spirit of the phrase is lost; and when the narrator ultimately “loses” his parents at the airport, in the final scene, the notion of loss or “incompleteness” finally, and ironically, comes full circle. The loss which the narrator experiences in the narrative space, is also expressed or foreshadowed in the linguistic loss which he experiences in trying to articulate the cultural meaning of the phrase itself out of language. Writing in English sets out to, also, reach the non-native as well as the native speaker and, in setting out, does so.

Hout argues that the Arab author is both liberated and limited by his or her choice of the English language (7). In a sense, and to complement Alameddine's quotation mentioned earlier, this linguistic distance liberates the Anglophone Lebanese Writer as much as spatial or temporal distance does. Hout, however, goes on to say that Arab writers often sprinkle their text with Arabic words without explaining them (7). This is true of many Arab Anglophone writers of the diaspora, but not of my own novel. Perhaps this is a reflection of my own position as a writer who is not fully writing from without looking back in. In a sense, while I am writing from without linguistically, my own physical presence between Beirut and Lancaster over the past few years has given me a somewhat unique position. I am neither fully writing from within Beirut nor from without. A writer of the diaspora might be tempted to sprinkle an Arabic word in an English dialogue and stop at that, possibly because that is how he/she thinks or speaks or because their Beirut of the mind allows them such liberties. As a writer who is "caught in the middle", at least spatially, my own Beirut of the mind will not allow me to get away with Arabic terms without first explaining them. It is, once again, a reflection of my position as one who in some ways is still writing from Beirut to the outside world in a language (English) that I have adopted, and adapted, but is not mine.

There are key passages in my novel where the narrator stops to explain a term or reference in Arabic, breaking the fourth wall in the process. Suddenly imbued with the authority that accompanies speaking about one's own culture to an outsider, the narrator briefly dons a sheath of reliability. The colloquial "mother and father", which means "whole or complete", is a key example and a running theme throughout the novel. The idea behind explaining this term is not so that the reader can fully comprehend it. One assumes the reader is intelligent enough to figure the meaning out from the context. Rather my idea of explaining such a term, "Arab-splaining" if you like, is to remind the reader that this is a story out of language and that these are characters who feel and think, for better or worse, in a different language. There is little use in pretending that this book was not written in English, and sprinkling the text with unexplained Arabic words seems to me to be doing just that. It is as if to pretend that a word of Arabic in a sentence of English will make the entire sentence seem Arabic enough. Indeed, there is little use pretending that the audience is not an English speaking one. To assume that the reader, or

audience, is familiar with the references and terms and songs etc. mentioned here, is to miss the struggle within the language which mirrors the external struggle of cultures, religions and languages.¹⁵

The unreliability of narration goes hand in hand with an image of a homeland that is long gone, or that never was; and the struggle to articulate this war torn and ever changing homeland amidst a flurry of trauma and childhood memories, in the English language, further compounds the issue of unreliability. The trauma and ineffability of war naturally results in the rejection of the myth of progress throughout Postwar Lebanese literature. In the following chapter, I examine the paradoxical embrace of humanism and the ensuing resort to humour which filters through my novel. I also tackle the shadow which the civil war's impending return casts upon the struggle to renegotiate space within the city.

¹⁵ Interestingly, the multilingual Lebanese implied reader will be familiar with the culturally specific terms which are explained in detail by this "Wikipedia" narrator, who is reliable only in spurts. Amongst those readers, there are some who could be considered to identify on some level with the narrator himself. It might suit others to forgo the "Arab-splaining" interludes, although doing so risks missing out on the punchlines. As I wrote the narrator's spurts of cultural explanations, I imagined my own multilingual Lebanese acquaintances nodding along as if "in on the joke".

Chapter Three

Development, Progress and Humour in a Renegotiated City Space

In the previous chapters, I have discussed my use of unreliable narration as well as the reasons for its common usage in the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novels and my own novel. In this chapter, I will explore the development of the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel. In doing so, I will trace its history and place it within context; which in turn will help shed light upon the theme of development within such a novel.

The coming of age novel is “traditionally a narrative in which its protagonist progresses from naive or callow youth towards a sense of a mature adult consciousness and fulfilling social integration” (Millard 6). This conventional understanding of the coming of age novel has been challenged in modernist Western literature, which often subverts the notion of development or progress, rejects universalist humanism and attempts to reshape our understanding of the genre.¹⁶ Western coming of age novels including *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *Ham on Rye* (1982) to name a few, strongly rejected the myth of progress. The narrator in J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* reveals his own worldview which appears to discard any hint at progress:

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and they're pretty, skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket. Nobody's be different. The only thing that would be different would be you. Not that you'd be so much older or anything. It wouldn't be that, exactly. You'd just be different, that's all. You'd have an overcoat this time. Or the kid that was your partner in line the last time had got scarlet fever and you'd have a new partner. Or you'd have a substitute

¹⁶ Lehan states, in *The City in Literature* (1998), that for instance, both Baudelaire and Eliot “rejected material progress because it led to a cycle of desire, deemed to endless escalation” and expressed a “sense of fragmentation and isolation” where “‘nothing connects with nothing’ to paraphrase Eliot” (76).

taking the class, instead of Miss Aigletinger. Or you'd heard your mother and father having a terrific fight in the bathroom. (Salinger 127)

The modernists could “not reconcile theories of cyclical history with belief in linear evolution and mechanical progress” and, furthermore, refused to accept “the notion of humanity based upon a purely rational theory of cognition and motives” (Lehan 79). In other words, the modernists rejected both linear progress and humanism, and with them the power of the human agency. In his *Standing by the Ruins*, Seigneurie notes Martin Heidegger’s “objection to the metaphysical nature of the humanist subject,” Michel Foucault’s rejection of “humanism as naturalization of the Western episteme,” Louis Althusser’s dubbing of humanism as “ideological obfuscation,” and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s dismissal of humanism as a “cultural catachresis” (21).

