

I Am Not Naked:
A Fictional and Theoretical Exploration of Home and the Flâneuse in
21st-Century Lebanon and Syria

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Abstract

This thesis mainly consists of two artifacts: a creative text followed by literary criticism. The research draws on the theoretical intervention of the flâneuse I have posited as a way of reading home in fiction. Notwithstanding commentaries on the flâneur in the social sciences and cultural studies, no literary study yet has posited the connection between flânerie and home, let alone theorized the notion of the flâneuse as a subversive figure that can be deployed in creative, and then critical, writing to make intelligible the possible variants of home in the present-day fictions of Lebanon and Syria.

I thus propose a redefinition of the term in a way that may also apply to readings of the trope in a literary text: I read the flâneuse as a determined woman whose acts of street-walking, or of movement from one place to another, are enacted on two levels in such a way that her physical journeys – in search of, or as a return to, her own conceived notion of home – intersect with an emotional itinerary that traces her development against, and resistance to, a backdrop of patriarchy and conflict.

My PhD novel, *I Am Not Naked*, is a first in marrying the Lebanese and Syrian contexts and in appraising the subversive quests for home of their fictional female characters, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual, from the theoretical lens of the “flâneuse,” against the setting of two civil wars, the Lebanese Civil War (1975—1990) and the Syrian Civil War (2011—present). In the second section of the thesis, I shift rhetorical gear from creative to critical discourse in order to situate the novel, and henceforth its analysis of home and patriarchy that I read through the different theoretical imports that attach to the flâneuse, in relation to new creative narratives from Lebanon and Syria.

Hence, in reference to three novels in which the trope can be culled – *I Am Not Naked* (Sleiman El Hajj, 2016, Lebanon and Syria), *Cinnamon* (Samar Yazbek, Syria, 2012), and *An Unnecessary Woman* (Rabih Alameddine, Lebanon, 2013) – I argue that the notion of the flâneuse I have postulated is reified in characters who defy patriarchy by employing flânerie as a multilayered vector for fulfilling the homing desire that drives their respective journeys. Necessarily, I hyphenate the intervention with relevant strands of criticism to better invigorate my reading of home-as-emotional-space, as opposed to a fixed place, in the three novels, hence

the feminist flâneuse, the postcolonial flâneuse, and the queer flâneuse, terms unused in previous scholarship.

My thesis also contributes to the nascent body of creative writing on the Syrian Civil War and the refugee crisis, and supplements the growing interdisciplinary corpus of research on (mostly male) homosexuality from a queer-female literary angle, given my novel's focus, in part, on same-sex female affects through its characterization of Teta – a queer Arab grandmother figure – a representation still unexplored in extant Lebanese and Syrian literature of the 21st century.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed:

Date: April 30, 2017

Preface and Acknowledgements

I have always been intrigued by the possibilities of purposeful, as opposed to aimless or merely leisurely, street-walking – the physical act of walking, not to be confused with streetwalking as prostitution¹ – long before I learned the stylized sobriquet “flâneur,” a Baudelairian term appropriated by the Anglophone scholars who later commented on it. Different oral histories of my mother’s village in the mountains of Lebanon fascinated and haunted me as a child. One particular tale evokes indelible memories:

In April 1915, swarms of locusts, tiny insatiable creatures, descended upon Lebanon eroding anything green, dry or not. The country at the time was under the control of the Ottomans who were in full swing of the First World War and prioritized what paltry food reserves were available for their soldiers. Most able-bodied men in the village had been enlisted to fight in the Turkish Army, which left women, children, and the elderly to fend for themselves as the iron paws of hunger descended.

Unbeknownst to the authorities, and to the droves of starving vagrants who passed through, and sometimes remained there, no longer able to move as they lay dying on the streets, my great-grandmother and her four sisters had found a way to bring food to their hungry children. A small family-owned wheat field in a woodland at the outskirts of the village had been forgotten by everyone else, or at best was assumed to have been devoured, much like everything else that was edible, by the locusts. A plan was devised: taking turns, one woman would stay with the children at home, two others would go to the field during the day, and would alternate with their sisters who would keep a vigil at night – using straw brooms and kitchen towels they spent laborious hours of the day and night brushing away the locusts, making sure there would be something to eat, however little, for them to survive the war.

They had to be creative in hiding the wheat, one time going so far as to pretend a sack they had put it in had a dead rat, which someone who approached them on the street then asked them to share. Another time, they were physically accosted by a raving emaciated man, driven mad by calamity, who asked them for a sexual favor before collapsing at their feet. Screams of “*jo’ān ’am mūt*” (I’m hungry, I’m dying) punctuated their journeys back and forth, but war deadens emotions and charity was not a choice. “A woman will always put her home, her own

¹ The different grammatical iterations of “street-walk” are henceforth hyphenated in the thesis, for disambiguation purposes.

children first,” my great-grandmother said. “That is her duty.” The story, passed on by my great-grandmother, to my grandmother, to my mother, and finally to myself, articulates a harrowing tale of survival for which female *flânerie*, as I later theorize it, served as a route for sustaining both homes and selves.

The Arab Spring movements of protest across different countries of the Arab Middle East, starting in 2010, engendered hopes for change that were quickly dismantled as regimes shifted from all-out dictatorships to fundamentalism, militancy, Islamicism, and civil war.² The images of resistance shown by men and women on the streets brought to mind my own conception of the motivated, determined *flâneur/flâneuse* rewriting the space s/he inhabits. But as I witnessed, and researched, the gendered responses to women participants in these movements (the beatings, the virginity tests, the physical harassment, the sexual violence, the shaming, the humiliation),³ the exhilaration left by the image of the *flâneur-flâneuse* experiencing the street in concerted tandem was soon replaced with my former malaise with the older variant of the trope. As recent as 2015, cultural critics were not only still commenting on the *flâneur* as necessarily male, but also arguing the impossibility of a theoretical *flâneuse* on grounds of visibility. Luc Sante contends that since “[i]t is crucial for the *flâneur* to be functionally invisible,” the *flâneuse* simply cannot exist.⁴ This crystallized the need to theorize a *flâneuse* whose purposeful narrative gaze responds to the urgency of locating an alternative “feminine” home, as well as subverts, exposes, and negotiates the multilayered social and cultural constraints that devolve from patriarchy and proscribe the movement, both physical and emotional, of the *flâneuse*.

As I delved into a program of theoretical readings on home and the *flâneur*, alongside recent creative writing from Lebanon and Syria, questions of space and place – reclaimed spaces, jettisoned places, and physical places re-presented as affective spaces – continued to interest me as I discovered other dimensions of the emotionally resonant topos of home in the fictions I would later examine as embodiments of purposeful female *flânerie*. I thus asked the following questions:

² See Sa'adah, 153-68.

³ Mona Eltahaway states that even male protesters often acted abusively towards female demonstrators. She writes that this “is where the soldiers in our regimes and the men on our streets unite: they both sexually assault women to remind us that public space is a male prerogative.” Eltahaway, 17.

⁴ See Sante.

Can the extant notions of the flâneur be re-conceptualized from a literary angle? How does this intervention invigorate readings of female flânerie, in particular, as a vector for home in 21st-century novels of Lebanon and Syria? In what ways do fictional female characters in contemporary Lebanese and Syrian literature employ flânerie to inform their home-seeking trajectories and their resistance to patriarchy?

I attempt to engage these queries both novelistically and theoretically. The mixed methodological route I followed involves both the production of a primary text, a novel, and a critical study exploring relevant literary criticism in relation to my conceptualization of the flâneuse.⁵ Equally important was an awareness of, and the need to reduce, scholarly bias; thus, I scaffolded the four sections of the novel in such a way that the emotional and physical itineraries of the different fictional flâneuses were conceived by the very character(ization) of each, feminist, queer feminist, or otherwise, and her own visceral, causative needs, rather than an imposed theoretical reading. In other words it was essential to examine whether the conceptual intervention was, in fact, applicable to the proposed fiction, not use the latter to validate the viability of the trope. To further reduce the margin of possible bias, I also investigate the intervention within the wider Levantine literary canon.

The reality, which all the different flâneuses, much like the women in today's Levant, are embroiled in, is that of the very context – coving, complex, and multifaceted – that inspires and shapes the affects and subjectivities that respond to this context. Similarly, whether as sources of support or inspiration, many who were involved in my exploration of the latter enriched my research journey in different and sometimes unexpected ways. First and foremost, I'm indebted to my family's backing, moral and financial, without which this project would not have been possible to submit in three years only.

Support was also readily available from a network of close friends in Beirut and in different parts of the world, most of whom are doctoral candidates or PhD graduates themselves. They never wavered in lending a listening ear, and a critical eye, regardless of discrepant time zones and their own teeming schedules. In particular, I would like to thank Moza Al Naimi (Qatar), Robert Anderson (Scotland), Anwar Azzi (France), Nayiri Baboudjian (Lebanon), Sarah El-Richani (Germany), Karen Estefane (USA), Mirella Hodeib (Iraq and Jordan), Robert

⁵ For a detailed outline of the theoretical framework, please refer to Part II of the thesis, "Theorizing Home and the Flâneuse: Literary Criticism and Analysis."

Hodgson (England), Nevine Mattar (Lebanon), and Rana Sughayar (Canada) for their personal interest in this thesis.

Much like the journeys of the flâneuses in my novel, my own research trek was not without hurdles. My internal supervisors Doctors Martin Randall and Michael D.D. Johnstone provided the needed sobering counsel regarding the creative stage of the research at a time when the legwork for the novel was proving a challenge at the level of structure. It was an exhilarating moment when, eventually, I received my first supervisor's confirmation that the present iteration of the creative artifact was structurally and thematically solid, and ready for submission.

Due to her familiarity with and expertise within the field of creative writing in the Middle East, Professor Roseanne Saad Khalaf, my external supervisor, offered nuanced comments on aspects of setting and characterization that had gone unnoticed in the early drafts, including drawing my attention to the postcolonial implications of the female gaze in the novel. I was fortunate to have her recruited to the supervisory team, albeit late in the writing process, and thankful for the time she not only spent in giving the research careful consideration, but also for the long-distance phone calls and the hours we spent discussing the work.

Several other sources have informed elements of setting and plot in *I Am Not Naked*. The village descriptions in the novel are steeped in memories of the many summers I spent at my maternal grandparents' home in the Lebanese countryside. Growing up, I was always surrounded by women, and the finishing school in Part One was inspired by stories I overheard as a child, and which stayed with me as an adult.

Perhaps what stands out the most among these childhood memories is the steadfast premise that men's authority must be accepted unquestioningly so that any predicament that results as an attempt to resist the mainstream is considered well-earned: *Chu ken badda bi hal chaghle?* Why would "she" want to act in a certain way and incur all that 'eib/shame upon herself? And yet my grandmother, much like my great-aunts, my aunts, and all the others who upheld, and uphold, this verdict, had become complicit, however unwittingly, in their own plights. I have sought to revisit and (re)appraise this dynamic, opening the novel with the notion of the finishing school in which a nubile cohort are being mentored by an older, more savvy *sitt/lady*. Since the narrative examines the social and psychological costs of conformity, it also illustrates the tortuous consequences of nonconformity on both individual women and family life.

As the idea of the finishing school started to gain precedence in my mind over other creative tropes or spaces that I could narrate and challenge at the start of the novel, a conversation I had with a relative of the Dowager Baroness Yvonne Sursok-Cochrane, 95, the only British peeress who is also Lebanese and resides full-time in Beirut, provided a different direction. The finishing school mistress would have an affluent background, I decided; this approach to her character locates her at the helm of the community's need to situate itself in relation to its womenfolk's acquisition of nubile social graces, and yet conceives a different layer of constraint that Madame Claudette seeks in her own ways to resist. Lady Cochrane's anecdote about antiques stolen from her residence during the Civil War in Beirut⁶ also inspired the founding grain for the scene in which Claudette discusses her own treasure trove and the need to safeguard it against the greed of intrusive squatters and militiamen.

Teta's impassioned speech in Part Four is inspired by Toufik Youssef Awwad's *Al Raghif*,⁷ a novel set in Lebanon during the Great Famine when my great-grandmother was, in her own way, a flâneuse. One memorable scene describes an infant on the street trying to feed on its dead mother's desiccated breast and then erupting in sobs at the futile attempt. Earlier, the mother, maddened by hunger and adversity, had taken to exposing her breasts to whoever was willing to offer her scraps. She was one of many women in the novel who prostituted themselves this way and were met with scorn, their *oyūn multā'a bāriza, ya 'ridna jamālahunna liqā' raghif khoubz* (their eyes bulging and desperate, baring their bodies as needed to earn a loaf of bread; translation mine).

The sentence, so to speak, which Teta receives at the end of Part Two and must confront in Part Four, namely for sexual and spousal misconduct, might seem quite unusual to a liberal reader's mind, but it must be read within the centuries of tradition that inform the ruling. The latter, which involves wooden clogs, plural for *qubqāb* (see Glossary), might also seem extraordinary or even unnecessarily cruel, and yet it is moderate, mellifluous even, compared to the atrocities committed in recent years under guise of honor killings in the Levant.

Indeed, the extrajudicial murder of women continues to date in Syria despite, and in some cases because of, the ongoing Civil War.⁸ I will not add more at present in order not to disclose

⁶ Cochrane's anecdote was reported by Michael Spectre writing for the *New York Times* on May 2, 2016.

⁷ See Toufik Youssef Awwad's *Al Raghif* (The Loaf), first published in 1939, and republished in 2000 by Librairie du Liban.

⁸ Batha, "Syrian War Causing 'Honour Killings'." Also see Zoepf, 159-66.

the storyline, but must acknowledge the execution of the historic female monarch Chajarat Al-Durr, or Umm Khalil Chajar Al-Durr, who was the first woman ruler in the Arab world, as the inspiration for this particular scene – Teta and the clog-bearing women. As I indicate in the literary analysis, women in the medieval caliphates enjoyed privileges and a public presence that is remarkable compared to the legacies of gender oppression and subservience imparted by several centuries of Ottoman rule, followed by dictatorships and/or fundamentalist regimes; Chajarat Al-Durr was one of these women.⁹

Three novelists, Lorna Ferguson, Philip Hensher, and Saleem Haddad, provided encouragement, and a fresh perspective, for my fiction and research. Ferguson, who led one of the creative writing modules I attended at Exeter College, the University of Oxford, in 2014, pointed out the potential to develop the short story “I Am Not Naked”¹⁰ into a longer work examining the same thematic concerns of socio-sexual anxieties in the patriarchal psyches of the Arab Middle East. She also encouraged my approach of reimagining objects and places from mundane life into something unfamiliar. I met Hensher at a queer literary function at a bookshop in Bristol, and as I expressed admiration for his (very) structurally unconventional 2015 novel *The Emperor Waltz*,¹¹ he advised that pushing the boundary of déjà-vu may prove worthwhile in the end, even if it incites concern in the beginning. Haddad’s debut *Guapa* was released in the second half of 2016 to a storm of acclaim,¹² and when I invited the author, 32, to Cheltenham to talk to my book group, he shared how the grandmother in his novel, who catches the Arab protagonist in bed with another man and thus launches the plot, is inspired by his own paternal grandmother back home. Although Teta is given a pivotal role in my novel as well, she is the antithesis of Haddad’s, a non-conformist seeking her own home fully conscious of the price her journey will levy.

The theoretical section of the writing-as-research benefited from journal peer assessment. An article culled from the thesis – a socio-literary analysis of gendered flânerie in Rabih Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman* – received comments from reviewers for *Middle Eastern*

⁹ See Irwin.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1.

¹¹ Hensher’s novel is a 615-page amalgam of disconnected, but still resonant, novellas and short stories set in different countries and historical periods, ranging from 3rd-century Rome to the German Weimar in the 1920’s, and from a gay bookshop in 1980s Britain to a social gathering in 2014 London, as well as a memoir unfolding in a UK hospital where Hensher had to spend a period under observation.

¹² See “Briefly Noted: *Guapa*,” *The New Yorker*.

Literatures. Given the anonymous nature of academic review I'm unable to thank the critics by name; I'm grateful nonetheless for their feedback, which has rendered my conceptualization of the flâneuse a somewhat less daunting process. For their encouraging and useful comments – and for their role in creating a most enjoyable viva voce experience – I'm also grateful to my examining team: Professor Syrine C. Hout and Professor Ros Jennings.

Four appendices inform my research and its progress. The first two appendices consist of the thesis's eponymous "I Am Not Naked," first in its short story form and then as a detailed synopsis outlining the progression of the craft and its themes of shame and sexualized bodies in the longer text that the story mutated into. The third appendix is an article I wrote on the vicissitudes of queer diasporic homes in Rabih Alameddine's early fiction. I have drawn on this article, published in *Excursions* 5(1) in 2014, to inform the segment in my literary analysis pertaining to the literature review of Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*, as well as to the postcolonial representations of queerness in Anglophone Lebanese fiction.

The fourth and final appendix is my empirical creative writing study appraising the conception of home among Lebanese university students, aged 19 to 21, from a coming of age perspective. My findings in this narrative study, conducted at the University of Balamand in Beirut, and approved at RD1 stage, reveal a level of flânerie among the respondents commensurate with my theoretical postulation of flânerie, which I then scrutinize more closely within my own fiction and later on in the comparative literary criticism. In many cases, incidents students witnessed on the streets informed their critiques of their home culture and their emotional voyages of coming of age in search of other, more viable, homes, usually in the form of civic awareness and participation.

Acknowledgement is also due to the following publications in which excerpts leading up to the novel have appeared: *Prole: Poetry and Prose* (2014) and *Compass: An Anthology of Work from the Creative Writing Programme at the University of Gloucestershire* (2015).

Finally, I would like to thank Hani Addada, Rabih Chatila, Karim Dahdah, Melanie Ilic, Paul Lewes, Laura Jane Moth, Jo Parkin, Maryam Rezaeian, Peter Slocombe, and Siobhan Williams. In different capacities, they helped me navigate the tetchy field of university bureaucracy, and/or listened when I needed to talk.

Although *I Am Not Naked* may have been inspired by a slew of personal incidents I witnessed firsthand over the past decade, the plot in my novel is largely fictional.

Note on Citation and Transliteration

Given the interdisciplinary nature of creative writing research, I have opted to use the referencing guidelines of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th ed.), often adopted by scholars in both the Humanities and Social Sciences. Creative output is seldom home to a structured bibliography, and yet since my thesis is framed within a scholarly framework, I have flagged the smorgasbord of creative and critical artifacts that inform the literary criticism in a list of detailed endnotes at the end of the dissertation. To set them apart from this criticism, the other sections of the thesis that feature citations use continuous footnotes. The endnotes are followed by a comprehensive Chicago-style Bibliography.

My empirical creative writing study and my critical article on female flânerie in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*, both of which appear in the section on appendices, follow the referencing apparatuses of the journals they were originally submitted to – the citation styles of BJMES and Harvard, respectively.

As my novel progressed, the need for narrating widely used phrases in the context I'm writing within, in their original language (Arabic), rather than an anglicized version, became obvious. It was important to emphasize the locality of the setting where endearments like “sweetheart” and “darling” are almost always spoken in the native Arabic, and in some cases, in the colonial French, and would appear unnatural in English, even if in a novel. Similarly, nouns used in daily life, such as *manqūsheh*, have no direct translation into English in the first place.

Therefore, I transliterated most of these terms, which appear italicized throughout the thesis, by using the Arabic vernacular spoken in Lebanon and Syria, rather than Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). In doing so, I used the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) and the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (BJMES), which follow the same transliteration system. Accordingly, all Arabic words that appear in the Glossary of translated terms, and subsequently in the novel, are transliterated with diacritical marks (macrons and dots), except the following: personal and place names.

Finally, on a very basic level, a novel is meant to be enjoyed, something that I hope the next section of the thesis manages to achieve.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Author’s Declaration	4
Preface and Acknowledgments	5
Note on Citation and Transliteration	12
Dedication	16
I. The Creative Artifact	
<i>I Am Not Naked: A Novel of Lebanon and Syria</i>	
Character Cast.....	19
Glossary of Arabic and French Terms.....	20
i. Part One	
<i>Finishing School</i>	23
(Lebanon, Summer 1984)	
ii. Part Two	
<i>After the Race</i>	83
(Lebanon and Syria, Spring 2013)	
iii. Part Three	
<i>Risk</i>	153
(Lebanon and Syria, Spring 2012)	

- iv. Part Four
Lapis Lazuli.....190
(Lebanon, Summer 2013)

II. Theorizing Home and the Flâneuse: Literary Criticism and Analysis

- i. Introduction.....211
- ii. The Feminist and Postcolonial Flâneuse in Sleiman El Hajj’s *I Am Not Naked* (2016) and in Rabih Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013).....224
- iii. The Queer(ed) Flâneuse in *I Am not Naked* (2016) and Samar Yazbek’s *Cinnamon* (2012).....256
- iv. Conclusion.....276

III. Appendices

- i. Appendix 1
El Hajj, Sleiman. *I Am Not Naked: the Short Story*.....280
(*Prole: Poetry and Prose*, 2014)
- ii. Appendix 2
Synopsis of *I Am Not Naked: the Novel*.....285
- iii. Appendix 3
El Hajj, Sleiman. *Between Validation and Emasculation: Paradox of the West as Architect of Queer Autonomy in Rabih Alameddine’s The Perv*.....290

Excursions 5, no. 1 (2014): 65-81.

iv.	Appendix 4	
	El Hajj, Sleiman. Rewriting Home: A Creative Writing Study in Post-Postwar Lebanon.....	304
	Notes	327
	Bibliography	343

*For my parents who wanted me to be a doctor of a different kind,
and loved me enough to let me go*

I. The Creative Artifact

I AM NOT NAKED
A NOVEL OF LEBANON AND SYRIA
By Sleiman El Hajj

Character Cast

Glossary

Finishing School
(Part One)
Lebanon, Summer 1984

After the Race
(Part Two)
Lebanon and Syria, Spring 2013

Risk
(Part Three)
Lebanon and Syria, Summer 2012

Lapis Lazuli
(Part Four)
Lebanon, Summer 2013

Character Cast

- *Teta*: the grandmother
- *Jiddo*: the grandfather
- *Mazen*: Teta and Jiddo's elder son
- *Rami*: Mazen's younger brother (has Asperger's)
- *Samira*: Mazen's wife
- *Samira's mother* (unnamed)
- *Ramzi*: Mazen and Samira's only son/Teta and Jiddo's grandson
- *Anwar*: Jiddo's friend (deceased)
- *Nanig*: Anwar's widow and Teta's lover
- *Georgine*: Samira's childhood friend
- *Ziad*: Samira's boyfriend as a teenager
- *Madame Claudette*: runs a finishing school in Samira's hometown
- *Nohad*: Claudette's charwoman and a gypsy fortune teller

Glossary of Arabic and French Terms

- *Allahu akbar*: God is great
- *Allah yirḥamo*: May God have mercy on his soul
- *Allah yistor!*: God protect us!
- *amrik sittna*: a sycophantic expression indicating deference to female customers or employers (whatever you say, Madam)
- *‘ānis*: spinster
- *‘asfūriyeh*: a reference in popular culture to a Lebanese asylum for the mentally ill
- *aḥdāth*: literally, “the events,” a prosaic reference to the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990), and to the ongoing Syrian Civil War (2011–present)
- *akīd*: of course
- *‘azzabtik* (fem.): a term used by way of apology (sorry for bothering you)
- *bala sharaf entī?*: Are you without honor?
- *bala zo’*: rude, tactless, uncouth
- *bassāra*: a female fortuneteller
- *bayt banāt*: A workhouse for women
- *c’est ce qui manquait*: that’s what we needed (said sarcastically)
- *chérie*: dear; darling; in frequent use by Francophiles in Lebanon
- *chū khass*: what does this have to do with [...]?
- *crème pâtissière*: French dessert cream
- *culotte*: underpants
- *edameh*: a good man
- *eḥkī ‘arabeh*: an exhortation to speak in Arabic
- *ḥabībī* (masc.), *ḥabībī* (fem.), and *ḥayete* (gender-neutral): terms of endearment
- *ḥaraket*: denotes pretentious or contrived behavior
- *hek*: this way; this manner
- *hors d’œuvre*: antipasti, starter
- *je vous en prie*: please

- *kāfra*: a female atheist
- *labneh*: salted yogurt strained through a cheese cloth, a Levantine breakfast delicacy
- *les confitures*: the jams
- *les orties*: the nettles
- *liaison amoureuse*: love affair
- *lūtī*: a derogatory reference to a male homosexual
- *mabrūk*: congratulations
- *manqūsheh*: a thin-dough Levantine pastry covered with thyme and oil, and sometimes with cheese or other toppings
- *merci beaucoup*: thanks very much
- *nawriyeh*: a female gypsy
- *ota*: cat
- *paillettes*: round, paper-thin shiny wafers sometimes embroidered on evening attire
- *qubqāb*: wooden clogs worn as bathroom slippers in traditional Syrian homes
- *qui*: who
- *Sabah*: means morning; also the name of the pan-Arab Lebanese diva active between 1943 and 2009
- *sahlab*: a dessert containing milk, orchid powder, and cinammon
- *sitt*: “lady” in Lebanese and Syrian parlance
- *Tante*: aunt in French; it is common practice in Lebanon to refer to an older woman as “tante” in an unprofessional context. The formal appellation is “Madame”.
- *tartare de bœuf*: steak tartar
- *tarte aux poires*: pear pie/tart
- *trompe l’oeil*: an art technique that relies on optical illusion to create a three-dimensional impression of objects depicted in a painting
- *wara’ inab*: stuffed grape leaves, a staple of the Lebanese cuisine
- *wlī* (fem.): a colloquial rebuke
- *ya*: usually precedes the name of a person being addressed in direct speech
- *ya waylī*: a self-deprecating expression indicating misfortune

- *ya rayiss*: an informal version of “Sir” in Lebanese and Syrian vernacular
- *za ‘īm* (singular); *zu ‘ama* (plural): a self-appointed or de facto leader (or leaders)

I AM NOT NAKED: A NOVEL OF LEBANON AND SYRIA

—Part One—

Finishing School

Lebanon, Summer 1984

Samira's memories of her childhood were so scant and distant that they had become rigid to the point where she could no longer trust them. But this she remembered very well. It was the summer of 1984, in the last decade of the Civil War in Lebanon. Samira's family, as did so many other mountain dwellers, stayed put in the family's hometown nestled in the relative safety of the Beqaa Valley. Her father and brother had gone to war, and she was left in the care of her mother.

School was over, thankfully, and Samira, 14, was starting to see an older boy she'd proudly ensnared, she imagined, earlier in the year. Her mother was frantic when word started getting round – even Nohad, the *nawriyeh* fortune-teller who was supposedly a recluse and lived in a cottage on the outskirts of town had heard the story – and she found herself and her daughter caught in a maelstrom of prudish slurs.

The news managed to leak outside the village and reached Samira's father in Beirut so that whenever the phone rang in the living room, shudders followed. Concrete action was needed, and her mother took the brave, and expensive, decision to send her to Madame Claudette for finishing.

As the esteemed mayor's widow, there was always much talk about Madame Claudette's background, and its importance in educating girls and setting standards for the nubile cohort in the province. At her house, she taught a variety of subjects, including French, embroidery, flower arranging, art history, cookery, the history of furniture and art objects, housekeeping and conversation, and most importantly, manners and etiquette.

According to local intelligence, Madame Claudette's late father was a retired diplomat with a rigorous eye for decorum and upstanding upbringing. She'd met her husband, the would-be-mayor, while he was finishing his law degree in France. Her father had arranged for them to meet at a function during her second year at finishing school in Paris in 1948 and he had courted

her steadily, much to her parents' relief. His own family was equally delighted: he had returned home with a Lebanese bride, someone with a similar background, religion, affinities.

Always and throughout, Samira's early memories were mystified by tales of Madame Claudette's past. The villagers described her parents as sybarites whose lifestyle had mired them in debt. By the early 70s, at the cusp of the *aḥdāth* triggering the war in Beirut, they were already facing bankruptcy, even as Claudette had returned to them, upon her father's insistence, the dowry she'd received upon marriage, the only money she had to herself.

Her parents fled their house in the city and it was soon overtaken by squatters and bandits – Claudette was a widow by then and braved on her own the upsetting story that reached the village of how a disgruntled militiaman had defecated in the once-opulent parlor of Madame Claudette's mother while his pals photographed the moment – and they died in Cyprus shortly afterwards.

“Of a broken heart,” the gossips said.

The next thing Samira remembered was the will – Madame Claudette's husband's. Its terms were peculiar and provided impetus to the overheard snippets of conversation that continued, for years, to adorn her supervised playtime as a child. It was designed to allow his widow long-term financial stability, enough for comfortable spending and a full-time helper, but constrained her movement. Claudette would have to remain in the village to be eligible for an annuity, which was to be forfeited were she to live elsewhere.

Apparently, a separate clause clarified the legal mechanism through which the deceased's wishes would be executed: to continue receiving her allowance, Madame Claudette would need to provide the bank with proof of address every sixty days, a document to be confirmed by whoever was mayor-elect in office during her lifetime. Although she would contest it in at least two courts of law, the stipulation was never rescinded.

There had been no point to keep the content of the will a secret. “It was his way of having me stay close to him, always, and to the people and village he so deeply loved,” Madame had said at the funeral. Underneath her mourning garb of sheer lace and black crepe, she was straight-faced and dignified, and kept any grief she had at bas-relief. Her words were accepted at face value; her husband had been popular as mayor, and a pillar of the community, largely due to his patience and generosity towards the men-folk in town, and after his passing and the death of

her parents within the same year, Claudette was admired for her stoic, felicitous behavior throughout all the adversity she had faced.

Then came the news the town had wished for but never materialized during the two decades of the marriage: The elegant and respectable Madame Claudette was starting a finishing school of her own.

Madame admitted a maximum of three girls to be finished over a period of three months and with so many girls applying, especially during the war, many faced disappointing news. In a way Samira was fortunate for being selected, which wasn't to say she wasn't piqued at first.

Time spent at Madame Claudette's would detract from that she could spend devising a viable strategy that would allow her beau, Ziad, to pursue his attentions to her content. Did Claudette have any needs, any weaknesses or liability, which interaction with her would unveil? If Samira were able to discern anything she could lever to her advantage, then perhaps the elusive Madame could be recruited to her cause. There were always possibilities.

Especially uplifting was the idea that 'being finished' would both appease Samira's parents', their concern for her reputation in the village, and help her, indirectly, get what she sought – time with and proximity to Ziad. When the evening of her first lesson finally arrived, she was beaming and bubbly. Having spent one hour after her bath preparing her hair in *bigoudi* rollers and primping in front of the mirror, she thought of how best to impress, and was as ready as she could be.

Madame Claudette's maid awaited Samira. She unlatched the gate and let her in. As they trekked to the house, Samira was intrigued by the garden. It was neat, not ostentatious, and seemed to draw its calming effect from the different beds of roses and hedges of lavender sprinkled amid the fig trees dotting the property. But there was also a leafy patch protected by what, from a distance, Samira thought was barbed wire.

The stalks appeared to be a mess, hemmed in by the fence, and seemed incongruous with the rest of the carefully groomed space. It was the first thing that had caught her attention when she came with her mother for the initial interview.

The house itself was in the traditional style of Mount Lebanon mansions, spacious but not humongous, with a stone-paved façade and a trapezoid brick roof. Samira had often heard the

villagers speak of their visits here as treats. The first parlor they entered, one in many, was sunlit and clad in mahogany. The abat-jour had been tilted to allow the seeping sunrays to rest upon a china vase with verdant stems encircled by a blue ribbon. Their leaves were unfamiliar.

“What are they?” Samira asked.

She reached over to touch them, but the maid let out a little yelp and pushed her hand away. “Don’t!” she said. “They sting.”

“Where do they come from? No one in the village has this.”

“They’re called nettles. Madame grows them in the coop at the back of the garden.”

“But it appears to be neglected.”

The maid recoiled at the word. “I don’t know what you are talking about.” Her dour and cabbage-round face had shut upon itself.

As they ambled across the house to where she was expected, Samira saw the place as it was: a warren of ornate woodwork and damask tapestries with most rooms crowded to Claudette’s content, and to her husband’s before her, with furniture, *objets d’art*, houseplants of different sizes in bronze cauldrons, chinaware, and assorted cloisonné curiosities, carefully collected over the years. So much so, it felt odd that thunderclaps, or the occasional courant d’air, could penetrate the house, as if passing through a gossamer wall across the horded rooms. When she made this comment to lighten the mood, she was met with a grimace.

Soon they were standing at the entrance to what the maid, in a muted tone, said was the anteroom where Madame regaled visitors with music before moving on to the adjacent dining hall. “It’s where you’ll be having your lessons too,” she said knocking gently. In fact, even as she spoke, they could hear the notes of the piano. They waited, and Samira examined one of the prints on the door. An 1876 political vignette grinned back at her: it was a translated cartoon, Benjamin Disraeli making Queen Victoria Empress of India. *De nouvelles couronnes pour les anciennes*. “New crowns for old ones,” the satirist had scribbled underneath. “The magic of flattery.”

A full minute passed, and with no answer coming from inside, the maid opened the door and motioned to Samira to a divan winding against the wall. “Sit there,” she whispered, and was gone.

In the middle of the room a simple silk curtain separated the divan from the piano area. This had been parted and Samira could see Madame Claudette, a slender woman still handsome in her 50s, her ample and shapely embonpoint bent over the keyboard in the concentration of performance.

More compelling than Claudette was the painting towering behind her on the wall. It was mounted under a plaster arch, giving a lush feeling of levitating into a different setting. A woman with an expectant look on her face was propped in the nude upon a plethora of pillows, the whole framed by a curtain that seemed to jut outwards from the scene – probably an after-touch by Madame Claudette or her husband. The obtrusive drapes cast a shadow that mixed with that of a man approaching the lying figure.

It was odd to have received her in that way, scheduling a lesson and then seeming to ignore her, but Samira was more curious than unnerved. The atmosphere of the anteroom was different from any of the others in the house. Perhaps because it was smaller and less cluttered, it was able to achieve a more foreign yet intimate, even romantic and ethereal, impression. She tried to find the clue to it in its sparse furnishings, in the way travertine marble, along with a single teal and burgundy carpet, tiled the room, in the fact that a carafe filled with red wine and two crystal glasses stood next to a vase with roses and nettles – she could recognize them now – and in the pervading perfume that was not only the vague scent of the roses surrounding the nettles, but also of the rosewater in which the arrangement floated on the malachite table next to the divan.

Samira's gaze returned to the painting on the wall. She longed to draw the curtain and see the face of the intruder behind it. If she tiptoed behind Madame, she might be able to do so and return to her place in no time. She treaded carefully on the carpet and sneaked behind her back. And then she was facing the naked woman. She marveled at her for a moment, examining her languid pose, the way her arm curved towards her crotch, and just as she was about to raise her own hand upwards to the curtain, she realized that the music had stopped. Samira was mortified.

“How lucky am I?” Madame Claudette said. “The prettiest girl in the province has come to see me.”

If Samira had committed a faux-pas, Claudette quickly dispelled it. “Go on *chérie*,” she said. “Draw the curtain as I watch. I know you want to.” Samira reached forward but her hand hit a solid surface; the curtain was part of the painting.

Madame Claudette beckoned to Samira to sit next to her. “All my girls want to try that out, and they fall for it. The technique is called the *trompe l’oeil*. It does exactly that, it deceives the eye.” Samira was still embarrassed and Claudette wrapped an arm around her. “Don’t look so stricken, love. That’s French Orientalism for you. Welcome to my boudoir.”

“It reminds me of something, but I can’t put a finger on it.”

“Of some lessons at school perhaps? The life of the Ottomans?”

“A sultan’s harem!” Samira exclaimed. “Is that what is? It must be.”

“It’s supposed to be a scene from a seraglio. The women, the concubines, are called odalisques.”

“And the man hidden by the curtain is the sultan!”

“Not only are you beautiful, but also very clever,” Madame Claudette observed. “You look much older than your real age, *chérie*.”

No one in the village had ever spoken to her thus, or made her feel special, not even before the Ziad affair came to light. “Merci, Madame,” she said, still savoring the words. “Was the spying necessary? It’s unsettling.”

“Probably not. The sultan wouldn’t have acted this way. He had those poor girls wound around his fingers and could command them to perform anything for him. But, of course, a creative artist wouldn’t care for that. It spoils the oeuvre.”

“But how could they manage on their own, without men, not even sure he would ever give them so much as a glance?”

“You’re different from other girls, aren’t you? Not afraid to speak your mind and, with me, you shouldn’t be.” She winked at her. “There were always ways,” Madame Claudette said vaguely. “There are roots and routes.”

“You mean affairs? But they only had access to eunuchs!”

Claudette narrowed her eyes. “Why are you really here? To improve your French and culinary skills, to learn the *étiquette mondaine, peut-être*?” It was the question Samira was waiting for. She told her about Ziad.

“I did hear a story like that. He’s the Palestinian gardener at your school, isn’t he?”

“Ziad is *edameh*, Madame,” Samira said. “I want to continue seeing him; we’re doing nothing wrong.”

“So you need a friend who can guide you through, how to say, your *liaison amoureuse* and not judge. Someone who isn’t family.”

Samira crimsoned eagerly; Madame Claudette was as intelligent as the village people said she was. “You must call me *tante* from now on,” Claudette instructed. “Madame sounds too pompous.” She poured wine from the carafe and raised a glass to her lips. “To friends.”

“And new beginnings,” Samira said, even if it sounded audacious. She looked again at the seraglio on the wall, drawn in by its vortex of warm colors, a swirl of movement, and of anticipation. Claudette stood next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “It was like that with my own husband, you know, though he was a mayor, not a sultan.”

“And you accepted it?” Samira asked, surprised at the turn in conversation, and at how comfortable she felt asking personal questions.

“Yes,” said Tante Claudette, “I had to.”

It was as if both of them were testing each other after that initial meeting. Samira observed Tante Claudette as one did wild birds, noting the elegance or occasional strangeness of their fashions and the way their behaviors changed depending on whether they were alone with another, or in larger company. Tante Claudette was often pensive and seemed to dote on Samira who enjoyed the attention and basked in its warmth.

Although she was chatty and listened to her pupil’s complaints about the tedium of village life with a patience approaching kindness, she released personal information so rarely in their first few lessons that Samira kept returning to their meeting, alone, when Claudette let slip that she had been forbearing on the subject of her marital rights. To Samira’s mind, consumed by thoughts of her beau, the gobbet of information Tante Claudette had so casually released held a prurient appeal, and she mulled it over for days trying to determine its significance.

After that, it had only felt logical to tell Claudette in some detail about her trouble with Ziad, namely the difficulty to meet in private. Her mother wouldn’t let her date him openly, and the rigmarole of their trysts at his gardener’s lodge was starting to wear her out. “She keeps telling me I’ll be ruined, Tante,” Samira said, holding out a jar of fig jam. “She sent you this as a thank-you for taking me on.”

“Merci, *chérie*, you are kind,” Claudette said, placing it on the malachite table. “I should have mentioned though I prefer fruit raw. *Les confitures* never appealed to me.” Two pillowcases lay next to her on the divan, ready for embroidery. “Shall we have the lesson first, and then talk? You need to get your money’s worth.”

Samira paced the room and paused at the entrance, Claudette watching closely. The print on the door, next to the caricature of Queen Victoria, showed in Commedia Del Arte fashion a hunting dog coiffed with a fez gazing down at a rabbit wearing a pince-nez and mittens. The dog had its head cocked to one side while the rabbit stretched out an amiable paw towards his canine companion. Beneath the two creatures was the epithet *Meilleurs Amis*: Best Friends.

“Friends,” she said, almost compulsively. “Friends.”

“What is it, *chérie*? If you won’t have your lesson, you might at least unburden yourself.”

“Ziad is keen to make love to me,” she finally admitted. “I’m scared I will lose everything then. The stakes are too high.”

Soon it was dusk. Samira’s tears had long dried and she was sipping a glass of wine. Tante Claudette stopped playing the piano and sat next to her on the divan. Together, they looked at the painting on the wall.

“What do you think the odalisque is doing?” Claudette asked. “What is she up to?”

Samira hesitated.

“Don’t be shy; you can say it. Unless you think I’m one of the pruders in the village.”

“Of course not. But it looks as if she is about to touch herself down there.”

“And why would she do that?”

Samira looked at her in disbelief, and Claudette said, “Look closer at the curtain, *chérie*. You were keen to draw it the other time.”

The compelling, forbidding presence of the sultan stirred something in her; she hated him, resented his whims, the way he could order the cake and then choose not to eat it. If he wished, he could watch from behind a screen concealing his presence the odalisque pleasuring herself. She imagined the concubines being aware of this possibility yet left to the lascivious torment of inaction, able to do little but wait, without daring to ascertain whether or not they were really being surveyed.

Aloud, she said, “She couldn’t be sure if, and when, the sultan would visit her.”

“There’s a lesson for you in that,” said Tante Claudette. “The harem in Ottoman seraglios developed unusually large private bits because frottage was their only resource. That, or chop-chop – they lose their heads at sunrise.”

The more Samira chafed at her mother’s injunctions, the more encouragement she received from Tante Claudette, and the closer she felt to her. Her mother was relieved. If she was spending this much time at finishing school, then that was a sign the mayor’s widow had managed to strike sense into her rambunctious daughter.

“I’m off to Tante Claudette’s,” Samira would say, and “she is Madame to you, don’t say Tante, it’s too familiar!” her mother chided, even as she was pleased her girl had gained favor with the town’s most eminent lady. To Claudette, Samira confided that Ziad wanted to get physical with her, again, and that she wasn’t sure that was a good idea yet.

“A voice in my head keeps telling me it’s wrong, you see.” She was in Tante Claudette’s boudoir, a wooden hoop in her lap. The stab of the needle through the taut fabric was satisfying.

“The voice speaks right. Your stitches are atrocious.” It was Samira’s third attempt that afternoon to embroider her monogram on a handkerchief. “Loosen it from the frame so it doesn’t get misshapen, and don’t look so gloomy; it ruins your complexion. Do you remember what I suggested last time? The way of the odalisque.”

“Yes, but we’ve done all that,” Samira said impatiently. “He wants more.”

Samira looked up at the seraglio on the wall, its corners illuminated by the late afternoon sun seeping through the curtains under the arch. The oblivious odalisque, lying in waiting, and the shadow of the gazing impostor, even if it were the sultan himself, taunted her. She longed to reach up and draw the curtain to expose him, but she knew from before that was impossible.

“There are roots and routes, *chérie*,” Claudette said, holding up the hoop to assess progress. Later, after the end-of-summer fiasco was over, and Samira had time to reflect on her plight, she realized how, in these instances, her tone had been more lewd than instructional.

“There’s another terrain you might want to explore.” Tante Claudette’s free hand brushed daintily over the *trompe l’oeil*, grazing the odalisque’s behind, suspended as it were midair on the divan: This was an eye opener.

“I would never have thought of that,” she told Ziad after her lesson finished and she walked the twenty minutes over to his gardening shack. He too seemed taken aback, marveling at his unexpected ally, an altogether newfound fortune.

The sex was not as good as what Ziad called “the real” but he said they could try it for a while, and he loved it, at least then. The rose trellis combing his lodge was rustled by a breeze and sprayed its dying petals into the room like severed tongues. Ziad stood up and started collecting the petals in a plastic bag. He worked meticulously, bending and stretching his arms with the hunting precision of a panther to gather any petals that had strayed under the bed or the edges of furniture.

“I sell them to the ice cream shop in town, and I didn’t get a chance to pick the flowers from outside before you arrived,” he explained. “They use them to make the rosewater flavor that is so popular here thanks to your Claudette.”