While the rejection of progress in the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novel has been consistent with this modern Western line of thought, its paradoxical embrace of humanism, in the face of trauma and the atrocities of war, is not. The Postwar Lebanese Coming of Age novel’s general reluctance to forgo humanism and its struggle with the war-ravaged and mutable space of the city mirrors the protagonist’s struggle to integrate within the fragmented, dismembered or “counter-developmental” society. As Western thought moved away from humanism, the Postwar Lebanese novel held on to it as a normative concept. The seemingly vexing devotion to humanism, and human agency, despite the atrocities of war, trauma and loss, is facilitated and aided by the use of humour, particularly in my own novel. This chapter also discusses the role of humour as a coping mechanism in dealing with the postwar trauma of the Lebanese civil war.

In “Anointing with Rubble: Ruins in the Lebanese War Novel” Seigneurie argues that, as Lebanon lurched into a civil war in the mid-seventies, “social chaos punctured the myth of progress and along with it realist literature predicated on a knowable world” (51). Having served the Arab cause for over half a century, realism in the Arabic novel was now obsolete, “an anachronism, and from its grip emerged the Lebanese war novel” (51). In an article in *Mulhaq Al-Nahar*, Elias Khoury even goes so far as to claim that the Lebanese novel was “born during the war” (14). The debunking of the myth of progress coupled with the death of realism proved essential preconditions for the birth of the particular styles and forms which characterize the Lebanese war and postwar novel.

The Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel is, however, indebted to the overall development of the Arabic novel. The modern Arabic literary revival (Al-Nahda) of the early twentieth century saw the employment of readily available historical and romantic subgenres of the erstwhile European novel as devices for the expression of the salient issues of the time, which were primarily: “the search for historical roots as an underpinning for emerging nationalist sentiments” and “reformist ideals” (Allen 8). Hilary Kilpatrick, in *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, highlights that Arab writers of the time “were inclined to express themselves through a tortured individualism and romanticism which were encouraged by the repressive political atmosphere” and that young writers began to publish “historical novels” (Kilpatrick 11). These imported Western subgenres of the novel were to “overwhelm attempts at using revived traditional [Arabic] prose genres to express modern concerns” (8). In this early struggle of old versus new, of classicists versus modernists; or those who would seek to revive the traditions and heritage of the Arab culture versus those who would seek to emulate and draw upon the encounter with the west, the latter held sway (12).

The Naksa, the debacle or Arab “setback” of 1967, contributed greatly to a shift in the Arab literary consciousness, as societies reexamined their “self-view, their attitudes towards other parts of the world (for example, the merging concept of “the third world”), and their relationship with their past” (Allen 8). Gone was the elation of independence which defined the fifties, to be replaced by a sense of disappointment and humiliation leading up to the seventies and all that this decade entailed including the now seemingly inevitable, start of the Lebanese civil war (Seigneurie 50). The decline of nationalism contributed greatly to the revival and repurposing of Arab literary traditions. It is in this context that literary inspiration was to be found in the “texts, generic structures and narrative modes of the past” (8). Writers in the Arab world reached for the classical tradition of Arabic narratives which largely consists of: “anecdotes, vignettes, moral tales, stories of miraculous escape” as well as “campfire [oral] storytellers (*hakawati*)” and “the *maqamah*” or “picaresque narratives” (Allen 9, 12-13).

The Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novels, which I have discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, also engage in this unearthing of classical traditions of Arabic narratives. In *Yalo*, the narrator uses anecdotes disclosed to Yalo through his

grandfather, and de facto father-figure, Kohno Afram. The Kohno, a priest, tells Yalo the story of the latter's mother and her ex-lover and the manner in which he, the grandfather, had handled the entire affair. The grandfather concludes that he had "told his grandson the story to teach him manliness" thereby employing the story as a moral tale (Khoury 43). In *The Tiller of Waters*, the narrator starts off the entire novel with a little anecdote about his mother arriving in Beirut on the back of a boat. The anecdote is used to help define the relationship between Niqula and his mother. He makes the comment that "not once have I believed my mother's version of the story" (Barakat 1). The narrator, in *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, highlights the story of Mr. Davis, an American working at the American University of Beirut, through an anecdote about the death of Mr. Davis' dog and the effect it had on his enthusiasm for life in Beirut (Khoury 37). I have, in the previous chapter, discussed the important presence of stories and anecdotes in my own narrative.

Amusingly, this shift towards the Arab literary heritage, as opposed to the earlier use of the subgenres of the west, has sometimes been met with resistance from Western writers such as the likes of the literary realist John Updike. In discussing Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, the American writer and literary critic remarked that Munif was "insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel" (Allen 9). This remark, and reactions like it, are proof that the Arabic novel, which has grated with some Western critics, was now beginning to carve out its own path and not simply attempting a generic transfer between cultures. In *The Arabic Novel* (1995), Roger Allen makes the point that "the treatment of the narrator of popular tales (hakawati), of the campfire storyteller, these evocations of traditional narrative" are responsible for "fresh contributions to the development of that continually innovating narrative type that is the novel" (9).