“But they’re withered,” Samira said.

“Not fully! The roses are the school’s property technically, so I can’t cut them when in bloom. No one would miss them now, and they sell at a reduced price. That clinches the deal.” His face was still dark with the afterglow of sex. “They don’t get much, but I need the money, Samira.”

Ziad made a mock bow, naked, and Samira leaned forward and kissed the stubble on his chin. “We owe your half-change of heart to Tante Claudette, yeah? She’s a whole different bag of goods that one.”

“No one cares what you think *ḥabībī*, least of all Tante Claudette.”

“She’s something else, I bet you. There’s more to her than what all those droopy folk think.”

“Don’t say anything bad about her, please. If it weren’t for her classes, I wouldn’t even be able to leave the house much and see you.”

“Well she’s gotten you here, hasn’t she? Did you ever wonder why she accepted you for finishing?”

“She thought the way the town had ganged up on me, on us, was just nasty. And then I suppose after that, she liked me and we got along well. What’s wrong with that?” Samira linked

her arms around his neck and let her fingers stroke his chest. “She thinks I’m quite lovely, on many levels, and that you are lucky to have me.”

“She said that, really?” Ziad asked. “Never mind.” A familiar look clouded his face.

“Are you thinking about your family again, *ḥabībī*?” Ten years ago, Ziad was only 14 when he came here seeking work and safety away from the horrors in Palestine. The year after, the Civil War started in Beirut.

“If she’s really your friend, then she should help us. I need money desperately.”

“So we can run away together?”

“Yes, perhaps, but also for my family.”

Ziad, she knew, never had a mother. She died during childbirth, and he was raised by his father, a chemist, and his father’s two sisters. But in the spring of 1973, the year before Ziad escaped to Lebanon, a gun-toting teenager from one of the settler families had entered his father’s shop and shot him when he was told he would not be able to pay for his purchases at a later time. So when Ziad said “family,” Samira knew he meant his aunts. Both of them were devoted to him, urging him to move to Lebanon’s relative safety, and in the meantime they stayed put, looking after their house in Jerusalem. They had refused to give up their home.

“I can imagine them carrying on their daily antics, their housekeeping and their prayers, waiting for my return. And what have I done, really? Jumped from the fryer into the fire!”

The next time she visited his cottage, they did not have sex. Ziad was in an agitated mood; there was something he hadn’t mentioned the other night, he said. He then surprised her by declaring that Tante Claudette, whom he had seen around town, evoked mixed feelings in him, given her striking resemblance to one of his aunts back home: “Maggie was no Claudette though,” he repeated more than once that evening.

Ziad might have been Samira’s clandestine beau, but he was also her storyteller. His skills as a raconteur had become evident early on in their relationship; his accounts of home in Palestine were engaging and picaresque, a thrilling respite in the aftermath of sex. He conjured characters from his past with wit and panache – audacious boys who, like him, courted trouble as children, throwing pebbles at Israeli soldiers and managing to remain alive – and the incidents he described ranged from household pranks to older pals’ tavern brawls and extended family meals,

and were always visual. They were also tender and doleful at times, and it was these that affected Samira the most for they seemed to forge a connection with him.

He said Maggie's ailments were driven by the strain of living under Israeli occupation, its violence so often unpunished it made her question God's existence. She grew up in Rama in the family's ancestral county but in the 1950s, residents were told they had an hour to flee the village before it was demolished. Ziad's parents and his aunts hiked the mountains for two days seeking shelter in a hamlet up the hill. When things calmed down, they managed to return to a shelled house and a cindered library. Ziad's father sold the property and moved the family to Jerusalem. "She was always bookish and religious, Maggie. I think her crisis of faith started then. But that was before my time."

The turning point happened in the winter of 1972 when he abetted his father in producing a miracle for his aunt's benefit. Their train was trapped by a blizzard and remained marooned for two days; they had been commuting from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to attend the Christmas Day service at the Church of the Nativity, almost 10 kilometers away from home. Bethlehem then was still under Israeli control and the journey had been fraught with multiple stops and searches along the way.

"Maggie had been suffering from the nerves for a while and had taken to smelling salts when, occasionally, she felt faint. Baba had given us Christmas presents the night before, but Maggie's was the prettiest: a vintage vinaigrette with a purple enamel cross engraved on it. That's where she put a sponge soaked in a solution of her salts dissolved in vinegar and the perfume she used."

"That sounds so beautiful and sad," Samira said, trying to imagine the scene. "Did he hope that the cross would inspire her if she started seeing it like that?"

"You mean if she associated it with her medicine?" Ziad scoffed. "My father would tell everyone it was our faith that kept the family going, but heck it wasn't prayer; rather it was the long, tedious hours at his chemist's shop. His stock of salts was constantly being depleted and replenished, especially after the Israeli settlements mushroomed like parasites and encroached upon us, bringing with them more havoc and violence. Aunt Maggie's Snow White spells, as we called them, started around then, and suddenly she was blaming God for everything. Baba was so outraged when she said she was no longer a believer, he struck her across the face calling her a *kāfra*, but we could all tell he was scared too. Scared and tired. He had to do something."

The fairytale reference awakened in Samira a wistfulness that made her want to cry. It wasn't that many years ago that her mother was telling her and her brother the Snow White story in so many iterations, all equally fantastic, Samira had begged her to choose and stick to one. So much had changed now, but she still had Ziad at least.

"What did Maggie witness on the train then? Did a miracle really happen?"

"We were stranded, there was no way we could leave or move forward before the weather improved, so Baba seized the opportunity to convert his loose-lipped sister to the right path. But to do so he needed my help."

"You were a child!" Samira protested. "What could you do?"

"I was a boy, and to my father, that made all the difference. My sisters are your sisters he often said; their honor is your honor; they're all the family you got now. Anyway, my task was easy. They'd all gone to the adjacent compartment for a night vigil – there was little else to do but pray that help would arrive or the storm stopped before victuals receded, and Maggie was bullied into joining. Baba had pleaded with her to help us keep face, and not offend anyone, least of all the Lord on His Birthday, and I think that must have softened her somehow. Through the crack of the door, I could see her spraying perfume on herself and her bed, something she often did to cheer herself up after crying.

After she left to join the others, I put Baba's instructions into place. He had prescribed me an early night, being too young to stay up. All I had to do was take the sponge out and dab it over the surface of the vinaigrette. I was also to spray some scent from her atomizer to hide the smell of the salts but there was no need; she'd helped set up her own miracle without knowing it. Then I returned to my room and waited."

Ziad's chortles made Samira uneasy. "I was always a hands-on chap, even at that age. I was never the school type, not finishing or otherwise."

"I still don't see what this is about and how Tante Claudette is related to it."

"You don't? You will one day, *hayete*. It's all the scheming life puts you through."

"To survive you mean?"

"Yes, or to keep a social position or uphold a status quo. For now, suffice to say that the resemblance of those two stops at the physical. Poor Maggie was no Claudette."

"What happened to her then? What did you do?"

“She couldn’t bear to stay up for the entire vigil so she returned to the next-door compartment she was sharing with her sister. And that’s when I heard a stifled scream and she ran to my berth, brandishing the vinaigrette in my face. ‘Ziad, look, it’s happened,’ she said. ‘But it’s too difficult to bear even now; if there really is a God out there then –’ She broke down in tears, and I took it from her hand. The enamel had turned a fiery red.”

“So a miracle did happen then?” Samira asked incredulous. “It made your aunt God-fearing again.”

“Pious, yes, but that wasn’t magic. I think this was when I started questioning my own beliefs. I’m happy I have none now, thanks to Baba. He kept the trinket with him that night and removed the tiny strips he had so carefully slipped into the dents of the cross. When Maggie examined it closely the morning after – she even scratched it with her fingers – there was nothing there but a silver container with a deeply etched cross. We’d pulled off a miracle and restored good faith. Tit for tat.”

“But what were the strips on the vinaigrette? Why did the color change?”

“They were bits of litmus paper from my father’s shop. The vinegar in the salts is acidic so there it was – a red cross for Christmas!”

There was silence after that, as if the epiphany, and its recollection and implications, rendered them speechless.

When Samira showed up for her lesson the following week, she remembered to bring fresh figs. It was the day she was to learn how to prepare Tante Claudette’s specialty, *tartare de bœuf*. The fruit, Claudette’s favorite, was meant to complement it.

The onion, yolk, and mustard dressing was soon ready, but the meat itself was missing, and then they heard the rustle of a dress and a furtive step. “What took you so long?” Claudette asked. The *bassāra* Nohad, who was also her charwoman, appeared in the kitchen, looking miserable. She had just returned from the market. Samira noticed immediately her empty hands.

“Why so despondent, Nohad? Where is the *viande*?”

“The butcher wouldn’t sell me any Madame. His wife was there and she sent me packing.”

“But why would she do that? She just wasted her husband’s money. Lean meat has become so expensive.”

Nohad squirmed and looked miserable. “She said last time I gave her twins the evil eye and —”

“Ah, the half-wit!” Tante Claudette exclaimed. “And her husband said nothing?”

“He only asked quietly that I leave. Also to send you his apologies ‘though I’m sure Madame will understand,’ he said.”

“We shall see about that,” Tante Claudette answered. “Samira, bring my parasol and follow me!” It was antique, and a staple of her summer wardrobe, helping to ward off the scorching sunshine, and for the duration of their journey into town, Claudette walked briskly, moving the parasol from one shoulder to the other.

Apprised of their visit, the butcher and his wife would have been better prepared, might have dressed differently or even agreed on a suitable story to account for their reckless treatment of Nohad, but as it were, they were flabbergasted. The fan on the counter was doing little to dissipate the heat, and they both looked flushed, and a bit stupid Samira thought, as Tante Claudette unleashed her contempt and upbraided them.

“Please understand us, we meant no harm,” the man implored, putting up a paltry defense, but his wife was more defiant. “We’ve already explained to you that the *nawriyeh* made our boys ill for two days after she set eyes on them and mumbled something; what more do you want?”

“Nohad has seen them playing next to the carcasses your husband throws away; why wouldn’t they fall sick?”

“That’s different,” the woman replied. “It gives them immunity; besides, it really is up to us to serve whomever we want.” Then, she made her culminating point. “Luckily, we don’t have daughters to worry about finishing, and even then, we wouldn’t let them come close two meters to a girl who beds the school gardener, the way you have, *ya Sitt!*”

Samira took the words in her stride, they weren’t unfamiliar, but Claudette was livid. “How dare you?” she sputtered, as the butcher tried to make peace, his platitudes muffled by the layers of fat across his chest. “I’m taking my business elsewhere,” she declared and darted outside before the couple could plead or object.

Tante Claudette was white-faced under layers of make-up. “What unpleasant people, *bala zo’*,” Samira ventured, quickening her pace not to fall behind and be blinded by the ferrule of the shifting parasol.

“His wife is a shrew, and he has no balls. I wouldn’t deign to fuck her even with a French cucumber covered with a mush of stinging nettles, and it’s a pity,” she said, turning to Samira, “vegetables in this country are petite and the nettles in my garden don’t sting much!”

“Have I startled you?” Tante Claudette apologized. “Churlish behavior brings out the worst in me. Come, hold my parasol while I stretch my hands.”

The only other meat-seller in town was another twenty minutes away, and by the time they reached him, Samira was exhausted. Streams of foundation trickled down Claudette’s face, and she looked changed. The crowd of housewives waiting their turn parted as they entered, letting them be served first. Here, the butcher-in-chief was a scraggy elderly man who was slightly more personable than his competitor. He brushed his apprentice aside and beamed at Tante Claudette, insisting to serve them himself.

“*Je vous en prie*, we will pick up the meat in half an hour; I don’t jump queues,” Madame said, returning to the door. “That’s a problem we’ve been trying to set straight before the war years even. It’s vulgar.”

Samira was seeing her in a different light today, and Ziad might have been right about her being more than what met the eye, but she was totally enjoying it. The revelation that her friend and mentor was spirited and strove to get what she wanted resonated with Samira’s own feisty character.

The heat was becoming unbearable. “Let’s get ice cream,” Samira suggested.

“With spoons, mind. No cone licking in public. It’s unladylike.”

The scene at the ice cream parlor reenacted that at the butcher’s. The owner sidetracked his assistant and stepped forward to serve Madame Claudette in person. There were a few customers already, all waiting to sate the cravings of their palettes, and again, the suggestion that Claudette and Samira be served first was offered and declined.

As they waited, silence fell as if the new arrivals had a buffering effect, and Samira could hear the gurgles of milk bubbling in a giant aluminum bowl over a gas burner pitted with shrapnel. The shop, which opened in the 1940s during the French Mandate and saw many a chaperoned village courtship, never closed its doors, not even when the building housing it was pockmarked by the retaliating bullets of disgruntled militias. They’d had a member sniped by a villager here when the *ahdāth* started; inevitable skirmishes had followed.

The man finished paddling colorful tiers of ice cream from different cases into cones and submarine-shaped plastic boats then scooped rosewater sorbet into a cup in the crux of his hand and presented it to Tante Claudette like an offering.

“Eau de rose,” he announced solemnly. “The water of our freshest roses. And for you Demoiselle Samira?”

“Make something special for my girl,” Claudette answered. “Be creative.”

The mood of that afternoon was fizzy and peculiar. Somehow, boundaries had been trespassed and decorum was suspended. It was as if the two of them were ordinary women gamboling downtown and eating ice cream with a spoon. Samira looked up at the tufts of cumulus hovering overhead and imagined that if she reached far enough, she could touch them.

Samira was particularly assiduous in her lessons the week after – she darned her monogram and set up a steak tartar to perfection – and tried to hone her speech and comportment to the best of her ability. Tante Claudette had spoken in no uncertain terms that manners at finishing school, and more importantly in public life, trumped most other matters. “A rude girl is worse than a charlatan,” she said.

As a sign of favor and a reward for her pupil’s efforts, Claudette opened the parasol, told Nohad to guard house and garden, and took Samira for another stroll through town. The trip this time was less sensational but equally memorable, and Samira tried to multitask, listening to Tante Claudette’s recitation of the history of the parasol and noting the awed expressions of the people down the street, a mixture of envy and respect.

Passers-by were tipping off their straw hats and saluting them in earnest. Some were more intrepid and ventured to approach, presenting a daughter or a sister to Madame who only nodded stoically, promising nothing. “They’re all such hypocrites,” Samira said. Not even a month ago, so many of them had turned their faces away when they spotted her on the street.

“Everyone has vices; these are no exception, and if you consider their roots, you’ll understand the route they’ve chosen,” Tante Claudette said. “Some protect theirs better, that’s all.”

“Or else remain in limbo like the woman in the painting, the *oudalisque*!”

“*Odalisque*,” corrected Tante Claudette. “Articulate your syllables well, *chérie*, unless you want to sound like poor Nohad. She’s had to grow tough hide that one, bless her.”

Nohad was famous in the village for her lisp, as well as her impressive skill at reading cups. Samira thought of Nohad singing, if she believed no one could hear her, scrubbing Tante Claudette's kitchen floor on her knees then weeding the garden and standing by the garden gate, waiting for them to return.

That Tante Claudette even knew Nohad had been news to Samira at first – Claudette had noted her surprise and winked at her: “Everyone knows the town *bassāra*, and she can help with things other than gossip.” Under Tante Claudette's instructions, Nohad had carried many of the antiques from the house to the attic in the early years of the war when no one knew yet what course it would take. It was there too, surrounded by loaded trusses, that they had taken refuge on days when reports from the town hall had been bad, and residents had been urged to stay in and lock up.

After a round of coffee-cup readings, all suitably dismal, Nohad had brought back news to Claudette that one of the widows in town had returned to her cottage to find it occupied by armed squatters on their way to the city. The woman was taken in for the night by the new mayor's family and returned to a ravaged home in the morning.

“Life was like that back then,” Claudette had said. “Completely random. You'd be gallivanting down the street to do your shopping in the afternoon and find yourself homeless or limbless in the evening. And if I couldn't take control over my own house, I would at least survey what could go on inside, even if I couldn't prevent it. I wasn't going to leave that to happenstance!”

Samira had taken time to grasp the story. “Surely you weren't going to spy on whoever entered uninvited,” she said, and Claudette admonished, “It's not spying if it's your own house; it's fair game, especially in a war.”

She asked the metal-maker in the village to provide her with a number of louvered screens to further air some of the rooms gone stale, ostensibly. In truth, these were to be faux-ventilators used across the attic as viewing vents. They had taken time to set up, given how cluttered the attic, on the same level of flooring as the roof beams, had become. Nohad alone had helped with the installation. She lay prone on the plywood floor, screwing each vent to the joists below the rafters above the rooms Claudette suspected would interest an imposter. “I didn't trust

anyone from the village to do it, certainly not the men. She had the hands for it too, as agile as any man's."

One day, a group of young ruffians from one of the rival towns managed to get into the house and started looking for valuables to pilfer, all the while chanting "God is great, *Allahu akbar*," unwittingly putting on a performance for the spectators hiding in the attic. Tante Claudette had been furious remembering this.

"Thankfully, the size of the antique javelins in the dining room made them unattractive to loot, but what God has to do with burgling the house of a *sitt* is beyond me. They didn't find a thing to pinch, except for a set of old poniards Nohad hadn't removed yet. Unlike the javelins they could be pocketed with ease; two of them had exquisite Ottoman handles. *Assez rare*. We could see the *racailles* through the vent; they took them off the wall and examined their blades. Then one of them unzipped his trousers and relieved himself in a plant urn."

Luckily, Nohad had been in attendance and covered her employer's mouth with her hand so the thugs didn't hear her gasp. After they left, Tante Claudette told her they couldn't have cared about the handles and probably threw them away. "It was the daggers they wanted. For killing."

And for days after their promenade, Samira dwelled on the story of the attic in a way that was almost indecent. As she listened to Tante Claudette playing different pieces of music on the piano one afternoon, her own gaze shifted and dwelled on the seraglio below the arch that was Claudette's favorite part of the anteroom. A mischievous scene took shape in her mind: Tante Claudette eating ice cream, but one flavored with rose petals touched by Ziad's body, all the while watching a militiaman pee into one of her ornaments. The thought was so overpowering, Samira couldn't restrain her laughter.

"I was just thinking of how fantastic those men looked while you and Nohad watched them," she said partly truthfully. "You must have felt in grave danger at the time."

"Not really," Tante Claudette said, scolding Samira for her mirth. "It was mortifying of course, but the attic has a secret door; you would never expect where it is or that the place even exists, so we were safe."

"There are so many nooks and crannies in your house; I'm not surprised it was a good hiding place. Can I see it sometime, your attic?"

“You shall climb there in good time,” Tante Claudette said. “Anyway, all that was before most of the young men in the province joined the fighting in the city. Ironically, it was only then that we all felt somewhat safer, and Nohad returned some of the items to the house. It cheered me up to see my things on display again. So you see, there’s more to her than a *bassāra* and a char. She’s been loyal too, not like the feckless war recruits who seek domestic work these days; they can barely read and write and will slit a throat for a pot of tomato paste.”

“She’s practically illiterate herself though.”

“True that. Yet she has pulse and gumption and a past, and that’s more than what many women can claim.”

In hindsight, the first inkling Samira had that the two women were acquainted was when she had glimpsed Nohad performing a mundane task, laboring over the nettle border in Claudette’s garden. This moment, and her lesson that day, would later evoke the more harrowing experience of having to barter her bra for a ride home with Nohad, not more than a few weeks later.

The lesson itself Samira remembered with painful clarity; it was one to which Nohad had contributed, albeit in a menial capacity. Two items were on the afternoon’s agenda: an appraisal of Samira’s coiffure and the preparation of what Tante Claudette fondly dubbed the *potage aux orties*: Nettle soup.

Samira had done as she was told and waited patiently at the kitchen table. Later, she stood by the window as Tante Claudette arrived, poured herself the usual glass of wine, and explained what the blanket of chaotic foliage at the rear of the garden was. She said these were cultivated nettles, a kind that stings only mildly: “On that point, my husband was firm. He vetoed normal ones, and after he died I never got to travel to France to get the seeds. We must make do with these.”

The stalks had been fenced off by an elliptical wire grid to prevent them from spreading. Samira remembered how intrigued she had been on her first visit here when she had noticed the unkempt enclosure. A woman was stooped over at its periphery, weeding out stray nettles. The straw-like hair wasn’t unfamiliar and when she stood and reached for a bushel basket, it became obvious it was Nohad.

Samira was startled. “What is she doing here?”

“Making sure *les orties* don’t overtake the house; what have I been saying?”

Samira looked out again, lost in thought. Nohad had announced to her mother only a few weeks back: “I see a dark mass hovering over your house, a cloud that might rain or might not; *ḥabībī*, it’s all in the cup, but it’s up to you to take action.” It was the thread that broke the camel’s back. “Even *you* know,” her mother lamented.

Samira was aware that Nohad being privy to town gossip was a barometer of social disgrace, even if the reasons behind that were never made entirely clear to her. Nohad lived far from the village center and never made social calls. Her forays into town were restricted to coffee cup readings and the occasional dreary task through which she cadged a living. Town news was seldom shared with her on these visits. That she had heard about “Samira and the Palestinian gardener who was seeing her” could only mean that people were starting to discuss the matter openly.

To avert impending disaster, and further wagging of the tongues, Samira had been presented to Madame, here, for finishing. Not surprisingly, Tante Claudette had asked them to wait a few days to think the matter over. Fighting down in Beirut, and in the suburbs, was less intense than before, but families were still reluctant to travel outside their hometowns, and so the demand for constructive leisure, in the form of lessons at Madame Claudette’s, was particularly high that summer. Eventually, her decision to take on Samira, overlooking other more obvious candidates, girls renowned for their flawless conducts both inside and outside school, had generated resentment and dismay. The village was rife with it.

People had gathered at the weekly town hall meeting, which happened to fall after Claudette’s selection of summer pupils had circuited the village. When she communicated her consent, Samira’s family was ecstatic. A finished girl was hardly a fallen one. “And you know that as well as I do,” Samira’s mother had brandished the news in face of the more pugnacious detractors who insisted her daughter was having illicit relations with a man. “They were friends only; it’s all above-table – Madame would never have accepted her otherwise.”

First, updates were shared about how well or not relatives and acquaintances were bearing the brunt of the civil fighting in Beirut, followed by a lengthy discussion of whether there was reason to fear what pundits were saying on television about skirmishes skirting the province. There was a general consensus that people remain vigilant and only leave town when necessary. Political talk petered out, eventually, and the conversation drifted to local matters.

Samira's mother had stood in for her husband and son still fighting in Beirut; in any case, Samira's father was a bombastic man, believing a daughter's untoward behavior should be managed by her mother, in the first instance. Samira remembered little of her interactions with him in general, or the villagers during this period, but her mother had made sure to share snippets of what people were thinking.

"It was the mason's girl who should have gotten it; this is very unusual," they said.

"Why even the mechanic Imad deserved it more; he'd been saving for this before the war started, and his daughter is worth ten Samiras."

An old man reminded the gathering why the lessons were important. "There will be bevvies of men seeking brides after the war, so a finished girl is a gem. Ideally, the best of them ought to make the cut." There were solemn nods and irate whispers. A woman said, "Mufid, the undertaker, should've had a chance too. He upped the prices of caskets last winter so he could get his girl done, and now this—"

"Keep telling yourselves that," Samira's mother retorted, and then spoke less confidently, "please leave us alone."

Samira's infatuation with Ziad had leveraged her worries, then, to a different plane. She pondered how all this unpleasantness would affect his work. Families with daughters had lodged a complaint with the school. Its administrative board evaluating the parents' concerns promised a satisfying resolution before summer was over. Samira feared Ziad would lose his job before the new term started. She had won Tante Claudette to her side she thought, but it was important concrete measures be taken soon. She could help them plan an elopement, if that was what Ziad wanted too, or, in the meantime, to meet more easily at least.

"There are roots and routes," Tante Claudette had said. If it were possible that the oudalisques, no the *odalisques*, could find a way to get what they wanted without losing their heads, literally, so would she.

As Samira watched Nohad clipping a sheaf of nettles for her lesson, Claudette raised her voice, commanding attention. "It's not as if she were a stranger to you after all. She's friends with your mother, *non?*"

"No!" Samira snapped, louder than she intended. In the garden, Nohad straightened her neck, saw her in the window, and muttered something inaudible. "My mother has her come in

occasionally for coffee readings, or to stir the heavy jam cauldrons during fig season, and these she pays her for.”

“*Chérie*, I was only teasing you. Look at you, fierce, and hot, and defiant! You could throw a fist in someone’s face or –” Claudette forced her gaze away from Samira and upon the *bassāra* who had moved to the farthest corner of the enclosure where the nettles’ stalks were so long and dense they reduced her figure to a mere silhouette.

“It’s the maid’s day out so Nohad doubles for her. And she chars for me too and does some work in the garden. You see the other one, despite the wage she gets, refuses to do what she calls the rough, and abhors nettle stings, however mild. Nohad isn’t too bad in comparison – she doesn’t even wear gloves – but she is scruffy, so I try not to have her interact with the girls when they’re here for lessons. Mind you, half the time I don’t get what she’s saying because of her lisp.”

“She’s never mentioned she works for you.”

“Doesn’t want to draw attention to herself, I imagine.” Tante Claudette shrugged. “She can’t be blamed.”

When Nohad stepped into the kitchen, Samira said, “It’s good to see you,” and Nohad stared. “I appreciate the help,” Samira thanked her, placing the nettles in a bowl of cold water; the leaves heaved at the surface like a floating rag.

“See?” Tante Claudette said. “It’s as if you’re talking to a troglodyte.” She turned to Nohad. “*Merci, Mademoiselle*,” she instructed.

“*Merci, moiselle*.” Nohad chewed the letters, her face glowing like a beacon.

Tante Claudette dismissed her.

“I think she will hate me more now,” Samira said.

“One day you might have domestic staff too, someone like her perhaps. You need to know how to train them.”

“She told my mother it’s not likely you would take me on for finishing. Not with that story of Ziad going around.”

“People with a past thrive on gossip like that.” Tante Claudette put a hand on Samira’s hair, twirling a loose fringe with her fingers. “Your hair is beautiful,” she murmured.

“She’s an unmarried gypsy of course but I never thought of that.” Samira tried to concentrate, overwhelmed by the stings of the nettles. “She was just someone who’s always there, that’s all.”

“Well *you’re* here now, *chérie*, and that’s what matters.” Tante Claudette lifted the lock of hair above Samira’s head. “We’ll have to see if a chignon bodes well with the shape of your face.”

But first, there was the nettle soup to attend to. “It’s an acquired taste, a delicacy,” Tante Claudette confided, guiding the preparation. “Very popular among some families in northern France.”

Into the pureed leaves, Samira stirred in the chives she had just pulverized with a pestle and then sprinkled the mixture with fresh fennel.

“For added flavor,” Claudette explained.

“Is this French?” Samira asked dubiously.

“Scandinavian, originally.” And that was that.

When the *potage aux orties* was finally ready, Nohad was summoned again from the garden and served it grudgingly in two porcelain bowls in the dining room.

Samira stared into the soup, avoiding eye contact. She put a spoonful in her mouth, thinking of Ziad. It tasted bitter.

There was a paucity of spirits in town so when Ziad produced a glass of whiskey that evening, Samira was impressed. “Where did you get it from?” she asked.

“The scoundrel at the ice cream shop said he was low on cash so he gave me a half-empty bottle in return for the petals. It’s better than nothing.” He came over and curled his fingers around her throat, lightly, affectionately, throttling her. His hands reeked of the cheap Ghandour soap that filled many a pump dispenser during the war.

“I love the tangy smell on you,” he murmured. Samira was embarrassed. “It’s the potage of nettles; they’re rather awful, but Tante Claudette adores them.”

“Oh yeah?” He started kissing her. “I want to make love to you. I’ve been waiting all afternoon.” The whiskey on his breath was overwhelming. They embraced, but when she slipped his arm below her back, he froze.

“No, not that,” he said, determined. “Not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I’m tired of doing it like a *lūtī*.”

“*Habībī*, we’ve talked about this. You promised.”

“Yes, I know we’ve only had it this way.” He sat next to her on the bed. “That’s the problem.”

Arranging their trysts was itself a challenge as pressing as Ziad’s demands. They could hardly keep meeting in his gardener’s shack without arousing the suspicion of the guards at the school entrance. At first, her childhood friend Georgine had provided a cover. She would walk through the school grounds with Samira who made sure the burly gatekeepers saw them come together. Having after-school promenades across the leafy campus was not uncommon. There was always a reason to do so: a leisurely stroll, a break from studying, quiet contemplation during the Lent and Marian fasts, studying outdoors with friends in warm weather, praying for the men-folk in Beirut at the shrine bisecting the school grounds, exercise.

When the end-of-spring exams were imminent, there was always an elderly villager – the younger men having gone to war – who would volunteer to bring in a sheep, a goat, and a hen for pupils to pet and palliate their stress. Together with Ziad, he would create a wooden stall close to the canteen’s kitchen garden at the far end of the school. This was a welcome change in routine for Georgine who, rather than simply make herself scarce at her usual bench in the school’s pine grove, would carry her Walkman and her favorite Sabah tapes to the makeshift pen, humming along to the Arabic tunes and playing with the animals.

Now that the summer vacation was in full swing, Samira was running out of plausible justifications for her nocturnal visits. Her mother allowed her recreational time after each finishing lesson, but as she was not renowned for either piety or studiousness, the rationale that the days were long and the nights young and a stroll in the school garden conducive for inspiration and a pleasant respite in the aftermath of a rigorous lesson with Claudette, and good sports besides, was wearing thin. And then arrived a day Samira knew was inevitable.

Georgine’s parents had put down their foot. She would have to suspend her interactions with Samira till it became obvious what the real story was – everyone was awaiting the decision of the school board. The rendezvous at the lodge had to stop.

Samira decided to confer with Tante Claudette, unraveling one worry at a time so as not to jar her. The misadventure at the butcher's and the walks through town that followed had drawn them closer. First, there was the subject of her virginity which Ziad, only reluctantly, had promised to keep. Claudette opined that this was a matter only Samira should manage when she felt ready and that neither her mother nor her beau should influence her decision. "You should not let yourself be coerced into something you don't want," she said, words that would gain particular significance by the end of that summer.

In retrospect, this was perhaps the most genuine counsel Claudette offered throughout the entire affair, so it was no wonder, then, that it had made Samira warm up to her even more; the advice felt just right. It cemented her trust and their bond. A summer that had started with listlessness, and an arrangement pushed for by her family, had brought her a mentor, a confidante, and a friend.

And then Claudette shared with Samira what she said no one else in town knew. She often spoke fondly of her childhood in France and of the two years she had spent at finishing school, and Samira had wanted to know why she never traveled back. "People in the village say you can't live elsewhere, but if you miss Paris so much, why don't you visit at least? Why didn't you go there when the war started and we all got stuck here?"

"I never lied to them you know. I truly can't go live elsewhere, as per my husband's will, but only the bank and the lawyer know the full details: I'm not supposed to leave the province for more than two days without alerting the mayor, and I can't leave the country at all. One stamp on the passport and my livelihood slips through my fingers."

Tante Claudette's adulating approach, the constant chanting of Samira's praises, had borne fruit too. Perhaps soon she could suggest a working plan so that a rupture with Ziad would not be put into motion. It was a kernel of hope Samira cherished.

The intimate nature of their conversations bolstered Samira's resolve to ask a question that had preyed on her since Claudette had brushed her hand so casually against the suspended odalisque's posterior. Walking hand in hand through Claudette's garden at the end of a lesson, Samira said, "Was it similar with you here before you became a widow? Did your husband have a penchant for that at first, like Ziad?"

“Goodness gracious, not at all.” Tante Claudette looked dark, saying her marriage had been more platonic than passionate. “He was a stern man, and above all else an intellectual, but art isn’t always life. I was lucky he consummated our wedding, *chérie*; in marrying me he had gotten what he wanted, a cultured companion at his service, not a wife.”

As they drew close to the nettle coop, Samira struggled to compose an astute response Claudette would appreciate. “At least, then, you were more than an odalisque,” she said.

“But that should be obvious by now, don’t you think? In his own way, he accepted me as I was, and yet it worried him.”

“Because you didn’t have children?”

“Yes, perhaps,” Claudette said, “but it also meant that, in the end, he didn’t trust me as much as people thought.” Her tone was bitter. Samira remembered, fascinated, how Tante Claudette was under some form of financial house arrest. She would never have the means to leave the province.

“This was his idea, you know.” Tante Claudette waved her hand at the enclosure. “Nettles are a dowager’s best friend.”

Samira was used by then to Claudette’s cryptic phrases. Their impact lingered for days and helped her forget her own troubles. The next time they had a tutorial in the kitchen – the setting seemed fitting – she asked about the nettles again.

Tante Claudette didn’t seem startled by the turn in conversation or how maladroit the query sounded. She said she had loathed the nettles at first but came to depend on them, describing how she’d taken a plethora of sprigs to her room one day, and lost track of time afterwards, waking up to see her husband at her bedside. “He was watching me with the cool gaze of an alert medical practitioner.” She quoted him verbatim: “You really have taken to them, haven’t you? I am pleased. Something to distract yourself with.”

“You mean experimenting with condiments to alter the taste? But why would you do that in the bedroom at all?”

Tante Claudette seemed to have traveled through time, and for a moment she looked tired and older. “And then they became addictive in a way,” she said. “You need a higher dose just like any drug, but he wouldn’t agree to bring in proper nettles, the kind that stings well and has a stronger taste too.”

“But it’s not as if you’re a glutton Tante, and you still use them for food anyway; they’re a staple of your kitchen!”

“Not only that, *chérie*.”

As an even younger girl, Samira was routinely forced by her mother to eat *mjaddara*, a bland Lebanese lentil porridge, as a punishment for lapsed house chores, and she feared a similar predicament involving nettle soup might befall her. “They taste foul,” she had wanted to say, but it was against her interest to antagonize Claudette, and as she couldn’t imagine any merit to the nettle coop beyond its strange gastronomical use, she restrained herself and was silent.

“Enough about me,” Claudette said. “Tell me more about Ziad.”

Boys in the village were usually sent to private schools, and the cohort at Samira’s was girls only: many had competed for Ziad’s attention, and Samira was flattered because, out of a score of potential candidates, it was her company eventually he had solicited. She knew he was regularly peeking at the students playing tennis, while pretending to trim a hedge or replenish a pail, and often she had looked his way, returning his gaze boldly and winking at him. Later, he wooed her with marguerites nicked from the garden – the school hierarchized flowers the same way it did its students, so that it was the least remarkable, the least achieving, who received minimal notice– and with sundry treats, a free *manqūsheh* every now and then, marshmallow chocolates, and lemonade from the canteen tucked away behind the gymnasium.

Her mother had tried to guide her towards other more suitable beaux, like her second cousin Tony, three years her senior, a serious studious boy who had been startled by Samira’s audacity, particularly, when the subject one time was broached, her surprising contempt for women who ask doctors to restore their hymens.

“But, if they can afford it, why wouldn’t they?” her cousin had asked. “No one will marry them otherwise. No gentleman at least.”

Of course, he had shared the disconcerting anecdote with her mother, and pledged not to repeat such damaging talk for the sake of the family. Hours later, an only slightly chastened Samira had confirmed her relation with Ziad was still chaste and tried, in vain, to argue the case again.

“I really like him; I want to know him better.” What could possibly be wrong with that, she demanded to know.

“That you’re fourteen and he’s twenty-four.” Her mother spoke mechanically. The tirade wasn’t new. The words had a tired quality; they faltered and flailed at the periphery of Samira’s reasoning: Ziad was not too educated; as a Palestinian, his job options were extremely limited, and his situation as a whole was volatile as his residency permit could be easily revoked; he could barely support himself, let alone a future spouse or child. And her family wanted better for her.

The fear that Samira would let down her guard and that the man’s seduction would reach a full circle gnawed at her mother. How much longer would it be before the affair ruined them all? The shame of Samira’s downfall the talk of the hour, wagging on the tongue of every dowager and gadabout. Disgrace.

Then her mother had grown weary, as Samira knew she would; her tone softened. “Why don’t you focus on your studies a bit more? And try to think of decent boys like Tony, someone with a secure future?” She tried to place her hand on Samira’s shoulder, but she balked at her touch.

“I don’t want to end up with a species of cosseted imbecile like him. A man’s man is what I want!”

Ziad had pursued her actively, relentlessly, and she bragged about his attentions to friends and neighbors so that, in the end, rather than have a head-on confrontation with their daughter, her family had allowed him to visit, but always under the vigilant gaze of her mother. After her visits to his lodge ceased, Samira had suggested a change in meeting tactics. “Let’s pretend to give them what they want,” she said. This meant a sex-free hiatus during which courtship rules were observed, to an extent, and Ziad saw her, as he first did at school, in daylight.

Often, they were in full view of her parents’ patio, but just far enough away from it so that they could talk without being overheard. Strictly speaking, they should have stayed at least within listening distance, but she was adamant that she have some private time with her beau, and the innocuous almost-rusticity of their stone-built house and its scented garden seemed to dispense with the protocol of village dating. In any case, her mother was becoming wary of their conversations and, one afternoon, followed them to the garden where she cowered in the shade of the vine tangles and made a show of cutting grape leaves with a pair of secateurs.

A few days later, Samira said, “She told me after she needed them for some garnish or other. Even Mizwak the family cat is more tactful and saunters away when we’re together!”

Claudette laughed. “What garnish was that, Samira? She wanted to make *wara’ inab* most probably.” Whatever reserve had existed between them originally had long dissolved; they were now chatting freely, intimately.

“It’s like living in a nunnery. I can’t bear it anymore.”

With Tante Claudette, she felt unguarded, relaxed, entirely herself. “You know what I love about being with you?” she said one day, and Claudette had smiled and caressed her arm. “You know me just as I am, with my quirks and flaws and little vanities, and don’t mind me anyway.”

“I have taken quite a liking to you,” Tante Claudette admitted, though by then, that was clear. Samira caught the gleam in her eyes and felt a pang of vindication. It was invigorating to have an ally who was also a good listener. The plan that had tantalized her for so long was starting to take shape. And then Claudette said, “It’s not easy finding friends in a village when one is a widow you know. Not if you fancy company other than sad women and fellow dowagers. Even then, there’s little to be done with them apart from boring gossip – inane talk and no action, no fun.”

Samira was intrigued. She herself was often fretful, and Tante Claudette seemed to be catching up. What fun could women like Claudette aspire to, within the confines of a village? She remembered, not without guilt, the stirring she had felt at the story of the girls’ genitals growing larger in the build-up to meeting their keeper, the sultan. “Surely there’s nothing wrong with befriending younger women?” she said aloud.

“No, but they tend to prefer other friends. Nice and manly eligible men, present company included.”

Samira blushed. She hoped she looked sufficiently contrite. “I’m sorry I’ve missed some lessons,” she said. “But you know what; it’s over with Ziad now. I don’t think he will want to keep seeing me with my mother at our heels. Unless of course...”

The pause wasn’t fortuitous. The moment Samira had been rehearsing arrived.

“Unless you are willing to help me Tante Claudette.”

Claudette selected a fig from the bowl on the malachite table next to her. She puckered her lips around the moist flesh, and Samira feared she might break the solemnity of her own pose

by giggling, for in the friction of the fig against Claudette's carmined mouth, she could see an adult pacifier of sorts. The thought was mischievous and satisfying.

"I've been meaning to make that very suggestion for some time now," Tante Claudette said, finally. "I think you're ready for the attic."

"What do you mean?" Samira asked, breathless, worried that her thoughts had been rendered visible and were found wanting.

"To help you, of course," Claudette said. "I will talk to Ziad, but you must promise to be discreet."

For Ziad's first rendezvous with Tante Claudette, Samira was anxious he looked his best. Even without her titivating efforts, his physique made him stand out. He was hazel-eyed, around six feet tall, and, at 24, was impressively fit. Prior to the meeting, Samira had asked him to relinquish his patched outfit and don smarter attire. He wore a fawn jacket she had picked for him from her father's closet, and smuggled to his shack, and an open-collared shirt that seemed a size small for his heavily muscled neck. She had cut his hair and he shaved his stubble; behind horn-rimmed glasses, Samira's after-touch, he projected a friendly expression befitting a school gardener.

As they entered the salon and walked to the anteroom where Samira knew Claudette waited, they could hear her before the maid even drew the curtain. Claudette was playing the piano, seeming to blend with the Oriental setting under the arch. She appeared as a tableau-vivant, bringing the painting to life with her music. Ziad looked upon her, and at the three-dimensional concubine behind her, and was mesmerized. Samira imagined Ziad longed, as she had, to draw the curtain above the naked woman.

At first, she left a suitable distance between them on the divan, but as Claudette played on, she felt emboldened and inched closer, eventually taking Ziad's hand in hers. The piece finished and Tante Claudette turned her back to the piano and gazed at her visitors.

"Can you tell me what that was?" she asked.

Ziad shifted uneasily and tried to look polite. Samira ventured a wild guess saying Bach – she knew she was supposed to know the answer; Claudette had played this before, but her thoughts had been elsewhere.

“It’s Beethoven’s *Für Elise*,” Claudette chided. “Even an untutored ear should be able to recognize it.”

“Sorry,” said Samira, her hand still on Ziad’s.

“So you’ve come to attend our lesson? To keep an eye on my girl? You think she isn’t in good hands?” Tante Claudette said, laughing at her own joke and winking at Samira who beamed back at her. “A day might come when this village will need men to chaperone the meeting of women.”

“Oh, fancy that!” Samira laughed too, within the decibels Tante Claudette approved, and emboldened by her friend’s banter walked up and kissed her cheek. “Come shake hands,” she said waving at Ziad. “Where are your manners?”

The maid returned with a large tray of silk and linen hydrangeas, floral sheaves, wire frogs, and adhesive tapes, as well as a caramel terracotta urn and a slightly bigger iron-glazed vase. In the middle of this cornucopia tittered a glass of wine.

“For you,” Tante Claudette said, handing it to Ziad. “We’re going to carry on with our tutorial from last week.”

Samira anchored the stems of the hydrangeas in the tiered flower frog, and secured it to the bottom of the vase with dainty dots of adhesive. “It is a lesson perhaps you can contribute to?” Claudette asked Ziad. “A trained gardener is alert to floral aesthetics.”

“It’s beautiful,” he answered. Samira encircled the whole with a silk ribbon.

“*Parfait*,” Claudette said. “You’re getting good with billowing flowers.”

Samira’s next task was to create an assemblage of short leaves snipped from houseplants. “I want to see a variety of colors and textures. Get started now.”

“Shall we go together?” Ziad asked, putting down his glass.

“No,” said Tante Claudette. “She must be on her own. Stay here.”

It was a custom at Madame’s to take the houseplants outside for the night, especially in dry weather, so Samira found herself clipping ferns in the garden and disentangling her thoughts. She was sure Claudette and Ziad had observed each other surreptitiously in the same purposeful way she and her mentor had tried to gauge each other’s measure the first time they met.

What were they telling each other, right here, right now? Would Tante Claudette help as she promised? Was her attic truly safe? It served its purpose earlier in the war; perhaps it could be put to good use again.

Meeting Ziad at his lodging was no longer viable, not without Georgine as chaperone, and their supervised afternoons at her parents' were stultifying whatever progress she imagined their evenings together had cobbled. Ziad's patience was starting to wane. He wanted them to get physical, again, and in her own way so did she.

As she stooped over a tap filling a carafe for her floral arrangement, a shadow loomed above her, and Samira straightened her back quickly, spilling water on her dress. Nohad stood there holding a wicker tray laden with figs.

"The last this season," she said. "Ripe and ready for Madame, and now damp because of you. Oh, *bonsoir*," she snickered. "Did I startle *moiselle*?"