With these developments in the Arab novel overall taking place, Lebanon plunged into a civil war from which emerged the Lebanese war and postwar novel. Within the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel conventions of literary realism were shattered by the "war's ideological transformations, shifting allegiances and rampant opportunism" (Seigneurie 22). The Lebanese war novel struggled to deal with themes such as: trauma, loss, identity, changing landscape and human dignity for which literary

realism and its notion of a “knowable reality” was ill-equipped. The pervasiveness of the civil war, quite apart from the length of the war or the scale of the fatalities, delved into the heart of what it means to be Lebanese disclosing a sick and ailing nation in the process. The Postwar Lebanese novel became a fictional exploration of “collective (national) identity” (Hout 13). In the face of the struggle with identity, as well as the trauma of war and loss, the myth of progress was – supposedly – firmly rejected. The Lebanese setting, and Beirut in particular, was shown to be a random, cruel and disorderly place in which people pay the price for crimes which they have not committed.

However, I would agree with Ken Seigneurie’s argument in his “Anointing with Rubble”, that at this juncture Lebanese postwar novels veer off from post-war Western thought by keeping their faith in humanism (51). In Lebanon, the opposite was taking place. The characters in each of the Postwar Lebanese novels which I discuss in this thesis, all suffer indignities and traumas of the civil war. Moreover, the human in the Lebanese novel does not enjoy an ontological privilege; in *Yalo*, for example, the dogs are said to take over the streets at night. The horrors visited upon them should in theory guide these novels towards an antihumanist line of thought, one that is consistent with the prevalent thoughts and literary trends of the West at the time.

Yet, despite the atrocities of war inflicted upon these characters and “as the reality of dignity fades, its status as a normative concept paradoxically grows, taking the form of a longed-for memory or vision of what was or ought to be” (Seigneurie 51). In short, as human dignity was being trodden upon in the war-torn streets of Beirut, the ideal itself was growing in status as a normative concept. We are left, therefore, with a Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel which resorts to a “retooling of modernist thought” to fit a progress-skeptic yet committed vision of humanism. Seigneurie calls this disjunction or duality “anything from self-evident to self-deluded” (51). On the basis of my engagement with Lebanese Literature, in particular through the novels chosen in this thesis as well as my own practice, I agree with Seigneurie that humanism is a powerful trend within the Lebanese literary sphere.

The rejection of the myth of progress, in the Arab literary world as well as that of the West, is problematic for the Coming of Age novel. Al Moussa claims, in her “The Arabic Bildungsroman: A Generic Appraisal” (1993), that “The distinct nature of the

Arabic novel... is best exemplified in what might be called the Arabic Bildungsroman” (223). As for the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novel, which emerged from the Arabic (Bildungsroman) novel, it soon found itself without the central theme of its subgenre: individual progress or development. As mentioned before, the coming of age novel is “traditionally a narrative in which its protagonist progresses” from youth into adulthood, “the narrator finds their self and their sense of a proper place in society, as a consequence of working through the challenges of adolescence” (Millard 6). The Postwar Lebanese Coming of Age novel’s rejection of progress was in keeping with Western line of thought, with novels such as *Catcher in the Rye* or *Ham on Rye* both subverting the myth of development thereby challenging our understanding of the genre. Its embrace of Humanism, however, was not.

The duality, the rejection of progress and elevation of humanism as a normative concept, is expressed in the final pages of Elias Khoury’s *Yalo*, as the protagonist, Daniel and his alter ego Yalo, presents his interrogator with the manuscript of the story of his life. The interrogator dismisses these pages as worthless before calling Yalo “a nothing”, an “insignificant little arsehole” and a “big turd” (332). Daniel, or Yalo, spends what seems like years writing away the story of his life in the prison cell, believing that he is achieving progress of some sort, only to have the interrogator knock the papers onto the floor. The following passage perfectly illustrates this sense of loss of progress as well as human dignity in the real world: “I saw myself on my hands and knees...I saw his feet. They were stepping on my hands and fingers and he was grinding the papers under his heel while I tried to gather them up and drowned in the water and the smell and felt kicks up my backside and heard roars of laughter” (332).

Immediately after this degrading scene, Daniel, the narrator, looks up to find his alter ego, Yalo, having “left his clothes behind, climbed onto the metal desk and jumped up to the window...up above, and he had regained his throne” (332). Despite the humiliation which the narrator endures in this scene, he still manages to hold on to human dignity as a normative concept, symbolized here by the presence of the naked Yalo on a throne.

Although Khoury’s fiction is notoriously metacritical, other novels reveal a similar tension between the debunking of the notion of progress and yet belief in the

human agency. In *The Tiller of Waters*, the narrator Niquila firmly rejects the myth of progress once again by claiming that he and his father “did not benefit...from the wisdom of my grandfather – or from the wisdom of anyone” (Barakat 166). He then appears to be drawing the same conclusion as the antihumanist Western line of thought by decentering the human being and denying his/her self-autonomy: “All we learned, he and I, seemed to come at the wrong time, despite all of our preparations and calculations... We left no trace” (Barakat 166). However, the narrator then wonders, in recalling his mother and Shamsa, whether “we alone could have prevented and preserved them [the mother and sister]” (166). Niquila retains a degree of belief in human agency.

To return to Khoury’s work, his narrator in *The Journey of little Gandhi* states that “Little Gandhi was, a man who lived and died, like millions of men, on the face of this spinning earth” (193). In doing so, Khoury once again negates the myth of progress and, at first glance, seems to decenter the human experience by claiming that Gandhi is simply one of many. However, the narrator then makes the point of highlighting Little Gandhi’s actual name, and ancestry, thereby reasserting the humanism behind the story: “His name was not Gandhi. Abd al-Karim, son of Husn, son of Abd al-Karim, son of Husn, son of Abd al-Karim, son of Husn and all the way back to Noah” (Khoury 194).

This discarding of progress and embrace of humanism endures even in the literature of the diaspora as evidenced in Hage’s *De Niro’s Game*. To give a final example, Bassem, in *De Niro’s Game*, admits to wandering “the whole day, aimless” in Paris (Hage 197). Bassem had been talking about leaving Beirut since the beginning of the novel, and once he gets there, he is left with a sense of aimlessness as if the progress he had sought was for nothing. The realization that he was “far from Nabila, that I had left Beirut” dawns upon him. This realization gives him a renewed “sense of purpose” (197). It drives him to look in his pocket for George’s father’s phone number, seek out a phone booth and make an important call. Once again, the human experience takes center stage and, to an extent, the belief in human self-autonomy is restored.

In my own novel, the father’s article attempts to explain the civil war to the protagonist and serves to emphasize the very fleeting and arbitrary nature of life in a war-torn region:

How shall I explain my war to you, my son? ... Rest your arm against the palm tree there, and your forehead against your arm. Close your eyes, while the war goes to hide, and count aloud: one year, two years, three and, then, fifteen. Where did they go? You want to open your eyes now, but you dare not, because you cannot feel the trunk of the palm tree you once leant against or the promenade on which you stood. And even that little piece of the Mediterranean which you and your friends used to frequent is gone. And now you don't want to play anymore, and now you shout and now scream and stamp your feet and now you wish you had never closed your eyes. You thought it was just your turn and that it would pass. And now it has (Bakhti 151).

As Samir Khalaf puts it, in his *From Time to Time*, “the scars and scares of war have left a heavy psychic toll which displays itself in pervasive post-stress symptoms and nagging feelings of despair and hopelessness” (50). Yet, even as the father in my novel is being beaten in the streets of Beirut by a militiaman, he reasserts his belief in human dignity by uttering the words: “I am a human being” (Bakhti 170).

The Humanism behind the Humour

A recurring joke in Lebanon which I have heard on multiple occasions, and throughout different periods in my life, posits the opening message in Lebanese passport as its punchline. In the US passport, so the joke goes, the first line reads “the United States of America will move land and sea to protect the citizen/national named herein”. The UK and French passports are said to purport similarly grandiose messages relating to the inherent standing and worth of the bearer of said passport. The Lebanese passport's opening line, in contrast, is said to read “do not lose this”. On the surface, this recurring joke seems to be a commentary on the effacement of human dignity and self-worth in Lebanon. However, a closer inspection, which I will ponder in the rest of this chapter, will reveal the survival of the normative concept of humanism as an ideal to aspire to. That is to say, the Lebanese passport may not preserve human dignity but by common accord it should aspire to reach for this normative idea which remains for the time being unattainable. In truth, the opening notes of all the aforementioned countries are a

variation on the request that the holder of the passport be allowed to pass “without delay or hindrance”.

The reassertion of humanism, individual autonomy and human agency, in the face of war, trauma and loss, is linked to the humour consistently present throughout my own novel. The humour becomes in one sense a way in which the narrator may reclaim his autonomy. By cracking a joke, or making light of a seemingly somber event, the older narrator exerts power over the stories of the past, particularly those in which he appears to lose control. In the early bathroom scene in which the narrator soils himself, a very clear manifestation of a loss of control or self-autonomy, the narrator makes the remark that “no man ever remembers the good old days when he used to shit himself on a regular basis, if he did, he would be infinitely more modest” (Bakhti 23). This somewhat poignant piece of humour is an attempt to retake control of the situation, and to exert his human agency over the story. It “relieves embarrassment” and brings the narrative closer to humanism (Simpson 1).

In the previous chapter, I discussed the manner in which the focalizer in my novel invites the reader to identify with his older self, casting his younger self as a somewhat embarrassing figure to be mocked from a narrative distance. It is this narrative distance which allows the humour to flourish. The use of a high register when discussing his parents, whose first names are never revealed, is born of the narrator’s insistence upon distancing himself from his childhood self who would be more inclined to use the low register, that is: the more innocent Mama and Baba, instead of the formal and distant mother and father. The distant high register, maintained by the focalizer in the act of narration, is not entirely consistent; in fact, the shift between grand and vernacular diction creates further opportunity for humour. Wood argues that in subverting the conventional expectation that a novel should commit to a single, unvarying, register, writers wring “comedy out of the jostling together of different registers” (148). In one example, the narrator in my novel discusses his understanding of god’s reaction to his parents’ interfaith marriage: “One expected nothing less of a Muslim man who had forged an unholy alliance with a Christian woman against the wishes of his now irritated family and his now pissed-off god, whom, one would have thought, must have known in advance and ought to have had ample time to cope” (Bakhti 2). The intermingling here of the grand