After the nettle soup lesson, Tante Claudette had made sure Nohad made herself scarce when Samira was around, and Samira had forgotten Nohad was gainfully employed apart from unsavory readings of coffee cups. Knowing she always predicted the worst, Samira wondered how she managed to keep the village women asking for more.

"Nohad, what are you doing here?"

"What is *he* doing here? I saw him."

Caught unawares, she had to improvise. "He's come to ask for work," Samira bluffed, and for someone being finished, and wet from the waist down, she hoped she sounded convincing.

"He won't get it," Nohad grunted. "Madame knows better."

Tante Claudette was standing next to a pensive Ziad when Samira returned; her hand was on his shoulder. "You know it's what you want," she said lightly and then noticed Samira at the door. "You're as stealthy as a leopard, *chérie*, did you get the right leaves? We've been talking; your beau is a wonderful chap!"

"*Hayete*, you're wet," Ziad noted, matter-of-fact. "I can see your underpants."

"*C'est ce qui manquait*," Tante Claudette said, "a girl in my house with a transparent *culotte*. What would people say?"

They looked at each other and although Claudette chuckled and everyone chimed in, Samira was uneasy. The feeling continued, and was compounded by a growing self-

consciousness she hadn't anticipated. She worked quickly on assembling the fern tendrils and begonia leaves she had culled from the pots in the garden.

"Good choice," Claudette nodded approvingly at Samira's concoction. "The shades of red and green blend seamlessly with the caramel hue of the urn." She draped a shawl across Samira's waist. Her hand lingered around her middle. "It's your home time," she said, "and Ziad and I must continue our friendly chat."

Tante Claudette herself closed the front door at her heel, and then Samira heard her laugh and imagined the hint of a commotion inside. A breeze rose, rustling the shawl's tassels around her legs, giving her goose bumps. She emerged past the fig trees opposite the nettle coop, and Nohad shut the garden gate behind her. When she glanced at the house again, all was still.

Finishing school continued as usual. Samira carried on with her quotidian, but she was aware a plan had been hatched. She herself was to do nothing and wait for a week while preparations were made.

On Friday evening, at the end of the lesson, Tante Claudette hugged her and said, "You must be brave *chérie*; everything is ready for you now." She showed her to the door and shut it behind her as she had done when Ziad had first sought an audience with her. The maid had retired to her room.

Samira was to head to the garage where Claudette said Ziad would be waiting. She made special attention that no one saw her, but even as she was still in the nook of the garden closest to the house, she thought she saw something move inside the enclosure next to the garage on the other end. Samira froze; she tiptoed behind one of the fig trees lining the garden gate and bid her time. For a minute or two nothing happened, and she started to think whatever she'd seen was mere illusion. Why should she worry anyway? It wasn't as if she were trespassing on foreign property. She knew the garden well. There were no booby traps here as far as she knew.

Just as she set to leave her hiding place, the creature in the nettle coop appeared to move among the high stalks, growing in size as it stretched its limbs outwards and upwards, standing on its feet. And then it scurried towards the garden gate, clutching a mass of nettle leaves jutting down like brandished knives.

Samira took a moment to recover from the shock – she never thought she could see Nohad this way. She was supposed to have finished work hours ago. Why had she stayed so late

in the garden and moved around stealthily, keeping her presence concealed? And then it dawned upon her that perhaps the reason was simple: Nohad was stealing nettles.

Ziad had seen her too. “She probably dries the damn things and eats them with bread and water when she’s hungry; we all have our ways.” He held up his flashlight and walked Samira through the garage.

“This isn’t where we’re going to meet, is it?”

“Of course not, it’s too exposed to the outside. Had I been less careful, Nohad would have seen me, the same way I spotted her!”

As the light waved across the room, Samira noticed that it was remarkably clean, practically dust-free, and that it was full of gardening paraphernalia, as well as various clutter and pieces of furniture. The former she wasn’t surprised to see as the garage had become a utility room Nohad used as needed – Samira was aware Tante Claudette hired chauffeured cars on the few occasions she left the village. She had sold her husband’s when it had become apparent she would not be traveling extensively outside the province after his death. The bric-a-brac was slightly more intriguing – items such as spare wicker chairs, a pram filled with painting brushes, and dysfunctional grandfather clocks one would expect to find in an attic.

Ziad explained that these were indeed in the space above the garage, which was right below the trusses supporting the roof of bricks visible from outside the house. He said he moved most of the content upstairs down to the garage after the maid cleaned it. “She wasn’t too happy about that; she hadn’t been in here in such a long time. It’s spotless now.” As he flashed the light across the room to demonstrate, Samira could see a sink in the corner and a toilet seat covered with newspapers.

“We’re almost there,” Ziad said and stopped abruptly in front of a wall. Nohad’s shadow stooping low then looming upwards and scampering away was still on Samira’s mind so when she saw a man in a cravat about to jump at her, she shrieked. Ziad’s hand quickly found her mouth. “It’s not what it looks,” he said. “It’s one of Claudette’s paintings.”

As he focused the light on it, Samira could see what it was: a sliding screen of wood, the man at its center in three-dimensional form. The optical illusion it created against the wall was immediate and disorienting, and in a brighter setting, she would have recognized it. The *trompe*

l'oeil technique had come up in her lessons and in the house. The man was flanked on both sides by haggard peasants prodding him with hayforks to make him leap into the ravine below.

"I'm sorry, I should have warned you," Ziad said. "This was crammed in the attic too. A scene from some war in Europe. She insisted we place it here." Samira trembled a little and Ziad put an arm around her, but a sense of menace remained.

Attached to the wall concealed by the sliding screen was a metallic ladder painted red. Samira climbed the burnished steps. Ziad was right behind her lighting the way, ready to offer support if her footing was unsteady. On a landing in the shape of an alcove tucked discreetly in the corner of the garage ceiling, he unlocked a door leading into the attic. The entire wall, including this door, had been painted the same pallid color, and the alcove itself was lined at the edge with paraphernalia. To an onlooker it would have appeared to be not more than a ledge added for extra storage space. The door closed behind them and Samira heard the chink of the key moving in the lock.

"It's safer that way," Ziad said. "Don't be afraid."

Although he had turned off the flashlight, the attic itself was dimly lit, and it took Samira a few moments to gauge its source. She could feel a carpet under her feet, and as her eyes got used to the dark, she could see that it extended over the ceiling of the rooms below. An array of wooden planks sloped across the pitched roof forming rafters. Crouching behind Ziad to avoid hitting her head on a beam, Samira watched as he pointed down towards a vent in the floor a few feet ahead, and right next to it, she could see the destination of their crawl: a mattress with a sheet and a pillow, and a small fan on top.

"Madame Claudette has turned on the light in the room below after the maid went to bed so it wouldn't be all black up here. We can't risk using the flashlight." There was no vent above the maid's room per se, but still they had to be careful and keep noise to a minimum. "The last thing we want is make her suspect squatters or militias have broken into the house."

Samira remembered Tante Claudette's story about using the attic as a dual home, a sanctuary and an observatory. As she looked into the vent, she could understand why. The louvers had been tilted in a way that made surveillance easy, but if a man down in the anteroom managed to wrench his gaze from the seraglio and looked up, she imagined he wouldn't see them.

Unlike the garage, the attic was dusty. The sawdust, Samira thought, lingered from the time Tante Claudette had installed the vents with Nohad, but there was also the prominent smell of varnish.

Ziad had added a new layer of carpet on top of the old one, and nailed it to ensure any sound of footsteps was deadened, especially over the maid's room. "She wasn't meant to know about the attic apparently, but it would have helped if she did. I could have used an extra hand!"

Samira wondered how much of the story he was privy to. The maid had gone home at the beginning of the war; she wanted to be close to her family in case the *aḥdāth* got worse. "They will always leave you in the lurch," Tante Claudette had said. "I was lucky to have Nohad."

The varnish had been Claudette's request. Normal nails rusted and the color made her squeamish. "She said there was no knowing if she'd need to use the attic herself soon so she wanted it ready."

Ziad embraced her on the mattress. "Finally, some privacy, *ḥayete*." He was careful not to go too fast. The setting was new to both of them, the scene felt strange, so Ziad did what, for then, was least onerous. He turned on the fan, and they lay next to each other holding hands.

Shortly after, light, and sound too, started streaming from a vent farther away. They could hear a woman's melancholy voice singing. It wasn't Tante Claudette's. Ziad sat up and assessed the situation. Samira acknowledged his finger-to-lip warning to be quiet and watched him get down on the carpet on his knees and start the slow progress towards the luminous screen.

She was aware the door en route to the ladder was locked, so the waiting was tense since the idea of escape was fraught with uncertainty. At the same time she felt she had entered into one of Ziad's own stories of adventure and mischief, so that the very tawdriness of the attic seemed fitting. When he returned, a colossal grin adorned his lips, and it stayed there for a long minute as Samira whispered one question after another, searching his face for answers against the light flowing from the vent next to their bed.

Ziad cupped her hand and pressed it hard. "Come," he said, "you have to see for yourself."

Since it was her first time sneaking to a different swathe of the attic, Ziad made a concession and used the flashlight. As she crawled behind him, Samira noticed that some of the

trusses on the edges of the roof were still laden with their contents: not all collectibles had been returned to the house after the preliminary incidents in the war. Samira wondered for a moment how expensive these were, and if the space they'd been consigned to for their private moments homed a treasure trove as well. The carpet-walk alone had been completely cleared. When they finally reached the glowing vent, Samira stretched her neck in earnest. She wanted to see as much as she could.

The room was Tante Claudette's, teal silk curtains were drawn across its windows, and the sound was the music diffused by a gramophone player next to a nettle-filled vase by her bed. Claudette had her back to Samira; she was rearranging her figurines made of Chinese porcelain on a triple-tiered whatnot, wiping each with a cloth as she did so. The colorful collection and its ornate cabinet looked familiar; they had been taken to the anteroom for one of Samira's lessons.

Tante Claudette called it *chinoiserie chic*, the product of Europeans' fancies of what the East looked like. "And what an exquisite imagination," she had said. Samira knew her mentor was tactile with her objects, often cleaning them herself with fuss and fanfare. None of this would have seemed unusual had it been for one thing. In the room below them, Tante Claudette was naked.

Claudette wiped the last figurine and sat on the edge of the bed. She removed a turquoise comb and a hand mirror from a drawer in the nightstand. Holding the latter at arm's length in front of her, her back straight, she passed the comb through her hair, leisurely, meticulously, oblivious to her surroundings.

It was heartening to note she followed the same primping regimen she prescribed, a dozen strokes on each side of the scalp. She returned the mirror to its place, lay on the bed, and without further ado, started touching herself.

Minutes passed and her moans became audible against the music emanating from the gramophone. Her gaze seemed fixed on the nettles in the vase, and she reached out towards them at one point, but held back and did not handle them.

Once or twice, she looked up in the direction of the louvers, at least Samira thought she did, so she quickly moved her neck away, butting heads with Ziad as she did so. When she craned forward again, he conceded the space, observing her as she peered through the slats.

Despite an insistent voice in Samira's mind prompting her to look away, she was mesmerized by the scene. She continued to watch a while longer and then took the lead, returning to their makeshift bed above the anteroom. Ziad towed the line, creeping reluctantly behind.

He admitted that on his initial crawl to Claudette's vent earlier, he maneuvered the faux ventilator into an angle that would further conceal their presence but maintain a better view of the bed. "It wasn't as clear the first time around." He was pleased with his achievement.

"I'm not sure what to make of it," Samira said. She lay face down, gazing through their vent, and through the curtain screening the piano and the sham one under the arch, at the odalisque, trying to detect the outline of the hiding sultan.

"Don't think about it too much, really, just enjoy yourself."

"What did she tell you the other day? Why did she want to talk in private?"

"To discuss the plan of course; she wanted to keep it a surprise."

"It's nice in a way to see her enjoying herself, but a bit sad too. She must feel lonely."

"Shall we ask her to join in on our fun then?" Ziad teased, but Samira turned to face him, and even in the dim light, she looked so shocked he quickly retracted the idea, saying it was a joke and cuddling her.

When they next clambered the ladder, the same scene repeated itself in the attic. Samira wondered how appropriate it was to be viewing her friend stripped of her finery and sprawled on the bed. Tante Claudette had displayed considerable largesse in letting them use her home to meet, and it seemed rather *louche* to repay her this way.

Back on the mattress, Ziad turned around and lay on his back, staring at the roof. "You were enjoying watching her, weren't you?" Samira said. She reached out and touched his cock. It was still throbbing.

"I was, yes, and I think you were too."

"I wonder if we inspired her, using her house this way under cover of night."

"Oh, I bet we did." He asked her to admit that it was fun to have seen Claudette touching herself, that it was arousing. "Look," he said. "It's up again!"

Samira wasn't convinced. "You never need help down there. This doesn't feel right, *ḥabībī*."

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it.” Ziad cuddled her. “I knew someone like that a long time ago, you know, someone in my family. My aunt Maud.”

“You’re not serious?”

“I am, *ya hayete*,” Ziad said patiently. “Would you like to hear her story?” Samira nodded; post-coital storytelling was an endearing ritual she missed. There was no rose trellis here and no fragrant breeze, just the battery-operated fan that merely recycled the stale air, but the stories were still welcome. She lay her head on his chest, enjoying his caresses, and feeling safe. What had Tante Claudette said about people having a pulse and a past? Ziad too had both; he knew what he was doing.

“At the age of thirteen, I started watching her. Aunt Maud was in her early thirties then, and unmarried. Neighbors called her a *‘ānis*, a spinster already, and even at her age, my father was reluctant to let her leave the house unaccompanied. She used to take long strolls in the evening in the olive groves near our house in Jerusalem, and I had to go with her. This never boded well for the expectations of the men who came our way. Sometimes a few of them approached us, trying to start a conversation, and she would glance at me helplessly. She knew I would have to report to my father anything suspicious or wayward.”

Samira cherished moments like this when their lust receded and she allowed herself to be enchanted by Ziad’s tales of home, far away – they were as vicarious an escape as Claudette’s hot and dusty attic. He said his aunt often walked around nude in her bedroom at night with the Venetian blinds open, and he would peer in from below the windowsill for an hour or so every evening. He watched her for a few months, up till tragedy struck and his father was killed, and never got caught. His aunt, like Claudette, liked to sit at her dressing table with no clothes on, arranging items from her wardrobe and humming Oum Koulthoum hymns in a sultry and forlorn voice.

“Then she would start touching herself looking in the mirror, and so would I. Sometimes I wonder if she saw me through the glass and if that affected her in any way, the son of the brother who constrained her so. Claudette, at least, isn’t family.”

“But you said before your aunt was religious, the sort that believed in Christmas miracles. Did she change later when she lost hope again?”

“That was my elder aunt Maggie, her sister,” Ziad said. “Maud was different.”

The rooms below them were quiet in general, except for the faint slur of squeaking voices from the television in the maid's, and that never lasted more than twenty minutes. With a litany of duties to attend to early in the morning, she needed every minute of rest she could get. She stayed up later than usual one evening and noticed the anteroom was lit. She turned it off, and Samira and Ziad were left in the dark.

Then there was the time they were more boisterous than their wont – Ziad had received liquor again in return for his petals and had been drinking. The noise, which the maid couldn't trace, frightened and kept her awake. The morning after, Madame dismissed it as a figment of fancy, imagined ghosts, the inevitable toll of the war on the mind. Samira was reprimanded during her finishing lesson.

Another setback was when Claudette lit a cigarette and the rising twirls of fume impeded the view from the vent. Samira and Ziad returned to their bed disappointed.

“I didn't know she smoked.”

Ziad took a deep sniff, inhaling as much air as he could. “It's hashish. I wish she would share.”

At first, Samira had pretended to gaze at Claudette just to please him, and did so in a benign and reticent fashion. Gradually, however, like a compass needle swinging to the pole, her gaze settled; she surrendered herself to the pleasure of Ziad's body heaving against hers as she watched Claudette touch herself, titillated by her moans.

Was there etiquette for the frolics of frisky ladies?

Were there ways Tante Claudette seethed at?

Samira would laugh at her own musings as they crept back to bed. “She'd punish you for insolence,” Ziad said.

Samira relaxed, enjoying the perks of her consummated plan. The ease with which she was now meeting Ziad was refreshing. There were frequent lulls in civil fighting in the capital that summer, and the news traveled to the province with those who reached the village, pining for its peace. A fortnight after the trysts in Claudette's attic started, Samira and her mother received a caller from Beirut and hosted a tactical dinner.

Samira's aunt visiting from the city was not the only guest. Georgine and her mother Norma were also invited. Having taken a distance as stories of the Ziad affair were propagated,

Norma declined several invitations to sup at Samira's house. Samira's mother had persisted, she was anxious that their daughters be seen together around town as before, and with so many dates to select from, Norma had finally acquiesced to her request – it was a private meal after all.

The day was spent in preparation: There was beef to be chopped and vegetables to be put in pots, radishes and potatoes to be peeled, purslane and green beans to be washed and trimmed, pastry to be rolled, pears to be pared, and eggs, sugar and milk to be whisked into a *crème pâtissière*. Samira saw to it all with an eye on the grandfather clock, over-conscious of the minutes as they ticked. She hadn't seen Ziad in three days.

Samira and her aunt served the welcome drinks, chilled glasses of mulberry juice, in the parlor. "There!" said Samira's mother, welcoming her guests. "You're looking awfully dainty both of you!"

"Thank you," Norma said drily. "I'm glad to hear your husband and son are still fighting. It means a lot to be doing it on the right side."

"They're heroes our men, aren't they?" She clapped her hands and joined them together. "Samira and I pray for them every day!"

"The atrocities they've seen, and done, would turn your hair white," Samira's aunt said. "Every time they visit me in Beirut, I get my dye ready."

Samira's mother laughed uncertainly and stole a glance at Norma. She wasn't sure if the joke was entirely appropriate. "Oh, I knew a get-together would be nice for everyone, now that my sister is here. So many tales of the city up her sleeve!" She led the party into the dining room.

"Georgine, *ḥabībī*, you must come and sit in the light of the window beside Samira. I know that you young people can stand any amount of sun. We older folk have to be more careful, that's for sure!"

Samira's spread was impressive. She had mounted a *tartare de bœuf* in small stacks of steak surrounded by sautéed potatoes and a salad of purslane and radish with casseroleed vegetables on the side.

"What a nifty presentation," Georgine said.

"Are the circles in the middle raw meat?" her mother asked suspiciously.

"Madame Claudette's recipe, the meat today's cut, the very best I assure you!"

Samira's aunt remarked on her transformation. "You never looked so pretty, so eager to please. Your complexion is glowing. You're what, fifteen now?"

“Next month, yes.”

“She’s becoming a *sitt*,” her mother chirped.

Georgine’s mother accepted the information grudgingly. After dinner was over, and Samira’s *tarte aux poires* was admired, sliced and gobbled, Norma opened her bag and retrieved a flute.

“Is that what I think it is?” Samira’s aunt asked. Norma had produced it with the agility of a prestidigitator scooping a hare from a hat. She held it up for everyone to see.

“Georgine has been taking lessons since her evening strolls ceased.” She looked meaningfully at Samira. The undertaker Mufid’s son who was a chorister turned music teacher was Georgine’s tutor. She was starting to hang out with his sister as well. “They’re both applying for finishing school next month, and hopefully this time, they will make the cut.”

Samira’s mother shifted uneasily and her aunt said, “Georgine, *ḥabībtī*, serenade us, will you?”

Norma thrust the flute into her hand. “Play,” she said.

Back in the parlor, Samira’s aunt regaled the gathering with anecdotes from the city. “So many women, young and gullible, are falling. Women of war have the saddest stories.”

“They no longer seem scared of being sent to a *bayt banāt*.”

“I’m not too shocked,” Norma said. “Beirut was never the best environment to raise girls, not even when the French were here.”

“One of my neighbors, Aaliya Saleh, is a bookshop manager and a bibliophile, had a nice Palestinian lad as an aide, helped her with the stock and the lugging, all the normal stuff. He went and joined the Sunnite militias one day and that poor creature ended up sleeping with him, parlaying her body for a Kalashnikov. To protect her flat, she said!”

“There is much in this war that the Palestinians are responsible for,” Norma observed. “Of course, Samira’s beau was Palestinian too, if you don’t mind my saying.”

Samira’s mother colored, tilting up her chin. “Why should we mind? There was nothing here to be ashamed of!”

“And yet Aaliya dared to admit that he taught her how to use it,” Samira’s aunt continued with a swerve of tactic, but the pall remained. “Shall we listen to the news while the youngsters have some downtime?”

When Mizwak came forward to the middle of the room and started purring steadily, unimpressed by either tension or decorum, everyone was grateful for the feline distraction. Samira fiddled with the radio set and, for a few minutes, all that could be made out was a prolonged death-rattle projecting from the crocheted antenna. Finally, the crackles and hisses resolved themselves into coherent voices, and the girls were banished to the garden.

Mizwak trotted beside them along the gravel path; they passed the vine laden with fruit and the pomegranate tree next to it, and arrived at last at the pebble-fringed garden pond. A few stout orange fish were visible in the murk, and a leaf was traveling across the surface of the water as if propelled by miniature oars. Samira thought of herself and Ziad, trying to get some private time here, her mother feigning gardening preoccupation nearby. But that was the past. Things were different now.

“Why have you named the *ota* Mizwak?”

“Because he is tasteful and clever, just like the word.”

“I hope all this unpleasantness isn’t affecting you, *hayete*.” Georgine looked contrite. “My mother is probably telling your family we can start meeting again when the new term begins. She thinks the school board will have asked your beau to leave by then.”

“He’s done nothing wrong!”

“You’re still seeing Ziad, aren’t you? I saw your face when they mentioned him.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“We’ve known each other since childhood, you can talk to me. I’ve helped you before and said nothing.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Mizwak brushed against her leg, and she reached down and petted him. “Georgine, you don’t really believe in the *bayt banāt*, do you? You think they are real?”

“Of course, they are! Where else do you think all those women who get turned out of their homes end up? They’re better off there than in brothels, aren’t they?”

Samira pondered this over, then they heard a bell ringing in the distance and they returned to the parlor. It was the same bell her mother used to summon her and Ziad for meals when, for a few moments, she had returned to the house alone to heat up a stew or a pie.

“That was an excellent meal,” Georgine’s mother said, making peace. “*Merci beaucoup*.”

Samira served the after-dinner coffee. “You must come to Beirut when things are quieter, and keep me company,” her aunt said. “I’ll present you to the right people there.”

“Thank you,” said Samira. “I must get ready for my lesson now.”

Two hours later, she was with Ziad. They had stripped to their underwear and were prostrated above the vent waiting for Tante Claudette to begin her evening rituals. Samira thought of how far they had gone to get here. Imagining Ziad commuting up the attic and down the ladder, back and forth, countless times, evacuating Claudette’s knickknacks to allow them this makeshift bower made her heart swell with pride and anger and affection. It was all too much.

“Let’s run away,” she whispered, not for the first time.

“And do what? We’ve nowhere to go.”

“We could get married and start a life together. Your aunts would help us, wouldn’t they?”

Ziad’s anecdotes of the impressible Maggie and the tragic Maud, and of his home in Jerusalem adjacent to the olive woods, had been heartwarming in a way. If they traveled as a couple, they could escape the village, the province, and the war in Beirut too. They might go to nearby Syria if he wanted. Years from now, they could even come back here and talk about how often she had daydreamed about that very moment in the future when, lying next to each other one final time, Samira would remember, not without triumph, the titillating waits above the vent and the fantasy of returning to the attic, older, stronger and unashamed.

Ziad shook his head in consternation. “Not yet,” he muttered. “All in due time.”

They could see Tante Claudette walking in, draped in a velour bathrobe and carrying a bouquet of green fronds. Samira leaned forward in awe. Even naked, Tante Claudette was elegant and her entrance with the leafy sprigs had a hieratic quality.

“You know what these are?”

“They’re nettles,” Samira said, remembering her lesson. “I wonder what she will do with them.”

The vibrato of bedsprings returned their attention to the room below. Tante Claudette had assumed her usual position, a pillow under her back, her legs undulating to the rhythm of her hands thrusting, in turn, into her crotch.

“See how deep her fingers go. Look at her now, *hayete!*”

Claudette had begun touching herself with the nettles, their stems disappearing as she pushed against the bed. Her moans, mellifluous as an incantation, were becoming more urgent.

“Is that something you might consider?” Ziad unhooked Samira’s bra, his fingers moving tentatively on her back.

“I don’t think so,” she said, and then more firmly, “no, it would hurt.” She could still feel the prickliness of the nettles as she prepped them for the soup. How could Tante Claudette bear it? Samira bent her head farther down for a closer view. As she did so, she failed to notice that her bra strap had slipped through the louvers of the screen and was dangling into Claudette’s room. Ziad grabbed her by the neck and, with his free hand, pulled up the strap through the slats.

Presumably, Tante Claudette saw none of this: she continued what she was doing, alternating between using her bare hands, and her bouquet, to pleasure herself. Samira was cowed by Ziad’s expression; he glowered at her and said nothing. She could feel his discomfort, and some residual irritation perhaps, but whether that was out of fear she almost betrayed their hideaway or dismay at her suggestion to elope, or something else, she could not discern.

They crawled back to their mattress noiselessly. By now she felt fully complicit in their spying, and at the same time she was enjoying seeing Claudette in a strange and unusual light so when Ziad said, “you must put away your bra,” she quickly obeyed. From then on, every time they lay atop the louvered screen, they were completely naked.

Time elapsed, and streets and homes became redolent with the perfumed scents of late August, jasmine and pine cones and fermented figs and, at Madame’s, with anticipation too. It was as if all three of them, Ziad, Samira, and Claudette, Nohad even, were waiting for something to happen. Samira’s next few lessons were uneventful, but there was a shift in atmosphere.

Tante Claudette was more effervescent than before, and her restlessness made her agitated and clumsy. After a long afternoon of expounding the thrills of late-Renaissance paintings, she led Samira by the hand to the garage. A faux-pas in the garden made Claudette collide into Nohad who was tending to the nettles and tripped forward in the enclosure, her employer falling after her. The two women looked a caricature of themselves and despite biting her tongue not to, Samira laughed. Claudette was stricken, leaving in her wake a stream of “*désolée*, Nohad, so sorry” like a trail of bird droppings.

They headed straight to the screen with the man in the suit.

“It’s more modern this one, but it’s still the same technique. He seems so real, doesn’t he? As if he’s about to leap from the frame and take you down with him.”

Samira shivered, remembering her first encounter with the sliding picture. “He frightened the maid so,” Claudette continued, “which is not too bad as I don’t want her to move the thing and get thinking if she sees what’s behind it.”

Samira looked around; she’d never been here in broad daylight. She was amazed by how cluttered the room was, the sink in its corner incongruous with the rest of its artsy contents.

“It was a pleasant surprise to find a toilet here,” Samira said. “Very convenient for us, of course.”

“My husband had it installed as he had a weak bladder and traveled often. I rarely stepped into the garage after he died – too many memories, especially so close to the nettle coop.” Tante Claudette sniffed. “The screen from the attic was a touch of genius, don’t you think?”

“The drawing on it jolted me, at first,” Samira admitted. The scene unreeled before her again: Nohad and the nettles, the man about to leap, the ladder, the attic, the smell of varnish, the louvered vents, and Claudette, naked and vulnerable, on her bed. “I thought Ziad was playing a twisted trick. He mentioned a war.”

Claudette perked up. “The Spanish too had their strife, you know, decades before ours. Nothing civil about either! These here are anti-fascist farmers egging on one of Franco’s underdogs, prodding him with hayforks towards his death. Look how anguished he is, how tormented! Always try to put yourself in the shoes of the characters in the painting Samira, whether it’s an odalisque or a politician; it will make the art come to life.”

There was passion and urgency to her tone. Samira only nodded.

Tante Claudette moved the screen aside, and Samira followed her up the ladder. They crossed the alcove and stepped into the attic, and for a moment, she expected to hear the key clicking in the lock, but unlike Ziad, Claudette only shut the door, saying it was lovely to be back here in daylight. “We couldn’t afford the faintest of flickers when there were squatters in the house, and nights were long and frightening.”

With sunshine pouring into the house and seeping through all the vents in the attic, the trusses supporting the roof appeared to be more horded than Samira had been able to see in the

fleeting moments they'd been illuminated by Ziad's flashlight. There were snuff and cloisonné boxes, small suitcases, wooden chests, wicker baskets, urns, lacquered caskets, storage bags, cutlery cases, and in one instance, she could make out a pair of candle trees, paper-wrapped and vaulted into an open cavity under the pitched roof.

Tante Claudette gave Samira a tour of the louvered screens through which she had spied on the imposters in the early days of the war. For a full quarter of an hour, she touted with brio the intrepid details of her attic activities with Nohad. Her voice was a heady mixture of triumph and enthusiasm and though Samira had debated for a while whether to tell her about the *bassāra* stealing nettles, she refrained from doing so, wanting to eschew news that disappoints.

Samira feared Claudette would want to show her the screen above her own room and she braced herself to pretend the perch was unfamiliar. Slithering instead in the direction of Ziad and Samira's bed, Claudette paused in front of disparate trusses, inspecting their contents and murmuring appreciatively. Then they were above the anteroom and, as Samira watched, Claudette raised her hand in diagonal fashion and inserted it into a crevice hidden by a slanting beam above the mattress.

"Ah, I knew Ziad could be trusted," Tante Claudette said, revealing the caddy she had retrieved.

Inside were two silver spoons, and she held one in each hand. "Can you see the engraving? It's the monogram of the Shah of Iran, and the year under it is 1951." The spoons had reached her father as mementos sent out to diplomats after the Shah's marriage to Princess Soraya, and Claudette's parents had given them to her on the occasion of her own wedding anniversary a year later. "My husband made us spend the whole day at the Louvre, and by the end of it the gift seemed fitting."

Not for the first time, Samira was intrigued. "For someone who loved art so much, it's unusual he'd want to spend his whole life here."

"Oh but it suited him a great deal! He got what he wanted out of the village: people adored him as a *za'īm* when he was mayor, and he loved the quiet retreat the place offered. And of course when the art itch got bad, he would get us on a plane somewhere. He restricted my movement as a dowager, *chérie*, but we did travel occasionally when he was still alive."

"It doesn't make sense, Tante. I don't believe he did that only so you would stay close to home."

Claudette's eyes were misty. "Paris is beautiful, Samira. It truly is the city of light, and to think I'll never go there again..."

Samira thought of a plausible solution. Claudette had once told her that art was like pets, but even these could turn vicious, so why not sell the house, everything in it, and start life afresh? If Claudette's income ceased, the sale of the property would allow her to move elsewhere. And then she made a chilling realization, and despite the heat in the attic, she shivered. "The house isn't really yours, is it?"

"No, but everything in here is."

The last pieces of Claudette's puzzling home were falling into place, or so Samira thought. A codicil to the mayor's will, signed a week before he died, left the estate in trust to the province. Claudette only had the right to live in the house but the deeds weren't in her name, and the art objects inside had been inventoried to be part of the museum it would become in the event of her passing.

Shortly after condolences were over, Claudette had hidden in the trusses as many pieces as was practicable, but her choices were restricted by size. None of the furniture in the anteroom could get in here, for example, not even the malachite table. That alone had been worth a fortune. "There was no one I could trust to help at the time. And later when the war started I sought refuge here again."

"So you do have a way out; you could sell and flee!"

"I can auction these off, if there are any buyers left after the war, but they're all that I have in this world, and even then I'm not sure whatever price they bring would be enough to start a new life. I have been saving money from finishing school, and I could use that too. I don't know, *chérie*. At least I have you."

If the contents of the attic managed to escape the agents who assessed the value of the artifacts, it was because, much like the militiamen and the squatters, they weren't aware of its existence. The man in charge had been thorough in his work, spending a week to canvas the property, including the garage. In the end he asked Claudette if anything else remained.

"Only my memories," she answered. "All else is past now."

Talking about the attic's history, and the remote idea of possibility, cheered them up again. That Tante Claudette found solace in her belongings, and dispersed artistic verve in abundance across the house, made more sense now. She sat up in bed and said, "Imagine having a tea party here. Red figs and nettle soup! And rosewater sorbet!"

Then Claudette gazed at the mattress, and Samira worried she had discerned a stain against the ropy pattern on the sheet. She wondered if she should wash it in the garage sink downstairs.

"A true lover's knot, isn't it pretty?" Tante Claudette said, finally. Her face fell as Samira, relieved, admitted she hadn't noticed the detail on the bed. "You really must pay more attention, *chérie*," she admonished. "Promise me you will remember some of our lessons, even if they end."

"*Akīd*, Tante, but we still have time no?"

"Hardly," Claudette replied. "In less than a month I will have to select three new girls for the autumn. But you, you will be well Samira, and good to me, won't you? You could still come here with Ziad if you needed."

That was mostly what Samira wanted to hear; her spirits rose again. Claudette tightened her grip on her and Samira pressed her cheek against hers. "Thank you," she said, "*milles merci*."

They lay next to each other on the sullied sheet, much like Samira and Ziad had done countless times, then stepped down the ladder and pushed the *trompe l'oeil* into place.

Tante Claudette made them stand and marvel in earnest, one last time, at the wartime lynching on the screen, its artistic merit, its sense of inevitability, the crossover between life and art: life-as-art and art-as-charade. Then she asked an unexpected question: "How is your mother these days, Samira? How has she been?"

"We haven't talked much since the lessons started, but at least we're not arguing."

"Doesn't she ask why you're late coming home anymore?"

"I told her we're starting a new series of lessons now, and that you've had to change the timing of some as one of the other girls is indisposed. As you've said, there are roots and there are routes." The notion that she would still be able to meet Ziad after her lessons finished was making her giddy.

“As long as you’re happy, *chérie*,” Claudette answered. “We must take up routes of our choosing when we can. Roots, speaking from experience, often stand in the way though, and end up winning.”

“Not necessarily,” said Samira, “we’re here, no?” She was perturbed that her friend’s interpretation of the phrase had shifted. She touched the painting, feeling for a moment as if the agonized man had stepped farther out and was cradling her.

Together, Samira and Claudette would climb the attic a few more times before summer ended. The excursion through the garden, the garage, the ladder, the cluttered alcove, and the crawls above the vented rooms was not without excitement. There was a frisson of cheer and pizzazz to this part of the day that left its mark: Tante Claudette with her in the attic vindicated in a way Samira’s lack of remorse at her own nocturnal rituals with Ziad. She had seen her in both settings, upstairs and downstairs. Peeking at her now was but a mundane part of the attic experience.

There was one more secret left to share. Lying next to each other in the attic, Tante Claudette admitted she’d had a young friend like Samira when she was her age, and they had been close. “My father was suspicious because she was of a different background, a different religion. He retained my governess, even when I turned 15, and instructed her to keep an eye on me.”

“A chaperone?” Samira scoffed.

“She often peeped through the keyhole to my room, so I kept a handkerchief dangling from the handle on the inside. But one day it slipped and she saw us, my friend and me lying next to each other in bed, the way we are now.” She reported this to her father who’d previously banned them from meeting. “This isn’t right for you,” he’d said at the time. Samira imagined Georgine’s family had said the same when they told her they must stop meeting: “Samira is not the right company for you.” And that was that.

“But what were you doing with her?”

“Only what’s natural for girls your age to do, playing, but mind you, there was no man involved, just us girls. My father’s ire would have been worse then. Soon after, I was sent off to finishing school in Paris. We have more in common than you think.”

Samira's daydream of Tante Claudette eating ice cream while looking through a vent came to pass, even if the presence of peeing militiamen had been purged from the house. Since Claudette dispensed with the practicalities of hosting a tea party in the attic, it was up to Samira to balance between holding the burnished rail in one hand and a hamper of sorbet, glass bowls, and nettle soup in the other.

"Marie Antoinette said, if people can't eat bread, let them eat cake, didn't she? I doubt she really uttered any of that, for when was history ever fair to our sex, Samira, but the spirit of it remains."

Tante Claudette opened the caddy as she had done the other time, retrieving the monogrammed spoons. She wiped them off with a tea towel from the hamper and invited Samira to delve into the sorbet.

"We can't leave town, but we're allowed rosewater at least and your lovely company, *chérie*. And I'd rather have these than cake any day!" Saying this, Tante Claudette hugged her impulsively, and Samira could feel her breath against her neck.

Their close proximity was stifling, and flushed with heat and sugar, Samira was finding it difficult to breathe. "Tante, it's hot in here; we need to put the fan on," she said.

"You're right," Claudette answered, inching away from her but remaining close.

To Samira's relief, Ziad honored his promise not to deflower her. Not long before her finishing concluded, he lost interest in observing Claudette's naked antics. Samira had his undivided attention now. His play became more aggressive, thrusting into her from behind with a determination that, in retrospect, was ushering in the end of their affair. Then the week before the final lessons, he wrestled her into a fetal position and pinned her arm above her head, her knee in the crook of his arm. Covering her mouth with his right hand, he said, "*You will not make a noise.*"

He lay on top of her kissing her face, still holding her in place. Samira closed her eyes and tried to relax. Soon she felt another pair of hands on her, un-calloused and softer than Ziad's. When she turned, she could see who it was.

Ziad didn't seem surprised to see Tante Claudette; he loosened his grip, and she pressed her limbs against Samira who tried in vain to cover herself. "It's alright, *chérie*, I've disrobed too," she said. "I know you've been watching me."

“What are you talking about?” Samira struggled to break free. “Get off me or I’ll scream!”

“No one will hear you *hayete*,” Ziad said.

“I gave the maid the night off so we wouldn’t be disturbed.”

Although she managed to escape the weight of Claudette’s body, Ziad’s sinewy arms were holding her again. “Don’t be uncouth, Samira. It’s only fair to return the favor.” Ziad released her hand, and Tante Claudette fixed it on her crotch. “I want it inside me, please.” She said it gently, and the request was the more appalling for sounding so gallant. Claudette was already wet – Samira could feel her fingers sliding through the folds of her flesh: she kept a firm grip on her wrist, Samira was trapped, and a rhythm was established.

Ziad watched, marveling at his own tumescence. Every minute or two, he would say encouraging words, various endearments to make her carry on, but he did not touch her anymore.

Samira eventually pulled away and rolled over to the rear end of the mattress. She was trembling, her fingers dripping with Claudette’s secretions. She watched in shock as Ziad’s hand replaced hers, and their groans roared, then purred and petered out, and their pulsings, like the drone of a cooling engine, finally abated.

Claudette extended her arm and tried to stroke her. “Did you enjoy that, *chérie*? *Non*? The first time is always tricky. It gets better, you’ll see.” She smiled and lifted Ziad’s hand placing it over her midriff. He looked sheepish and turned his eyes from Samira. He was different now, less virile, as if Claudette’s body, so close to his, was diminishing his manhood.

“You wanted help and I offered it, didn’t I, love? You will keep our little secret, won’t you?”

“Of course not!”

“I did think you might feel this way, at first,” Claudette said. “But I hoped you’d consider it at least.”

“No!” Samira barked, jumping to the side of the bed. “You’re mad.”

“*Non*?” Claudette said, closing her eyes. Her voice was tender and sad. “It’s a pity.”

On her knees, naked, staring down at them, Samira felt empowered. The lewdness, the innuendos, they all made sense now. “The story about your aunt Maud was Tante Claudette’s, wasn’t it?”

“That was just a joke.”

“It was my idea, don’t blame him. Ziad is leaving his school job and wanted money. I hadn’t touched a girl like you in such a long time. And you needed attention, not just finishing.”

“Was it all lies then, everything you told me?”

“Not at all,” Claudette said softly. “You’re beautiful, Samira, and smart too when you put your mind to it. I’ve always meant that.”

“I’m going to tell my mother,” Samira said firmly.

“Your mother? *Hayete*, you’ve barely had a civil word with her all summer.”

“Be reasonable,” Claudette tutted, “you will only incriminate yourself.”

“You disgust me, both of you.” The stench of sex was making her flinch. “I will wash my hands and go.”

Samira dressed fast now, throwing on her dress and her underwear, and scrambled to wear her shoes as if she feared a Cinderella moment would unfold, her clothes and slippers transforming into mice and geese and rags, before she put them on and fled.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Claudette asked. Samira picked up her faux-bijoux and wondered what to do with them. The time she’d spent accessorizing on Tante Claudette’s instructions made a mockery of her.

“*Chérie*, I wish you wouldn’t,” Claudette said again, gazing at Samira as she shoved the trinkets into her bag and crawled to the attic door. “The only person you will harm is yourself.” She followed her down the ladder and watched in concern as Samira scrubbed her hands and splashed her face with water. “Can’t we talk at least, and see if we can reach an understanding? There are roots and routes, always remember that.”

When the phone rang, Samira’s mother had just paid Nohad for her weekly reading and had scurried to the back of the house to fetch a jar of jam, an extra reward for Nohad’s efforts during the fig season. “Wait here while I get it for you,” she instructed.

“Who is this?” Claudette asked the raspy voice that answered.

“It’s me!” Nohad piped.

“*Qui?*”

“Nohad, the *bassāra*,” she said. “Your charwoman,” she added to make sure she was recognized.

“Where is Samira’s mother? Tell her it’s urgent.”

Nohad mouthed, “it’s Madame,” and her client placed the jam on the coffee table and fussed over the receiver. “Do I look presentable?” she wondered and then remembered Claudette couldn’t see her.

“Bad news, I think,” Nohad said, not without relish.

“*Allah yistor!*”

When Claudette was finally put through, she announced that Samira’s lessons would have to stop.

“*Ya waylī!* Is it that man again, Madame? Did she try to sneak Ziad into your house?”

“She might have,” Claudette answered brusquely. “The maid has seen him loitering in the garden.”

“I’ve seen him too,” Nohad whispered, inching closer to the receiver. “But it’s more serious than that this time,” Madame Claudette was saying.

“Has he had his way with her then? Is she with child?”

“The girl has made a move on me.”

“She made a move?” Samira’s mother repeated, not understanding, and as Claudette furnished her with details, reality clawed in, and she had wailed. Nohad held her. Only minutes before she was telling her that soon she might have a plateful of unpleasantness. The dotted tar-like sludge of her Turkish coffee, and Nohad herself next to her, stood proof of that.

“But I couldn’t have known at that moment that misfortune would come so swiftly, or in what form,” Nohad later said. “She’d wept with fury, and with grief too as if she’d lost a child, which she had in a way. That girl was always trouble.”

Samira’s entry into the house produced a racket of slaps and screams. “Have you no shame in you? No dignity? *Bala sharaf entī?*” Her mother harangued her and Nohad watched. “How could you do something like that to us? Not in my worst nightmares could I have heard what I just did.”

“It’s not true, Mama, whatever they said is lies only; you have to believe me, please,” Samira managed to say in between strikes and sobs.

“It’s one of two things, and I don’t know which is worse: It either happened, or it didn’t but Madame used that to cover for something bigger. But then why would she be in cahoots with

you? Did she catch you, naked? You're pregnant, aren't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You slept with that man you little bitch!"

Struck across the chest, Samira flailed, knocking over the coffee table. The finished cup, the fig jam, and Samira crashed to the floor, but her mother persisted. "I will show you to a doctor, and if it happened, I swear to you, I swear –" Nohad stepped forward and whispered something in her ear. This quieted her, and Samira resumed her pleading.

In a moment, her mother was fumbling in her purse for money and threw it into Nohad's hand without counting it. "Take her," she said. "I will send clothes later."

She hit Samira one last time. "Leave the house. Now!"