“forged an unholy alliance” with the more vernacular “now pissed-off god” is my attempt at finding humour by shifting through the registers. Another example is to be found in the narrator’s desperation to use the toilet in the bathroom scene, amid his father’s call to show restraint and composure: “fear was inevitably replaced by the unbridled urge to go or shit or pee or excrete desperately unwanted wastes” (Bakhti 22). The sentence is long, and in literary terms wasteful. It employs too many adverbs in “inevitably” and “desperately”, and seemingly uses the synonyms for the same word in quick succession. The deliberate wastefulness of my choice of sentence is meant to reflect the subject of the sentence itself, but it is the variety of the register which creates the humour within it. The more vernacular “shit or pee” is sandwiched between the words “unbridled urge” and “excrete” which belong to a high register. Apart from the shift between registers, there is further humour to be derived from the sentence’s urgency. The implied ending to that sentence is “or call it whatever you want to call it just move out of my way and let me through”. In this sentence, I have tried to show a narrator who is conscious of shifting through the high and low registers and uses this humorous shift in order to better illustrate the urgency and immediacy of the situation.

This is not to say that the humour in the novel belongs exclusively to the narrator. On the contrary, the humour is owned by the community in which the narrator finds himself. It is the product of the environment which surrounds him. The familiar, multilingual, Lebanese reader, as mentioned earlier, is invited to identify with the humour displayed by the narrator. In *From Time to Time*, Khalaf notes that “there is hardly a Lebanese today who is exempt from these atrocities [of the Lebanese civil war] either directly or vicariously as a mediated experience” (28). Craig Larkin draws upon Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory”, arguing that an entire generation of Lebanese were subjected to traumatic narrative accounts of the war, and that this inherited form of memory carries (Aghacy 27). Khalaf goes on to explain that “indifference and entropy” has become an overwhelming feature of Lebanese postwar society and that trauma seems to have “muted people’s sensibilities and crippled their capacity to feel outraged” (42). However, the ineffable, war-induced and nationwide trauma, which I have spoken about in the previous chapter, is relayed by many of the characters through anecdotes which rely on the use of humour. The Franco-Algerian comic Fellag states that “through little

stories, humour makes it possible to tell the big Story and to touch upon points that cannot be grasped in any other way” (Dunphy 132). For instance, the father, in my novel, employs humour to put his son’s “dreams and ambitions” into perspective. The sense of helplessness, instigated by trauma, is overcome or at least kept at bay through the introduction of humour. In his *Hybrid Humour* (2010), Dunphy argues that “if laughter is the best medicine, it follows that painful experience often begets an incisive wit” (7). This “incisive wit” or well-timed and deliberate use of humour becomes “a coping mechanism”, owned not by the narrator but by the narrative world (Simpson 2). Just as the atrocities, and trauma, of the war are a shared experience within the Lebanese public consciousness, so too is the coping mechanism of irreverent humour.

Ziv identifies the defensive mode as one of five key functions of humour (Simpson 3). He argues that said function utilizes humour in order to deal with “anxiogenic” or difficult subjects (3). By making light of these otherwise serious situations, such as the earlier bathroom scene in which the characters seek shelter from the bombs in an enclosed space, my narrator simultaneously distances himself from them. In distancing himself, and employing humour, the narrator deals or “copes” with the difficult subjects of war, loss and trauma.

It is also worth noting that the spatial, temporal and linguistic distance which I, as a writer, have taken from my homeland has created an environment in which humour can flourish within the text. Perhaps the humour in my novel is what differentiates it so clearly from the other Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novels discussed in this thesis. This brand of irreverent, defensive and yet poignant humour, in particular, which I have referred to as a coping mechanism for postwar trauma, is a staple of modern Lebanese society. However, humour in *Yalo*, for instance, is near non-existent.¹⁷ Though the novel often features Yalo in fits of laughter, the laughter itself is a sign of madness and an inability to cope with the atrocities of war, rather than an indication of humour (Khoury 123). The humour is at best subdued in *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, *The Tiller of Waters* and *De Niro’s Game*.

¹⁷ Humour in the Lebanese novel in general is subdued, with a few exceptions, such as *Koolaidis: The Art of War* (1998) by Rabih Alameddine.

The difference in the use of humour between my novel and the aforementioned novels lies not in the novels themselves but in the authors. While the novels were all born in the period after the war, the authors were not. The trauma, displacement and loss, which they endured or witnessed during the war is more pronounced in their writing. Without wishing to paint an entire generation of Lebanese writers with the same brush, their immediate and raw experiences of the war have left them with an urgent, and understandable, need to emphasize the horrors of the civil war. Whereas the novels of Khoury and Hage seem to dissect the civil war in a literary attempt to perform an autopsy on the nation, my own novel revels in the humour which an inherited, rather than experienced, form of memory has allowed me. Albert Helman, in his key text on the development of national literatures in developing countries, claims that the penultimate phase consists of the writers of such nations taking a distance from themselves and “the introduction in literary texts of humour, self-mockery and a drive to put things into perspective” (Dunphy 108). Temporal, spatial, linguistic, attitudinal and generational distance facilitates the humour found in my own novel.

There are, of course, other functions of humour in my novel, to return to Ziv’s taxonomy in humorology. Apart from the defensive mode, the father introduces the aggressive function which “always ridicules and makes fun of a victim, allowing the non-victim a feeling of superiority” (Simpson 3). For example, when the narrator soils himself, the father remarks that he would “rather be out there” amongst the bombs (Bakhti 23). He also constantly ridicules the young narrator’s dream of becoming an astronaut, asking rhetorically: “who ever heard of an Arab on the moon?” (Bakhti 2). The Don also employs aggressive humour by singling people out via a cruel nickname which usually points to an obvious flaw or fault in the victim. Other examples include Mohammad’s discrimination against the Druze in calling Basil a “goat-worshipper”.

The social function of humour is also clear in the novel, as it serves to “reinforce intra- and inter-group bonds, strengthening the cohesiveness of interpersonal relations” (3). The father’s refrain of “Jesus-Mohammad-Christ” is one instance through which such humour is evident. The merging of the names of key figures in the two major religions in Lebanon, even as the narrator’s father uses these names in vain, reinforces the bond between both religions. Another example is when the narrator discusses his parents’

marriage: “One expected nothing less of a Muslim man who had forged an unholy alliance with a Christian woman against the wishes of his now irritated family and his now pissed-off god, whom, one would have thought, must have known in advance and ought to have had ample time to cope” (Bakhti 2). These attempts at humour serve to bring together the two religions in laughing about the ridiculous situation which speaks to the Lebanese community as a whole. Much of the humour in the novel contains wit allied to a sense of melancholy. The father’s snide remarks directed at the narrator in the bathroom scene, after the latter soiled himself, are humorous but also pitiful because of the situation in which the narrator and his family find themselves in as the bombs rain down around them. This scenario, which is a common experience to all Lebanese families who lived through a time of war or instability, is meant to reflect this irreverent brand of humour which the Lebanese often employ as a coping mechanism.

In some cases, Ziv’s taxonomy of humouology, and others such as Basu’s classification, appear to display a degree of oversimplification (Simpson 3). These functions of humour often seem to intertwine. Humour is frequently at once social, defensive, sexual, aggressive and intellectual. It is “lubrication, friction and glue” (Simpson 3). I have found that writing critically about humour is much like explaining a joke, in that through the act of explaining or writing the humour itself is lost. Much of the critical commentary displayed above is retrospective because that is the only way to analyze humour. As I was writing the novel, I realized that critically dissecting a joke as it is being written is the best way to nullify it. The spontaneity and natural flow of humour in the novel is one of the main reasons why I ensured that the first draft of the novel was done before I began to properly delve into this thesis. I have spoken at length about employing humour, but the fact of the matter is that humour is something of a freelancer. Its contributions to the overall text is not with one specific end, unless that end is laughter.

The “Ordinary Practitioners” of Beirut

Despite establishing that the myth of progress was debunked, whilst the normative concept of humanism was nevertheless embraced in the Postwar Lebanese novel, it is worth exploring the reasons behind the protagonist's rejection of progress so consistently in said novel. My own Coming of Age novel, much like other Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novels, is left with a protagonist who neither "understanding nor adequately coping with the atrocities" of war resorts instead to aggression (Hout 105). While it is true that the events of my novel take place after the official civil war which ended in 1990, intermittent violence such as the 2006 war with Israel and the 2008 conflict continued to take place. These coupled with the anecdotes, vignettes and moral tales of the previous war generation, ensure that the violence and atrocities of war remain ever present.

Stressed throughout the Postwar Lebanese novel is "the human cost, paid most dearly by the innocent as they find themselves engulfed by poverty, corruption and political/ sectarian brainwashing in their developing years" (Hout 106). Young protagonists, therefore, find themselves subjected to sectarian brainwashing, militarization (*De Niro's Game, Yalo*) and, potentially, death or immigration (*Yalo, De Niro's Game, The Journey of Little Gandhi*). The bleak choices faced by the young protagonists of the Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novel indicate that social integration was never an option because of the "social, economic and political instability which continue to permeate Lebanon" almost thirty years after the end of the civil war (Hout 106).

It is the ongoing prospect of war which "creates a fixation with history" argues Phil Melling (Hout 201). With the social, economic and political instability constantly threatening to erupt, the protagonist of the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novel is regularly looking over his/her shoulder, revisiting the atrocities of the war and its impending return. The protagonist's struggle to come of age, to integrate within society, is mirrored in the struggle over space in postwar Beirut.¹⁸ This is particularly due to Solidere's transformation of the center of Beirut into "a gentrified locale that tailors only

¹⁸ Amusingly, in his *Heart of Beirut*, Samir Khalaf discusses the struggle over space in Downtown Beirut regarding the newly built al-Amin Mosque's "colossal proportions". The mosque soon became "a source of contested negotiations to scale down its height and the number of its protruding minarets so that it will not overshadow the adjoining Maronite St Georges Cathedral" (31).

for the wealthy, while the rest of the city remains an agglomeration of sectarian zones and inequalities that will further widen the rift within the country” (Aghacy 22).