Nohad wouldn't reveal where they were going. "We were only having coffee when Madame called," she kept saying, her words like tentacles strangling whatever question Samira asked. "Your poor mother went crazy, and now I help. I must help." She repeated this last phrase with such frequency and vehemence, Samira screamed: "Where are you taking me?" Her voice ricocheted outside the open window across the moonlit plains of the Bekaa. Her hometown and all the adjacent hamlets were behind them.

Then the road sloped downwards and potholes emerged. They descended a hill and drove through an empty street, lined on both sides with cement structures. Teenagers in ramshackle houses peered through their windows as the car slowed down, but otherwise the only signs of life were the political slogans festooning a lamppost or two, as well as the tatty garb hanging on metal wires and the occasional sheep perched like sentinels in front of the houses.

Nohad took a shortcut between two midcentury buildings and the car stuttered to a stop in front of a butcher's shop. They had been driving for forty minutes. Samira could hear a hatchet slammed against a slab of meat. "Chop-chop," Tante Claudette had said, deploring the fate of odalisques no longer under the sultan's aegis.

Chop-chop.

Chop-chop.

"Is this the place? Where are we?"

"We're going to a *bayt banāt*, a workhouse in Baalbek, and they will look after you there. But first you must calm down. You sound like a lunatic from *'asfūriyeh* sent to war."

The cutting and grinding continued and then ceased abruptly; a man exited the shop and walked up to the car. He asked what they were doing there. “You’re not from around here. I haven’t seen you, or this car, before.” His eyes narrowed at the decrepit husk that was Nohad’s Renault 5. “We’re leaving soon,” she said, turning on a light so the man could see them. “We’re only two women, unarmed.”

The man noticed Samira’s bruises. “What happened to her?”

“A family affair,” Nohad explained. “I’m taking her to a *bayt banāt*.”

“Another one! War sets in and morality evaporates.” The man looked at Samira with disgust and retreated into the shop.

“He probably thought we were militants from the city with hand grenades and a rigged vehicle,” Nohad said with a sneer.

“What do you mean a *bayt banāt*?” Samira thought these only existed in the cautionary tales her mother recited to her, growing up.

“What do you mean what do I mean?” Nohad said, exasperated. “It’s a home for girls like you, fallen women, loose wives, disowned daughters. The whole gamut.”

“But what would I do there?” Samira cried.

“Learn a trade, I suppose.” Nohad demurred. “To become a seamstress or a maid, and hope someone will hire you after.” She ogled Samira and crossed her hands over her lap. “But speaking from experience, that won’t be the case much!”

Nohad grinned, noting Samira’s horror. Her buckteeth gleamed, revealing her mirth; there was no longer a need for patience or pretense. She forgot her lisp, and the words when they gushed took time to be deciphered: “You didn’t see that coming did you, *moiselle*? You fancied all that finishing at Madame Claudette’s would make you a *sitt*, a lady? And you, all the time, a pervert!”

“Nohad, please don’t take me there,” Samira implored. “I know something about you too. I’ve seen you taking nettles from Madame’s and said nothing. I kept your secret. Please!”

Chop-chop.

Chop-chop. And eerie laughter: Nohad’s snickers complemented the din that resumed at the butcher’s. “If that’s all you know, then you know nothing,” she said. “I needed the leaves for food. Did you think otherwise? All uppity airs in town and at Madame’s you grope her as she was telling you about plants or art, or something. Perhaps you wanted to shake her hand,

moiselle? Did you fancy her breast was her fingers?” Nohad paused, catching her breath. “That’s just wrong,” she muttered and looked away.

The lurking shadows of the *bayt banāt* terrified Samira as a child and her fear was now amplified by the reality of what could happen shortly. Her perception of herself as a spirited girl contrasted sharply with the images in her mind of scary matrons reprimanding inmates and calmly pouring scalding water on their feet or pinning their hair so close to their scalps they almost bled. There was a punishment for every misdemeanor, even the littlest ones. “They don’t take kindly to skittish girls,” her mother had warned.

Samira recalled Claudette’s pithy hints about Nohad’s past, and her comment earlier about life after the workhouse suggested some familiarity. She needed to persuade her not to complete the journey to perdition, and the reference to petty pilfering hadn’t helped. In trying to appease her again, she emphasized their shared predicament. Nohad, who only yesterday was the charwoman clipping nettles and fetching steak for her lessons, had become omnipotent. But she too needed to talk, and in the quiet discretion of the night, Samira had to listen.

Nohad’s parents had been second-generation gypsies whose presumed knowledge of the occult and of tasseography ensnared the communal imaginary in the province. They abandoned their nomadic lifestyle to the lure of potentate living in the mountains of Lebanon. Both died of glandular fever in 1944, and a young Nohad was raised by an elderly relative. There was then quite a stir, and much grievous chatter, when her relations with the previous mayor’s cousin, an older man, were discovered. Tante Claudette had taken pity on her and interceded on her behalf so she could return to town after her time at the *bayt banāt*.

“It wasn’t really an affair, sex mostly, but I was seventeen, and it was fun while it lasted,” Nohad said. “Sometimes I wish Madame hadn’t helped and I had just left and made a fresh start, but I was stubborn, like you, and stayed put. Look at you, panting after a Palestinian gardener, but later you wanted to try something different, yes? What were you thinking?”

The air was torrid, the street swathed with a humid stillness, permeated only by the meat-wrangling sounds of the butcher late at work. Samira felt so hollowed out by helplessness and uncertainty that she seemed to be floating. “Please, just take me back home,” she said. “I’ll give you anything you want.”

“Anything? But I’m not unnatural me.” She mulled the matter over, her lips rising over her crowded teeth. “You have any money?”

Samira shook her head.

“What can I get off you then?” Nohad sulked. “I’m not unnatural,” she said again, “I don’t know what else I could take.” She examined Samira in the fashion one scrutinizes baubles at a flea market, seeking an undamaged item.

Then she made up her mind: “Your *soutien*.” She pointed at Samira’s bra and tugged at the strap. “Silky lace,” she said, satisfied. “I’ll have that.”

Samira couldn’t believe she’d heard right. “It’s not your size,” she pleaded.

“I’ll sell it then. It should be worth something.”

Samira’s nose was bleeding, a legacy of the blows she’d received earlier, and blood had been trickling down her face. “You look like you’ve joined the war in Beirut,” Nohad had said. This worried her now. “Quick, take it off,” she urged. “It’ll get sullied and blood stains don’t wash easily. I’ll have to leave you there otherwise.”

When the job was done, and the bra was safely stowed in the glove compartment, Nohad started the car. “Good girl,” she said. “And now – home!”

After several knocks, Samira’s mother opened the door and ushered her in. “You think you’re too good for the *bayt banāt*? Is that why you’re back?” She wasn’t wholly surprised to see her.

“Merci, Nohad, *‘azzabtik*,” she said, handing her a fresh pot of jam from the pantry. The venal look in Nohad’s eyes released a despair that descended on them like a vulture.

“Remember your word. She’s a young girl; keep that in mind.”

“Mama, please,” Samira said after Nohad left, leaving them to nurse their bruises. “Let’s just talk. I don’t know what they told you.”

“We can talk. But it’s too late to change what you’ve done.” She tied an apron, fetched dressings from the medicine cabinet, and did her best to staunch Samira’s nosebleed and clean the scratches on her face. The interim between sending Samira with the *bassāra* and her daughter’s return had given her time to think more rationally.

“Madame Claudette promised not to tell anyone, as long as you never come close to her or to her house again. If she so much as sets eyes on you, she will speak up. I haven’t told your

father and brother yet. Nohad said she will hold her tongue but I don't believe her. It's just the kind of story that nourishes her imagination and soon the whole province will have heard."

A long-term solution was needed, one that Samira's father and brother might be able to countenance. Her mother had packed her clothes in her absence, but it hurt her to think that all her daughter's finishing and education would be wasted. She wouldn't be disowned, and therefore there was no need to consign her to a *bayt banāt* till she came of age, but she would have to leave town.

An incumbent ceasefire in Beirut had been renewed for logistic reasons. It was announced on the radio earlier in the day that specific routes were safe for 48 hours. Samira would leave by bus in the morning and call her parents as soon as she reached her aunt's house in the city. When summer was over, her aunt would enroll her at whatever public school was able to open its doors. She would visit the mountains sparingly, and discreetly, when invited. Her disgrace, in time, would diminish, and she would hopefully find a man to make of her an honest woman, a mother to his children.

"Perhaps, then, I'll be able to forgive you, but for now it's best for everyone that you go away."

Samira agreed to everything. She was grateful Claudette had spared the more lurid details of the affair, and she resolved her mother would never learn what really happened that summer.

"Has anyone heard of this, apart from Nohad and Madame? Who else knows?"

"No one," Samira said. Ziad knew of course, but it was too painful to think of him, and even in her distress, she could reason correctly that it was in his interest, much as in hers, to disappear. Like the marguerites he had pinched to court her with, he would not be missed.

—Part Two—
After the Race

Lebanon and Syria, Spring 2013

Samira

It was a Thursday morning, three weeks after the race. Samira and Georgine were in the car, crawling up the bumpy road towards the Lebanese countryside in the Bekaa. Although most of her maiden life had been in Beirut, ever since the summer fiasco of 1984, Samira had still made a few, and brief, trips to the mountains, and while her visits there gradually diminished in her adult years and stopped completely after she married Mazen and moved to Syria with him, Bekaa still had its pull on her. She was fond of the place, not her hometown or province, but the surrounding hamlets, even if she couldn't imagine herself living in the countryside again.

A part of her wished that leaving the city for a day would mean leaving behind her worries in Beirut. The online mission she had set for herself was proving more taxing than she thought it would be – all the more so because she felt unable to share it. The truth is she felt ashamed, but if this was the only way she would be able to discover why her son Ramzi had changed so much since the race, then she was ready to shelve her qualms and go ahead.

“It is a miracle we pulled this off,” Georgine was saying, inspecting her hands. “Secretarial work is severely undermined. And then they make a big fuss about finding replacements for our few days of leave.”

“I am not exactly a secretary, remember,” Samira said, wrenching the steering wheel as the car tires scrunched against the gravel in a pothole and lurched to the side. “I work in a clinic.”

Georgine had forgotten to put on her seatbelt, and when she started protesting, Samira cut her short. “Please don't make me feel any worse. What were you expecting? It'll get better when we get ahead on the highway.”

“*Hayete*, what is this about? What's wrong with Ramzi?”

“He hasn’t been himself since the day of the race,” Samira said, tearfully. “He spends most of his time plastered to his computer and barely leaves his room. When he does, it is only to university, or to look after his plants. Mazen doesn’t even notice.”

“He is perfectly fine, I’m sure. Same thing a friend at work had with her son. He stopped talking to her for ten days for no apparent reason. Turned out he had failed a class. You don’t have school issues with Ramzi, at least.”

“I keep reminding myself he actually *won* that race,” Samira said. “Isn’t that what winning is? A good thing?” She waved her hands, her palms spread out in inquiry. “Do you think he might be taking drugs?”

“He wouldn’t be able to afford them, not with the allowance Mazen gives him.”

“What about marijuana? Wouldn’t that be affordable for a student?”

“Well, if it is marijuana, we know where it’s coming from,” Georgine said, trying to lighten the moment. She was looking out the window at the rows of Bekaa pastures they had just passed; the continuing postwar perception of Bekaa as a host to marijuana growers in certain nooks and crannies baffled her. It had become something of a suburban legend.

“That’s not funny, Georgine. And why would Ramzi of all people smoke pot? He doesn’t even smoke regular cigarettes. My thoughts are driving me mad.”

Midway through the plains, the landscape changed. The Bekaa pastures had been replaced by large low tents made out of shabby, white plastic, each seeming to form a natural extension to the other in the shape of one gigantic spreadsheet swathing the area. Georgine asked what they were, and Samira said they were greenhouses, growing fruit and vegetables for grocery stores.

“It’s where your spinach and green leaves come from,” she said teasingly. Georgine ate vegetables sparingly; she claimed raw vegetables gave her indigestion and cooked vegetables were too mushy, and that she had an allergy to coriander. This, she had announced years ago in the village when the two of them were young girls sharing meals at school, and made a reminder of first thing when Samira had moved in to share a flat with her in 1991. The Lebanese Civil War had officially come to an end the year before, and they had started their course in hospitality management at an affordable vocational college in Byblos, a large fishing town north of Beirut.

It was Georgine too who first introduced Samira to Mazen who had spent a semester there before dropping out, and it crossed Samira’s mind some time after that the two had had a

fling of some sort, right before she met him, and then parted amicably. Whatever the case, Samira had fallen quickly for Mazen. The man was a charmer, masculine but not handsome, and he had this way of making her feel like everything she said or thought mattered. The attention he gave her was a major change from how things were at home where she had always had to put up a struggle to make herself heard.

Right after he proposed, they had gone up to the mountains to celebrate, and after a stressful lunch with her family, Mazen had taken her in his rental car for a drive outside the province, to clear their minds. He cracked open green pea kernels and dipped them in a bag of salt. “We’re going to be fine, Sam,” he said, popping a pea into his mouth. “I want you to know that I will always be there for you and will always listen to you when you need me...Are you with me?”

She nodded. He had parked crookedly by the roadside, and the breeze that was wafting across from the plains made everything seem fine indeed. The war was over, to say the least, and Samira felt happy. Grateful too. When she had mentioned the incident to her mother, who was old-fashioned and didn’t believe in marrying a foreigner, she had scoffed at her. “Men always say they won’t change once they seal the deal,” she said. “But they do – they do so all the time.”

As traffic slowed, Samira stopped and parked on the side of the road where several carts laden with fruit and vegetables were lined. The colorful heaps of organic produce were too tempting to pass over, but it was the white houses, initially, that were beckoning to her.

Underneath the translucent plastic were moving shadows, and in places where the sheets were torn or had slipped from the structure, one could easily glimpse behind. She saw endless rows of leaves and shapes of coarsely dressed men, stooped amongst the greenery. She said the workers were probably Syrian, newly arrived refugees and a number of older illegal immigrants. The fields on this part of Bekaa were almost the nearest part of Lebanon’s northeastern borders with Syria, and immigrants found it easy to cross over, especially since no visas were required. Many of the incomers wouldn’t venture further down to Beirut, working in the greenhouses, where papers weren’t asked for and cheap labor was in demand.

It was the on-site noises, blending with the persistent hiss of the water sprinklers, which Samira found fascinating though. The houses were buzzing like children in a recess, and there

was something about the energy of the place that was uplifting and contagious. She couldn't stop staring.

Georgine found nothing compelling about the houses. "I've been thinking what if Ramzi might be struggling with his sexuality? And as an athlete, he's been brooding over it since the race you say he won? That might explain his change in behavior."

Georgine had followed Samira to one of the mobile vegetable stands on the roadside, creating a trail of platitudes as she walked.

"I'm sorry I said that *hayete*. Please hear me out. I didn't mean it in a bad way. And, of course, it's not true."

"Yes, a kilo of that please." Samira pointed to a heap of zucchinis. "You know, for somebody who never had children, you're full of opinions." Something in her face or tone had startled the vegetable man, and he looked frightened. Georgine returned to the car, opened the passenger window and, looking their way, awaited Samira's return with trepidation.

Ramzi was singing. He had arranged his plants in the tub in a triangle and turned the shower on to a faint drizzle. The bathroom's outdoors smell as he watered the plants reminded him of his grandparents' home in Syria. Samira sat on the toilet lid and watched anxiously.

"Don't come in on me like that," he said. "I know you're there. You're back from Bekaa early, aren't you?"

"It is already six, Ramzi, and I'm exhausted. Can I please use the bathroom?"

"Fine," he said. "I'm done anyway."

His dismissive tone angered her, and his back was still in her face as he started removing the pots from the tub. "If you weren't busy wasting more and more time every day playing in here, you might have noticed the time. And what, now you've started singing to them too?"

"So, I was singing for a plant what of it? Isn't that better than smoking pot? Or singing karaoke in some pub in Gemayzi, like you do?"

"Are you on drugs, Ramzi?" Samira said. Her voice shook as she spoke.

"No, I'm not! When will you stop quizzing me?"

"Ramzi, you've changed since you won that race. You're not even eating or exercising as before."

He stared at her. She moved and sat next to him on the rim of the bathtub. Seconds passed, and the moment was almost companionable. “I wish you’d tell me what’s on your mind. Are you still brooding over Uncle Rami? Is that it?”

“No. No, it’s not like that. You don’t understand.”

“Are you gay?” she blurted, not looking at him. “*Tu aimes les garçons?*”

“Me?? No, I’m not. I don’t. Where did that come from?” He sprang from his place and started pacing the bathroom in short, choppy strides. “I miss Teta’s home that’s all. And how things were before the war started and we moved here.” He stopped and looked at her. “Does that make me gay in your mind? I’m not too happy; is there anything wrong with that?”

Samira knew this would come up at some point, and she had rehearsed the part carefully: “Ramzi, listen,” she said. “You had an idyllic childhood in the village, all those summers there, and enjoyed it. But you need to move on. Life goes on; we can never turn the clock back.”

Her words spurred him on, and when he spoke, his voice was a notch louder. “Not turn the clock back?” he asked. “Isn’t that exactly what you do, trying constantly to pass as someone younger, with all the cosmetics and gym and dieting you enthuse about constantly. You don’t even look like you could be a mother.”

“This isn’t about me, Ramzi. I don’t know what to do. I feel I’m losing you,” Samira said, bursting into tears. “I want to help you, but I don’t know what to do.”

Ramzi softened. He had never seen his mother cry. “You don’t have to do anything, Mama, really. I’m fine.” After a while, he said, “Thanks for the new coverlet, Mama. I saw it in my room earlier; I miss these colors.”

She had bought it for him from Zara Home the week before, making sure it had the nature colors he loved. “I am glad you like it, *ḥabībī*,” she said, wiping her face – she did like it when he was nice to her.

Her misgivings fueled by the row in the bathroom, Samira had been frantic to test Georgine’s theory. All afternoon, she had entertained different opening lines, regretting she was not on her own so she could research the matter properly. In fact, this was how her online mission had started. She knew how much time Ramzi spent on the Internet on environmental and plant-related forums; she was teased by the idea that this might be a way to unravel what he was refusing to share offline.

His uncle Rami had died last September, soon after Ramzi moved with her to Beirut to start his course, and he had copied her on a podcast about Syrian flora he had emailed his grandmother. He seemed to think that this podcast, in which Rami was keeping up a running commentary on some plant species indigenous to the family's hometown, would be of comfort to her grieving mother-in-law. Samira excavated the email and used the link to lead her to the forum botany-sr.info that Ramzi had joined after his uncle's death using the obvious username Ram(Z)i.

Members of the website tended to discuss a surprising variety of plant-related topics, ranging from plant cancer to commercial uses of vegetable oil and from a discussion of carob tree growers in Damascus to the politics of distributing Lebanese wheat in Syria. After a week of listening and re-listening to most of the podcasts on the forum, and driving herself to make notes of them so she could follow up on any remarkable material of a conversation-opening nature, she took the plunge and joined.

She chose a username, Deema2013, and posted her first comment on a discussion Ramzi had launched about the ethics of keeping houseplants, a thread which no one seemed to have attempted to respond to in an intelligent or carefully considered way. Quoting a simplified account of photosynthesis on Google, she agreed that withholding sun from a houseplant so that it would take a certain shape extended the usual discussion today about the aesthetics-versus-ethics debate in relation to living things. Ramzi responded with enthusiasm, saying that the carving and trimming and what he called the "sunlight pulling" owners sometimes do to make plants and trees look more appealing constitutes a form of aggression plants can feel.

"If we decide to go under the knife, or a UV light, to look better, we don't have the right to do the same thing to a living thing that can't speak for itself," was the first thing he said when he added Samira on the Skype account she had created for the occasion. After a few days of exchanging comments on different threads of interest, he had finally sent her a PM. "We seem to be bumping quite a bit into each others' posts. Fancy taking this to Skype?"

The first thing Samira said though was that she would be unable to open her camera or talk on the microphone since she had promised her husband, who was away on a business trip, she would not. "He gets insanely jealous; we got married two months ago, right after graduation."

"So you were college sweethearts? That's sweet."

“Yes, but it’s never easy, is it? I started wearing a veil last week. I am happy though. I love him.”

“Oh wow. You actually did that for him??”

The blue globe sign on the lower right of the screen had turned into a sinister red X, and Samira knew the connection was lost. Some of the male patients at the clinic had been saying only yesterday how Lebanon’s Internet connection is the most expensive in the Middle East and also the most unreliable. And, of course, they were right.

When the connection came back to life, it was Ramzi who began to apologize, mistaking the ended call for offense. He thought she had signed out, feeling upset after misinterpreting the tone in his last chat line about her supposed veil. “Don’t go,” he said. The next thing she knew, he had turned his camera on and was speaking into the microphone. “It’s difficult to get the tone right from behind a screen – I’m too tired to continue typing anyway. This is easier.”

From that time onwards, Ramzi would open his cam and speak into the microphone, and Samira typed. The interaction was established, and the subterfuge involved in this dynamic carried with it the hint of a thrill. Not that her worries about Ramzi diminished in any way. If anything, Samira only became more frantic to get answers, and in her haste and exhaustion she let slip that, in fact, she had been up in Bekaa earlier in the day.

“My mother was up there too,” Ramzi said. “Are you from Bekaa?”

“No, but my husband has a few relatives there,” she fibbed. “We were visiting them.”

“In our case, it’s the other way around. My mother is from Bekaa but moved to Beirut when she was 15. We’re hardly in touch with her family though.”

“Sorry to hear that,” she said, and she meant it.

“Yeah, it’s fine; I’ve gotten used to it. Mama’s family have always raised their brows about my dad being Syrian, very silly really.”

He told her stories about his Syrian side of the family, about Teta, his grandmother, and Rami, his uncle, and about Teta’s friend Nanig. He showed her a picture of the four of them drinking lemonade in her in-laws’ garden. The picture was taken at the peak of summer two months before Rami died, and they were all wearing straw hats, except for Nanig who was clutching hers to her chest. He told Deema about Samira too, his mother, and compared between his parents’ house in Damascus and his grandparents’ home in the countryside.

Samira was amazed at how readily he was sharing intimate accounts of their family life with Deema, a complete stranger. It was as if he only needed a sounding board, delivering a litany of information at the slightest prompt. She asked him if it was just nostalgia that was making him unhappy, and he said not, but that perhaps they could talk about that the next time they spoke, which he explained would probably be in a week's time since he had exams coming up. Also, the extra time would give him a chance to contemplate the matter further.

She still wanted to ask him if he was gay, but no longer seemed able to steer the chat in any direction, and by the time Ramzi started explaining why Samira had one child only and mentioned his stillborn sister, her brain was allowing small, practical thoughts only, like how it was a good thing she had not put on any mascara or make-up before leaving the house, as it would now be smudged down her face.

The evening she was to have her last online meeting with Ramzi, Samira decided she would calm her nerves a bit by kicking off the night with a less stressful date: a dinner out with Georgine in Gemayzi. The neighborhood, just beyond Beirut city center, was one of the few parts of the city that had escaped the Civil War so that it was an aesthetic process of renovation and preservation, rather than rebuilding, that many of its alleyways and traditional houses had undergone in the postwar years. Many of the old shops here had been transformed into attractive pubs and restaurants with massive popularity and an eager clientele, and it was in one of these places that Samira would gather regularly with Georgine to have a drink, or sing karaoke, and take their minds off things.

Feelings in Beirut were still high after cellular videos of an MP's bodyguards beating feminist activists with the butts of their rifles had gone viral on the Internet. The women were said to have been chanting derogatory slogans while attempting to take pictures of the deputy having dinner, and the affair was being debated on most news channels. So it was the French Bar Tartine, where the action started, that they decided to try, not only because this was the newest addition to the area's slew of posh restaurants.

"They must have been standing there, right outside that glass façade looking upon the courtyard, when they received the first blows," Samira said.

"I've been wondering if this wasn't staged, you know," Georgine said. "Like a twisted publicity stunt for both the MP and the women's NGO."

“Hardly that. Would you enjoy being hit by a gun?” She said it, not without malice, for Georgine’s comment about Ramzi’s sexuality was still on her mind. Georgine shrugged her shoulders and examined the menu. “Where’s the wine list?” she asked.

“You can have wine by the glass here, not by bottle, and they only have small mineral water bottles, not the larger ones most restaurants serve.” Samira made a deprecating gesture with her hands. “It’s meant to get people to talk, apparently, and now with the MP incident, they’ll be getting plenty of that.”

Georgine was staring at an artistically placed security cam on the wall behind Samira. A waiter placed their food on the table discreetly. The grey bulge of the camera was set above a pastel-colored painting and blended nicely with the background. “Do you think they had that placed after the incident?”

“I’m tired of CCTV cams everywhere in Beirut. Every breath is recorded. Even in the changing rooms at the gym. Yes, ladies, you better keep up soigné appearances, even as you are about to get into the shower.”

They laughed, somewhat uncertainly.

“So, what’s happening? Why the sudden interest in plants? You hate the village, Samira.”

“I’m curious to know more. What of it? It’s just a few articles I’m reading. Botany updates.” She had seen this coming. “And you,” she said, glaring at Georgine, “you should be better prepared for that time of month, rather than go fumbling in my gym bag while your good friend showers.”

Georgine wasn’t convinced. “Does your mother-in-law have anything to do with this?”

“Oh, not at all. I’m hardly seeing Teta.”

“Are they still up at your house in Faraya?” Samira’s in-laws had moved there to escape the rabid war in Syria. “Did their Armenian friend end up joining them by the way? The one with the weird name.”

“You mean Nanig? No, she didn’t want to leave her house or something.”

“Look who’s here,” Georgine exclaimed, dropping her fork. “And I thought she doesn’t actually eat,” she said. Susanne Sulaita, the darling of Beirut’s weight-loss seekers, had just walked in with an unidentified man and was being led to a table at the other end of the restaurant.

“You know the kind of patients she has is similar to the ones who come to our clinic,” Samira said proudly. She had been to see her in October, soon after moving to Beirut. Susanne

had a reputation for treating her patients almost as friends and for constructing accessible, efficient diets based on genetic blood tests; her clinic in Hamra's famous Blue Building targeted a thronging clientele from all over the country. Georgine, who had mixed feelings about her plump figure, was an exception.

"And if you go for a check-up," Samira said, turning to her, "she will have you strip down to your underwear and then start using these quaint wooden gadgets to measure your body fat from top.... to bottom."

Georgine looked embarrassed for a moment, and then they broke into peals of near-hysterical laughter. The tension in Samira's body had simmered down a bit, and Deema, who had a date to keep, was finally ready to make her exit.

Samira excused herself and scurried down the street to the parking lot. No valuable time to waste waiting for the valet to bring the car around. Valets are typically notoriously late in Beirut, and on another night out with Georgine, she wouldn't have minded. They would stand on the sidewalk, chattering away as other pub and restaurant patrons spilled out and joined them in the valet-waiting tradition. Samira hadn't told Georgine she had parked the car herself either. She would only have quizzed her about it, and she would have had to explain why instead of heading back home, she was now in traffic, driving toward Tareek El Jedidi.

Ramzi had said he wanted them to talk at 11.30p.m., and with no time to waste, she put to good use her stops at central Beirut's plethora of traffic lights, adjusting her appearance piecemeal: changing from heels to flats, one foot at a time, then draping a shawl over her shoulders and removing the shimmering Swarovski earrings Georgine had given her on her last birthday after their reconciliation last summer. She tied back her hair in a plain bun and was ready.

Early on in the project, Samira had to decide on a venue for getting online to do her research and have the Skype sessions with Ramzi. These sessions could obviously not take place in the small house they were renting since Ramzi was spending most evenings in his room using the Internet, and the walls separating the rooms were as thin as gossamer dresses. She was tempted at least once, after a tiring day at the clinic, to do the research bit from her room, but she was sharing a laptop with Mazen, and felt sure he would raise whimsical eyebrows about her newfound interest in their son's research passions. The few friends Ramzi had made since they

moved to Lebanon at the start of his course seemed to be living in central Beirut, in either Ashrafieh or Hamra, and so Tareek El Jedidi, farther out in the city, had seemed a safe choice. Samira felt at home in the city in general, and this was a part of Beirut where she imagined no one would know her.

With the steady flow of incomers from Syria, several parts of Beirut were quickly transforming into slums, and Samira soon realized that regardless of the time of day, she would always be surrounded by a throng of both locals and refugees swarming the area. In some ways, she found this reassuring, reasoning a crowd would make walking incognito smoother, and somehow safer, a task.

The café itself took more time to decide on than to find, given the surprising abundance of tatty places offering Internet access and desktop use for a fee. The one she chose was conveniently located in a dingy backstreet separated by a smattering of adjacent buildings at walking distance from the even more bustling thoroughfare spilling into the main highway. Like in almost every other net café she checked out, the patrons here were men, smoking, sipping soft drinks or coffee, chatting on the net, and surfing porn websites, not bothering to minimize their windows even when newcomers entered the place.

Twice there was another woman; she would trot in furtively and stay for barely twenty minutes. The second time she came, she spoke up. “I come here to check my university email,” she said, the second time she came, seating herself in the stall next to Samira’s. “Dial-up doesn’t always work at home. We can’t blame that one too on the refugees, can we?” she said, laughing. She continued to talk, undeterred by the lack of response. “What are you doing here?”

“Research,” Samira said curtly. The woman wasn’t impressed.

Ramzi’s voice sounded normal, but his mother could see he had been crying; his face was colorless. He must have shaved after his class that afternoon, and she noticed he had cut himself on his chin and on his neck too. For the first few minutes of the conversation, he leaned his head back against the headboard behind his bed, gaze turned to the ceiling. He was sitting on the new green-brown coverlet. Then he adjusted his posture and looked into the camera. His eyes startled her, his gaze jumpy and frightened. Samira’s mother had had the same defeated look the week her father was sniped, eventually, during the Civil War in Beirut.

“I don’t know what to think,” Ramzi said.

“Think about what?”

“I’ve mulled it in my mind over and over again, but that’s the only conclusion I could reach.” He paused, gathering his thoughts and still looking confused. “It just seems so unbelievable, like a bad dream, and it hurts,” he said, starting to cry.

She hadn’t seen him cry in years. Samira reached out impulsively and touched the screen.

The man on the computer next to her glanced her way, amused, using his Pepsi can as an ashtray. Films of smoke from his cigarette floated across making her squint.

“It happened on the day of the race, didn’t it?” she asked, quickly deleting the question: Deema, the environmentalist, had never been told about the race. “Perhaps if you tell me, I can help you sort it out?” Her hands shook as she typed and retyped, editing mistakes. Ramzi, like his grandmother, scorned typos.

He sniffed, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his pajama top. “Can I see you?” he asked, peering straight into the screen. “Switch on your cam, please.” When Samira still wouldn’t respond, he leaned back against the headboard and returned his gaze to the ceiling. “You know. I can’t speak about her. I just can’t.”

“Of course you can,” Samira wrote, trying to keep her calm. “You must.”

“Alright,” he said, after a moment. “I don’t know where to begin, really.”

“By telling me about this girl. Whoever she is.”

His face twitched. He lowered his eyes, as if looking at his keyboard or his lap.

The man next to Samira had opened another Pepsi can and was looking at her clutching her earphones, pressing them to her head. “Are you alright?” he asked. Without giving any answer, she terminated the call, closing the camera she had inadvertently opened in her haste.

Teta

Thursday, March 28, 2013 was a difficult day. Teta's grandson, Ramzi, ran his first race in Lebanon, the same day her husband forced her to come with him to Faraya to escape the ongoing war in Syria. On that day too, she lost contact with her lover Nanig who had remained home.

One week after the race, Teta still had no news of Nanig, and unable to call her from the house where they were staying, she wandered over to the town square. There, she knew, there were phones-for-pay in the grocery stores, many of which had been added recently as a courtesy to the large number of refugees who had made it to Faraya.

The town square of Faraya was a Lebanese landmark. Even though the town had changed a great deal since it gradually morphed into a major ski area over the past fifty years, the town square had retained its local character. Teta had visited the village a few times since her daughter-in-law Samira acquired her property here and the line of roadside *manqūsheh* stops, interspersed with willows dominating the square, never changed. She was eating a *manqūsheh* to calm her thoughts when she noticed a narrow alley right behind the delicatessen. Intrigued by the smell of oil and fresh dough that seemed to emanate from the alleyway, she followed the trail. The alleyway narrowed for a minute or two, still redolent with the smell of food, then exited into a large clearing, parallel to the town square. The first thing Teta saw was a set of colorful vans on one side and perhaps seven or eight tin structures covered upfront with opaque plastic sheets on the other. The way the vans were parked made them seem a natural extension of the tin houses, and the whole was arranged in an intriguing open bracket form. This it seemed was where the refugees had made a makeshift commune.

Instead of going back through the alleyway to the main town square, Teta, trying to forget her predicament, stood watching the refugees making the artifacts they probably hoped to sell to the tourists who kept coming here, even after the ski slopes closed and the skiing season ended. Now she understood why; the makeshift camp looked on the outside like an attraction of sorts, it was easy to forget the drudgery that lurked in the inside of the vans and the tin houses. The weather was still a bit chilly, and a meter away from the shade of a van's canopy, a man was sanding slices of wood, two young children watching him closely. The repetitive motion of the sander over the surface of the wood was rather hypnotic, and the work looked satisfying.

Teta imagined Nanig with her, sanding a piece of wood, asking sheepishly if she could transform it into a wooden cat. Nanig loved cats. But her mind whirred shamelessly, almost by habit now. With no cogs to clasp to, it produced instead a sordid slideshow of imaginary but very possible scenes: Nanig, in the night, too scared to sleep, expecting knocks at her door at any moment. Nanig watching helplessly her cat Fatoom kicked around by the boots of a laughing soldier. Nanig on her hands and knees about to be raped by opposition insurgents, especially scary for her considering how her own husband used to force himself upon her. Nanig, tortured and bruised, looking helplessly into a camera as regime forces filmed the moment to post the footage on YouTube, a knack all factions had developed.

In the center of the clearing, a temporary kitchen had been set up: a cauldron, a few rudimentary-looking ovens, and trestle tables covered with vegetables in plastic pails. Some of the residents were milling about, chopping and carting things in preparation for their meal. The source of the smell that had enticed Teta here was evident too. On the side of the trestle tables, the black, circular *manqūsheh* ovens, arranged neatly in a rectangle, were laden with the dough diluted with water and made sizzling noises once the mixture of thyme and oil was added on top.

A boy, not older than twelve, stood guard behind a ragged sack filled with cashew nuts. “You don’t have cash for Prozac, buy cashews,” he chanted as she approached.

His mother, who had noticed Teta’s arrival, left her stand behind a sizzling oven and walked over. She explained her son Melhem believed one pill of Prozac has the same effect as two handfuls of cashew nuts and was using the catchphrase to market the nuts among the refugees and their visitors.

“It’s not a joke. It’s niacin and they prescribe it for alcohol addiction,” he said, his tone serious and convinced. “I’ve read about it.” The gleam in his eyes as he spoke looked familiar. Heemo, as his mother called him, started pontificating about the perils of a niacin-free diet, the sales of his cashews set aside.

“I am sorry, he does that when he meets a new person who catches his interest,” the woman said, embarrassed. “It’s meant to be a compliment.” She asked if Teta were Syrian too. Where in Syria, she wanted to know.

The woman sighed in relief, happy to meet a fellow refugee. “I could tell from your accent,” she said. “Are you here in the camp though? I don’t remember seeing you before.”

“No, I’m staying with my husband at our daughter-in-law’s house. She’s with her family in Beirut so we’re using the house here for now.”

“Oh well, it’s a small camp, but more comfortable than the larger ones in Beirut. The Faraya municipality has been generous with us too, sending some foodstuffs and allowing us to use this parking lot so close to the town square.”

A girl stepped out of one of the makeshift houses in the commune and joined the boy by the cashew sack, nodding briefly at her mother.

“She’s Heemo’s sister,” the woman said. “They’re fraternal twins.”

Teta and Nanig had a fascination with childbirth stories. Teta could understand Nanig’s since she never had children, but her own interest in the matter always intrigued her.

“Can I ask you something? How was it like giving birth to twins?” she said. “Was it difficult?”

Surprisingly, the woman laughed. “It was alright,” she answered. “I had a C-section of course, and they put a screen so I wouldn’t see, but that was it.” Her face clouded. “It was later that things got worrisome, when he was a few years old,” she said glancing over at Heemo.

“He’ll be fine,” Teta ventured, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “My son had the same condition too.”

The woman sucked in her breath.

“Asperger’s? Your boy had the same condition?” she repeated. “Does he dwell on specific subjects too, reading about them endlessly?”

“Oh yes, all the time. Botany was his thing.”

“We took Heemo to a child psychiatrist in Damascus you know, a few months before we came here. He hadn’t sounded very encouraging. Will he be fine, do you think? Is your own boy fine?”

Is Rami fine? Teta thought of Rami, drowned not yet a year now, and of Nanig too, possibly, glaring at her with reproach from their graves. But what good would it be to share any of this; her interlocutor had spoken in whimpers and desperately needed to hear otherwise.

“Heemo will be fine,” she said. “Just look after him well, and he will be fine.”

“Sometimes I fear it will catch up with his sister too, but the doctor said not to worry,” the woman fretted.

“And he is right. It is not as if it were infectious.”

“Would you like to have lunch with us?” She hesitated, glancing over at her children. “It’s just a soup and *manqūsheh* meal.”

The children were eyeing the cauldron around which people were starting to mass, clutching plastic plates. Teta was starting to feel the squalor of the place more tangibly now; she had no desire to see more.

In the grocer’s shop, another refugee was using the phone. Teta stoically chased morbid musings from her head, but the thirst for the destruction of human life seemed unquenchable, and the more she thought about the matter, the more she feared she would not be hearing from Nanig again.

After twenty minutes of giving a closed signal, the phone finally rang and went silent; presumably, somebody was on the other end of the line.

“Nanig, is that you? This is Teta speaking. Please let me speak to Nanig.” There was static on the line, and this time there was no mistaking the signal. The line had cut.

Four weeks onwards, Teta’s daughter-in-law marked her ultimate victory. The silence of their menfolk bolstered Samira’s resolve to evict Teta from her house in Faraya: Mazen, still bewildered by the news, and the dramatic manner his wife announced her intrepid pursuit of the truth through the Internet, had been a mute spectator of his mother’s eviction. Teta’s husband too retreated into his usual reticence. Ramzi had returned to Beirut immediately after racing day, and Teta hadn’t been able to reach him since.

The peremptory notice Samira gave her meant she was left with forty-eight hours to decide between renting a flat or joining one of the refugee camps dotting the Lebanese coast. With still no news of Nanig, who obviously had never reached Faraya, Teta still clung to the sliver of hope a blindfolded prisoner would cherish right till the moment the trapdoor under his feet is released. So she chose to rent a small apartment in a Hamra alley in Beirut. A dingy building erected several decades earlier and pockmarked with the stray bullets of recent political skirmishes, it was the cheapest she could find and also the nearest to the camp hosting the ongoing outpouring of her less fortunate compatriots. There she hoped to find Nanig.

The day after she reached the city, she woke up in the early morning to the hum of an azan and ate one of the four apples she had sneaked into her bag before leaving Faraya. She

cleaned her new two-room home as swiftly as she could and emerged from the building, overwhelmed immediately by a bustling street agog with anticipation. The child beggars, many from Syria, seemed particularly happy about something; the heart-wrenching pleas for money she had expected were replaced by wide cheeky smiles. Like other areas in west Beirut, Hamra, Teta realized, had morphed into a slum with the steady influx of refugees, and the children and teenagers all seemed to be heading in one direction – the large square at the periphery of the Hamra shacks, the makeshift refugee camp several blocks almost a thirty-minute walk from her building.

A girl in dreadlocks, not older than thirteen, was pulling her hand excitedly. “Are you alright, missus?” she asked, eyeing the apples in Teta’s plastic bag. “You looked ready to faint.” She said her name was Uruba and that Teta had been standing transfixed for the past five minutes, her hands stroking her neck impulsively, and that people on their way to the square festivity had been bumping into her.

“I was thinking about someone,” Teta said.

Uruba pocketed the apple Teta offered, and looked at her curiously. “Why do you keep touching yourself?” With practiced legerdemain, Nanig’s photograph was in her face in an instant.

“Someone gave me something, and I no longer have it now.” In her haste to leave Samira’s house, Teta had left behind the lapis necklace Nanig had made her promise to keep.

“Lapis lazuli is the ugliest stone,” Nanig had said, “but it’s the most expensive thing Anwar ever gave me, and you wearing it makes all the difference.”

“No, I haven’t seen this person,” Uruba said, glancing the picture over. “Ever!” She couldn’t contain her enthusiasm anymore. “You should hurry. Walk a bit faster so we are not late.”

Teta chided herself for maudlin thinking, feeling foolish and wanting to cry, but determined that Nanig was still fine. She was gradually swayed by the general sense of anticipation she had felt earlier, an anticipation that seemed to swell the closer they got to the clearing at the outskirts of the Hamra shacks, the refugee homes.

“Today will be a good day,” Uruba chirped as they joined an ebullient crowd of children and teenagers moving in purposeful strides towards the clearing.

The reason behind the excitement was soon apparent. At the rear of a car in the middle of the square, a 1980s Mercedes of uncertain color, was attached a rope at the end of which was a rubbish bag with something moving inside. It was difficult to discern what that was though.

Uruba gladly furnished an answer. “Kittens,” she said with relish. “Street cats; they shoot off like crazy and then come after the little food we have.”

The boys next to Uruba let out shrill laughs. “Too bad toms don’t use condoms,” one quipped.

“This is terrible,” Teta said. “How can you do this?”

The boys glanced at her with disdain, trudged closer for a better view.

“Do you think they might recognize Nanig?” she asked.

Uruba shrugged. “I doubt it, but we can try. Bilo, Moudi, the missus wants to show you something.”

The boys stepped back for an instant. “This person doesn’t live here,” they said sharply, eying the picture with suspicion. “And neither do you.”

“Cats, was it?” Uruba said, exchanging a knowing glance with her cohort, and turning to Teta. “We used to solve the problem by shoving a new litter in a sack and tossing it in the garbage.” Uruba spoke lightly. “But there is always some feeble-hearted garbage man who will open the sack and let them out. And then we’d be right back where we started. This way is better.”

“And more fun too,” the boys added gleefully. “Anwar knows what he is doing.”

The car to which the rubbish bag was attached carried a red plate, which indicated that the owner was a cab driver: Fadi. Uruba had the details. The cat litter dilemma in the Hamra shacks had coaxed the man out of forced retirement. Four years ago when his cab driving license needed renewing, the immigration authorities made Fadi do a test. There were all kinds of things wrong with him, Uruba laughed, and he failed. Since then he hadn’t been allowed to drive, not officially at least, but he had kept both the car and the red plate. They helped him remember better times when he was more gainfully employed and, on days like this, came in handy. He felt useful again.

Fadi immediately reminded Teta of Nanig’s husband Anwar. She hadn’t thought of Anwar in years; it was as if his passing a decade ago had helped her block any conscious attempt to

recollect smudges of his actions: A man who was aggravated by liquor in his own home, but made sterling efforts to maintain the martyred air of steadfast composure people in the village respected him for. The community felt sorry for Anwar – a hard-working educator, they thought, slaving away at the local school to only get older without children of his own. His wife it was whispered could not have any. Teta's husband, who shared Anwar's ideas on school discipline but not his drinking habit, repeated this to her every time she mentioned she was visiting Nanig. When she answered lightly that infertility was not contagious, and that Rami and Mazen were proof of that, her husband had glowered at her, saying that joking this way about their teenage boys was bad luck.

Nanig had been too old for Anwar when he married her, people in the village claimed. At thirty, a spinster already, and thereafter a barren one. And yet he had stood by her – a grand man! A grand man, Teta said aloud. It sounded ridiculous. They didn't know, how could they, about the many trips she had made with Nanig to Damascus in the early years of her marriage, the city doctors confirming there was nothing wrong with her. And then the drunken brawls that followed Nanig's announcement of good health every time: Anwar's disbelief, the beatings with the wicker rug-whip, and the forced promise that his wife would return again to Damascus, but to another gynecologist, another clinic.

When he passed away of liver cirrhosis, Nanig told everyone it was heart failure and then declined to receive mourners on grounds of poor health. Anwar had had sex with her for the last time the night before he died, and the fresh bruises on her neck had gotten infected. She could no longer hide them wearing the hefty lapis necklace he had given her, and besides it was inappropriate for a widow to don jewelry. In the past, she had used it to cover the discolored skin above her chest, the prints of his fingers and the welts they left every time he forced himself upon her, in the hope that the more aggressive his efforts the higher the chances of conception. He was a virile man; if Nanig wasn't conceiving, it must be her own body that was anomalous.

Teta hadn't wanted her to be left alone with her memories, but she had her sons Rami and Mazen to look after too. Still, she made sure to spend as much time as she could at Nanig's house, which wasn't always easy. Rami could be petulant on days his interest in his books ebbed, claiming more attention than usual. And then one afternoon, a quickening, a livening which, in retrospect, had been floating in their heads even when Anwar was around.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Nanig had said. She was twirling a stem of lavender plucked from a pot in the garden outside her kitchen. More stems lay broken in the garden itself.

“I’m sorry I’m late, love. Mazen rearranged one of his brother’s books without telling him and Rami had a fit.”

“Those two will kill each other one day if –” She stopped midsentence, looking contrite. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“You know Rami is not well,” Teta said quietly. “That won’t change.” She realized how weary Nanig was looking. Her cheeks seemed as slack and as dry as over-washed Damascene cotton garments. It took her an eon to finish her coffee, and when she put the cup aside, she sat with her hands in her lap, the fingers relinquishing the mangled stem, moving restlessly together with paper-like sound.

“Go have a nap,” Teta said. “I will tidy up and cook us a nice dinner, a stew you like.”

Nanig bowed her head sideways, nodding slowly then rising and leaving the room. There was more to do than tidying up, and it helped, as usual, calm Teta’s thoughts. Using the white alcohol from the local apothecary, she cleaned the soot from the frame of the kitchen window looking upon the grassy enclosure Nanig liked to think of as her garden. Teta cringed, imagining Anwar’s empty liquor bottles stashed in the metallic cupboard in its corner. She took out a plastic board and started chopping vegetables for their meal: cauliflowers, tomatoes, and onions from her garden, potatoes and carrots from the grocer’s.

Fifteen minutes after, as she was gathering the potato and carrot peelings from the counter, Nanig was in the kitchen again standing next to her. Teta noted, not for the first time, the piercing of her ear, a little dimple in the mourning lobe. Anwar’s passing had also meant his widow could not wear her earrings, a gift from her mother, for a while. “I can’t sleep,” she said. “I’ll have a bath instead.”

Although she closed the bathroom door behind her, there was no chink of a key turning in its lock, and with the door between the kitchen and the bathroom passage propped open, Teta could hear the intimate rattle of Nanig’s preparations, the friction of the old chain against the tub, the plink of drips as she adjusted the temperature, and the splutter and gush of the water that followed. Then came the soft thud of her buttoned dress as it hit the bidet and the splash of water as she stepped into the tub, followed by a more yodeling thwack as she lowered herself down. A thought Teta had always tried to banish sprang into her head: Nanig’s slender flesh crimsoning in

the heat. She placed the chopped vegetables in a pan and the pan on the hob, turned on the gas, and attended to the pile of kitchenware in the sink, scrubbing harder than was necessary to scramble her thoughts in the din of clanking crockery and cutlery.

The steam was still beading the kitchen wall tiles when Nanig finally finished her shower and walked in, smiling wanly when Fatoom purred and rubbed against her. She sidled into the nook next to the sink and watched Teta work, quietly. She took her all in: Teta's sullied apron, her rolled-up sleeves, her steam-frizzed shoals of hair.

Nanig stepped closer. She turned off the tap, and when Teta started to say something, she placed for a moment her hand on Teta's mouth. The airy smell of coarse olive soap and water freshness made Teta dizzy. "Can I kiss you?" Nanig asked.

"Yes," Teta whispered. And they did.

Uruba was tugging at Teta's sleeve again, urging her not to miss the action. There was a momentary calm she could only interpret as further anticipation right before Anwar started the car, whose lurch forward was marked with a grunt and a groan as the driver, who was not wearing a seatbelt, hit his head against the steering wheel.

The cheering resumed when after driving forward for barely a few meters, he changed into reverse mode, his gearbox howling, and backed up, turning the steering wheel just a little in one direction, and then, immediately, in the other. Up and down the old cab darted, back and forth, coming dangerously close to the excited spectators since Anwar was frequently reversing without looking over his shoulder or in the rearview mirror. Soon enough, a plume of exhaust fumes hung limply amidst the crowd. Anwar climbed out of the car, untied the bag theatrically, and threw it in the garbage bin with a hearty swing. "Good riddance to vile rubbish," he said, raising his hands in triumph as the audience of children and teenagers chuckled and cheered.

It took a while longer for the crowd to disperse, but when they did, Teta walked over to the garbage bin. It was quiet except for the drone of the insects in and around the bin, and for the chafe of the few remaining leaves of a tree, which swirled around listlessly as the wind went up with the first signs of rainfall. The bag was not at the top. It had slid down a little, not just from gravity, but partly from the movement inside. She could now hear muted squeaking and almost inaudible scratching. Her right arm stretched out impulsively toward the bin, but she stopped herself midair, and stayed that way for at least a minute trying to control her breathing. Slowly,

using her left hand, she pulled her right arm down till, limp and wet, it returned to her side, and she turned and walked away until she was far enough to be out of earshot.

Back in her room, Teta disrobed, standing naked next to a leprous-looking geyser erect on its three-pronged legs. When she returned to the building, the landlord had wanted to have a word. “Be very careful when you light this,” he said, glazing his eyes to indicate he had only entered the bathroom to warn her. She struck a match, its flame, with a whoosh, finding the gas. The geyser ticked and rattled; hot water flowed, her bath was ready.

The soothing quiet that followed felt like the first time Teta touched velvet, the velvet of the frock she and Nanig had purchased for Mazen’s wedding, and when she fell asleep in the tub, she saw her in her dream. They didn’t talk, but Nanig was holding the door to her house open, the sun from the kitchen window lighting the air behind her so that she appeared to glow through the outlines of her body. She looked out with wonder, fear tempered with compassion, and on the other side, trembling a little, Teta watched.

Walking, like running, can be an act of falling forward, a constantly arrested plunge in the quest for something or someone. Teta wouldn’t be defeated from the onset, not by her encounter with Uruba and the Anwar-cheering crowd, and the butchered cats, and the general staleness of the city. In this way, her walks through Hamra in search of Nanig became an article of faith. She performed them daily: an iambic ritual, a rhythmic teetering not unlike the meter of the classical Arabic poems she had taught at school – the words, like the brisk steps of her morning walks, flowing purposely into each other, into lines and stanzas, but always on the brink of something that collapses even as it is formed. A holding on and a letting go. A craving, a chimera, an absurdity, a folly perhaps.

She walked and walked, but the place she really wanted to go to kept getting farther and farther away. Nonstop honking wasn’t rearranging invisible particles in such a way as to decongest traffic, and cranes seemed to loom and spin at every turning. Each step she took pushed the city out from under her feet and her hometown into her mind; Beirut’s orgies of concrete were making her pine for green. She looked at the horizon to relieve her eyes, but even the skyline ratcheted tensions. It rippled and fluctuated, a contrast between poverty belts and high-rise tenements, spreading out, lunging skyward, blotting out sun and sea; there was no way left to navigate. No one knew Nanig; no one here from their village; no one had seen her. The

man she thought looked familiar was someone else; the women she recognized gave under her touch like melting ice; gum-selling children she talked to asked for money and scowled at the now crumpled picture. With every step and unanswered question, a disaster was braked – Nanig was still alive somewhere.

Daily, the city pulsed with the ferment of its inhabitants, the weariness of its walkers, and the wretchedness of its refugees. Back in her room, Teta numbed her thoughts with astrology. Glancing furtively around her, she would comb the horoscope section of a local daily, which, in the first few days, she could still afford. Then, she made a thriftier discovery.

A teashop on her street, livened after dark with the pizzazz of its patrons, was also an Internet haunt with a history. Its electric sign gleamed with the same name as the café that was once a bookstore that had been a tram-stop when, some fifty years ago, trams still ran in Beirut. She had smiled wryly checking the surroundings. A ruddy-cheeked young man in a frayed sweater was dipping into a Tupperware of tabbouleh, the city's bulgur and parsley salad, and touching his crotch. Other boys, many her grandson Ramzi's age, were also watching porn clips, snacking meanwhile on pots and bags of affordable treats: peanuts, yogurt, and chips, as well as kebab wraps and soda cans sold by street vendors.

Suppertime at the zoo.

She wasn't much better. Crazed by updates on Virgo, Nanig's horoscope, Teta had reached her own rock bottom.

Throughout their relationship, and the fifteen years Teta had known her, Nanig had retained a constant faith in astrology. Not so much the daily horoscope predictions in newspapers and on the radio – although she did read and listen to those – but the notion that our personality traits are somehow predestined by the planets and the stars. She was always saying that Jiddo, Teta's husband who still treated her formally despite her closeness to his family, was taciturn and stodgy because he is a Taurean. On the days she remembered the gnarled and gruff Anwar who had been twelve years her senior, she cried, dredging up foul incidents from her past, saying their stars had been incompatible and that they should never have married.

Ramzi wasn't spared this infuriating logic either. Sometimes, when he was over in the village for the summer, Nanig would say the boy was emotional and romantic because he is a Virgo like her, all silly talk Teta reasoned with her, not with much success. In fact, they rarely

argued. The only time they'd had a serious row was when Nanig gave her an ultimatum. Perhaps it was coming back with such force because of its sheer irony: After all, Teta was a refugee reading horoscopes in an internet café, disgraced by her daughter-in-law for loving another woman, even as she imagined she'd saved Samira's marriage by putting an end to Mazen's infidelity, and then keeping it under wraps.

Samira had been complaining for some time her husband was spending long stretches of time away from home. Work matters he always said. When his mother had a word with him, he grew dodgy and tried to shirk her questions, but relented eventually and told her the truth. It was a relief to be able to unburden himself, Teta thought. He must've known she couldn't have betrayed him. He'd been seeing an old friend from his short-lived college days, a Lebanese-Armenian woman, for a while now, and up till he learned she might not be able to have children, was even considering leaving his wife for her.

In her shock and haste, Teta shared the story with Nanig, and she took it badly. They were spending the weekend in Damascus, and Nanig had gotten into her mind that once there, Teta would bring Mazen and Samira together and confront them with the truth. When she noticed Teta had locked herself in the bedroom with Mazen only, leaving Samira in the living room to be consoled by Nanig over her birthday that Mazen had missed, Nanig declared her ultimatum. Teta would tell Samira her husband was cheating on her, or Teta and Nanig would separate. One relationship had to go.

That same night they went to the theater to escape the tension in the house. Teta wasn't a big fan of Layla and Majnun, but Nanig hadn't seen it. A virile man, a poet torn by passion, afflicted by grief, and maddened by calamity, Majnun's tragedy probed the perils and tribulations of censored love in ancient Arabia. Teta had forgotten how sultry and atmospheric the play was: Swashes of light, delirious puppets, overwrought actors. Insanity. No sentimental demonstration here was in bas-relief.

Ramzi was with them. Rami too. He hadn't wanted to remain in the village, not after a fall-out he'd had with his father over a trifle. They'd been shunted a few seats away from Teta and Nanig, but these had been the only remaining spots in this gallery, one of the few Teta could afford. Nanig was staring at the roaring pit below them and Teta tried to hold her hand: Nanig's face was still, as pale as the alabaster pillars of their village hall. She seemed to be avoiding looking at Teta, and gently pushed her hand away. It was the Mazen and Samira problem again,

Teta thought bitterly, and Nanig was still upset by what she thought was an unfair decision on her lover's part. She could be like that sometimes, both petulant and clairvoyant. A child.

"Please talk to me," Teta pleaded.

"Not if you're still covering for your son."

"Think of Ramzi, Nanig."

"And what? His mother be damned?"

"Mazen said he'll end it." This was news to her. "I threatened to tell his father."

"Yes, your husband," she scoffed.

"I can't do what you're asking, Nanig."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Mazen wants another child," Teta said. "His wife's keen too."

"Ah yes, the story of the doll," Nanig hissed. "All the more unfair."

"Unfair? She thinks the stupid doll will get her pregnant again." Teta laughed, but it was forced. An argument broke out in the pit, and the puppets groaned.

"That's where you're wrong again, you know."

"If you've seen what broken homes do, you'd know I've done the right thing. I won't have Ramzi suffer if I can help it."

Nanig was shaking now. "I know what broken homes are," she said. "My grandparents died in the Ottoman death marches. My mother believed in the mascot too."

They had seldom talked about her family, or how she ended up in Teta's village even. It was not a congenial topic for her. Shortly after her wedding, people had forgotten Anwar's bride was of Armenian origin: Nayiri, her real name was. Nayiri had a ring to it, perhaps, but Teta called her Nanig, affectionately. She frowned. "The doll isn't Mazen's, surely?"

"I imagine he got it from that woman he was seeing."

"But I could've sworn it was Samira's idea."

"Only because it suited you."

"It's mad," Teta said, grabbing the rail. "The whole thing is mad. We've all gone mad."

In the pit, Layla was being veiled and hennaed in preparation for her wedding night. The forlorn hum of the maidens who assisted her floated across the stage. The surly swarthy man her father had chosen for her was getting ready too, but raucously, his kinsmen fueling his appetite

with wine and prurient anecdotes. In a moment, he would enter her tent, and the puppets on their poles would go berserk, again.

Teta could see Rami and Ramzi approaching. Ramzi mumbled something about his uncle wanting a toilet break.

“Do you think you can go with him?” his grandmother asked.

“Yes,” said Ramzi, and they were gone.

Teta felt light-headed, her thoughts muddled and lost before they were articulated. “I’m not as unscrupulous as you make me,” she said. Majnun’s tribe was closing in on him discretely. Another minute, and she knew he would be told Layla was said to be dying. Teta was the one trembling now. “Aren’t we doing the same thing, anyway? It’s not that different. Why should anyone get hurt?”

“But it *is* different,” Nanig said. Majnun’s grief thundered across the room. “I love you.”

A few days passed, and Teta, again, was at the internet café. It was Saturday. Or E-Day like Ramzi would have put it. Ramzi and his grandmother had started using email when he was still in high school in Damascus. He said he liked the feel of the written word, to wake up on a rainy weekend, and open an update she had written to him the evening before.

The usual buzz of the café’s patrons, the wiping of the lint and ash-covered screen, the drawing of a breath, and there it was, a message from Ramzi. Teta replied shakily, copying the date on the back of Nanig’s picture, and retraced her steps to her room down the road: *Teta, I’m still trying to cope. I’m sorry about what Mama did, and I want to see you. Monday at 3p.m. on the Corniche? I love you. Ramzi. PS: Nanig hasn’t called yet.*

The searing rush, an alchemic quickening that started with contentment quickly morphed into a hopeful exhaustion. Teta had let Rami down perhaps, but a lot remained at stake. Ramzi and Nanig were still out there. She had to stay put, and when Monday would arrive, all would be fine.

Ramzi had also insisted on creating a Facebook account for Teta – email wasn’t enough – even though none of the people his grandmother socialized with in the village used the website. She humored him, and listened to him, and the warmth and tenderness he gave in return were invaluable.

“Think of Facebook as a more visual form of email between the two of us,” he said. “And you can add Mama too,” he added slyly, “and keep an eye on her like I know you try to.”

“Don’t be silly now,” Teta had said. She never admitted to being suspicious of Samira, not to her grandson at least. But the prospect of keeping track of her daughter-in-law online was too tempting. Soon, her newsfeed was flooded with notifications about her goings-on: Samira recorded her every breath.

“Beware, Samira is on a girls’ night out,” Teta said out loud, much to Nanig’s bemusement. “Again!” She spent an hour every morning trying to connect to the Internet. She could never tell if the cable’s turtle speed was affected more by the war or the antediluvian desktop in Jiddo’s house.

“What does that mean?” Nanig asked, letting out a yodeling yawn. She was still in bed, her face pressed sideways against a pillow.

“It means she was dressed like a trollop and out with other intrepid women in Damascus while my son and his son spent the evening on their own worrying about her.”

“You are too hard on Samira,” said Nanig. “She is a good mother in her own way. She loves Mazen and Ramzi.”

“You think so?” Nanig’s intuition was at times uncanny. “I feel she keeps them away from us somehow.”

Nanig shrugged. “I don’t think she does,” she said. “You just don’t like her.”

“She’s not very educated either; she doesn’t make the effort.”

“I’m not very educated,” Nanig said quietly.

“What? No. No, I didn’t mean it that way,” Teta protested. “But just look at her, sharing reams of photographs on the Internet and making a fool of herself. Surely you –” She became more rushed and flustered as she spoke. Soon, Nanig’s hands were cupping her shoulder, pressing down on it gently. “Stop it,” she said, giggling. “I know you didn’t mean it.” She loved days like this when Teta came over first thing in the morning, letting herself in with the spare key she had given her after Anwar died.

The whirl and clang behind her made them start. “Nerves,” Teta muttered. Nanig shuddered. The grandfather clock chimed again, an ominous reminder of Anwar’s obsession with punctuality, including fucking his wife as per different timetables, all useless.

“Shall we cut our hair today?” Teta asked. Nanig waved towards the bedside secretary where she kept the scissors.

“My treat,” Teta said. “Let’s have a professional trim. Something different for a change.”

“Is that a good idea though?” No man had touched her hair since Anwar’s passing. During his lifetime, Nanig’s hair was kept long: he liked it this way, it appealed to him, he could hold it and pull it from behind as he had his way with her, and besides helped cover any resultant bruises. Since his death, she had made a point to wear it short.

“Seriously, Nanig, my husband won’t be back from the village hall before dusk, so we have time. We can come back to your house for coffee before we go with Ramzi to the pond. He won’t get here before 11. What do you say?”

Nanig nodded.

“We’ll try to get Rami with us.” Teta sighed. He hardly left the house now that the war had started.

“Ramzi’s visit will cheer him up like usual.” Nanig reached out and covered Teta’s hand with hers.

An exchange of glances, a silent moment. It lingered; it was comforting, as refreshing as a glob of dew on a stem of lavender.

Nanig and Teta rarely visited the hairdresser. Nanig could not have afforded it regularly, not with the meager government pension she received as Anwar’s widow, but then even if she could it would not have made a substantial difference. She had never been a social butterfly, rarely receiving visits from the village, and in time grew comfortable with the way Teta trimmed her mane.

Rehabilitating the shoals of her own matronly hairstyle was a pastime Teta enjoyed after she retired, perhaps also a way of setting herself apart from her daughter-in-law who seemed to think of little else. Is that the reward for frivolity feted by Samira on Facebook – a ruinously expensive haircut followed by a luncheon at an upscale Damascene restaurant after a Saturday morning of trying on flimsy tops in front of a gilded mirror in the backdrop of the city’s Roman remains?

Teta found it difficult not to think of their village hairdresser as an opportunist, performing with an outlandish amount of playacting and malodorous sprays a task which she

could easily accomplish in a corner of Nanig's bedroom with the ornate scissors they bargained for at a Sunday market, and sharpened regularly with aluminum foil. She needed the change though. Jiddo was spending his days at the village hall discussing politics with the townsmen and nights on end watching in silence escalating news of the civil war. She couldn't tell what was worse – Nanig's heightened anxiety when she wasn't with her or Rami's increasing isolation and abhorrence of baths. Getting him to wash was becoming as frustrating as, years before, teaching him to swim.

There was a more practical reason too: they hadn't had tap water for days.

At the hairdresser's, a shop with a terrace dappled by hanging wisteria pots, Nanig stopped suddenly causing Rami who was behind her to stumble and latch on to his mother. At the entrance, Nanig moaned softly in front of the varnished statue of a hawk in flight. The paint was starting to peel revealing the pewter stone beneath.

"Don't lose your nerve now," Teta said. "We are with you."

The hairdresser who was watching surreptitiously from a window beamed when they entered. "Wait here," he said, pointing to a set of rattan chairs. "I have to gather some things."

He disappeared behind the crocheted curtain at the back of the shop and returned with a towel and combs. He swung behind him a leather vanity case, a cumbersome-looking thing like the bags of the effete Damascene doctors who had never failed to confirm Nanig's fertility. The towel went over her shoulder and was pinned to the collar of her blouse. The case was set aside for now. The man pontificated: He wanted to prepare the hair first, and he planned to do it the traditional way, which meant starting with an egg mask and preempting any objections.

No, it was not a waste of eggs, not even with the battles nearby. "Dead people can't eat omelets, can they?" he asked, shaking his head. "And every woman should pamper her hair while she still can."

Rami sat staring at his mother blankly, fiddling with his shoelaces, his knees pressed across his chest. More bickering, and then, a concession. One egg only would be used, and out it came from the vanity case neatly wrapped in tissue paper. "I usually keep them under lock and key in a caddy," the man said. "Grandchildren are greedier than they used to be, and they don't understand business, do they? But you wouldn't know, would you? Ramzi is a gem!"

He broke the egg with fanfare, curving his forearms and tilting the halves of the shell over a bowl to separate the albumen from the yolk, then whisking the white with rosewater and olive oil in a brass saucer. And suddenly, Teta was struck by the reality of what was about to happen. For the first time in a very long while, someone else's hands, a man's, were going to touch Nanig's hair. Her churlish mane slackened and tumbled under the moist stickiness of the mask, her head seeming to grow like an orchid coming into bloom. Teta was trying hard to refrain from touching her nape, and the man was giving them a strange look.

"It's a bit balmy in here, isn't it?" Teta asked.

"There are some hand fans in the wicker tray by the door." He answered pertly, indicating the waiting area. "Help yourself."

The man had led Nanig to the lip of the sink. "The county's water network is yet to be repaired since last week's fighting," he said. "I filled these myself last night from the village hall's artesian well." He doused her hair ceremoniously, filling jug after jug from one of the gallons lying under the drain pipe.

A blissful lull while the vanity case was unlatched for the second time, followed by an ominous rhythm: the scythe-like rasp and snap of scissors opening and closing. "Who cut her hair like this?" asked the hairdresser. He glanced at Teta, and she froze. He could either read through her or was judging her own unkempt mane. He pulled and shook two strands of different measures on either side of Nanig's ears, gazing at her scalp as if she were a curiosity.

"Well, perhaps I shouldn't ask," he said, sparing Teta the shame of disclosing her hand in the misdemeanor. On a pixilated screen in the corner blared the news of more gory carnage in nearby Homs. Rami's eyes lifted momentarily from his book and focused on the screen. He took out an apple from his rucksack and bit into it, chewing loudly.

"People have no patience for finery nowadays, you see it all the time. Hair like this," the man was saying. Nanig glanced sideways and touched Teta's hand.

"She would just like a trim; we both do," Teta said. She was no longer sure what was meant by that but the line was a classic Samira catchphrase she often used while calling to book appointments in Damascus when, conceding to her husband's wishes, she came over to the village for weekend visits.

“Trim?? Nothing to trim, Madame!” The man whistled, exasperated. Nanig shrank further in her seat, and Teta bent over and touched her hand, staring at the hairdresser for what seemed a long angry minute. When she stood up again, Rami’s frown startled her, and as she asked him, smiling, how he felt about seeing Ramzi later and going to the pond, his gaze darted back from the tableau of Nanig and the tormented hairdresser, and his mother next to them, to his botany book.

The war continued. Places remained. Time frolicked through them like wind through autumn leaves. The right now was already morphing into something different – the future turning into the past. One change becoming another. Like the flame at the end of a match, wood turning into smoke and smoke into void.

Teta was trawling through bracken and long grass, hands full. The path behind Nanig’s house snaked into a back garden, which visible from the kitchen, was reasonably hidden from the street side. The loquat tree and the modest cairn built during Anwar’s lifetime allowed privacy for the morning activity Nanig had come to relish. She was doing press-ups, proper press-ups Ramzi’s way, knees and back rigid, locking her elbows, touching the grass with her nose, a formidable sheen of sweat on her shoulders and neck. Teta laid the tray next to her, and Nanig hoisted herself up on to her elbows, squatting on a flagstone by the side of the house. She laced her trainers then stretched her hamstrings on the ivy-covered kitchen sill. “I’ll have the crushed ice with the carob treacle please.”

“The *sahlab* is yours too,” Teta protested. “You’re too thin. I’m worried about you.”

“No, you have the damned beast’s nuts,” Nanig said, laughing. The nutritious orchid powder drink thickened with milk and topped with cinnamon sounded like ‘fox testicles’ in formal Arabic. A farce concocted by some vapid linguist gone hungry while hunting – the foraging anecdote from bygone days had always appeased Teta’s students’ curiosity. They found it quaint but satisfying. “I finally got Rami in the bath,” she said. “He seemed to like watching me fill the tub with gallon water.” She drew closer to Nanig. “It’s just us now.”

Sitting with Nanig was exquisite because when she would speak, she used words sparingly, and yet was truly talking, and listening. She addressed herself wholeheartedly, something Teta rarely felt with her husband and children. The only one in the family who always gave the impression of really being there was Ramzi, even as a child.

“In the garden, the trees with their branches
 like plaited locks hanging down,
 such that the hands of the breeze cause them to sway
 in whirling about.
 And in it the slender hand of the branch rose high,
 being devoid of ornaments,
 until finally, its upper portions
 were decked in its blossoms like a necklace.”

“Alsayyāb,” Teta said. “He reminds me of you.”

Nanig continued to eat the carob-treacled ice in slow, measured spoonfuls, staring ahead. There was the soothing rustle of a breeze seeping through the dense foliage of the loquat tree, and Fatoom sneaked up to her and purred like an engine as she stroked him. “Why would anyone in their right mind have a hawk by the entrance to their shop?” she asked. “Where was he hiding it? I’d never seen it before.”

“The hawk had been in storage in his depot since the French Mandate. He’s only taken it out after our civil war started. An old superstition about warding off interlopers. I’m sorry, I should have mentioned it.”

“No, don’t be. It’s not your fault. All that falconry Anwar did; those trips he went on with your husband, he was always particularly odious on the evenings after a hunt. Very sexual.”

“Jiddo savored these trips too,” Teta said. “He fussed Anwar silly about his supposed prowess as a shooter and boasted about boosting his morale after. Men’s quality time is always disastrous.”

Nanig attempted a smile but remained pensive, overcome by an unceasing thought that she struggled to articulate. “I’m starting to feel less scared of him you know,” she said glancing in the direction of the loquat tree and the metal cupboard in its shade. “When we do our jams later in the summer, we can store some of the pots over there.”

Teta was stupefied. The cupboard was akin to the unexploded ordnance of the country’s disgruntled guerrillas. They had avoided so much as a mention of it in recent years. “We will break the lock after Ramzi leaves,” Nanig said. “I want us to throw the bottles away. And the rug whip. Everything. It’s ours now.”

There was little left to say – when they embraced, Teta felt ecstasy, a now familiar pummeling across her chest. Nanig’s heart was thudding too. Teta could feel it, a drum-skin thrum at the base of her throat.

In the kitchen, Teta and Rami were watching Nanig. She was crushing cardamom pods with a pestle, separating the seeds from the shells. She measured two small cups of water into the coffee pot and just as the water began to boil, put in two heaped teaspoons of finely ground Arabic coffee. She stirred the mixture till it rose again, adding the cardamom.

A ritual established over their time together, a ritual that ripened into a solid reality of shared frustrations and edifying moments, it suddenly acquired augmented power with the realization that they were really together, finally. They savored the splendid aroma of this afternoon’s coffee as if it were some elusive elixir; mundane gestures had an extraordinary resonance, the breathing in of the fragrance of the coffee, savoring it, exchanging glances, serving more and sipping again: even Rami sitting upright on a stool, seemed different, more thoughtful than usual...

“Ramzi will be arriving any minute now,” Teta said.

Rami and Ramzi were safe, Nanig was with her, and the knowledge in and of itself was invigorating. She felt the same kind of elation every time Ramzi came to spend summer with them. What more could she ask for? Elsewhere in the country, an ongoing spate of eruptions and undertows, the war blustered mercilessly, fought with tooth and hammer, anvil and rifle, cluster bombs and human shields. People lived and died, and homes disintegrated, but life around her continued to throb.

Silence descended; Fatoom slept in a swathe of sunshine on the sill. And Nanig, Rami, and Teta drank their coffee. With each sip, time seemed more sublime.

E-Day in Beirut was drawing to a close.

Although the geyser was already on clunking mode right before Teta’s evening bath, she could still hear a familiar beep. Standing in the bathroom, she picked the phone up, expecting a

fond word from Ramzi perhaps, the comforting sheen and shine of youth, another conciliatory message.

Instead, it was Samira.

Teta's hands sprang to her neck, realizing again that the lapis stones were missing. Even as she stared at the mirror, her color was rising, spreading upwards in a single tide of color over her throat, her cheeks, her forehead.

Endgame: All was finished.

Ramzi

On Ramzi's computer screen appeared an image he would dwell on for some time. A statue of the Virgin fashioned of frozen holy water had been placed atop a special pedestal made to smell like a woman's genitals. When the holy water began to melt, the surrounding air became redolent with the passionate fragrance of lovemaking. The article, which Google returned as a hit for his search on same-sex love among women, feted the work as experimental olfactory art with a feminist mission. People gawped at the Madonna figure as it transitioned into a puddle of holy water; they gingerly wetted their fingers to obtain the coveted smell: the mysteriously obtained scent of a vagina. It is organic, claimed the article, not synthetic, a unique olfactory experience: the real vaginal odor distilled in vitro.

The online search wasn't whimsical or arbitrary. Or salacious even. Teta, his grandmother, was having an affair with another woman, and the idea, like the image of the melting Madonna, stung like a formidable creature lifted from a swamp, all pincers and liquids and strangeness.

He had taken refuge in the bathroom, with his laptop and his plants. The scents were those of the plants in the tub, his garden by proxy: sweet lavender, aromatic basil, sharp coriander, strong geranium, and his tomato plant. From the bathroom of the adjacent flat, he could hear splashes of water and the insipid meows of the newest Haifa song.

On the opposite wall was the master bedroom of the house. His parents were, for the umpteenth time since they left Syria to Beirut, trying to conceive. He could hear them: eager grunts and skittish moans, and a more playful exchange too, the soft thud of something thrown back and forth like a pendulum. His father, a profligate charmer outside the bedroom, had

acquiesced to Samira's gormless notion that a conception mascot, a doll in the form of a Lebanese boy in period garb, would somehow get them another boy. Ramzi had seen the effigy once; his mother had forgotten to return it to its case, and it lay nonchalantly on the mirror ledge in the bathroom next to the silver toothpick Samira made his father use, and a bottle of mouthwash. A loosely-jointed thing with a Phoenician headdress and a leering expression, its limbs were sheathed with a corduroy sherwal giving it a padded look.

A boy in the making, another running, and a truth revealed. The act of running expended physical energy but stirred mental acuity. It helped recollect thoughts, sober the spirit, and sharpen the mind. Ramzi had felt deceived by Teta since racing day, but he was angry at Samira too. His mother, the stalker. An earth-brown worm appeared on the underbelly of a geranium leaf and writhed languidly. He was about to brush it off with the edge of the watering pail when he imagined it having a name in a kid's storybook, and the pot banged against the side of the tub. The groans and heavy breathing and the tortuous friction of corduroy on flesh halted. Coitus interruptus.

"What's that sound?" his father asked.

"Ramzi pottering around the bathroom with his cursed plants, what else? Give that back to me!" Samira said. "My head hurts now, damn!"

Ramzi was the one with the headache, or anyhow could feel it gathering now, tightening, mounting from the muscles at the top of his spine. He sat down leaning against the tub and practiced his breathing. Compared to the tub and the bathroom, Teta's garden in the Syrian countryside felt like a country park. He remembered his uncle Rami lying with him in the paddling pool at his grandparents' house. He was seven years old and there had just been enough water to lift him clear of the bottom. Uncle Rami was laughing; the pool was good for him; the water there didn't scare him.

Nanig brought them a platter of halloumi and peeled cucumber slices on pita bread freshly prepared by Teta. Uncle Rami picked up a book full of plant drawings and started reading. If Ramzi squinted a little he could no longer see the carob tree or the brick roof of the house or the vine twirls lining the roof or the cat Fatoom's little paws on the rim of the pool. Then he had waited...and waited... And finally it happened. He floated free, neither hands nor

feet touching the plastic. The world had let him go and he was flying up into that burning edgeless blue.

Holding Teta's hand as a child, Ramzi had relished the warmth and safety of his palm in hers, her fingers smelling of that dizzying white alcohol she used to clean kitchen soot. He imagined someone else holding her now, Nanig and Teta naked as all adults who make love must be, and the clash between these two kinds of tenderness was unfamiliar and disturbing. Grating and off-kilter, like Venus flytraps touching unexpectedly.

The smells, sounds, and images snagged and tussled, but struck an uneasy balance, a precarious *mise-en-scène*. He was part of it too, fragile and unmoored, lapped up by the green of the makeshift garden as he watered it.

There was an olive tree dab, smack in the middle of this bunker-like bar, and Treesome was always packed on party nights, with hipsters occupying the coveted Ottoman stools. But it was more than that: Treesome was a roller-skating rink. Drink-and-rink was its sobriquet, and although alcohol was said to be restricted to the bar area, other beverages were allowed on the rink.

"But I won't drink anyway, in case someone recognizes me and tells your father," Samira said gravely. "I haven't tested since I came down from Faraya a few days ago, and we've been trying again!" She had gone up to see Ramzi's grandparents the day after their disastrous encounter on Skype – Ramzi flinched; his jaws tightened, picturing her face on the other side of the screen.

"Well should you be skating then if you might be pregnant?" Her phantom pregnancies had been the bane of their household in Damascus. "Why have you brought me here?"

"So we can talk! It's crazy isn't it, how we can never discuss anything over Nescafe like mundane people. We always have to be moving." She laughed lightly, and he grimaced. "Oh lighten up, love. Do you get to learn how to make plant-based ointments on your biology course?"

"No, I don't think so. Not for now at least."

The wired crowd was starting to swell with a flow of skaters swooping in a circuit of their own, and at the rink's periphery, svelte girls in pairs and groups launched themselves forward into effortless arabesques.

"Well, I will need your help to find a place for me; Dar Bistro, it's somewhere on Hamra Street not far from your university." He nodded. His mother's ability to flit briskly between topics was fascinating.

"Georgine is taking me there for a workshop," Samira said, pirouetting off-piste and narrowly avoiding a collision with a sporting couple. "There's this woman from Canada who will teach us to prepare personal lubricants from herbs. They're supposed to help with conception. And are edible too, a win-win situation!"

A quick chortle from the teenage skaters nearby, and a couple glided snazzily around the olive dab, hands joined, throwing them furtive glances. A boy skating with his mother at a hip rink like Treesome – as incongruous as marijuana growing in a convent's garden. And then it struck Ramzi, again: Samira enjoyed being seen with him in public; she always passed as a chic friend, either that or an older sibling.

"Should you really be telling me this?"

"Christ, you're eighteen now Ramzi, not eight! You would've been curious to know, I would have thought. My favorite plant aficionado, my love, my –" She beamed at him, speaking cajolingly, holding on to his arm, but he cut her short. The intimate proximity was stultifying. He felt trapped.

"How are my grandparents?" he asked. "How is Teta?"

A man behind them had flailed like a drunkard and gone down, to jeers and cheers and sympathetic giggles, helped to his feet by his partner. Stripped of her mirth, Samira was dough-faced, announcing unceremoniously that she had asked Teta to leave her house in Faraya, that she couldn't have let her stay, not after all that happened.

"But where would she go? Where *did* she go? She has no one here."

"I gave her one of my old phones so we could reach her, and a line. She has her pension; she will manage."

"I know you never liked Teta, but we can't just put her on the street!"

"It's not about me, Ramzi. Consider your grandfather. Your dad too. And the family!"

“Mama, I’ve been thinking. Teta hasn’t had it easy; she’d been dealing with Uncle Rami practically on her own all these years. And the loneliness, that too. It drives people to crazy things, doesn’t it? Remember what happened with us only last week!”

“Yes, maybe, but this is different. It’s not really negotiable, is it? Too much at stake.”

“You’re the one always saying we live only once and that we should make the most of it! You went to your karaoke events in Damascus even on fighting days.”

“Ramzi this is different,” Samira said for the second time, less patiently.

“Why? Because it’s not something we’ve seen before? I still feel deceived by Teta somehow; it’s hard to believe she hid something like that. It makes me think of her in a different way and I need time to adjust but I don’t want to cut off with her completely.”

Samira’s gaze was so level now, so grave and un-girlish, so unlike her usual self that it made him shiver. “You said it: deceit. Nothing justifies a woman cheating on her husband. The father of her children. And with a woman too! I know we’re not too religious, but is this normal, Ramzi? You tell me.”

She went on encouraged by his silence, her voice becoming a notch louder. “And with whom? Do you know what people in the village call Nanig? The hermit. Those less kindly call her this: the cretin, the town cretin. Even their ancient hairdresser says that!”

Ramzi felt again the familiar throbbing across his head, an intimation of agony in the weeks after the race. “Normal you say? Alright, I will tell you what isn’t normal, Mama. I went to cyberspace for comfort. And you, you stalked me!”

They were talking at the top of their lungs, screaming almost, and skating next to each other trying to seem normal, they were caricatures of themselves ripping through the crowd. They made a final, disconsolate circuit of the rink, and then, like fledglings leaving a nest, they were back on the ordinary floor, too strained for drinks, waddling and ungainly.

They drove home in silence, the gloom of the rink still upon them. Samira went to bed, bypassing Mazen’s invitation to family time in the living room, even as he stood enjoying a cigar by the open window of the kitchen. He had removed the boy in corduroy from his case and placed him on the sill, a flirtatious reminder for Ramzi’s mother of their schedule on the following day, particularly now that he was taking the morning off on Wednesdays. A glass tumbled and crashed on the floor as Samira snatched the doll and left the room, shutting the light

and banging the door behind her, as if dousing them in darkness would somehow rewind and erase the tattoo of time.

That night Ramzi went home. He was elated to be back in the village, but it wasn't to Teta's that he found himself walking. Going to the back of Nanig's house, he paused in front of the loquat tree in the garden. The metallic cupboard in their shade had been opened, the lock lying on the ground. A wicker rug whip lay askew atop a stash of bottles shattered against the cairn. The kitchen door had been left ajar, and the house had the eerie feel of a deserted place. He called out to Teta first, and then Nanig, but could hear nothing. Once in the kitchen, the sound of a woman's muffled tears seeped from the direction of the bathroom. Although Samira herself wasn't there, a family reunion was taking place. No words were spoken; none were needed. Teta was on the floor next to the bodies of Uncle Rami and Nanig. Ramzi knew it was them even though their faces were covered with bathroom towels. His father steadied himself holding on to Jiddo's arm, and together they peered at the inert figures, and at Teta prostrate next to them, but they turned their heads away as soon as they noticed him. Even as a dreamer, Ramzi couldn't tell if what he saw on their faces was anger or grief.

A spool of gardening thread and a small watering pail competed, as usual, for cupboard space with Samira's paraphernalia. She had once again shoved the spool under Mazen's water bottle, its plastic the texture of a desiccated animal hide. Ramzi placed his laptop on the toilet seat and his twined tomato plant in the sink. Faintly sun-kissed through the skylight on the landing just outside the house, the greenish fruit was now glistening as the morning rays seeped through the oblong above the bathroom mirror and cast their glow. He had often played the word game Gallows in the shade of the laden and staked tomato plants in the corner of Teta's garden. There she kept stowed a writing slate and wooden easel borrowed from school, and Nanig and Ramzi usually teamed up against Teta and Uncle Rami.

Back then, he hadn't yet twigged that Teta had made them play the game in Arabic as a reminder that they must cherish their mother tongue, which in less rural areas was becoming increasingly moribund as foreign languages flourished. Teta and Rami won most times, and before Nanig's eyes and Ramzi's there appeared the thin beams of the gallows and the victim's head, and with the final strokes of Teta's chalk on the slate, the dangling matchstick limbs.

“Village gallows are in and of themselves a violent thing, if you really think about it,” his uncle said to him once. “A result of nails driven into a living thing. I’ve seen them.”

His parents’ breathing in the adjacent room was barely audible now. His father appeared in the door, pudgy hands holding the towel around his waist, the casual intimacy of family life in a crummy apartment. It took him a moment to realize what Ramzi was doing.

“Would you hold up the tomato for me while I stake it?”

“Yes, but I don’t have much time.”

His father held the plant as instructed. Ramzi cut a length of twine from the gardening spool and began to secure it. “Baba?”

“What?”

“Do you really think Teta is a bad person?”

Mazen gawped at him, stooped over the plant. “I don’t want to talk about this,” he said. “You shouldn’t dwell on it.”

“But I can’t help thinking about it.”

“How was the rink yesterday? You really ought to be kinder to your mother, *ḥabībī*. You’ve made her cry.” He removed his hand from the plant and used it to adjust his towel which was starting to unwrap. The plant partially collapsed upon the stake, weighed down by its burden of fruit. “Right, I better run a quick bath,” he said looking dubiously at Ramzi and the tomato plant. “I’m seeing a new customer in less than an hour, downtown!”

The excitement of the salesman tweaked his face. “Please,” he added apologetically, “the address for Saturday’s workshop – Samira is waiting.”

And so, Ramzi searched for details of Dar Bistro on Google instant street view, one last favor for his mother, but the riff of emotion he’d felt at Treesome returned swiftly. He was looking for recognizable signposts and noted the café’s location in the middle of a Hamra alley marked by two azadirachta trees parallel to a tired-looking lamppost, dented and shell-bent. The once cobbled ground, patchy with splashes of spilled and fissured concrete, was swarming with children and teenagers pushing their way excitably through the street. There stood Teta, a looming figure accosted by a girl tugging at her dress.

His parents had spent all afternoon at Dar Bistro, learning how to make edible lubricants from herbs. Although they didn’t always get along, he was happy for them. They hadn’t fought much

over the past few years, but their relationship was not always quiet. The hubbub he witnessed as a child was mainly due to his father being away from home, time lapses Mazen always explained as work. It was always exciting when Teta would visit them in Damascus and Nanig came with her most times. “The poor woman must feel dead-bored in the countryside now that she is on her own,” Ramzi’s mother often said.

One time Samira was particularly upset because Mazen had spent a few days in Beirut, forgetting her birthday, and they had been arguing since he returned. Teta and Nanig were visiting for the weekend, and had brought Uncle Rami with them. In this way, what Teta had planned as a pleasant evening at the theater with Nanig turned out to be a family affair, with Rami and Ramzi tagging along, much to Teta’s concern that buying good seats for everyone would stretch and snap her purse strings.

“I’m not in a mood to look after anyone,” Samira had said. And that was that.