In his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Michel de Certeau identifies two different views or understandings of the city. The first is the ordered and organized “Concept-city” which is the authorities’ panoptic view of the city from above. They are the “voyeur-god” looking down upon the city and making its “complexity readable” (Certeau 93). The second view is that of “ordinary practitioners” who, through “spatial practices”, produce the “metaphorical city”. These “ordinary practitioners” are “the walkers”, or city dwellers, who “live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (93). The project of Solidere was the project of the authorities, or “voyeur-gods”. It took over a space which had been carved by the city dwellers and turned it into part of the “concept city”. It is true that this down town space had been destroyed by the city dwellers themselves, such as the Red-light district in the skirmishes of 1975 and 1976, but “much of the old souks could have been preserved” by Solidere (Khalaf 153). The ongoing sectarian division of the city, and the gentrification of the center, have left Beirut, in Makdisi’s words, unable to “project a future based on the hope of the war’s genuine end” (Aghacy 22). Instead, the “ordinary practitioners”, or walkers, construct different paths for themselves, with Hamra and Ras Beirut taking on the main burden of the down town Beirut area which had been closed off due to reconstruction, political activism and a simple pricing out of the middle and working class. Aghacy asserts that “Beirut is a city in process, experienced from below, an opaque partial site resisting the transparency and controlling strategy of the panoptic view” (204). Walkers resist the authorities and the “voyeur-god” idea of the “concept-city”, choosing instead to draw their own lines. This resistance of the “voyeur-gods”, as well as the “concept-city”, echoes the rejection of a structured and linear progress in the Lebanese *Spatial Coming of Age* novel. The belief in human agency is strengthened, in Ras Beirut, as walkers, narrators and protagonists resist an imposed vision of the city in favor of carving their own paths.

Another relevant example of the ordinary practitioners reshaping the landscape of Beirut is in the now iconic, towering edifice of the Burj El Mur, along with the Holiday Inn. Both are war-torn buildings which were soon used as posts for snipers and remain

haunting reminders of the civil war today. These snipers positioned in the Holiday Inn and Burj El Murr tower are somewhere between the “voyeur-god” and the “ordinary practitioner” – fallen “voyeur-gods” perhaps. They have regular access to the panoptic vision of the former but choose instead to focus with tunnel vision on the minute. The effort to police space by the “voyeur-god” is once again subverted here, not by the ordinary practitioners but by these fallen “voyeur-gods” whose bullets changed the walker’s paths and renegotiated the space within the city. In my novel, the narrator notes that his grandfather claims to have seen all the way to Nicosia from the Holiday Inn. Lionel Abrahams, states, “Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half’s in the concrete streets we have lived along” (Herbert 205). The memory here relayed to the reader by the narrator is half in the grandfather’s brain and half in the concrete which he observes in the act of narrating. However, the edifice remains inaccessible to the narrator, and the view which it allows is seemingly consigned to the past. The recurring stories or anecdotes, passed on to the narrator of my novel from past generations and often brought about by his encounter with the city, are proof that in Beirut “the geographical intersects with the historical, and the past always spills into the present” (Aghacy 205). Beirut is shaped by the stories told by these characters, and others like them. There is no clear path forward towards progress for the protagonists. There are only the paths which they can, or choose to, carve out for themselves.

It is the sight of the war-torn towers themselves in the Beirut skyline which is more spatially and visually significant in postwar Beirut. Recently, I was at the Tate Modern museum in London with my sister, Rinad. We stumbled upon a concrete cast on display, entitled *Monument for the Living*. She pointed out that the monument resembled the Burj El Murr tower, an observation which we both laughed away on account of the fact that it would be too out of place in a London museum. In fact, it was. Marwan Rechmaui’s miniature monument of Burj El Murr had caught us off guard in London, but that very real blight on the Beirut skyline which we encountered almost daily had never been cause for us to blink twice. The narrator, in my novel, mentions the Holiday Inn and the similarly defunct St. George Hotel building, alongside the more modern Pheonicia Hotel, Movenpick and Four Seasons. Herbert observes that “the postcolonial city emerges as a palimpsest of individual and collective memories and fragmented histories”, a

description which aptly describes Beirut (205). This is evident in Beirut through the juxtaposition of edifices and structures, particularly before and after the war, as well as the fragmented and partly fictional tales which cross timelines and generations. In the aforementioned passage, the narrator of my novel is on his way to the White Sands. When he gets to the sea, he turns his back on all of the hotels and looks outward. He asserts agency over space from his pedestrian perspective. However, he describes the public shore as a shrinking space, with attempts by the “voyeur-gods” to privatize and block public access to such spaces.

The protagonist of the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel finds him/herself locked in a struggle with space and, in this case, fragmented history. As a result, the protagonist is unable to integrate within a Lebanese society which itself is not integrated and whose relationship with space and history, may best be described as counter-developmental. By “counter-developmental” society here, I mean a society which counters the protagonist’s attempts at seeking development or progress via maintaining an inhospitable, socially disparate and sectarian space as well as propagating fragmented, as opposed to unified, versions of history. Khalaf argues, in *From Time to Time*, that Lebanon experienced a “dismemberment of a society” and that “the most elementary social ties which normally hold a society together – ties of trust, loyalty, confidence, compassion and decency – have been in many respects fatally eroded” (29). The protagonist of my novel is left trying to socially integrate in a dismembered or “counter-developmental” society. The narrator is entitled to expect loyalty from his closest friend, Basil, but ends up being betrayed when he discovers that Basil had a role to play in the beating which the former’s father received at the hands of the militiaman. Also, the trust which society places in teachers is violated when the Arabic teacher gradually indoctrinates Basil into sectarian militarization. Stuck in a counter-developmental society in which history is fragmented and space is split into sectarian strongholds and gentrified locales, the protagonist cannot hope to find progress or development. In a sense, the “game is rigged” from the start against the protagonist of the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel. The outcome is, seemingly inevitably, a rejection of the myth of progress in the face of the atrocities of the war, present and past. And yet the embrace of humanism remains a distant normative concept to reach for but never fully grasp.