The play was a popular one: Layla and Majnun. This Ramzi remembered was overwhelming. The tilt of the gallery and the drop to the stage were frightening. A dark, cavernous pit, it was dimly lit, changing color to mirror the action in the story. The lurid atmosphere was punctuated by the puppets in Arabian garb, skillfully maneuvered and sporadically coming alive to accentuate the progression of events. Most imposing was the snarling, turbaned leader of Layla’s tribe, her father in fact. Layla was being difficult, and when he hit her across the face, declaring she would be married to a suitable man from a sister tribe because Majnun was said to be insane, the people sitting between Rami and Teta stood up and gesticulated towards the stage, tossing their heads and cursing Layla’s father.

Ramzi didn’t know whether it was all that standing up and talking loudly, which made their already packed gallery appear to heave with the huff and puff of its occupants, or the general tumult in the theater, or the heated discussion Teta and Nanig seemed to be having a few seats down the row, that explained the frozen expression on his uncle’s face. When Majnun let out an infernal shriek upon learning Layla, his beloved, was to be married to another tribesman, and the puppeteers echoed his shriek and writhed the puppets on their poles, Rami grunted and said he needed the toilet.

“You think you can go with him?” Teta asked, eyeing Ramzi keenly.

“Yes,” he said, looking at Rami. The anguished roars of Majnun’s tribe heralded their search for him, and the lights changed again with Majnun foraging for food in an oasis of

scattered foliage, and Ramzi felt slightly scared. He knew Rami was too. The toilets were located at the end of the gallery above, and as he ushered his uncle along its serpentine path, he stretched out his arms so he wouldn't accidentally brush against anyone, and Rami kept close to the undulating Ottoman wall. There was the occasional inquisitive glance, and a few people stared openly. Rami returned the looks with fierce aplomb.

A man in a plush chamois jacket was right in front of them, and he recognized him as one of the men perched between Rami and Teta. Ramzi was certain he was drunk; he capered so.

Rami smirked.

"Did you say something?" the man asked provocatively, but already the toilet-bound crowd was moving on, propelling everyone forward.

Rami stationed himself at the urinal, the only vacant one, next to the man in the jacket. Ramzi looked away so he wouldn't see his piddle. Moments later, he heard his uncle scream.

"He touched me," Uncle Rami said. And in an even louder voice, "Don't ever touch me." He leaned and struck the man across the chest. The man fell backward, grabbing onto another man for support, and his face grew darker. He put his fingers to a tear in his jacket, and to Ramzi's horror, the tear was not a tear but the neck of a pocketknife that he waved in their faces as he struggled to his feet.

"He didn't mean it," Ramzi said. Already a few people had gathered. They watched, stupefied. "Not in front of his child," someone pleaded. One of them stepped forward and held the angry man back.

"He is my uncle." Ramzi regretted saying it, it was absurd.

"Tatars." The man in the chamois jacket spat. "Freaks," he said, but Ramzi could no longer see the knife.

In the pit, Layla lay on her sickbed. Majnun groaned in the distance, and the puppets swiveled and squealed. Nanig was staring at the stage.

"My mother," Uncle Rami said, grabbing the rail.

"She's not fallen there..."

"I think I saw Teta on our way back," Ramzi started, but Nanig interrupted him. "She only wanted to wash her face." The crease on her forehead deepened.

"How long have you been here?"

The calm ended, as Ramzi knew it would, with the familiar clamor of heels outside the front door. For most of the day, he had been alone, his thoughts his only company, and gradually returning to where it all began, the day of the race.

Samira was bending over him. She held her hand, and her shopping bag, to her chest. The bag's flamboyant inscription was right in his face: Green Your Sex Now. It took him a moment to realize she was screaming.

"Is it true what your father said, that you've written to Teta this morning, saying you want to see her? Are you doing this to spite us? You're only being stubborn now. There's nothing you can gain from your grandmother, nothing but shame."

"Well, coming from you, that sounds reassuring."

"I'll be honest with you Ramzi. I've been thinking too, and I've done something. Something you should know."

He felt numb, bracing himself for another Sapphic disclosure, a phrase used by the curator of the melting Madonna exhibit.

"You are attracted to women," he said, "but you haven't acted on it so as not to cheat on my father? For my sake also."

Samira shook her head. "This isn't funny, Ramzi. I've talked to Teta too. We got word from the village two days ago."

She paused.

"Nanig is dead."

The day Ramzi's grandfather called his grandmother a whore was also the day he was to run the 5K race in Faraya in support of the Syrian refugees. It was the day his grandparents finally reached Lebanon and the first time in the past four years that they left home since the start of conflicts in Syria.

The late spring sky glowered overhead, promising to burst at any moment. Not that rain would have made any difference in the outcome of this race. The mountainous ground below his feet was already sodden, and his every step squished water and mud below his shoes. His muscles were tenser than usual. Even if three years of running the national Syrian school

championships had taught him a thing about overcoming nerves on racing days, the stresses of competition hit him a little harder than ever before. Forty minutes remained before the start, and as he paced the edge of the field, his mind ran over and over the details of the course. It was among his favorites – hilly and fast, and mostly in the woods. No surprises awaited and earlier in the morning, he had walked the trail solo to calm his thoughts. It still felt a bit odd being here on a Thursday; ever since he had started his course in Beirut, he had rarely left the city and had only come up to Samira's house occasionally on weekends for a change of atmosphere and a breath of clean air. Inheritance down the female line was very much frowned upon, and yet ironically, his mother, who as a woman couldn't pass the Lebanese passport to him, had come to own a house here in Faraya.

He noted the flooded areas, and which curves and steep inclines would likely be transformed by the hordes of runners into dangerously slick patches once the race was called. And though the conditions appeared treacherous, he was delighted. Wet race days were always his favorite. Slipping off his trainers, he exchanged them for racing spikes. Then he grabbed his bottle of herb-based balm and slathered it all over his legs, filling the air with a spicy aroma that meshed appropriately with the woody scent of the course, in many ways similar to the smell and feel of Teta's home.

Increasingly, Ramzi had been starting to realize that the sense of a place is in many ways more important than its physical reality. His parents' house in Damascus had whatever modern showiness Mazen and Samira could afford, but there in Jiddo's house in the village, Teta's earthiness was ingrained everywhere, abundant, in every nook and cranny. The house on the deed was Jiddo's, his grandfather's, but he was so generally aloof, it was Teta's presence that seemed, off-paper, overarching and indelible.

The furniture, the architecture even, was unpretentious, and there was a feeling that both the physical and living things of the space – the comfortably arranged tiles, the roof bricks, the inner stone linings, the wood-framed, sunlit windows, the basil and strawberry shoots on the terrace, the parsley, mint, and coriander beds in the garden, the wild thyme and rosemary offshoots in the garden's corners, and the general greenness inside and around the house – having been accepted and left as they were, imparted, in turn, a sense of release and relief to the occupants of the space, especially someone like Ramzi only there for a weekend visit, his last since Uncle Rami's funeral.

By the front door to Teta's kitchen was a big pot of fern perched on a stand. She had several rubicund pots lining the wall next to the stand, but this was the oldest and her favorite. Inside it lay two kittens on a ruffled-looking colorful wrap, their small furry heads quivering on thin necks.

"You made that for them," he exclaimed, peering into the pot.

"It's from an old duvet your grandfather no longer wanted. They seem to love it."

"Are there only two?"

"I'm not really sure. If there are, the mother seems to have lost them. She comes and goes for these two though. The November air seems to be doing them well too, pleasantly warm but not stuffy."

"She doesn't mind you being around?" I asked.

Teta shook her head. "She certainly doesn't mind the makeshift home," she said smiling. "But I do try to be discreet."

She motioned for him to go inside. She was still in mourning for Uncle Rami and was clad in black, except for her shoes, which were once black too but which, with only a bit of sole to wear out left, still had some life of uncertain color in them.

"She must have sensed she and the babies would be safe here," Ramzi said as they took their seats in the sunlit kitchen. "Not many cats here escape being run down, Teta. I thought the war would guide people toward more peaceful recreation other than sniping each other and speeding up their cars when they see a stray animal crossing. The mother cat obviously realized that you would not harm them."

He hesitated. "I'm not surprised though. It's exactly how I feel when I'm with you, safe from harm, and grounded. You are the most real person I know."

"I'm glad you feel that way. You must be careful not to romanticize people though. Nor be too trusting. I'm not perfect, *ḥabībī*."

"I can't imagine you doing anything bad, Teta. Mistakes are different; we all make those."

"Sometimes mistakes are irrevocable." There was edginess in her voice. "When I think of your uncle – I'm not trying to shock you but to encourage you to see people as they really are, even if you love them. Especially if you love them."

Ramzi began to protest but Teta interrupted him. “At one point after your uncle died, I blamed myself so much I came close once to killing myself.”

“You were lost and confused at the time, Teta. You had gotten a severe blow after he died and the way I was told he drowned in that goddamn pond haunts me too, still.”

Teta reached for a glass of water and offered him one. “People are not always angered for the right reasons,” she said quietly. “Sometimes we do what seem like righteous things only because we are afraid to stop and look more closely within ourselves. And I don’t mind taking the blame in this case.”

“Is this only about Uncle Rami?”

Teta didn’t reply.

“It was an accident, Teta,” Ramzi said, prodded by her silence. “A tragedy, but an accident. When Jiddo lashes at you, it is his grief speaking. He needs a scapegoat for his anger, like you said. You did your best for Rami, given how he was. You loved him to the bone. That, I’m sure of.”

Ramzi felt unstoppable, confident. But it was more than confidence, and as he rejoined the rest of the runners, some of the guys’ air of success as professional athletes spread to him, and he more strutted than walked to the starting area. The field was awash with men and women of different ages, the grays, purples, reds, and oranges of the uniforms adding color to the pewter-tainted day. A nervous energy coursed through the tracks, but it failed to penetrate his concentration, and as the other guys around him reiterated what parts of the course to be wary of, their words became part of the surrounding hum.

Locating his starting box, number nine, he noted contentedly that it was a favorable position. And hardly glancing at the runners beside him, he took possession of the area, briefly closing his eyes and picturing the start for a moment. Swinging his arms back and forth and rolling his neck to clear a kink, he strode out, checking that his muscles were loose and ready. And as he slowed then returned to the line, the race was finally called.

He claimed his position. The starting gun sounded, and the two hundred runners sprinted for the hill three hundred meters ahead; there the pack would start to prune itself as runners gradually fell behind. He got off the line strong, and found himself a step ahead of many of the

people on his corner of the starting line. They were immediately behind him though, thundering through his thoughts of Teta.

His grandmother had watched closely as he took a sip of water. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you again, my love,” she said. “This is the first time I get the chance to be alone with you since we buried Rami. I’ve missed you.”

Uncle Rami had died in September 2012, at the end of Ramzi’s last summer in Syria at a time Teta had been adamant against leaving the village. Now, he hoped, she would finally change her mind.

“Are you happy with your studies, my love?”

“Yes, very much. We are starting the intro lab on plant cancer next week.”

“I can’t believe I am getting to see you for the weekend only.”

“I know, Teta. That’s why you should join us. Before the airport shuts down again and the borders with Lebanon might close if the situation worsens.”

Ramzi played his final card. “Teta, I had to put up a fight with my mother to let me come here. It might be the last time I can if the clashes don’t stop. She said she would lock me in till the war is over if I ever decide to come again against her wishes.”

“Yes, trust Samira for that.”

“Seriously, Teta. Don’t you want to be safe with us, in Beirut?”

“I know you mean well my love, I really do, *ḥabībī*,” Teta spoke slowly. “And I respect you for what you are doing, but you must not try so hard to make something happen only because it seems to you the better choice.”

“So you won’t come?”

Teta turned her face away towards the terrace. The mother cat had returned to the makeshift home in the fern pot and was feeding the kittens, their tiny jaws wide open, greedy.

About thirty runners had turned out to form the lead group, each of them fighting to be the one to determine the pace. They arrived at the first hill, an open and long but gentle slope – an easy hill, the mildest, in fact, of the course. Ramzi pushed the pace faster. None of them dropped back, yet no one had taken a clear lead yet. He detested the large pack and yearned to break free. The peak of the hill lay ahead, where the trail curved and disappeared into the apple woods, his favorite part of the course. He waited, knowing that once there, they would sort out.

The path narrowed as it veered off into the forest. A guy to his right, a splash of freckles, red Adidas uniform and auburn hair, moved suddenly in front of him, driving an elbow into his side as he attempted to cut him off. Ramzi dodged, momentarily breaking stride, and increased his speed to enter the woods. But the guy stuck with him, and he sensed him right behind, even as Ramzi was now ahead, but he was wary of him and yearned to shake him off. The apple-tree trail would change soon, he knew, and he hoped his competitor was not as familiar with the course as he was.

They were now immersed in the glistening trees, which were in early bloom, and the noise of the crowd – family members, friends, relief supporters, sponsors, and photographers – gurgled a while longer, fading into a distant drone. Here the only sound was that of thudding footsteps and labored breathing. They were beginning to thin out now, and as the path turned again, it revealed a sharp descent. Ramzi adjusted his stride accordingly, prepared for the hill. Just ahead of him, a guy slipped, falling suddenly, his arms and legs flailing. He leapt over him. There was nowhere else to go, and Ramzi refused to join him in the fall, even as that meant he would not be clearing him unscathed since the spike of his shoe connected with his leg. Ramzi could feel blood but no pain.

Teta and Nanig had introduced him to the woods when he was an infant, bringing him along in the baby carrier. But not content to face inwards, as baby carriers are designed, Ramzi made a fuss until they switched him around, so he could watch the world around him. From infancy onward, this curiosity drove him. They would often take family trips to hike portions of an oft-overlooked trail not far from the village pond, where once he was old enough to travel on his own two feet, he would insist on leading the way, darting ahead to discover what lay around the curve. He did not always stick to the path – there was a whole forest out there to explore. Undaunted by the unknown, he followed rabbit trails off into the underbrush, through blackberry patches, and across the streams, his grandmother and her friend tagging behind, urging him every once and again to slow down.

Quite often their treks took them to the outskirts of the village, 400 meters or so down the main road, if one could call it that, although there the road changed. It shrank, and after winter's snow and spring's melt-off, the dirt would be marked with paths and holes. While traveling to the trails in Jiddo's pitch-black Buick they were usually the only car around. But now and then

other vehicles passed, and, if they were at certain portions of the road, Ramzi would quiver at the excitement of peering out the car window at the valley that vanished down from the shoulder of the road. Once at their destination he always scampered out, trotting in circles around the car until Teta and Nanig, and Uncle Rami too on the days he didn't mind company, were ready to join him. Off they would go, the four of them moving quietly through the brushwood and the meadows.

He especially loved the creeks and swamps, where he pursued frogs and minnows, searching for signs of other animals. He cradled salamanders in his hands, showing them off, especially the big black ones, before releasing them. Other times he managed to catch snakes, and was particularly thrilled by the baby ones that were sometimes only a tad longer than his hand. The things he collected with rigor, treasures ranging from shed snake skins to rabbit skulls to feathers, Ramzi carried with him to his parents' house in Damascus, their protests unheeded. He could distinguish a rabbit print from a stray cat's and learned to identify birds from a distance. Teta liked the hawks, even as they scared Nanig who shuddered the rare times they spotted them, saying meekly they reminded her of her dead husband.

The outdoors was as much a home to Ramzi as his parents' house, and he reveled in it, in the solitude that was not quite solitude. With Uncle Rami by his side, he fell asleep sometimes in the sweet-smelling grass of the meadows, to the wind blowing through the carob trees. The goldenrod bloomed in August, and they ran together through the stalks, which towered mightily above their heads, the yellow crowns cheering on the sun. His uncle, a voluble encyclopedia on wildlife at twenty-six, taught him about every plant on the hill behind Teta and Jiddo's house, and, together, they created their own paths through the underbrush, not content sticking to the regular paths. Rami would speak in long-winded excited monologues, talking to him tirelessly, rarely expecting a response.

Ramzi could sense a change in the pack now, as they approached the two-kilometer mark. A few steps ahead were the two top runners in the Lebanon state championships. Beside him were six others, all strong competition, some of whom were Syrian nationals he had run against before, a couple of whom he considered almost friends. The freckled guy was still hanging on though, and he could glimpse the red of his shirt just off to his right.

They arrived to the bottom of the hill and commenced with the fastest section of the course, a flat loop through the woods and along the edge of the open apple fields, not far from the base of the Faraya ski slopes. The lead runners were picking up speed noticeably now, each struggling to take charge, fighting for command. Ramzi matched the pace and remained in pursuit, while pushing ahead of the others in his group, except the redhead, who continued to match him, step by step.

The race was almost halfway through, and he felt steady, his body moving fluidly at a sturdy pace, effortlessly ahead, and his mind conscious of every step, yet in another zone, like an interested observer gazing patiently from afar.

The last time Ramzi ran with Teta was when he visited the village before moving to Beirut. Uncle Rami and Nanig had been there too. Blackberry brambles had sprung at them, scratching their legs and drawing blood as they scrambled up the slope. But, intent on reaching the clearing above, they scarcely noticed. The pain was minimal – they were too tough to grouse about a few thorns – and their flight uphill toward the pond continued purposely, pace unbroken even as they grazed on the plump blackberries that they grabbed and ate as they flew by.

Their feet sank into the mossy ground, landing every now and then on the slime of a mushroom or the crackle of a dead leaf, and when the former happened, Uncle Rami, otherwise undeterred by the scratches of thorns, would let out a deep, squeamish growl. They had all gotten so used to the sound by then and it was easy to ignore. Teta and Nanig goaded him upward, gently, his rucksack beating against his back, and on they all sprinted till, reaching the pond in a whirl of heat and perspiration, Ramzi peeled off his shirt and shoes in an instant, jumping into the water.

Teta and Nanig were looking for a suitable dry space not too close to the pond to settle his uncle comfortably. He was too fastidious to join them and the tiny minnows in the water, much like the mushroom slime and the water itself, irked him. He couldn't swim.

“We are going to walk right over to that pond over there and get into the water. We will go for a short walk after but will come to you first to get the towels. Will you stay here and wait for us?”

Teta recited the same question she had been asking her son ever since the four of them started their daily visits to the pond. These usually began soon after Ramzi moved over for the summer to Jiddo's house in the village, almost smack in the middle of Syria.

"Yes," said Uncle Rami, barely looking at his mother. That too never changed.

"I think he'll be happy there in the shade," Nanig said, tentatively, as they walked toward the pond, glancing backward once or twice.

"He'll be happy as long as he has his books with him and as long as they don't run out," Teta said. "I think by now he has read every book that has ever been written on wildflowers, vegetable marrows, and the plant kingdom." There was the familiar note of subtle resignation in her voice. "He started at age six; thirty years onwards, and nothing has changed."

"I don't understand why he insists on carrying the books himself," said Nanig, wrapping her hand over Teta's fleshy arm, "and our towels and apples too."

"I think he feels safe that way, in control of something, somehow," Ramzi said as the two women threw their sweaty dresses over their shoulders almost at the same time and dove into the water.

"Look at you," said Nanig. "You are almost fully grown now. Are you eighteen already?"

"Seventeen," Ramzi replied. Nanig saw him looking at her shingled hair, the pointed curls above her ears sticking out like scissor blades. "We had professional cuts today," she said. "Teta insisted."

"You're too young to be a grandmother I always think," said Nanig, as Teta who'd swum almost two meters away from them, affixed her arms downward and stopped moving as a school of minnows circled her.

"The perks of early marriage," Teta said almost breathlessly, her head bobbing out of the water as she tried to keep her balance. "If that's really what they are." She spoke more comfortably now, as she shook off the fish and swam over. "But you shouldn't be saying that to my only grandson," she said with a gentle slap on Nanig's shoulder. "I've missed you, my love. I can't help feeling this every day. What? You took forever to finally show up here."

Teta glanced sideways across the pond. Uncle Rami was still where the women had left him but had taken his towel out of the backpack and was now sprawled on the ground with his book. "Are you sure your father is well?"

"He's doing okay, all considering. I miss you too, Teta. We all do."

“Samira, even?” Teta asked half-teasingly.

Already, they were wading in treacherous water, too early though for today’s swim, even as all their outings had been echoing a similar chime almost every day now since Ramzi had moved to the village.

Samira – Teta’s imagined nemesis, Ramzi thought as they emerged from the woods again, detouring the edge of the field where throngs of hollering spectators cheered their favorites and jumped excitedly. He heard their words as if they were dispatched from a different planet, but, also, he absorbed the brewing energy of the place and forced his body, now beginning to feel the urgency of the pace, to give more. They vanished into the woods again, into the last kilometer of the race. Here the path led through the muddiest section of the course, and not too unashamedly, he hoped that his rival, the elbow-jabbing guy, would fall, not knowing where the steadiest footing was. They turned yet another curve, and, again, the guy pushed him deliberately.

Less than a hundred meters ahead there was an area which had been transformed by the overnight rains into a giant mud bath. Running with Teta and Nanig had made Ramzi anything but squeamish about mud, and as he arrived there just as the two leaders exited the crossing, fuming and filthy, his eyes narrowed with delight, suspecting elbow-guy would try to push him.

They were plowing through the mud bath. His rival kept close and lunged toward him halfway through. Ramzi half turned to deflect him, and the guy lost control, gasping, surprised, as he tumbled into the muck.

Teta never quite got along with his mother, and Samira, a long-standing city girl whose pretensions put her at odds with his grandmother, loathed the countryside. Jiddo, more reserved by nature, sought peaceful family relations and therefore kept his criticisms, if any, to himself.

“Teta, you know Mama is right,” Ramzi said. “Damascus too is no longer safe even if it is still functional on the surface. We had to reschedule final exams three times this year. That’s why I was late to come here this summer.”

Teta did not appear to be listening. Nanig was fidgeting in the water, a meter away. She seemed focused on bobbing up and down, her body moving constantly, her head out of the water.

“The carnage in Homs is encroaching upon us,” Ramzi continued. “My parents are still staying put, but they say it could be any time now, and we need a back-up plan. I have to move to Beirut next year anyway...for my studies.”

Teta was again glancing over at Uncle Rami who had taken out a marker and was passing it excitedly over a page. “She wants to whisk you and your father over to Lebanon, just because she has family there. Why would you want to go live as a refugee in a cramped and crummy space when you have a large and pleasant house here in a safe area. The war hasn’t reached us, and Samira knows it.”

Nanig had swum to the other end of the pond and was watching them. Every now and then, her scrawny arm would arch over the water, her hand almost perpendicular to the surface as she seemed to be drawing circles in the water around her. Teta broke into a crawl over to her and back to Ramzi and repeated the pattern for almost five minutes while he waited.

“Her relatives can’t even house you in the city, and even if they could, they wouldn’t. You will have to rent. It will cost a fortune.”

“But we’ve arranged an affordable lease in Beirut, Teta. We’ll be close to university. And in summer, if things don’t get better here, there is always Faraya we can move to. You wouldn’t mind Faraya.”

His mother had been bequeathed this small country house by her maternal grandmother through a codicil no one had seen coming. Samira’s grandmother had fallen out with her sons and withheld the necessary power of attorney that would have passed the property into their name. It was Teta, though, who had been able to talk sense into her daughter-in-law preventing her from selling the property almost as soon as she had laid hands on it. And the house, meager as it were, was, at least in its surroundings, somehow reminiscent of Teta’s home.

“I don’t mind Faraya, no,” Teta was saying, “not if once in a long while for only a short holiday.” Her voice shook. “But this is different. I know if you and your father go, the time will come when Jiddo and I will be asked to leave. And your uncle too. And I just can’t leave here...And I won’t.”

Teta glanced at Rami again. “I’ve had enough of the water,” she said. As she swam away, the sun fell on her face, and Ramzi couldn’t tell if the glistening drops on her cheeks were pond water or tears.

It was midday now, the heat oppressive.

“What will you be studying?” Nanig wanted to know.

“Biology first,” Ramzi said. “And then botany.”

“I don’t know what that means,” said Nanig.

“It means plant science. I want to work as a plant scientist eventually.”

“Isn’t that what Rami is obsessed by? You two have a lot in common.” Nanig spoke timidly first, then became flustered mistaking the tired look on Ramzi’s face for skepticism. “Not that I meant that you’re mentally sick or anything. I know that –”

“Uncle Rami is not sick,” he said wearily, swimming to the edge of the pond. “He’s just different. People with Asperger’s process things differently than the rest of us.”

“That’s what I meant. Different. Asp-what-have-you..It’s such an unpleasant word, I could never speak it correctly.”

“Actually, there is much debate nowadays whether it should be removed altogether from the psychiatrist’s checklist,” Ramzi said shutting his eyes for a moment and raising his head toward the sun. “Much like homosexuality.”

“I didn’t know that.”

A few meters away, Teta had taken out an apple from Uncle Rami’s backpack and given it to him. He must have told her something funny, for Teta’s hearty chuckle reached Ramzi and Nanig in the pond.

“Where will you be studying in Beirut?” Nanig said.

“At the American University.”

“Isn’t that a very expensive place?”

“It is, but I’ll be going there on a sports scholarship.”

“Teta didn’t mention it...”

A moment passed. They were beginning to feel the heat. A family of ticklish fish had ventured close to the edge and was moving under and around Ramzi’s feet, synchronized and determined.

“When you have children,” Nanig asked suddenly, “would you be happy with their choice if they wanted to be schoolteachers like your grandparents?”

The question startled him. “I suppose I would be happy if they were happy.”

Nanig was looking at him intently.

“But would you be happy first or only after they’d made the choice and seen if it worked for them?”

“I don’t really know,” Ramzi said, not knowing where this was going and starting to feel irked by the water and the fish. “I don’t have children yet, and I can’t know if I will have any.”

“Yes, of course. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Teta had returned. She seemed more upbeat, her usual self. “What a gloomy pair you kids make,” she said. “Is anything the matter *hayete*?” she asked Nanig who had moved back into the water and was drawing circles in the water with her finger.

“Have you been upsetting her?” Teta asked, some reprimand in her voice. “Come,” she said helping Nanig out of the water, “let’s go for our walk.” Ramzi could see his uncle following them with his gaze, as he himself did, till they disappeared in the blackberry underbrush and then the carob trees behind the brambles.

Rami’s eyes met his for a moment before Ramzi took a dip to cool his seething scalp, but when he emerged from the water, his uncle was back at work, furiously, marking a page as if life itself depended on it.

The runners burst out of the woods to the bellows of the audience nearly hoarse with excitement. Many of them were racing along the sideline, yelling compulsively. The momentary distraction made Ramzi forget the throbbing pain traveling up his feet, legs, and torso. He shut his eyes a split second, embracing the extra energy as he lengthened his stride, reaching up to the two lead runners who were still neck and neck. Almost two hundred meters remained, and the noise from the people crowding the sidelines petered out again, their screams a fuzzy background to his final thoughts.

When he moved to Beirut in the autumn, his mother went with him. Not thrifty by nature and no longer able to live on savings, her boss had transferred his practice to the Saint George Hospital in Ashrafieh, not far from where Ramzi was studying, and his father soon followed them. He had finally found a car company that would hire him on probation, and he was anxious to use the sales experience he had gained back in Damascus.

“Next thing I knew,” Mazen was saying, “I was hiding between tombs holding my breath, hearing the gym teacher’s voice get louder then fade away.”

“Whatever reminded you of this?” Teta asked, barely touching her plate. Jiddo’s eyes darted over at her, but he said nothing. They had finally fled Syria the night before to join their son and his family.

“We are eating, Mazen,” Samira chided. She had prepared a breakfast of *labneh* spread generously on pita bread, and tea, followed by a treat of salted zucchini chopped and fried with eggs and olive oil and a sprinkle of sumac.

“No, but seriously – and here we are now.” Mazen flailed his arms in triumph.

“Your son is selling well in Beirut,” Samira explained. “We must admire his optimism and energy, even if it is barely 7 in the morning.”

With late spring around the corner, most crops in the village would be ripening, so instead of sweating in long gym classes, Ramzi’s father would pick apples and berries, stealing some sometimes, and would set up a roadside stop selling whatever goodies he had gotten his hands on earlier that day. This included cigarettes and fruit, as well as the colored candy and Sinbad gum he’d buy a quantity of using Jiddo’s pocket money at first and the money from the roadside sales after. The gum offered a small sticker with each piece and was a favorite with the village children. These escapades had given him a taste of freedom as a child and an experience he always swore secured his future in sales.

“School and sports were never Mazen’s best friends,” Jiddo agreed.

“Your grandson is making up in both respects,” Samira said, reminding Ramzi to collect Teta and Jiddo’s luggage from the car.

“You’re looking impressively smart for the time of day, Samira.”

“She is already dressed for work. We should be leaving soon. We’re carpooling.”

Ramzi’s mother had gotten the ultimate upgrade she’d always hoped for in her employment. After years of various secretarial positions, she had become administrative assistant to a plastic surgeon, and like any serious worker, she dressed the part to perfection.

“You must be exhausted,” Samira said. The early breakfast was their first respite after a long night of traveling. “So how has it been out there?” Teta seemed to bristle at the urban presumption of “out there,” and Samira became more conciliatory and asked about Nanig.

“Are you alright, Teta?” Ramzi said, noticing her red-rimmed eyes.

“She is fine, but tired,” Jiddo replied. “We didn’t sleep last night.”

Mornings in Faraya were always a bit chilly and quiet too, except for the very audible chirrups of the birds which had made of the willow tree underneath the living room window a dwelling of their own.

Mazen had left the front door open, and Ramzi was already inside wondering where to place his grandparents' suitcases. They had traveled light in Jiddo's Buick, prompted by the sudden arrival of clashes at their hometown. Ramzi's parents had no need of the house for the time being and his mother, not as ungenerous as Teta made her out, was glad to put the house at her in-laws' disposal.

"I am going to call Nanig," Teta was saying. "I won't rest before I do. She is all on her own, frightened. You made me leave her behind. She is my only friend. If it weren't for her support, I would have killed myself after Rami died."

"Your friend?" Jiddo screamed. "If it weren't for her? We know why Rami died. I heard what you were telling the bitch over the landline. That illiterate bitch. I heard you."

"You're doing this to punish me."

"If I wanted to I would have punished you a long time ago." He paused. "No, you won't call her. Not from your grandson's mother's house, you won't."

Ramzi entered the room, alarmed and uncertain. "What is wrong? Why are you yelling at Teta?"

His grandfather, the perennial introvert, showed all the lines of fury on his face. "Because your grandmother is a whore, that's why. They both are."

"Why do you say that, Jiddo? It isn't right."

"Not right, you say?" He started to speak but stopped himself. "Don't meddle, Ramzi. You're too young for this." He offered nothing more on the subject, just stood silent as the hum of the birds continued. He walked out briskly then came back almost immediately for his glasses then stormed out again.

"Your grandfather is right, my love. You're barely eighteen." Teta stifled a sob as Ramzi walked over to her, wanting to provide some comfort but unsure what he could say or do.

"Go win that race, Ramzi," she said. "Go."

Now that his thoughts were simplified, the energy of realizing his grandmother's deceit seemed to detract from that needed in his legs. And with one hundred meters remaining, Ramzi gave it all, breaking fiercely into a fight-or-flight sprint for the finish line which lay directly in front, scarcely aware of passing one of the leaders, only realizing that he was still even with the other, and he exploded, somehow bursting ahead the extra centimeters crucial to pass him and hit the finish line.

He staggered down the aisle, a roaring swirl of color and of movement. And it seemed, somehow, that he had won.

Teta and Ramzi

Ramzi met a fisherwoman when he first moved to Beirut. In his daily morning jogs by the sea before his classes started, he would stop to watch her untangling her net after a night's fishing just offshore. Her small boat bobbed up and down in the tiny marina at the end of the Corniche near the house his parents had rented. She sat on a wooden stool puffing on a cigarette that was lodged between her lips as she worked, occasionally taking it out to sip on a cup of coffee placed on the ground by her feet.

She fascinated him, not only because of her tanned, leathery skin, her wild grey-white hair and the way her small eyes shone like pebbles whenever she looked up from her net, but also because she seemed so nonchalant, so detached from everything around her, even the men who occasionally jeered down at her as they crossed the Corniche. The mundane scene had evoked a memory from childhood, Uncle Rami, in an unusually loquacious moment, telling a tale unrelated to his usual discourse on flora. The lean, swarthy woman he had described to Ramzi had fished for subsistence too, only she was a thief, repeatedly stealing from the pond some of the trout the village hall was farming at the time.

One day on Rami's lonesome walk home – his brother hadn't wanted to be seen with him since school kids thought he was weird – he had lost his way, his mind entangled in its thickets of thought, and found himself in the woodland bordering the pond. There was a nefarious mingling of odors, of dry crackly debris and decaying leaves, caking in the heat to which the dense canopy of leaves was not impervious. A host of straddling carob trees formed a kind of

archway, beyond which he could begin to glimpse an exuberant silver sheet, the surface of the pond luminous under the afternoon sun.

The thief was tied by the hands to a hook nailed on a beam driven into one of the carob trees' lower branches. A pillory, village gallows of sorts, Uncle Rami said, and almost a dozen people had gathered, men mostly. Jiddo and Nanig's husband stood among them, but Teta and Nanig weren't there. The woman's leathery arms and upper body were stretched in such a way she was practically standing on her toes. A pan full of rotting fish was hanging on another hook on the beam and was at eye level with the poor woman. The crowd hissed at her as she was slapped and taunted with a handful of fish, their stench permeating the air like floating carousels of smoke. Slimy shrubs of spurious origins Ramzi's uncle wouldn't deign to name had found their way to the bifurcated trunk of the carob tree where he was perched and collapsed under his feet without warning. He grabbed a branch to steady himself, letting out a scream as his face fell forward, entwined with the gritty tendrils of the branch's leaves. They hadn't heard him, but he had fled quickly, reaching Nanig's house first on his way home and shouting for Teta who wasn't there.

One morning, Ramzi mustered the courage to finally approach the fisherwoman and when she did not seem to object, sat down on a rock and watched her at work. She looked at him and grunted, but said nothing, turning her attention back to her net and cigarette. He allowed himself to look closely at her then, the chafed knuckles of her hands and her gnarled feet in colorless plastic slippers, toenails thick and yellow and unevenly cut.

"You seem different," he blurted out.

The fisherwoman looked up, her eyebrows raised. "What?" she asked gruffly.

Ramzi froze with fear.

"What did you say?" she repeated. She frowned hard.

The butt of her cigarette fell to the ground as she spoke and Ramzi stepped on it to put it out. "You shouldn't do that," he muttered, shaking his head.

"What the hell," she said, slightly startled, and then burst out laughing. He found himself giggling in return.

"You're a strange one." She studied him more carefully now, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder.

They became fast friends after that, though she only ever grumbled a greeting when he arrived at the marina to meet her on Sunday mornings, and when they did make conversation, it was always brief and to the point, a brevity Ramzi found comforting. He asked about her nightly fishing trips and if she ever felt alone; he wondered whether she would consider taking him with her on a nightly excursion. She replied that the work itself was satisfying, but that the men here thought she was competition, and didn't like it.

"They can be a bit threatening, but I got used to it. It's not that much different back home, not when it comes to men." Her laughter was contagious, and Ramzi joined in, stopping only when she insisted that the water at night was particularly treacherous and that anyone who fell into it would be swallowed up in no time. He shuddered at the thought but still did not give up his newly acquired notion that anything was possible, even for him, if only he were brave enough to attempt it.

It was late afternoon and the Corniche basked in soft light.

"I study one street down there," Ramzi said, pointing away from the main road to the American University. "And I jog here. There was an old fisherwoman from Syria I made friends with, at that small marina just under the bridge."

Teta stopped to look in the direction he was pointing, then asked where the woman was. "I am not sure what's happened to her, Teta. The people around here weren't too happy with her."

Teta made her way slowly to one of the concrete benches that lined the pavement and sat down. Ramzi motioned to a vendor on a bicycle to stop and he bought two pieces of kaak from him. He sat down next to Teta, made a hole in each of the layered pieces and filled them with the ground pistachio, thyme and sumac mixture that came with the bread.

"Here you go, Teta," he said, handing her the kaak.

By dusk, Lebanese parents with colorful strollers and nannies of different ethnicities were walking leisurely up and down the pavement. Looking around him, Ramzi was once again struck by the mix of people, elderly men in foldout chairs, veiled women alongside others in body-hugging jeans and tight tops, young children on tricycles, men with pierced noses walking hand

in hand with their girlfriends, joggers with their iPods blotting out the world and, out on the rocks, fishermen with their rods and tackle. On the far end of the road, an Indian woman was pushing art materials in a pram, a mobile artist eking a living.

There were vendors also, either carrying their wares on their backs or standing next to large wooden carts from which they sold green almonds dipped in salt, boiled corn on the cob, Turkish coffee, smoked pumpkin seeds and roast chestnuts, as well as Beirut's version of doughnuts and cotton candy, along with other pastries and strings of dried figs and apricots. A lanky middle-aged man seemed to be dealing drugs, glancing furtively around him before slapping a suspicious bundle into the outstretched palm of the buyer. A woman close by noticed the exchange; she calmly moved her kids farther off without any reaction.

"This is the one place in the city everyone can go to without paying," Teta said wryly.

They looked to the right, to the hills and mountains in the distance. It was a clear spring day and except for a small area of white on the highest summit, most of the winter snow was gone.

"This isn't too bad, but I love the mountains too," Ramzi sighed. "And I miss the village. I dream of living there one day, a place I can go to breathe fresh air and quiet."

"Do you imagine a solitary life for yourself then, *habībī*?"

Ramzi turned to her, surprised by his anger. "Isn't that better than being in a dishonest relationship like you and Jiddo? Or living with a stalker like Mama?"

"Samira was worried about you; she meant well."

"That's a change to your tune."

"I don't like the thought of you always being on your own."

"What do you wish for me then?"

"That you meet someone who cares for you and appreciates you as you are. It will all come when the time is right, I'm sure of that."

Two refugee boys scrambled past their bench, one of them tripping over his plastic slippers and falling down. Before Ramzi could stand up to help, he quickly picked himself up and walked away with a limp. When Ramzi turned to Teta again, he realized how very fragile she looked and felt his heart thudding. She seemed to have shrunk in size after leaving Faraya. He hesitated and reached out to touch her arm.

“I can’t imagine how lost you must have felt when Mama called to tell you,” he began feebly.

“She sent a text message, Ramzi. *Got call from village hall. Nanig dead. County mortuary holding body for one week.* That’s all it said. Samira never called since I left Faraya. None of them has.”

“I’m sorry Teta. Words are trite I know. I’m ashamed.”

“Don’t be, my love. The more I think about it now, the more I realize how useless regret is. I’ve made up my mind. I’m going back home tomorrow.”

“What? To the village?”

Teta nodded. “It’s still better than the slums here.”

“Teta, it’s not completely safe yet. You’ll be on your own.”

“That’s what I want, Ramzi. I want to give Nanig a decent burial; it’s the least I can do.” She paused, breathing heavily. “I’ll stay in her house. She has left it to me.”

“Aren’t you worried about what people in the village will say?”

He had learned though that Teta disliked it when he didn’t seem to be respecting her decisions, so he wanted to take back the question; it sounded silly. Teta didn’t look offended.

“The villagers know Nanig and I were close, and that I’ve been her mentor since she moved there after her marriage. I will say the truth, that she had no next of kin, and that she didn’t stay intestate so that the property doesn’t go to the state. Not that there’s much of that left.”

“But surely the war will finish, and Jiddo will go back to the village.”

Teta remained composed, brushing a crumb of kaak from her lap. “He won’t say anything to avert a scandal, and I’ll tell people we’re house-sitting different homes so that we pass them in good shape to Mazen.” Her voice trembled a little. “And to you.”

“And to my brother.”

“What?”

“Mama is pregnant.” Said out loud, the phrase seemed to acquire a life of its own. “This time it’s real she says; they’re hoping it’s another boy.”

“I’m sure they are.” Teta laughed shrilly. “But you shouldn’t blame them, my sweetheart. Boys suffer less.”

Ramzi was trying to grasp what had transpired, and suddenly the significance of Teta's words struck him: they were to part ways one more time. He picked up his piece of kaak, taking a large bite from it, the tangy scent of the sumac inside it filling his nostrils. He felt a prick in his eyes and blinked the tears back hurriedly so that Teta wouldn't see them.

"Clearly, you've given the future a great deal of thought," he finally managed to say.

"And you? What do you want to do?"

"I'm looking for a room to rent. I want to be able to think clearly. I feel I've overstayed my welcome, and now with a new baby on the way..."

"It's a brave decision that," Teta said, nodding vigorously, "to forge your own path and see where it leads you. At best, all the past can give us is fodder for a better future."

"Is it always this hard though?"

"Or as easy as trusting your destiny, and letting go." Teta placed her hand on his. "In some ways it is a good thing we can never go back," she said. "Only a mad field snake covets its own shriveled skin."

Jiddo

Although Jiddo had seen signs of Teta's affair, he had tried, at first, to remain impervious to its implications. Shortly after Anwar's death, Nanig had been ill for a while; according to Teta, Anwar's widow had suffered from an allergy on her neck for some time, giving it a bruised impression, and it festered. Teta insisted that Nanig stay over at their house so she could look after her, and at the same time be close to their son Rami.

Although there hardly seemed a reason to, Nanig had taken to bed most of her stay with them, and Jiddo often paused at the door to monitor what was happening. Every time he was faced with images of Teta bending over Nanig, changing her chamber pot, caressing her arm, nursing her and otherwise just holding her hand, images that hadn't felt entirely right, he had banished them with aplomb. In his mind, Teta and Nanig were two very different women who enjoyed each other's company, unlikely friends perhaps, and yet no fuss beyond that, no suspicion. Up till the day he too had seen them in the garden, much like Samira had the summer before. Which is why when she evicted Teta from her house in Faraya, he had taken it, calmly, in his stride.

In her rush to leave, Teta had forgotten behind the lapis lazuli necklace Nanig had given her, and Samira confiscated it. “I will keep this,” she told Jiddo.

“It’s your house, isn’t it?” he answered. “Suit yourself.”

The day after, he had to prepare his breakfast drink, yerba maté, for the first time in his married life. Much like the old days, he still wore to breakfast gentlemen’s toggery, trousers and a firmly buttoned shirt, another legacy of his career as a disciplined schoolteacher. He brought the maté leaves to his face and sniffed them, then pulled the belt across his trousers more tightly; they kept getting baggier ever since the move to Lebanon.

Teta had dried, chopped, and ground the leaves into a gritty mixture that Jiddo had asked her to pack before fleeing the village. He made sure the water in the kettle was hot enough, but not boiling, since over-brewed maté, as he had always told Teta, was too pungent to be tasteful. Anwar often complained about his wife’s maté, which only made Jiddo even more exacting over this morning ritual. Only a man who is a cuckold or who has a simpleton for a wife drinks bitter maté, he often said.

He poured the water into the calabash gourd that was still on the rack where Teta had left it to dry alongside Jiddo’s favorite bombilla. The silver instrument, both a straw and a sieve, had been a wedding gift from Teta’s parents. It was still shiny after all these years, mainly due to her assiduous cleaning. He had, in fact, used water that was excessively hot, and as he sucked through the bombilla, its flared end blocking the chunky mixture, a cloud of misty maté swathed his face. Scrabbling for a handkerchief in his pocket, a sharp needle pricked him. Jiddo hoicked the offending item; it was a sprig of rosemary, for remembrance.

Two days before the news exploded, and Teta was asked to leave, she had put two sprigs of rosemary in a miniature glass vase she had found in Samira’s house.

“One for Nanig,” she said, “even though I know she’s alive.” But that was only speculation on her part he reckoned, wishful thinking and a petty attempt at spiting him for not allowing her to use Samira’s landline. “And the other for Rami.”

Jiddo was incensed. “You have the nerve to mention your son in the same sentence as that woman. You killed them both.”

“Rami drowned because –”

“He saw you with her, he must have seen you, thrashing behind the brambles, beyond the pond. His own mother, a nasty immoral freak. Disgusting.”

“He saw no such thing.” Teta’s voice shook. She struggled for composure. “He saw nothing,” she repeated, determined not to cry.

“He did, he must have. And had one of his fits and started to leave, and, in his haste, lost his footing and fell into the water with his books.”

“No,” she said, and then in a louder voice, “no, no, no!” Rami’s shadow – the memory of that day, the incredulity, the horror – was throttling her again.

“Yes!” said Jiddo. “And that woman too. The village cretin, an idiot. You must have led her on. She would never have dared something like that, not without encouragement.”

“Why do you say Nanig is dead? You know nothing.”

But he did know, at least a fair bit more than she did. Jiddo sighed. The relief he’d thought would sweep over him once Teta was known for what she was, by her son and his son, and everyone else, and justice and honor were restored, was not as tangible as he had fantasized it would be, lying sleepless in bed ever since he’d found out he wasn’t the only one who knew.

“I am sorry, Jiddo,” Samira had said yesterday in the familiar overwrought tone women used under stress. “I can’t hold the truth anymore, not when my son’s wellbeing is concerned.”

Despite his reservations about Samira, he had found himself agreeing. And yet if his feisty daughter-in-law hadn’t come across Teta and Anwar’s widow, he might have been able to handle the matter differently. But women were gossips. Home-wreckers. It had only been a matter of time. The writing on the wall had had it for Teta and Nanig for a while now.

“I’ve only done my duty to this family,” Jiddo said to the empty room, “what any sane man would have done.” He brought the bombilla again to his lips; the maté had gone cold.

One time Jiddo had gone to fetch Teta from Anwar’s house. He needed to have a word. Teta had been staying away from home frequently, arguing that Nanig must not be left alone after her husband died. He sought them in the kitchen and had seen them instead crouched next to each other on the grass in the garden, their cotton undergarments exposed as a breeze tussled their dresses. The smell of wet soil was fragrant, floating gently through the metallic slivers of the window blinds. Jiddo had found the closeness of the two women nefarious.

“Must we really plant rosemary?” Teta asked. “It can’t be Anwar that you want to remember.” Jiddo had shuddered at that – he winced again, now – but Anwar’s widow had giggled.

“No,” she said, placing a hand on Teta’s exposed hip to steady herself, and with her other hand matted the soil around the rosemary sprig. “It’s to mark something beautiful. To remember us.”

In her rage, Samira had knocked off the vase from the mantelpiece, and after the fiasco was finished and Teta was sent packing and Jiddo was on his own, he had stooped down and picked one of the sprigs, Uncle Rami’s, lying atop a shard of glass. He watched it, inert, in his hand.

Soon after Samira left the village the summer before, Jiddo was forced to make a decision. It must not appear that he had turned a blind eye now that Teta’s secret was no longer safe. He had conferred with the mayor who, in turn, discussed the matter covertly with the town leaders. They had endeavored to be discreet, but somehow word was leaked, and Teta and Jiddo, being well-known in the village as its prime schoolteachers, were soon a trigger for fascination and scorn. That Teta of all people was not only having extramarital relations, but was also unnatural, caused agitation and dismay.

A solution to this conundrum was needed; the two women must not go unpunished. Rami’s death had been hard on Teta and she was spending most of her days at Nanig’s house. She was no longer alert to her surroundings, and so, without further ado, the village hall held an inquest into Teta’s affair on 10th October 2012.

Unlike quieter days when there was little village business to ponder, when Jiddo approached the hall, the noise of conversation from the waiting women had been anything but mellifluous. Since the accused in absentia were local women, not strangers or vagrants, other women from the village had to be involved – their cooperation would be needed in case a verdict of clogs was agreed.

The narrow street serpented upon itself, opening into a pillared courtyard with carob trees at its center. Behind the line of carobs, the hall rose with its wooden-framed windows, its brick-

lined roof. A window was opened and shut loudly; soon the sound of men talking became audible too. With a turn and a lump in his throat, Jiddo was there.

The huddling women, some of whom Jiddo recognized as Teta's former students, grew silent and parted in the middle to let him mount the steps and enter the building. There, the mayor, a tow-haired man with a flush of pink cheek and a smooth-shaved complexion, was waiting. The few witnesses he had subpoenaed on an informal basis had been sworn an oath to discretion. By the end of summer, many villagers had already left their homes and the ones who remained were few but hardy. They had made an attempt to dress smart but looked undecided. Some men had done the same as Jiddo and put on their Sunday suits; others were wearing their usual trousers and boots and fully buttoned their shirts for a semblance of formality.

After Rami's funeral, Teta and Nanig were rarely seen together. Since the hairdresser was one of the last to spot the two women in public before the day of the drowning, he was called upon first to give his testimony. He too was dressed in a suit, adjusting his collar compulsively, thrilled by his sudden importance. He spoke at length of the oddity of Nanig's alarm in front of the hawk statue at the entrance to his shop, and then Teta and Nanig entering, Uncle Rami behind them. He described in detail the protracted haircut and the infelicities of Teta's behavior, the comment on the balmy air in the room, her initial objection to the egg mask and the subsequent jealousy in her eyes when he touched Nanig's head. This was followed by the restraint Teta tried to exercise in refraining from covering Nanig's nape with her hand, which she extended then stopped midair and returned to her side.

"And it was then," he said, with triumph, "that I made sure there was something unnatural between those two."

"Are you certain it wasn't your imagination *ya* Abou Salim?" the mayor asked.

"I swear to you it wasn't. I only speak what I saw." He turned to Jiddo. "I'm so sorry, so sorry. First Rami's drowning and now this."

With stalwart, unmoving dullness, Jiddo said, "Let's not let this drag, gentlemen; what I've seen for myself in my own house was enough."

"Patience, Jiddo, patience. We might be in the middle of a war, which makes things easier in a way, but we have our procedures to keep. You know that better than anyone."

Two boys of fourteen or fifteen walked into the hall in their Sunday best. Their mothers had insisted to hear in on their statements, but were only allowed to do so in a silent capacity. Rattan chairs were drawn up for them in a corner where they sat and fidgeted, throwing inquisitive glances towards Jiddo who could feel their presence even as he had his back to them.

The boys had seen Teta walking in the direction of Nanig's house the day they were playing on the street, trying to put a kite together. They were kneeling on the ground taping the President's photo to the kite when they felt a shadow looming above them. It was someone they didn't know, a gaunt woman with bleached hair asking them where the pond was. She had spoken shyly and one of them had identified her as Mazen's wife, Jiddo's daughter-in-law.

Later in the day, they were combing the village to see if any strangers were loitering and had seen Samira dashing frantically away, from the same direction Teta had gone to earlier, and they had waited in the bushes by the road to see if she was being tagged, but there had been no one.

"How is this relevant?" Jiddo asked, fear in his voice. "Samira knows nothing."

"We are trying to corroborate what you saw too, Jiddo. It is not the habit of this congregation to reach an in-house verdict without a proper hearing first." The mayor asked when Samira's last trip to the village had been, and Jiddo said it was on a weekend in August, the month before Rami drowned in the pond.

"She might be able to help us then."

The men nodded. "She might have seen something untoward on her visit."

"Please leave Mazen's family alone," Jiddo pleaded. "I've hardly buried my other boy. Don't you think we have suffered enough already?" Asking Samira to make a statement would reveal that he had known of the affair long before she did, and had done nothing about it. Enough damage had already been made. "Samira has moved with her son to Beirut," he said. "She won't come back any time soon. We will have to make do with the assembly here."

One witness was left. It was the peddler who was selling fruit and vegetables when Samira was visiting her in-laws. He had seen all three women on the day, starting with Nanig first, on her way to Teta's in the morning. He had seen Teta in the early afternoon, and she had bought a bowl of loquats off him. She had appeared "natural," he said, neither forlorn nor joyful, but he

did remember her strange joke about the loquats, admitting that they were for her “friend Nanig” to cheer her up.

“We’ve eaten all the loquats from her tree,” she said, laughing. The peddler straightened his back. “Hardly the right day to make a joke, considering it was Anwar’s wake.” Later, he was making his last round of the village when he saw Samira running out of Nanig’s garden. “White as death, she was, as if she had just been attacked and was running for her life.”

“Are you sure that was Samira?”

“Of course, it was. I could recognize that strange hair anywhere.”

“Did anyone follow her from the house?”

“I saw nothing after that *ya rayiss*.”

Jiddo was pale himself. His distress was visible to all.

“I think we’ve heard enough,” the mayor said. “Now if there are no more questions –”

The peddler eyed the gathering with ghoulish curiosity. “Will it be the pillory again? As we did with the vile fisherwoman? Or the clogs?”

The men had been pacing the room, and one of them sauntered over to Jiddo. “She’s got to go,” he said, and pushed his pencil back behind his ear in a solitary, assured, assessing manner. “We can’t have that sort of thing going right under our noses. Anwar, *Allah yirhamo*, would turn in his grave. What sad luck that man had.”

The mayor was saying something to an upright man of middle age, an elaborate moustache, the red streaming eyes of a diabetic and a heavy tweed coat. He had a fringe in the center of his forehead like the tassel of a shawl. “She couldn’t give him children even. And now this.”

“*Hayda adaro*,” another chimed in.

Half an hour later, a decision was reached. To maintain all cry and hue to a minimum, the plan would be put in action once Teta and Jiddo relocated to Lebanon, as Jiddo told the gathering they would if the *aḥdāth* in Syria worsened. Nanig’s predicament, then, could pass as the caprice of a disgruntled militiaman. And Teta would receive a similar fate if she ever set foot in the village again.

“Right, so the matter is settled,” Jiddo said.

“Oh yes,” the mayor answered. “I shall give word to my wife who will inform the other women. They know what to do.”

—Part Three—

Risk

Lebanon and Syria, Summer 2012

Most of Samira's married life had been spent in Damascus and she visited her in-laws' village sparingly. Her memories of Teta and Jiddo in Syria, much like those of her childhood in Lebanon, were scant. But this too she remembered very well. It was the summer of 2012, only weeks before her brother-in-law Rami drowned in the pond, and Samira was spending a weekend with them.

Ramzi was already there for his last summer vacation before the start of his course in Beirut, and Samira thought, not without relief, that he would soon get busy with his studies and forget the village, and his grandparents. With good news to share with him, namely that she was pregnant with his baby sister, she had decided on a weekend to visit.

She slept poorly the Friday night she got there. A succession of nightmares scabbed her slumber. First, she dreamed about miscarrying Rania – in her mind, the baby already had a name – and then about losing Ramzi. He was running a race in support of refugees, Teta at his heels, and Samira followed but could not keep up the pace. She screamed at them to stop, Teta seemed to disappear, and Ramzi pushed further, fading from view.

Samira woke up and did not shut her eyes again. There had been street lamps burning and had lit the threads of the bleached mosquito net which hung from the window and hovered over the bed like a floating canopy. The bed was her husband's. It was the room he slept in as a child, and Teta had told her they could use it when they visited. Unlike the rest of the house, the room had been slightly refurbished to accommodate the occasional visits of the newlyweds, but much of Mazen's paraphernalia remained untouched.

She opened the hefty lower drawer of the nightstand and pushed her hand beneath the soft blobs of her husband's old cotton garments till she could feel the gritty texture of frazzled paper. The backdated copies of *Playboy* were still there.

Samira was aware early on of her husband's fascination with women's breasts; he would flirt with her shamelessly on the subject, so the content of the magazines wasn't a surprise. She had

first seen them on a visit here shortly after her marriage. The family had been preoccupied with a sudden fit her brother-in-law Rami had gotten into, and Samira retired to the inside of the house on her own.

Jiddo, Samira knew, scrutinized his property, especially the bedrooms, for signs of poor housekeeping; Teta had adopted a regimen of daily dusting and cleaning, and Mazen's room, old as it was, was kept immaculate. The magazines, well-leafed through and worn at the edges, had been left face down on top of the nightstand, and were remarkably clean. They had been taken away on Samira's subsequent visit, and when she searched the room, she had found them stashed under a heap of darned socks and underwear.

That Teta must have been aware of their existence had startled Samira more than the ability to procure the material itself. Mazen, she thought fondly, could talk his way into anything. He had even suggested one time that she and Georgine touch each other for him; Samira imagined he'd been gauging her sense of humor and had laughed it off after a stunned moment. As he had.

Later, she'd shared the anecdote with Georgine. She too had shaken her head and laughed. "Mazen is the eternal boy, he won't grow up."

Looking at the dim-lit room now, Samira could see the relics of his past: an airplane model, a life-size toy car with wheels, his roller skates, his computer, his porn. Mazen's old desktop stood erect on a metallic table in the corner, sheathed in hand-woven crochet with a fawn diamond pattern that Teta only removed when she wanted to send emails to her grandson. Samira imagined her bent over the keyboard in the effort of composition and smiled. She had come a long way to see Ramzi; she was keen to enjoy the weekend and put her differences with her in-laws aside.

In fact, if the fighting in Syria grew worse, she would have Mazen's parents and his brother come stay at her house in the Faraya mountains in Lebanon. It wouldn't be too different from here she mused, but even *that* would be more modern. Heck, she couldn't even get reception on her phone. She would have to use the landline to call Mazen and Georgine later.

The dark had eased a little.

The street lamps were turned off by the village hall; the light outside became a sullied pink, and the pink gave way, in time, to a jaundiced yellow. It crept, and with it crept sound,

softly at first, then rising in a staggering crescendo: crowing cocks, whistles and bells, and the sounds of Teta and Jiddo wrangling.

“I don’t want Nanig in my house,” Jiddo was saying. “Especially not today.”

“This isn’t the time,” Teta answered. “You will wake the boys up and Rami will get agitated. Samira is here too, remember.”

The grating sound of Jiddo’s authoritative voice was soon replaced with the aromatic fragrances of Teta’s breakfast preparations: fried eggs, grilled hallumi skewers, black beans with olives and lemon juice, a labneh spread with mint from Teta’s garden, homemade *mankoushehs*, fruit salad. The swirl of smells drew Samira out of bed. She washed her face in the basin by the nightstand, splashing water several times till she felt her pores tighten. She had been told at the clinic where she worked that that was useful for toning the skin. She combed her peroxide hair and scrutinized herself in the mirror. She was so thin her pregnancy didn’t show.

The day had started at last.

Only Teta and Samira sat down to breakfast.

Everyone else seemed to have disappeared. Teta said Rami had been woken by the quarreling in the kitchen, and had gotten upset, and was taken by his nephew to the pond.

“He won’t swim, but Ramzi does, and the time they spend together does Rami good.”

“But I’d like to see my own son too,” Samira said. “That’s why I came.”

“You hate the village, Samira,” Teta said quietly. “Why are you really here?”

“To share good news with Ramzi, whom I’ve missed. I hardly get to see him once he comes here for the summer.”

“What’s up your sleeve, *ḥabībī*? What is this story about news?”

“You will know in good time, Teta.”

The *ḥabībī* had been meant to be conciliatory, and Teta followed it up by asking if Samira and Mazen “had been trying” again. Given that Uncle Rami would never marry and that Mazen had one child only, it was important that the family grow a bit. Teta had been furious at the idea that they were using a conception mascot, but she managed to dissipate a tense moment by imitating Jiddo’s voice requesting she approach Samira – fecundity matters were not a man’s domain.

Then in an unusual moment of companionship, Teta herself shared a story she had withheld in the early years of Samira's marriage. She hadn't been able to breastfeed Mazen as a child due to an illness: "I can still hear his screams when he was hungry, it was horrible. Canned milk just didn't sate him."

"What illness?" Samira asked, but Teta was reticent to add more. Instead, she asked her if she would consider breastfeeding if she gave birth again. The implication was that not having done so with Ramzi had been a liability of sorts. Even as Samira privately wished her son was more like other boys his age, keen on cars and women and exuberant living, not a botany-loving recluse, she was quick to his defense, especially at any hint of criticism from Mazen or his family.

"I love Ramzi more than you can imagine," Teta protested. "That I couldn't breastfeed his father marred Mazen's babyhood. It's not something I could've told you when Ramzi was born. You might not have taken it the right way. I know you think I'm a stubborn old woman, but I do mean well, and I love my family."

"You must not always undermine my ability to think for myself, Teta. I'm more than my hair." Teta looked stricken, as if noticing its color afresh, and Samira laughed. "I will breastfeed Rania when she is born."

"Who is Rania?" Teta asked sharply.

"If I have a baby girl, we will call her Rania; that's what I meant." Samira wondered if Teta could read through her. "Can I ask you something?" she said, emboldened by the unusual openness of their conversation. "Why were you fighting with Jiddo earlier?"

Teta reddened and looked away, and Samira feared that she had found the question impertinent, voyeuristic even, but when Teta raised her eyes to hers again her flush was fading, and her face showed neither annoyance, nor discomfiture, but a kind of gloom Samira hadn't seen before.

"It's Anwar's annual wake today, a grave occasion in town. He was respected by everyone, and Jiddo, as you know, was his friend. He gets agitated on these days."

"What about Nanig? Won't she be there too?"

"This is a men's-only event. Nanig will come here to see me."

“She must still feel sad about her loss, having to remember it this way every year,” Samira said. Teta’s laughter came in a gusty, raspy rush. When she regained composure, she was solemn and apprehensive. “Sad doesn’t begin to describe it.”

As the grandfather clock in the parlor struck twelve, Nanig had already left the house. She had spent a good part of the morning alone with Teta.

“I will trim her hair, it relaxes her, even if it’s short already,” Teta announced. When Samira saw the pair of ornate scissors her mother-in-law had laid next to a towel on the kitchen table, she took her cue to leave.

On the terrace by the front door, Samira was mesmerized by the grey and green structure hanging from the vine trellis on its side. It reminded her of the piñatas she’d purchased for Ramzi’s birthdays in elementary school. She stood next to it pondering what it was, admiring its silver-like cracks from which green-yellow slivers were starting to protrude.

Out of the corner of her eyes, Samira could then see Jiddo not too far behind her as he climbed the sloping stairs, crossed the terrace, and made his furtive entry into the house. She tiptoed in his wake and stood at the edge of the open door.

From where she was, she could only see the towering outline of Jiddo’s figure and could hear Teta’s hissed whispers. Jiddo reminded Samira of her own father before he joined the fighting in Beirut in the 70s: he would be reading the paper, seeking news of the war, and would be hidden from her behind it, so that, desperate to conquer his attention, she sometimes so annoyed him that the incident would culminate with her slapped and, crying, leaving the room.

Unlike her father, Jiddo was always in a suit, as he was now, albeit old and frayed, to reflect his sense of self-importance as one of the village’s first generation of senior schoolteachers. He was one of those people who seldom laughed, but was also slow to anger so that his fury, when it came, was all the more frightening, seeming to leap from one unsuspected crevice like a fire threatening to consume the whole house.

“She was here, wasn’t she? I’ve seen her scurrying away on my way back. Like a fugitive.”

“How was your morning?” Teta asked. “How was Anwar’s wake?” She was being pleasant, trying to avoid a scene, but there was no cordiality in her voice, only strain and exasperation.

A putrescent smell was starting to form and wafted across the terrace from the direction of the grey-green piñata where Samira stood earlier. Was it a new garden ornament Teta had acquired, Samira wondered again, or, given the smell, a weird plant of some sort? But then that might have been Rami's concoction too; he was mad about plants. Samira felt faint and walked into the house, her presence announced as she dropped on a divan with a thud.

When she came round, she slowly lifted the tea towel soused in Teta's rosewater, and saw Jiddo stooped above her. A look of irritation disturbed the surface of his face, but when he spoke, he made his voice soft. "You were here too? Don't you want to see the boys? Rami and Ramzi are at the pond."

Samira told him she didn't know the way, that she'd never been to the pond, hadn't slept well and would rather go rest in Mazen's room. Jiddo gave her detailed directions, as Teta watched. Finally, he drew the door ajar and bowed her out.

"Mind the steps on your way down," Jiddo said. "They're steep." And though Samira did not turn back, she knew he lingered to watch her cross the terrace and descend the gravelly stairs – as solicitous for her safety as her own father, and mother, had been.

Samira was walking uphill, surrounded by woodland. After losing her way and asking for help, a bushel of boys flying a kite plastered with the President's face had stared at her with open curiosity.

"Did you hear about the new massacre in Aleppo?"

"Why do you want to go to the pond?"

"You better be warned. Rami, the Strange is up there."

"He was wearing a tray today."

"Just tell her where it is. She looks so white she could fall."

"Are you a relation of Rami?"

"Shush, she is the wife of Mazen, the Salesman."

"Right, his brother!"

"The pond? Yes, that way." Someone pointed a finger towards the cliff.

Wild trees leaned close to one another, their branches entwined in a twisted embrace, and Samira feared she had misunderstood the boy's signal, as she had Jiddo's directions. The trees at first gave the impression of a vault; this in turn created an archway that straggled cheek by jowl

with the gnarled foliage atop the hill. And as she raised a branch and looked ahead, craning her neck forward, she could see them: Rami and Ramzi, alone by the water.

From a distance it appeared as if Ramzi had a tray over his head and that his uncle Rami was holding it for him. Rami put it aside during the brief moment Samira bent over to kiss Ramzi's cheek and then resumed his position. It was difficult to believe Rami was Mazen's brother, and most times she found him weird. A slender man in his thirties, he tended to be quiet even when sometimes his lips moved compulsively to the words of some reading on forests or trees, or whatever it was that Samira was told had a soothing effect on her brother-in-law.

Rami's trousers were pulled up to his knees, and a lock of lank and colorless hair kept falling into his eye. Every few moments he would wriggle his face to dislodge the offending strand but given how keen he seemed to hold the tray over his nephew's head, the maneuver was not an easy one. Samira observed him, not quite sure what to say. "Why are you holding a tray over my boy's head?"

"It's not a tray," he grumbled. "Can't you tell?"

"It's a portable solar panel," Ramzi explained. "It's a goodbye gift from Uncle Rami, and I'll be able to use it for recharging my phone and laptop."

Now that it was Ramzi's last summer in the village before moving to Lebanon, Rami had decided to give him a souvenir that was dear to him. "I purchased it from Damascus with my birthday money. Teta and Nanig took me there before the war."

"Bravo, Rami," Samira said. "I'm happy to see you."

"How is my brother?" Rami asked, and Samira took a few seconds to realize that he meant her husband. She wondered if the two ever missed each other. If they did, they kept the feeling to themselves.

"He's in Beirut working on the house we leased for Ramzi's move. It needs a paint job." She looked down at Ramzi, sprawled leisurely over a blanket, his uncle shielding his head from the sun. "I've missed you, *ḥabībī*. I have news."

As Samira talked about her pregnancy, Rami sat down next to them and clutched the panel to his chest. She asked him not to tell Teta because Mazen must hear first. "Can you keep a secret?" she said.

"Is this a secret?"

“It is, for now.” Years ago, Samira had been visiting when she learned she was having Ramzi, and hurried to share the news with Teta. Jiddo overheard and was angry. “You should have told your husband first,” he said at the time.

A calm moment followed, and the kite Samira had seen earlier was carried by a breeze and floated above the trio by the pond. Uncle Rami was the first to break the silence. “I must go home to take my medicine,” he said. He picked himself up and sauntered away, disappearing behind the trees, taking the solar panel with him.

Samira and Ramzi were finally alone.

They lay on their backs next to each other. “Your father will think the doll helped, of course. When Rania is older, she shall laugh when I tell her.”

“What doll, Mama? And why are you so sure it’s a girl?”

“I just feel it. It’s that boy in corduroy, Mazen imagines it will get us pregnant.”

“That’s stupid. Where did he get it from?”

“I don’t know. He never said who gave it to him and yet wouldn’t admit to something like that himself. He’s told Teta this was my idea, and she gives me funny looks.” Samira hesitated. “The mascot has gone missing.”

“What do you mean, Mama? I saw it before I came here.”

“When I left the house yesterday, it wasn’t there. Surely he hasn’t taken it to Beirut with him. Has he?”

The sun was hanging low, and Samira was feeling faint again. If only she could shut her eyes and sleep, but the heat here was becoming overwhelming and, at her in-laws’, Teta and Jiddo waited, inquisitive and chastising. She wanted to go home, in Damascus, with Ramzi.

“Teta is preparing a feast tonight to celebrate my acceptance at the American university, so make sure to get plenty of rest this afternoon,” he started to say, but was interrupted by agonized shrieks emerging from the carob trees on the side of the pond he seldom used. Teta and Nanig knew a shortcut on the opposite end where trees were replaced by brambles laden with the fruit they savored as they ran up the hill.

Samira looked at the trees and all she could see was the kite. “Some kids were flying it earlier; it must’ve been carried by the wind.”

“Its strings have gotten entangled in the branches, no doubt, and a bird was caught in the mesh,” Ramzi said. “I will go see what I can do.”

“What if it’s a big bird? A hawk? It will harm you.”

“Hardly a hawk, Mama. You sound like Nanig now.” Ramzi stood up, ready to move toward the carobs. “Please don’t worry. You should go back now.”

“Something there isn’t right.” Samira shuddered looking in the direction where she assumed Teta’s house was. “I think I fainted a bit this morning. I don’t want to return alone.”

In the woods, the din of the desperate creature grew louder.

“Just go Mama; all will be well. I have to rescue the bird first,” Ramzi said. “Go.”

The ground descended then seemed to have risen again. The breeze was stronger, and two or three lengths of bleached hair whipped Samira’s face. She had trekked down the side of the pond where the wild berries grew, and the brambles and the woodland were behind her.

She paused every now and then hoping Ramzi had followed in her steps and wandered aimlessly till she came across a lopsided sign pointing in the direction of the town hall. She saw two more teenagers flying kites, with faces of politicians she could not recognize, and decided not to engage them in conversation. She resolved instead to stop at the first house on her way and ask for a glass of water, and for directions.

Many of the houses off the street were hidden by dense shrubbery, and it wasn’t always clear where their entrances were. Their footpaths were only familiar to residents and neighbors, so when Samira saw a weathered cairn with a leafy loquat towering behind it – she recognized the dangling fruit from Teta’s breakfast earlier – she sought an entryway and found it through a garden that curved around the house to its backside where the tree stood, a large metallic cupboard basking in its shade.

Samira wondered how the occupants of the house would receive her, a tired and sweating stranger with long bleached hair, some wanton creature or a poorly disguised spy; she seldom came here and few people knew her. She imagined the spontaneous expression on their faces, a mixture of alarm, hostility, and disdain, so when she heard voices approaching, her first reaction was to hide. Her perch behind the loquat tree was a perfect fit. The diagonal cupboard in front of it screened the view from the house but didn’t obstruct her own. Light trails slithered past, and

there, on the stone slab at the side of the garden, two women sat eating loquats from a bowl and laughing.

So this was where Nanig lived! It was the first time Samira saw her laugh. Teta and Nanig started to play a game, and Samira's initial relief at seeing familiar faces quickly faded. The spectacle they presented, two grown women jostling each other and aiming the loquat pips, as though they were spitballs, into each other's faces, and then cuddling like lovers made her freeze.

Teta grimaced as a pip hit her chest, and Nanig reached over and fastened a blue necklace around her neck. "Lapis lazuli is the ugliest stone," she said, "but it's the most expensive thing Anwar ever gave me, and you wearing it makes all the difference..."

"*Habībī*," Teta said, clasping the other woman to her breast.

Samira observed Nanig press her cheek against Teta's naked shoulder, her limbs unhurriedly splayed outwards like a firework exploding in slow motion. Teta's hand gravitated to Nanig's breast, cupping it from below, then rose to her face, caging her lips. Nanig kissed the fingers and appeared to nibble the fleshy palm, scooting it up with her nose to her brow where it rested like a lazy benediction.

Wrapped up in each other's bosoms, their movement continued, and then the hot garden, and the women's breaths growing heavier, turned into the scene from a nightmare Samira had long tried to suppress: a sweltering attic, a determined gardener, finishing school romps, the plotting, the scheming, the nettles and their grower, the schoolmistress herself, Tante Claudette's hands fondling her, and Samira's own hands on her, in her, the frenzied beatings and the *bayt banāt*.

Samira kept looking up at the loquat tree, the light seeping through its leaves dimming as the afternoon advanced, hoping that when she looked beyond the metallic cupboard again, the scene would have changed. She felt sorrow and shame and anger and great bitterness. There was something else too, a light tremor coursing in her and increasing in urgency, like the beginning of an earthquake, steady and irrevocable. Her eyes brimmed and trickled. She let out a sob and bit her tongue, but the women had heard. The noise fractured their embrace.

"What was that?" Nanig asked.

"Teenagers kicking stones and trying to fly their kites," Teta said with confidence. "And they plaster them with photos of the *zu'ama* now. They've been at it all morning."

“The war will reach us soon. I’m scared, Teta.”

“Let’s go inside. It’s safer.”

Mustering her remaining strength, Samira steadied herself and treaded across the garden, holding on to the cairn for support. However soft her steps, her adrenaline thudded, the grass under her feet seeming to grow louder, and she panicked, thinking she would be discovered. Back on the street she came across the carob tree next to the lamppost which Jiddo had said was in the right direction, and Samira broke into a run, ignoring the shrill calls of the peddler who tried to block her way with a brandished cucumber.

Seeing Teta with Nanig was like a biblical itch. It was gnawing on her; it was intense. The more Samira thought about it, the more poignant her own memories became. She would not see Teta the same way again, and by the time she reached the house, she had made a decision.

She would tell Jiddo what she had seen.

In the dining room, Jiddo was waiting.

He sat upright at the head of the wooden table, his linen napkin cascading from the knot in his shirt down to his stomach. His hands were placed neatly on either side of his empty plate, his face locked in a scowl. “You’re late, Teta,” he said without looking up. “And you’ve forgotten to make lunch; you know what that means.”

“It’s me, Jiddo,” Samira said. “We need to talk.”

“Oh Christ, it’s you, again.”

Jiddo rose slowly, keeping his back straight, and entered the kitchen to check on his meal. The reeking odor of brewing beans was intense. Samira could hear him exchanging a few muffled words with Uncle Rami who was stirring the pot over the stove. She paced the dining room and gazed hard at Teta’s possessions, for the first time perhaps, holding her fingers centimeters away from them as if they had an aura that protected and kept them out of reach.

On the sill was a small porcelain or enamel model of an oriental fruit, a diced oval fig. The kind of gift Teta and Nanig would have given each other. Samira picked it up on impulse, and just as she did so, a bee came buzzing at her from the open window. She raised one hand to flap it away, and somehow tipped the fig to one side. Its peel formed the lid of what it actually was, a jar, and as Samira’s hand knocked it sideways, it fell to the floor and broke in a terrible fracas. In the kitchen, Rami screamed.

“What have you done?” Jiddo said, entering the room.

“I’m so sorry... Was this from Nanig?”

“*Chū khass Nanig?*” Her father-in-law winced, noting the damage. “This was an old present from Mazen. He got it for us from Beirut.”

“Can we try to fix it then?”

Jiddo wet and pursed his mouth, and studied her. “Once glass breaks it can never be mended. Even you know that, Samira.”

When he spoke again, his voice sounded strange. “What was it that you wanted to say about Teta?”

There was the rustle of a skirt in the doorway, and before Samira could describe what she had seen in Nanig’s garden, Teta appeared, as if conjured by the house she had so dexterously made hers to assert her presence and defend herself.

“There you are, finally,” Jiddo said. “I was going to send your daughter-in-law to fetch you.”

Samira stepped back, as if stung, pricked by the cloying shadow of Tante Claudette’s prodding fingers, her breath, her smell, and Nanig’s hands on Teta’s hefty bosom, the tossing of the pips, the kisses. “*Please Tante Claudette, stop. You are hurting me. Why are you doing this? Tante –*”

A lingering panic: a quaking, a caving, a plunge of dismay. Samira leaned against the windowsill for support, the broken fig still in her hands.

“What have you been doing?” Teta said. “You’re as pale as a woman having morning sickness. But you’re not pregnant.”

“A coy attitude, that’s all it is.” Jiddo spoke firmly. “*Haraket.*”

“Is something wrong, Samira?”

“No, Teta. I—”

“What? Do you mumble now?” Jiddo asked.

The ornament on the terrace that had intrigued her in the morning gave her a cop-out, something useful to say. “It’s that thing outside; it’s making me ill.” It smelled of rot, a mixture of garden and moisture.

From the still open door, Samira could see it: the funny structure with aluminum foil from which yellowish sprouts butted their heads like dozens of baby snakes trying to escape a pit. “Is this a twisted kind of piñata? It’s not for *Ramzi*, is it?” She shuddered, a different ripple of dread starting to form.

“A what? What does Ramzi have to do with this?”

Samira explained what a piñata was, proud of her knowledge despite her fear.

“Ramzi is too old for that,” Teta snapped. “This is something else entirely.”

“It’s a sunflower seed fat ball,” Jiddo said with a smirk. “For the birds to nibble at.”

“The rain and the spring have been mild, you see.” Uncle Rami started talking, prompting everyone to look at him. They hadn’t seen him enter. “The seeds have started burgeoning before they were eaten. Teta usually prunes them to keep the ball neat, but she’s been busy lately, with Tante Nanig.”

“Don’t say things like that, Rami,” Teta said.

Teta and Jiddo looked startled; Rami joining a conversation impromptu was not commonplace in their household, or was there more to it than that?

“Nanig is not your aunt,” Jiddo said quietly. “She was never family.”

Teta had withdrawn to her room. Rami was back to stirring his bean soup. As Samira tiptoed to the kitchen to shut the door, he was frowning into the clouds of steam rising from the bubbling pot-au-feu.

In the dining room, Jiddo resumed his dignified pose at the head of the table, the napkin dangling from his shirt, his face expressionless now that he knew Samira was watching him. She paced the room, trying to muster her courage and assemble her thoughts. She braced herself, feeling the mounting pressure, the stultifying silence.

“Teta is not who we think she is,” she started to say. Her voice trembled with the enormity of the story she had to share. “She was in Nanig’s garden this afternoon. They were playing like lovers.”

“Be quiet Samira,” Jiddo interrupted. “You know nothing.”

“But I’ve seen them together –”

“You saw nothing.”

“I did, I did! They were kissing, Jiddo.” Her voice had risen a notch. “They must be having an affair, and to think –”

“I know that already,” Jiddo said. His face had lost all color. “And now even you know. Even you.”

The phrase was all-too-familiar. It was a branding judgment. Samira could still hear it in her ears, over and over again: “And now even *you* know,” her mother had said when the *bassāra* Nohad had heard of Ziad’s attentions.

“Do you realize what this means then?” Samira said. “I’m worried about Ramzi. He spends too much time with them.”

“Don’t make a scene,” Jiddo pleaded. “Lower your voice.”

“Will you punish her, Jiddo?”

“All in due time. But Teta is my wife, my business. You should mind yours.”

She should look after her own husband and son, he said, and to try to give Mazen a second child. “Forget Teta, and focus on bringing another boy into this family, someone who will carry after us once we’re gone. If you don’t do that, Mazen will just be like his brother. A non-starter.”

“What about Ramzi? He’s your grandchild too.”

Samira wanted to say more, to object, to vociferate, but Jiddo’s gaze subdued her, and the more she canvassed the room – the tired-looking dining table with the well-ironed linen, the over-washed crochet drapes and immaculately wiped venetian blinds, the portrait of her father-in-law with a shotgun in hand and a bleeding hawk at his feet, the magnolia cupboard where Teta stored the Sunday cutlery they would be using tonight, Jiddo’s silver bombilla alongside the encrusted candlesticks Teta’s parents had given her as a wedding present in lieu of a dowry, and the broken fig left on the sill – the words were hushed and banished.

“It’s not for you to be difficult,” Jiddo said again. “Mind your own business.”

The hisses of the steam jet curlicues from the Presto where Jiddo’s meal cooked were now audible. Rami emerged from the kitchen, a blank expression on his face. Typical Rami. You never knew where you stood with him, or what he was thinking.

“The beans are ready to eat,” he announced. “They taste much better than the ones we had a few years back.” He started telling Jiddo and Samira about the evolution of scarlet beans in the village before the war started.

The fierce sunshine of the day had given way to a sultry moonlit dusk, and Teta suspected Samira would, as usual, complain of the dewfall. That was the only explanation she could give to Uncle Rami's persistent knocks, which wrenched her awake from a fitful nap, and the cloth hat he held out to her.

"From Teta," he said, glazing his eyes to indicate he was acting on instruction.

Samira stood at the door a while longer, watching Rami's disappearing back, and soon she could hear voices. Ramzi had brought back the injured bird, and Teta dropped her labor in the kitchen and fussed over the creature. In an adjacent room, Jiddo too was speaking, his words falling with a cadence that was low-pitched but perceptible, however much he tried to be discreet.

"Wait Rami, wait. One moment please."

"I need to turn off the water sprinkler."

"Did you give Samira the hat?"

"Yes."

"Did you say it was from Teta?"

"But it's not from Teta."

"Don't speak so loud!"

"Did Teta and Nanig really kiss each other in the garden?"

"What? Where did you get that from?"

"I heard Samira tell you so."

"Were you eavesdropping then?"

"Yes."

"Rami, you know that's wrong. It's bad manners."

"That's wrong, but telling Samira the hat is from Teta isn't wrong?"

"It's not the same thing, *ḥabībī*. Oh Christ —"

"Is it true then?"

"You're a grown man. You know how hysterical your sister-in-law can be." Jiddo's tone was chummy and jocular. "She's even using a conception mascot in Damascus. All nerves and fancies. Forget what you heard."

Samira lay in Mazen's bathtub, nursing her thoughts. Jiddo's clumsy attempt to appease her revealed how anxious he was to keep peace. What had she told him earlier – had she really sounded hysterical? What would happen now? She could not continue to marinate her memories in fear and sorrow and self-pity. She had to think of Ramzi. His presence here was laced with the uncertainty of what he might witness, as she had, if he hadn't already. He was eighteen perhaps but young for his age. Seeing his grandmother lying with another woman might be a shock. He would be mortified.

Samira showered, as much as was practicable in the tub, and stood by the window in her bathrobe. Although the sun had sunk behind the woodland in the distance, there seemed to be a lot of light left outside, even if everything that had seemed vivacious at noon was now turgid with muddy undertones of gray and brown. Some birds warbled loudly, pecking at the fat ball with alacrity and greed. Below them, Teta and Ramzi had taken out the dining table to the terrace and were setting it with plates and cutlery for supper.

What could she say to Teta now? Would Ramzi agree to return home with her? Samira felt delirious, as if she'd had a drink too many, her thoughts a step or two ahead of her consciousness. Just calm down, she told herself. Calm down.

She turned away from the window. Her clothes were laid out on Mazen's bed: a loose-fitting summer dress, a silk foulard from Beirut. Jiddo's hat. She dressed and then stood in front of the mirror, brushed her hair and applied her make-up. She stood for another moment, assembled, observing herself in the mirror again, the dim room fading around her, her reflection fading a little more quickly. She felt hollow, and stunned. She had hoped the bath would consolidate, or reinvigorate, her senses, but it had not. She would have to put in more effort to feign composure.

It was time to join the others.

A feast was laid on the terrace.

The family had assembled. None of them was bareheaded – the evening air was balmy and moist. Even Rami had something on. He wore his solar panel on top of a padded fitting. Every now and then he steadied it with his hands.

Teta and Jiddo were perched at opposite ends of the table, and Samira sat facing Rami and Ramzi. The rescued bird had been bandaged by Teta and was feeding on the fat ball. The

other birds had moved aside, but Samira could feel them at her back, poised alertly on the trellis, waiting for scraps.

Teta had prepared a not ungenerous spread, as if the act of cooking could exculpate her from all that she was culpable of: Samira was conscious, in particular, of the smells that made her nauseous, the slimy and oily aubergines, the potato mash pockmarked with sumac, the stale *fattūsh*, a combination of wilting purslane, crumbling bread, and overripe tomatoes, and the dark chunks of meat collapsing upon an abundance of rice like a decomposing corpse. Teta's special scissors were there too, resting neatly next to a cluster of grapes and a brick of cheese sweating on a plate.

Jiddo noted that the scissors were back to their proper use, and Rami nodded vigorously, holding up a hand to the panel. He assured everyone they were clean and ready. But to Samira's mind, they were something else: an instrument of Teta and Nanig's intimacy. The words played over in her head: *I will trim her hair, it relaxes her*. They had more significance now.

"Ramzi, I'm returning to Damascus tomorrow," Samira said. "I want you to go home with me."

"Come now, Samira," Teta replied. "He's barely been here a week."

"That's true, Mama," Ramzi said.

"You will come back with me. It's vital that you do."

"But it's my last summer here before university starts. I'll be leaving soon."

"Stop pestering him," Teta said. "Let the boy eat."

Ramzi carved a wedge of cheese and reached over for the scissors. "Don't!" said Samira. The ejaculation came out louder than she intended.

"I saw Teta washing them this afternoon," Uncle Rami said. "I did."

"Rami, don't meddle please."

"Leave these boys alone," Teta intervened. "Who do you think you are?"

"Can we have some peace at this table?" Jiddo said.

Rami fixed his eyes on his plate and covered his headgear with his hands; he started twitching his neck from side to side, as if trying to leak his discomfort out of his ears. "Samira has a secret," he blurted, and was interrupted by his father, "Don't say anything you will regret."

"Samira is pregnant."

A commotion followed. Jiddo asked if it was a boy, and Samira balked like a frightened animal when Teta softened and tried to hug her. "Don't touch me. Just don't."

"Mama, please," Ramzi said. "Whatever has come over you tonight?"

He reached for the scissors again and Samira reacted, bending across the table and snatching them from his hands. In doing so, she brushed against the solar panel which thudded to the ground and cracked from side to side. The smack of the fall agitated the birds, and they hopped on the trellis and flapped their wings, cawing loud.

For a while longer, the family stared at the damaged slab. "She has a knack for wrecking things, this one," Jiddo said, the first to break the silence.

"Mama," Ramzi started, but was broken off by a wail from his uncle.

"I paid all my money for this," Uncle Rami said, punching himself in the face.

"I'm not going with you," Ramzi said. "I'm staying here."

The dark had eased a little, again, and the street lamps were turned off by the town hall. When enough light had seeped into Mazen's room for Samira to be able to see her reflection in the mirror, she knew that dawn was upon her, and she prepared to leave.

She could hear the tolls of the church bells announcing the early Sunday service, just as she walked into the room Ramzi shared with his uncle. Samira paused in front of the bed, gazing upon the sleeping figure, breathing softly. "I will miss you," she whispered and bent over to kiss him.

"What are you doing?" said a voice behind her.

"I only came to say good'bye." She motioned to Uncle Rami to remain silent. "I'm leaving now." Samira crossed the terrace and descended the stairs one last time, and got into her car without glancing back.

As she drove towards Damascus, making all the necessary detours to bypass the areas where fighting was ongoing, she tried several times to reach Mazen on the phone. But just like the night before, his line was closed. Georgine too wasn't picking up.

Loathe to spend the day alone in an empty home, and feeling the need to share her story with someone she could trust, Samira resolved to join Mazen in Beirut. He would be happy to see her, even if the visit was a surprise. He was probably busy with their newly leased house, painting the parlor with the pastel colors she had requested, and his phone battery had run out.

The walls had been peeling off when they viewed it, but the rent was excellent, given its prime location close to the Corniche. Ramzi would only need to walk a few minutes to reach his university.

Samira parked the car in the garage, went into their house in Damascus briefly, and wobbled over to the coach station, feeling determined despite her exhaustion. She took a pill, having barely slept the night before, and dozed off for most of the trip. She was woken up twice, once at the border for security check and then in Beirut once the coach reached its destination at the Charles Helou Station.