This rejection of the myth of progress, manifested in the protagonist's inability to find social integration, is reflected in the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age Novels which I have discussed. In Hage's *De Niro's Game*, Bassam is constantly aware of his place in the fragmented society. For instance, he refers to himself and his friend, George, as "aimless, beggars and thieves" (Hage 17). He also describes the cats in his neighborhood as "Christian", displaying the level to which sectarianism had been a part of the counter-developmental society which engulf him. He notes that "garbage was piled up on the corners of our streets", indicating the inhospitable environment in which he finds himself (Hage 35). He also highlights the social disparity by mentioning that the "expensive" dogs on the streets, abandoned by their rich owners who had long ago left for France (Hage 35). He ends up in France himself as part of a self-enforced exile. He is last seen booking a ticket from Paris to Rome, with Beirut still haunting his memories.

In *Yalo*, the protagonist ends up in Roumieh prison: an institution that is the very embodiment of a failure to socially integrate. He sees himself constantly as an outsider who has "lived the rest of his war on the verge of laughing... Laughter means that everyone is a stranger and deserves to be laughed at" (Khoury 123). When Yalo sees, his friend, Alexei's mangled corps being chewed on by dogs, it drives him to laughter. Yalo is charged with rape, murder and accused of forging identity. His encounters with Madame Randa, the wife of the rich benefactor and landlord Michel Salloum, further highlights the ever-growing gap between the classes. Niqula, in Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters*, ends up in a semi-delusional state addressing his long-deceased father and struggling to come to terms with reality. Gandhi, in Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, simply ends up dead.

In a sentence that perhaps best sums up the complicated relationship between the protagonist of the Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel and the city, or space in which he finds himself, Khoury's narrator claims that Gandhi "knew the bullets [which killed him] were not aimed at him, but at the heart of a city that destroyed itself" (Khoury 194). The Postwar Lebanese Spatial Coming of Age novel, therefore, is a subgenre which deals with the struggle for space within the city as well as the struggle for growth and maturity in a "counter-developmental" society. Through humour, the narrator of my

novel asserts human agency over his past, thereby renegotiating the space within his city and rejecting linear progress.

Conclusion

Mikhail Bakhtin claims that the hero of the coming of age novel “emerges with the world” and often stands on the threshold of one epoch overlooking another (Boes 236). When the idea of writing this novel first came to my mind, the “Arab Spring” was still fresh in the public consciousness.¹⁹ Hope abounded that this pan-Arab revolution would bring real change to the Arab world, ridding it once and for all of despots and quenching its thirst for sincere and flourishing democracies. With the war subsequently escalating in Syria and Libya, and developments in Egypt making it impossible for a true democracy to prosper, this bout of optimism was soon abandoned as spring became winter.

The notion of a failed or incomplete revolution, betraying an enduring faith in human agency, is one which I have alluded to throughout my novel. One example is when Mustafa raises his fist, on the bus ride home, in defiance of Basil whom he perceives to be a vicious dictator, only to be beaten down later by his mother (Bakhti 126). Other examples include Basil’s own rallying cry of “revolution”, in the chaotic playground battle scene, which earns him a suspension or exile. And notably, the narrator’s various attempts at rising up to meet his father’s stare only to be struck back down to size (Bakhti 2).

In the final scene at the airport, I wanted to convey that exasperating and vexing devotion to humanism through the father. The narrator remarks that his father’s raised and clenched fist reminds him of Mostafa on the bus but interprets it not as a call for revolution or change but the opposite. The narrator’s interpretation of “it meant stay strong, do not let the world change you” both embraces the human agency to resist an external force (the world) and rejects change or the myth of progress (Bakhti 199).

My novel’s narrative time is one in which, to paraphrase Samir Khalaf’s *Heart of Beirut*, the city was in the process of reformulating itself (19).²⁰ Beirut was picking itself up from the ashes of the civil war and looking tepidly towards a potentially brighter future. The series of assassinations, including that of the former billionaire prime minister

¹⁹ “Today, most people try to avoid using the term “Arab Spring.” Very little has been achieved in the area of democratic reforms. Instead of building vibrant and stable democracies, most of the countries of the Arab Spring revolutions have entered a phase of violence and instability” (Ghanem 7).

²⁰ Narrative time refers to the historical, cultural and chronological elements which encompass the novel.

(2005), as well as the war with Israel (2006) and the militia skirmishes (2008) soon intervened to put the city in turmoil again. These events, which feature in the novel, are then supplemented with the early throes of the war in neighboring Syria (2011). The Syrian war continues to claim many victims one of which in this novel is, the narrator's close friend, Basil. Basil becomes essentially a militiaman whose militarization comes at the hands of, the Arabic teacher, Mr. Malik. The father's elegiac strain of humanism, which is evident in his articles as well as his actions, offers an alternative to, as Seignourie put it in his *Standing by the Ruins*, Basil's and Mr. Malik's "mythic-utopian conviction that human life is a quantum of matter-energy in the service of greater forces" (20). I, who am writing from within and without the confines of the city, have situated the narrator and protagonist of my novel, who struggles to come of age throughout, on the threshold of one Beirut overlooking another.

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