She was roused a third time when she screamed in her sleep. A fellow passenger had been kind to her: “There now, you were having a bad dream.” She offered her a sip of water from her Sohat bottle.

“Where am I?” Samira asked, drinking the water.

“On a coach to Beirut. Don’t you know?”

“Rania, my baby girl, was flung down a well. I reached out to rescue her, but women from the village were holding me back. It was horrible.” Samira was gripped by tremors which coursed through her body and made her tremble. The woman next to her shook her head in concern. “You were only dreaming. Where is your baby now?”

“Right here,” she said, pointing to her abdomen.

Samira stood under Beirut’s manila sun and choppy fleece of clouds.

She started walking to clear her thoughts and chase the cobwebs that her Saturday in the village, and her uneven slumber, had created. She wondered how Mazen would take the news that his mother was having an affair with another woman; for a minute or two, she even debated whether or not to disclose the information, but it was important that he learned the truth. For Ramzi’s sake at least.

Samira so desperately wanted to talk to her husband, to be reassured by his usual air of self-confidence that every situation was under control, that she kept thinking she was seeing Mazen out of the corner of her eye. She ambled past groups of men smoking hookahs and reading the news, young men jogging, women in Sunday suits, some in head scarves, others in full-on chadors.

There was a mother begging on the sidewalk, pretending to nurse an unweaned toddler who yelped and asked for her breast, and a yelling man who Samira swore at first was Jiddo, telling her she was too gaunt to conceive. She walked by shrapnel-riddled facades of wartime buildings, and some newer ones pockmarked with bullets from more recent skirmishes. She passed a derelict villa with Ottoman arches and bay windows next to an abandoned building; it was in the courtyard of the latter that a pullulating audience had assembled around a newlywed couple, a middle-aged-man and a girl not older than fourteen.

“*Mabrūk, mabrūk,*” the crowd crowed.

“Is that her father?” Samira asked a woman loitering at the periphery.

“No, her husband; it’s disgusting.”

The high-rises spiraling into the sky not far from here reflected so much light they seared Samira just for glancing at them – the road curbed and she took a turning; she crossed a squalid tenement, cut through a teeming street, and joined a throng of pedestrians by the seaside.

The city folded her in, and for a little while, she ceased, entirely, to think.

The farther she walked, the more cars and motorcycles flew by, and the disproportionate humidity and fumes in the air bent the light into waves, like burning oil. Samira was beginning to feel nauseous again. As the baby moved inside her, it seemed to push upwards what little food and drink she’d had over the past twenty-four hours, and unable to restrain herself anymore, she stood in a corner next to a girl in dreadlocks kneeling on a rug, and retched into the sea.

The fishermen under the Corniche shouted up at her. A lone fisherwoman close to them said something, presumably in her defense, but they silenced her rather fast. The girl next to Samira stood up and held her hand. She said her name was Uruba.

“Why were you kneeling?” Samira asked.

“Because I look sadder that way. It makes onlookers more willing to help.”

Amidst the hubbub of people and sirens and cars, Samira hadn’t noticed the blue-caped couple who had drawn closer and were observing them. “Are you alright?” the policeman asked. Before she could answer, gunshots sounded off in the distance, and Samira jumped.

“It’s just residents in an adjacent neighborhood shooting in the air to celebrate what a *za’īm* must be saying on television. Nothing to worry about.”

“Or it could be someone celebrating the birth of a baby,” the policewoman added, and traipsed over to a public cottage to relieve herself.

“I saw something awful earlier,” Samira said. “A child bride.”

“I’m afraid we can do nothing about that.”

“Have you no shame in you? My friend is only thirteen.” It was the first time Uruba spoke since the officers arrived.

“What did you say?” the man said. His face was dark.

“You heard me. You only turn a blind eye because we’re refugees.” The policeman started, as if to hit her, and Samira screamed. “Don’t hurt her, please.”

“We have no choice but to let the weddings happen, and these girls know it,” he said. “Once their parents give their consent, there’s not much the authorities can do.”

The policewoman returned and joined her sulking colleague. “She’s not being difficult again, is she?” She glowered at Uruba. “Do you think you’re too old to be whipped?”

Uruba swallowed at the height of a big breath, and Samira recognized this as a technique to overcome a lump in the throat. She tried to intervene, again, despite her physical weakness, but was rebuked by the female officer: *Really, now, a woman who looks like you.*

Different images stampeded in her brain: Samira returning to her mother after finishing school... “You were naked you little bitch... You slept with him, didn’t you? I will show you to a doctor, and I swear to you, I swear...”

“I wasn’t naked, I wasn’t.” She was standing at the entrance of her parents’ house again. The threat of the workhouse was behind her, but there was more to come: “You think you’re too good for the *bayt banāt*, don’t you?”

Samira’s hands had covered the flimsy dress she was wearing. She felt exposed without her bra, and vulnerable, and had lost other things as well... Her face was bleeding from her mother’s blows and scratches earlier. She had aged a decade in a matter of hours.

“So you threw away your undergarments along with your dignity? Did you also want to walk naked through the village?”

“I didn’t. I wasn’t naked. Nohad took the bra.”

“Oh really? You take me for a fool, *wlī*? What will happen to us now? What will people say? What *else* could they say? No longer a girl, really, but a woman...”

“Mama, please...”

“A woman who looks like you...”

The officer’s phrase triggered another surge of vomiting, followed by more irate shrieks from the fishermen below. The policewoman, and soon after, the policeman, burst into chuckles that turned into throaty coughs which convulsed them, and Samira grasped the opportunity to collect herself and thrust her feet forward, moving away.

“Taxi?” someone was saying. “You want taxi?”

Cabbies in Beirut always mistook Samira for a foreigner, a legacy of her dyed hair, and would accost her in broken English. The man hobbled over with a cane, his right foot landing crookedly and his knees collapsing inwards with every step. It looked unnatural and agonizing.

He had such dense stubble it appeared as if asphalt had been smudged across his face, and it serpented down his neck to connect with his chest hair. And yet underneath this grid of coal, he had looked vaguely familiar at first, even as Samira quickly dispelled that as another illusion fomented by her exhaustion and her nerves. Only an hour ago she had thought Jiddo followed her here, cold and reprimanding.

A gold pendant in the form of a cross hung between the lapels of his open black shirt. “I’m Christian, see?” The driver held the cross to her face. “You no worry, no trap, no ISIS around.”

Samira was exasperated. “*Ehki Arabi,*” she rebuked. “I can understand Arabic. I’m Lebanese.” The man chuckled. “*Amrik sittna,*” he said. “But really, I could have sworn you weren’t.” He closed the door behind her before limping over to the driver’s side.

The dust blown up by the speeding cars made the air flannely, and this in turn made her nauseous. But there was nothing left in her system to retch. A taxi ahead had whisked away a passenger another cabbie had anticipated, and the air was clotted with shouts and smoke and bad feeling.

“That’s what happens when no rules are apparent, only happenstance,” Samira’s driver laughed with derision. He started a conversation with her about how immoral people in Lebanon were becoming: “So many call-girls from Eastern Europe I drive down to Jbeil and Jounieh every week. And residents there pretending to be so pious. *Sittna,* my aunts from Palestine were visiting some time ago. Hadn’t seen them in years. One of them is very religious, was keen to

visit The Lady of Harissa tower but couldn't understand how the neighborhood below it was a red district. She wanted to know which came first. Tit or tat, if you ask me."

Samira had lost all color, and her hands were shaking. She felt trapped, again. She knew now why he had looked, and more importantly sounded, familiar. She hadn't seen him in 28 years; he was different now, and the voice had a tired quality, but it was him.

The taxi driver was Ziad.

Although Ziad's role in Claudette's plot was never made clear to her, some things about their affair became more obvious after Samira left the village. But much like his religious aunt had played a role in her own Christmas miracle, so had Samira unwittingly led him to Claudette, seeking her help for his suit. She had nailed the lid on her own coffin.

Samira knew she had fallen for him, long before finishing school; in her mind he represented all that she sought at the time: safety, entertainment, escape. A vicarious, exciting, and experimental home... When she had seen Teta and Nanig in the garden, it wasn't Ziad who had crossed her mind, not at first at least. And yet his role in her disgrace had been crucial. She still found it painful to remember how he had betrayed her trust, prepping her up for Claudette's enjoyment, when all the time she had imagined it was the other way around, the other way around! That it was Claudette who was the foreplay, the spectacle, the performance to be enjoyed...

Now hearing him speak, she experienced another thing. Fear.

Ziad was talking to her. "Are you alright *ya sitt*?"

"Yes, but the air here is heavy." She breathed loud, lowering the window further.

"Not that that will help much," he said. "This is Beirut for you. In any case, we're getting close to your house."

"What happened to your leg?" she asked, after a while.

"Oh that," Ziad said in a jovial tone, as if he were talking about someone else's limb. "It was bludgeoned by a javelin. Luckily it missed the artery, so it wasn't amputated."

"A javelin?"

"Yes, a spear-like instrument. Sharp as needles."

"Who would do such a thing?" But even as she asked it, Samira knew, and dreaded, the answer.

“A rich old bitch,” Ziad said, with a scowl. “She owed me money.”

The car slowed down, its progress hampered by crawling, snarling traffic.

“Did I bother you, *ya Sitt*?” In the back seat, visible through the mirror, Samira sat looking pale as a white-haired matron braving illness. For a quick moment, she feared Ziad had recognized her too, and imagined he was gazing at her in an amused, and calculating, way.

Only the recognition wasn't mutual. Samira had changed her hair color from brown to peroxide blonde years ago, had grown taller, and seemed taller still with regularly worn heels, and her breasts had fully developed; her bloodshot expression, and the terror she imagined coloring her face, lurked unseen behind her designer sunglasses.

To Ziad in the driver's seat, she was just another customer. “Sorry for my language,” he said. “It was someone I was in on a plan with, and when it didn't work out well, she stopped paying.”

“But why did she throw the javelin at you?”

“She knew that I wouldn't be able to ask her for money after that. Or to report her.”

Samira wondered what he meant. Had he been blackmailing Claudette?

“The wound hurt for months afterwards, you know. She had poisoned the tip of the javelin's head.”

With nettles, Samira thought, shivering.

“With nettles,” Ziad said. “You probably wouldn't know those. They're stinging plants. As nasty as they get.”

He took a right turn and then another, entering a less bustling thoroughfare. The squalls of heckling, and the clamors of people and movement, had subsided. “There we are *ya Sitt*. This is your address.”

Samira walked up to the house in a trance.

The sound of a scuffle on the inside, playful not sinister, made her pause. There were choppy sentences spoken faintly, incoherent against the melodious voice singing in the background. It was a small-sized ground-floor property, a single window looking upon the living room. The shutters were kept semi-open to allow natural light to seep in, but even as she peered through the slats, the source of the noise was indistinguishable.

When they decided to rent the flat, Mazen had boasted great plans for refurbishing it. He seemed to have finally begun. One of the walls was a dirt-stained off-white where he had scraped off the wallpaper. Its edges remained clad with the Ottoman style mosaic tiles the landlord had plastered when he first bought the house decades ago. The rest of the paper lay in dust, in great sheets and scrolls. Then Samira noticed something else: the missing Phoenician boy-doll.

It lay on the floor, by the screen that hid the former occupants' tattered couch, and next to it were some discarded items of clothing, along with Mazen's tools and paintbrushes and the bottles of oil and turpentine. The screen fell down as it was kicked aside, spilling over a pot of paint, and Mazen and Georgine stumbled forward like drunkards, their embrace interrupted by the crash. Georgine's breast was dangling from her shirt, and as Mazen made a rush, trying to stoop over it to kiss the nipple, she became coquettish and wouldn't let him complete the deed.

She was dressed, as the Lebanese say, to give a man a stroke, her curves accentuated by her body-tight skirt, her mouth redder than blood, her thighs luminescent as the gossamer silk stockings, which she had bought with Samira in a shopping spree, lit up by the sunshine pouring from the window. She was barefoot, but wore anklets, her hips moving with startling lasciviousness. Her hair was parted in the middle, falling slickly about her shoulders; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, and her lips raged with lipstick, but her countenance was familiar: Mazen's dazed appearance and bloodshot eyes after a night out drinking and smoking pot with other salesmen from work.

Her shirt, open to the navel, revealed not only a plump breast but also the white gold crucifix Samira had given her on her previous birthday; the shirt itself was sequined with a chaotic array of French-style *paillettes*, phosphoric yellow, metallic blue, and flaming red, which matched those of her anklets and stormed in the late-afternoon light. The glass in her hand threatened in any instant to be reduced to shards, to splinters, and as they embraced, again, holding on to their drinks, Samira could hear through the partially drawn shutters their grunts grating and rising, like razor blades on glass.

When she could take it no longer, she moved to the door and starting banging on it. And then it opened. Mazen stared at her and rubbed his eyes. "Come in *hayete*, we weren't expecting you. Georgine came to keep me company as I worked. When did you get here?"

Outside, the late afternoon sun loped to an early dusk. The paint spilled on the floor had been left to dry: it made the air in the room sweet and heavy. The sound of music had long stopped.

Georgine sat looking at the ground, her shirt buttoned up and her breast no longer showing. Having pressed against it for some time, Mazen's face still seemed flattened and aslant. He had the usual scrapes and bruises on his chin, a mundane legacy of shaving for which he usually mixed Samira's moisturizer with his to get the soothing effect he coveted – a spousal secret she had been sworn to keep. The anthills of razor burn on his jaw and neck gave his raw, worm-pink face a used-sandpaper quality.

“Let me pour you another drink,” he said.

Samira lost track of how many times he had replenished their glasses. They were all toasted now. She recognized the tawdriness, the twistedness of the situation, but felt helpless. It was as if something she had tried hard to keep intact had finally broken. She wiped sweat and tears with the foulard around her neck. “What was happening here?” she asked, again. “When did this start?”

“We were having an early nightcap. To celebrate the lease, and today's work. Oh Christ, don't look so gloomy both of you. Nothing happened.”

Samira staggered over to the fallen screen. She picked up the mascot and brought it close to her face. It smelled of smoke and whiskey, and of Georgine.

“Was this your idea?” she asked, letting it drop.

“Yes,” Georgine said, deadpan. “It was my grandmother's. She brought it with her when she fled Turkey as a newlywed.”

Mazen dipped down and scooped up the boy-doll from Samira's feet. He held it at arm's length and started shaking it. “Do you take me for a cuckold? And on top of that, you upset my wife?” He erupted into laughter at his own mock fury.

Georgine was instructed to put the music back on, and did as she was bidden. The sultry Sabah song playing earlier resumed. Mazen filled up their glasses one more time and slipped away to the bedroom. When he returned he had in his hands a frayed cardboard box his wife knew well, but wasn't expecting to see, not here: *Risk*.

“Shall we all play?” Mazen said. He turned to Samira. “We'll have an even better game now that you've joined us. You know the rule well. Georgine can't be part obviously, unless you are happy for us to extend it to her –”

“Please, enough,” Georgine said. “We’ve had enough.”

Samira could now understand why her friend’s breast had been exposed earlier, for she herself was expected to take off a garment every time she lost a soldier, two if she lost a country.

“It might be a board game, but victory girls were always the spoils of war,” Mazen said the first time he insisted on playing the game, his way, narrowing his voice to imitate the Parker brothers who invented and exported it, as he read out from a make-believe manifesto the invented stipulation to undress.

Mazen was talking to her but her thoughts were petrified with stampeding images, some real, some imagined: a peculiar spoil of war, the child bride she had seen earlier wondering about her wedding night, and then a different kind of bride, Teta and Nanig creeping under sheets of their own, and of histrionic and cunning brides like Claudette, Ziad and his mangled leg, the javelins, the nettles, the attic. She started to sweat, again.

Georgine rose and barely managed a foot away from the board game. Her visible tipsiness was perversely comforting to Samira. It reminded her of their girls-only nights out, the sense of camaraderie, of security.

“I’m sorry,” Georgine mouthed. “So sorry you saw this.”

The last time the two women met was a fortnight ago when Samira had first come to check the house. Mazen had taken them out to a club after, and later they had slept, here, Georgine on the couch behind the screen, Mazen and Samira in the bedroom. The screen, the bed, and the couch were the only furniture the previous tenants had left behind. Putting the screen up had been Samira’s suggestion. She thought partitioning the room this way would give her friend some privacy as she slept.

They’d given her a ride to her house in Bourj Hammoud the morning after. That the three were crowded together in a 1960s cab, which was in surprisingly good shape, elicited from Mazen a series of lewd speculations about a ménage-à-trois with Samira and Georgine, two gorgeous women he said, in a vehicle such as this one. This lewdness, which one day ago Samira would have passed as a jocular expression of bonhomie among old friends, or at worst one of Mazen’s humorless jokes, was now revolting. She remembered, with a pang, the magazines stowed in his nightstand in the village. They too had featured women posing in vintage settings –

antique cars, rustic parlors, rose gardens, period kitchens, oak-paneled libraries. Had Teta savored the deprecating images, the way her son had?

“Look,” said Georgine, as they inched closer to Bourj Hammoud, the Armenian quarter. “My beautiful home is turning in its bed, waking up.” It was the only place she could have afforded to live on her own. She too had moved to Beirut, but only in 1991 after the war finished, so she could start a course in hospitality management, and they had reconnected; she was the only person Samira confided in after leaving the village.

Samira peered outside the window beyond Georgine, who looked fatigued and cheerless. The Beirut River was starting to dry as was it wont every summer. Gobbets of garbage bobbed on the little water that remained, and a number of stray dogs ran, barking, along its banks. Beyond this, dimly, silently, through speed and smoke, she made out the panoply of asymmetrical pewter roofs of Bourj Hammoud, combed with the dull-burning gold braziers that made it famous, and with the dark plumes of fumes spiffed by its factories.

A mist of smoke and humidity clung to the river beneath, hiding the surrounding ghetto’s corkscrew alleys and slumbering streets, clinging like pestilence to the homeless who sought refuge under the bridge, some of whom flashed by, swarthy and lone, trudging along the waterside. “Another minute and it’ll be just us, again, and the doll,” Mazen said, laughing. “If Georgine can’t be with us, we at least have that lovely mascot.”

Although he had initially told Samira it was enough to keep the padded figure at a close distance, where it would appear to gaze at them during intercourse, its function had evolved in time. Mazen had coaxed her into using it as a sex toy of sorts. He glanced right and left to see if anyone in the car had caught the joke, but her friend squirmed in her seat and wouldn’t look at him, and Samira was demure. It did occur to her at that moment that the mascot had been given by Georgine, but she dismissed the idea. It hadn’t made sense then.

The moon was full, its copper light streaming steadily inside. They did not speak, but Samira knew Mazen too was awake. The drone of snoring was absent, and his eyes reflected apostrophes of the bizarre light. The glow individualized his receding hairline and his chubby cheeks, as if they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle coming together.

“Do you want me to treat you to a really good sleeping trick?” he asked, turning in bed to face her.

“Trick or treat, you mean? I think I’ll pass.”

Mazen chuckled softly. “No, really,” he said. “Just close your eyes and remember something sweet, a happy memory.”

Samira felt drained; it was as if all emotion had ebbed out of her, leaving a hollow that made her numb. A sleepless zombie tutored in happy reminiscing. It was difficult to concentrate with Mazen’s body so close to her, Georgine’s smell still on him. Vines of hair spiraled up his neck and across his back, accumulating into little black flames on each shoulder. If she put her hand forward, she would touch them and get burned.

She had always marveled at how proud he was of his hairiness. Samira’s need for a skating partner on days she decided to indulge herself at the rink—it always made her feel younger, especially if Ramzi went along—meant that when no one else was available, she would take Mazen with her. He always made sure to remove his shirt midway through a pirouette and held it high above his head, saying it was impressive that “a charred omelet on rollers” could be so agile.

She could feel his gaze upon her now. The baby rubbed against her gently from the inside, and if she weren’t so sedate, she would have felt tender and sad. She wouldn’t tell Mazen yet; he didn’t deserve to know. In the adjacent room, Georgine was crying softly.

“I can’t remember any happy memories,” Samira said.

“A fun day with Ramzi perhaps? A day out skating?”

Ramzi’s name unleashed a spate of worrisome recollections: Teta and Nanig embracing in the garden, unashamed and uninhibited, Jiddo’s stoic and dismissive attitude, Ramzi and Uncle Rami playing by the pond, Ramzi’s strange relationship to his grandmother, a fraud and a cheat. And to Nanig too, a cretin. Bad influences, all of them.

Despite her stupor, Samira was determined. “If your parents end up harming Ramzi in any way,” she whispered, “it’ll be the end of them, I promise you.”

Mazen was stupefied. His body stiffened, a stodgy piece of charcoal. “You’re talking nonsense now,” he said, turning away from her. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You really must get some shuteye.”

“So you can crawl over to Georgine?”

“I already told you nothing happened,” he said, getting out of bed. “Nothing.” In a moment, he was in the living room. Georgine’s tears halted and were followed by audible

plaintive whispers. “Can’t you see I’m drunk and upset?” she said. Samira wasn’t sure if her husband replied, and in any case could not hear it.

“I can’t think straight,” her friend said, finally. “Please go back to your room. Please.”

When Samira woke up, Georgine was next to her, fast asleep. She had swapped places with Mazen during the night. “Did you sleep well?” he asked when Samira walked into the kitchen. He was sipping his coffee, already dressed for yet another job interview in the city.

“I thought it’d be better if I weren’t next to you.” He nodded in the direction of the room. “Also, the bed is more comfortable than the couch for you girls.”

Later, Samira asked Georgine to stay behind so she could give her a ride to the coach station. She wasn’t risking running into Ziad, again. In between Mazen and Ziad, her friend seemed the lesser evil, but Samira needed explanations, and Georgine, contrite, obliged. She had been Mazen’s lover during the brief stint he’d spent at their college in the 90s, and even as they’d split up before he started his relationship with Samira, they still saw each other sporadically, but only in a sexual way.

“Mazen has an animalistic magnetism I should’ve done more to resist, but he’s a talker and I gave in,” Georgine said. She also said she was relieved that Samira now knew since she would no longer have to live with the guilt and the shame, but vowed that that was it – she would no longer see Mazen on his own.

In response, Samira, told her, not without contempt now that she had the moral upper hand, that she had traveled to Lebanon to share something terrible, only to find her in her husband’s arms. “Who else knows?” she asked, wincing as she did so. It was her own mother’s poignant question, decades ago, the answer to which came in the shape of a certain taxi driver the day before.

“Teta knows,” said Georgine. “Mazen’s mother has known ever since you complained to her about his absences and she took it upon herself to find out the truth.”

In a hysteric fit, Samira started to laugh; she teetered about the room, as another bout of morning sickness set in. “Ramzi’s precious Teta,” she muttered, “everyone thinking she is a strong woman of virtue, but you know what?”

“What?”

“She is a whore, that’s what.” Feeling faint, her eyes spooled back into her head, and she stumbled on a piece of wallpaper and fell forward. She let out cries of agony as her water broke and premature labor started. When, in a few minutes, Rania was born, she was all grey and twisted, and quiet.

Georgine, dazed, stared at the wrinkled bundle of flesh – Samira was 42, worn thin by fasting, dieting and exercise; she had mentioned nothing about a pregnancy. Kneeling down, Georgine spanked it on the buttocks but there was no sound, and for hours later, even after she called an ambulance, and then Mazen, and went with them to hospital, Samira’s words to her were the same: “This baby was a miracle. I’ll never have another child again.”

Georgine kept her promise and saw Mazen only when, and if, Samira was present. In time, Samira was able to forgive, if not forget, what she had done, and they slowly, cautiously resumed their friendship. But Mazen and his family were a different matter altogether. Even when she tried to suppress thoughts of all that had transpired, the memories remained at the bottom of her mind, as stagnant and as awful as a decomposing corpse; it darkened her spirits and fomented her thoughts for revenge.

Samira’s first impulse was to seek a divorce, to take a distance, to go as far away as possible, but she wondered how Ramzi would be affected by all this, and she hesitated, taking time to hatch a better plan. She aspired to a trifecta of events culminating in disgrace, Mazen’s family’s. He would be living with her and Ramzi in Beirut in the event of a job offer, and Samira knew that soon his parents would have to join too; like many Syrians, they had nowhere to go but Lebanon. The war was escalating and was approaching their village; already there had been talk of chemical attacks, and counter-attacks, in other areas of the province.

First, there would be the invitation to her in-laws when home in Syria was no longer viable, and then their eviction after exposing Teta to her son and grandson. It was this last that would need perfect timing, and where contingencies might arise, but she would use the same logic that men would, citing Teta as a bad influence on Ramzi. Teta’s husband, if he had any dignity, would leave with her, Samira thought. Finally, she herself would cut ties with Mazen having revealed him and his family for what they were.

There was something pleasing about staying and watching things pan out, rather than leaving immediately, the satisfying supposition that disgrace, once shared or disseminated,

would, like any other calamity, be easier to bear. No invitation would be extended to Nanig. As Jiddo had pointed out, she wasn't family.

As Samira's plan was starting to take shape, so did her preparations to move house with Ramzi. She was aware that it must be implemented piecemeal so that he wouldn't be shocked, or harmed, if everything collapsed at once. Teta and the village had been his home and childhood. But he would gradually see the whole lot of them, the way they truly were. He was still young and would adapt and adjust to life in a different city, no longer Damascus now, but Beirut.

When they traveled there in September, Samira anticipated a quiet month, and in many ways it was, at least in the first few weeks up till Rami died. Mazen was still in Damascus, coming to Beirut only on weekends to see them and go to job interviews. Teta, Jiddo, and Uncle Rami remained in the village. They hadn't spoken to her after the debacle on the terrace, only expressed their sorrow at Rania's death through Mazen. And it wouldn't have been particularly deep Samira thought, for Rania was a girl.

Ramzi's adjustment to life in Beirut took more time than she anticipated. He found it pretentious in many ways, and some people at the American university shied away from him when they learned of his Syrian origins. Knowing that cats on campus were protected by a web of regulations prohibiting feline abuse – a student proven to have kicked a university cat could receive a Dean's warning, followed by possible expulsion in case of recidivist behavior – Ramzi had been suspect when an outbreak of cat killings at the start of term was reported, and lamented, by the university community. A neighborhood occupied by refugees in the campus vicinity was notorious for executing litters of cats that pinched what scraps of food they had, and incoming Syrians faced accusing fingers.

It wasn't until Ramzi started running with the track team that he started making new friends, and even then, only a few. Sometimes Samira would look for him in their crummy apartment and find him sitting in the bathroom, surrounded by potted plants.

"Your country isn't making me feel welcome, Mama," he said.

Soon, this became a habit. He took to watering his plants in the tub, much to her consternation. Then they resumed an activity they'd both enjoyed back in Damascus before the fateful weekend when she visited him in the village; he'd been formal after that, his way of

reminding her the scene she had made was not forgotten, that she had seemed to upset Teta and ruined Rami's panel.

Now that they were in Beirut, Samira suggested they start skating again, which would allow them regular time together when they could talk – she had chosen Treesome, and Ramzi had been intrigued by the rink and its history. It was still up and running, one of the few spots in the city Samira had fond memories of. The rink was particular in that it operated a bar that served cocktails to skaters, even during the Civil War, and provided Samira as a young woman with a breathing space she needed when she relocated to Beirut after her disgrace in the mountains. This last bit she kept to herself though. No one in Mazen's family knew about her past.

Simple things like shared conversation, meals in the kitchen or walks on the Corniche, or even watching television together felt different now. Small snatches of intimacy that Samira coveted, now that she felt Ramzi was all that she had left.

Beneath his usual jocular air, Mazen was anxious.

He had wanted to patch things up. Or else, the situation at home would be awkward when he moved in with Samira and Ramzi in Beirut. Spending a weekend there applying for jobs, he invited Samira to an upscale restaurant in the Saifi district. He knew she would appreciate the posh side of town.

They were barely seated, and Mazen was already talking away, a persistent grin stretching his face. Samira was quiet, her thoughts coagulating before she could articulate them. The table he requested was candlelit, the walls around it swathed with tapestries, and the contrived sense of intimacy made the room stuffy. Samira stood to draw the heavy-silk curtain behind her and peered outside the window. Saifi's small-scaled, basalt-cobbled streets, aesthetically narrowed by broadened and elevated sidewalks, and aligned with rustic lampposts and flowerbeds, were now all but empty. Active and vibrant in daytime, the neighborhood at night enjoyed a rare lull that Samira found soothing.

When she turned around, the maître d'hôtel was waiting to begin his recitation. He murmured the special of the day in French, *un potage aux orties*, and hovered with a vast leather-bound menu and wine list.

"I didn't know you served nettles," Samira said.

“Only as an *hors d’œuvre*, Madame, and only when available.”

Although he had never tried it, Mazen agreed to order the nettle soup as his main course, wanting to appease Samira who was keen he had it. He had selected the restaurant as a place to make things up, to force her to see what an effort he was making, and in the end, though it had cost him an arm and a leg, it had been worthwhile he thought. “I’m sorry about the Georgine story. We really *are* just friends.”

The soup was served along with hot focaccia sprinkled with julienne herbs and dotted with pink Himalayan salt. On the side of the platter rested a flowering sprig of nettles in an earthenware bowl. The presentation was exotic and satisfying.

“Is this plant a native to Lebanon? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a curious species I came across as a young girl,” Samira said, calmly. “I think you will like it.”

“We should tell Uncle Rami about it then. Teta tells me he’s been brooding since your visit. Perhaps this would stir his imagination to cheer him up.” Mazen laughed then put a spoonful in his mouth. He grimaced. And Samira knew, before he said it, that it was bitter.

“It’s exquisite, isn’t it?” The plant was in bloom, and the white fuzzy-like buds had a meretricious appeal. “You can caress the leaves and see how they feel like.”

Mazen, still reeling from the taste, looked doubtful, but the flower pot was enticing; the melancholy softness in Samira’s voice was starting to seduce him.

“Go on,” she said, one last time. “Touch them.”

The story of the nettles, or how they made his brother leave a restaurant in Beirut howling, never reached Rami. He drowned in the village pond on 21 September 2012, the last day of the summer. Clad in black, Samira traveled to Damascus with Ramzi where they met his father. She didn’t brave the northern-bound journey to the village, and Mazen acquiesced in her decision to stay behind.

Samira hadn’t wanted to see the villagers feigning grief – the families that remained there carried their hides tough, and tears for Uncle Rami would be scant. He had been neither sociable nor militant and any overt sorrow was only necessary for Jiddo’s sake, an expression of courtesy. People felt sympathy for Jiddo, the same way they had for Anwar before him. Jiddo, the respected father of Mazen, the Salesman, and of Rami, the Strange.

The nicknames the village boys had given the two brothers weren't desultory. Samira remembered her last encounter with the family, the ominous gathering on the terrace, the humidity and the headwear, Rami coiffed with his solar panel telling everyone she was pregnant, and the chaos and screeching of the birds as the panel plummeted to the floor. She wondered now if it would replace the more conventional wreath of flowers atop his coffin. The day after, he had questioned her; he wanted to know what she was doing in the room so early in the morning, and Samira, truthful and defeated, had pleaded with him to be quiet. "I only came to say good'bye."

More importantly, she wasn't yet ready to meet Rami's mother again. The foreplay of the two older women pelleting each other with loquat pips wrangled with an equally unsavory reality: Teta and Nanig united not in lust but in grief, together nevertheless, and she couldn't bear to see that. Perhaps because Teta was aware of all these undercurrents, she had specifically demanded that no one from the family stay the night. She wanted to grieve in silence, alone, she said.

But was there more to it than that? Uncle Rami's books had been floating on the surface when the men from the village hall arrived. Their weekly meeting was interrupted by the news. Had Teta been by the pond with him when he died? What had brought him so close to the water? He had never dared to enter it before. And where had Nanig been? Samira imagined them shrouded in black lace, wailing together, walking behind the coffin, trudging towards the graveyard, where the charade, with feeble supplications and hoarse chanting, would end.

The day of the funeral passed slowly.

Samira lay in bed contemplating her next move. Back from the village, Mazen's spirits would be down and she knew from experience how best to resuscitate them. Her phantom pregnancies kept him baited and attached to her. When his chicanery with Georgine came to light, Samira hadn't let him touch her for a while to allow for mounting tension, so that in the few times they had sex once he imagined he'd been forgiven, especially after his ordeal with the nettles, his yearnings had been intense. Samira enjoyed it for what it was, now that the pressure of conception had been relinquished, from her side at least. The feeling was invigorating.

It was almost midnight when Mazen and Ramzi returned to Damascus. She had kept the lights off on purpose, and Ramzi went to bed immediately. Samira could hear the furtive thud of

approaching footsteps and could see Mazen's silhouette as he paused by the half-opened door. By the faint glow of sequined lamps, he would see her in the familiarity of their old room, surrounded by animals in plush and scattered damask-wrapped cushions, the telltale boy-doll perched on the nightstand.

She was expecting him.

Two months later, Ramzi made two announcements. He had qualified to run a race in Faraya to support the refugees, and would get sponsorship for that through his sports scholarship at the university. He also intended to travel to Syria to meet his grandparents and try to convince Teta, one last time, to move to Lebanon. With Mazen still working in Damascus and looking for jobs in Beirut, it was up to Samira to decide whether their son would be allowed to make the perilous journey. He was adamant to do so.

Although her first impulse was to object, she had to balance her worries for his physical safety, and the unnerving notion of him spending time with Teta alone, with the progress their relationship had been making since they moved, together, to Beirut. She didn't want to appear to defy his wishes openly, a confrontation which would leave its stains, and besides she could guess at the outcome of the visit. Teta wouldn't leave without her lover, and Jiddo would only deign to importune the favor of her spare roof only when life in the village became intolerable.

They reached an agreement. Ramzi would undertake the journey, but it would be his last before the war ended and therefore Teta's final chance to see reason. The morning after his return, Samira was jubilant. He was back safe and she could tell by his dejected air the evening before that his efforts had been unsuccessful. They spent the day skating at Treesome and chatted about his varsity training for the upcoming race. Samira was supportive, her pirouettes matching her nimble spirits, her face only coloring when he mentioned his grandmother.

"You were right, Mama, she refused to come. We can only wait now."

And they had waited.

By early spring 2013, Teta's village and the surrounding province were no longer safe. The President's war machine was crawling forward, smoldering all opposition in its way. There was further talk of chemical weapons, followed by rumors that armed guerillas and their families would soon overtake the area and settle in the town halls of the villages. An Islamic caliphate

was starting to take root in myriad parts of the country, and it was feared that the approaching militants were their supporters. Nothing was certain except this: the continuing reality of fire, mortar, and bloodshed. For weeks, there was burgeoning terror and a sense of impending calamity, then having stayed put for so long, many of the remaining villagers started to leave.

When kites with Koranic verses were found stuck in the deserted woodland by the pond, their plethora of strings mangling birds whose shrieks were heard from a distance for an entire night, Mazen's father took his final decision. It wasn't clear which faction had come up with the idea, a devious twist on the village boys' play, or who exactly should fear the message underpinning the verses, or whether the vehicle carrying them was even appropriate. But they achieved their purpose. People were more confused and frightened than ever before: Samira could see it on her own husband's face when Jiddo called him.

Mazen was superstitious; to him, the kites were enough. He needed no further proof that anything associated with the pond was sinister and macabre. Rami's drowning had left its mark. He urged his parents to flee immediately. His father needed no more incentives either, and on 28th March, Teta and Jiddo arrived in Faraya in the early hours of the morning.

Samira woke up at dawn, laid out her suit for the day, and immersed herself in breakfast preparations. Her mixed spread reminded her of her mother-in-law's on the weekend Samira had visited them to see Ramzi. She knew Jiddo, and Teta, would appreciate it after a night of traveling. Having missed Uncle Rami's funeral, it was important that everything seemed normal, to dispel whatever suspicion or resentment they harbored against her. She must appear to be hospitable.

The rich smells of fried food lured Mazen and Ramzi to the kitchen. Mazen was already dressed for work, as was Samira by then, and talked with pizzazz about the new job in sales he had landed in Beirut. He was his jovial self again.

Ramzi was excited too. The day of his race had finally arrived. He would be able to tell Teta all about it later; she was keen to see him win.

Outside, the early-morning chirrup of the birds continued in the willow next to the house. Soon, it was punctuated by the approaching rumble of Jiddo's old Buick.

There was no turning back.

—Part Four—

Lapis Lazuli

Lebanon, Summer 2013

Teta

There were no hotels in Samira's hometown, but it was as close to the Syrian border as she was willing to get, so when Ramzi insisted his grandmother meet her there, Teta found herself looking for a place to stay the night. She ended up, here, on a spare cot in the village fortuneteller's living room. The woman Nohad, as Samira's mother referred to her, had started renting out sleeping space on a per night basis to paying guests, female only, and the ongoing war in Syria meant that business was thriving.

On 13th July 2013, Teta crossed through the never-ending cavalcade of checkpoints at the border and reached the village by early evening. When a cab dropped her off at the cottage on the outskirts of town, she was received by a grim-faced Nohad who said she had changed the bedding on the cot, and would prepare some breakfast for her in the morning – a courtesy to Samira's mother who'd recommended the accommodation. "It won't be much, mind, but better than nothing," Nohad said on arrival.

A musty odor persisted even as Teta left the window open all night, and she stayed up wondering whether the village was the best place to meet, however geographically convenient it might be. After what Ramzi told her about his mother's trials and tribulations before she was sent off to Beirut, much of Samira's behavior had finally made sense, but her proximity to the finishing school was unnerving, and Teta woke up to a nightmare of Samira hanging herself in the attic. This particularly terrified her, not only because of its potential impact on her grandson, but also because Uncle Rami was dead – the circumstances were different but the outcome was the same. There was no accident in Rami's death as the villagers had assumed.

Last summer, Ramzi had been visiting right before he moved to Beirut to start his studies, and his departure left a lingering gloom behind. There was rain during the first two weeks of September, uncommon for that time of year, so when the village was basking in sunshine again, Teta and Nanig, joined by Uncle Rami, resumed their daily excursion; on the first few days Rami

was perched farther away than his wont since the immediate vicinity of the pond was still wet and muddy from the recent showers.

“We are going to go right there and get into the water. We will go for a short walk after but will come to you first to get the towels. Will you stay here and wait for us?”

Teta’s question was the usual one, but their pond-going rituals were no longer the same. Both Rami and Nanig had become restless. Rami had changed his habit of taking one book only to the pond. He was now filling his rucksack with the heaviest tomes of the lot. On the other hand, Nanig’s patience was starting to wane. Ever since she had decided to reclaim Anwar’s liquor cupboard, and given Teta the lapis lazuli necklace, she had seemed more confident, even as the ongoing war scared her, and more demanding. “Must Rami always come with us? We seem to never have a minute alone, Teta.”

“Ramzi is gone now, and you know I can’t leave him with Jiddo.”

“Why not? He’s his son too.”

“But you know how Rami is, and Jiddo is uncomfortable with it, so there’s always tension, and Rami feels it. *Hayete* what are you doing?” Nanig was pulling her towards her in the water. “Let me show you a trick,” she said. “I want us to go under for a moment. But don’t close your eyes when we do so. It’ll be fast.”

Teta glanced over at Rami, he was still where they had left him, but he was too far away and she couldn’t tell if he was looking at them, or reading. She bobbed up and down with Nanig as the minnows in the pond circled around them, teasing their ankles, and when, together they went under the water, she kept her eyes open as promised, and Nanig cupped her face with both hands and kissed her. They floated on the surface afterwards, next to each other, and let the September sun stroke their skins.

On 21 September 2012, Uncle Rami reminded them it was a special occasion, the last day of summer. He insisted on wearing his favorite autumnal outfit with a multilayered overcoat and by the time they reached the pond, he was sweating profusely. “Are you alright, *ḥabībī*? Don’t you want to take your coat off?” Teta asked.

“We’re not in winter yet, Uncle Rami.”

And for what would be the final time in thirty years, Teta said, “We are going to go right there and get into the water. We will go for a short walk after but will come to you to get the towels. Will you stay here and wait for us?”

The sun was kidnapped by a fleece of cloud, a cold breeze had risen, and the water, when they grazed its surface with their feet, wasn't enticing. Teta suggested they modify their ritual and have their stroll instead. But first, they needed their towels and slippers. When they returned to Rami to get them, he had a stone in each hand, and Teta worried for a moment he was going to hit them. In front of him was piled a small mount of pebbles, and he looked surprised to see them back.

"You're right, it *is* the end of summer," Teta said gently. "Where did you get these from?"

"From the woods, no doubt," Nanig said.

When they themselves emerged from the woods twenty minutes later, there was no sign of him by the pond, but when they drew closer to it, they screamed and jumped into the water. They couldn't see his face, which the minnows were covering, but it was him; he had sunken to the bottom, fully clothed, his overcoat shrouding him, his book-laden rucksack on his back. It wasn't the only thing that had weighed him down. His drowned body was incredibly heavy and it took their combined efforts to pull him to the shore. They removed his overcoat, and stones and pebbles tumbled out of its pockets.

"When did he have time to put them there?" Teta screamed.

"He must have been preparing for this. What shall we do now?"

"Go home, Nanig. Just go. There's nothing you can do."

"No, I won't leave you. I won't leave you alone!"

"You must, you must," Teta said, hysterically. "They can't come here and see us together. There would be too many questions. It'll be the end of everything. Go away. Go now. Go."

Teta vigorously emptied the contents of the rucksack into the water, and the books buoyant above the surface left a meandering trail of ink. She returned to the shore and laid Rami's head in her lap, rocking herself, compulsively, back and forth, trying to understand.

When the men from the village hall were alerted to the tragedy by the vegetable peddler who came, eventually, upon the scene, they were galvanized into action. They rushed to the pond and when, finally, they reached it, the two wet bodies huddled together made them sure Teta had gone mad with grief. Only Jiddo had stared at her speechless, his eyes hard with suspicion.

It was midnight now, and Teta was relieved to hear that the drone of snoring in the adjacent room had returned. Her screams earlier had interrupted the landlady's slumber and made her curse. She must not disturb the woman Nohad, again, and when she cried, she did so quietly. She wondered if she would ever be able to share any of this with Ramzi. The only other person who had known was Nanig. And she too was gone now.

In a way Teta herself was lucky to be alive. She had been in Beirut in May when she learned by text message that her lover was dead, and resolved to return home, not to Jiddo's house but to Nanig's: the journey was in every sense an odyssey. The bus trip from the Charles Helou Station in Beirut to Damascus took three hours longer than usual due to the intensive checkpoints which proliferated as the distance between the two countries diminished; on the Syrian side, the sound of missiles had been distant, suggesting that death, at the moment, was still at arm's length. Once in Damascus, she had to take a series of cabs and vans, and put a veil on her head for camouflage.

In one of the towns close to Raqqa, the van was stopped, and its passengers were shepherded by a turbaned man with a Kalashnikov straight to the town center. "To witness a sobering festivity," he said. "Please do not worry."

After marching for ten minutes, they arrived upon a clearing where a large crowd had gathered and loudspeakers were blaring the news: a 'son of Lot' had been caught sodomizing another male in the ruins of a confectionary in an adjacent town, and a public punishment was to be carried out. Citizens and visitors alike had been invited to gaze and learn; the van Teta was on wasn't the only one whose journey had been disrupted. They had arrived in time.

Clad in a flowing dark robe, the executioner atop the three-storied building had the picturesque appearance of a demonstrably evil monster any Lebanese or Syrian adult would remember from childhood: the urban legend of Abou Kees, an old but vicious child kidnapper, crumpled and careworn. The condemned was in a blindfold and was positioned at the edge of the roof, his hands tied behind his back, his mouth agape. Even where she stood at the periphery of the audience, Teta could see his legs buckling, his thighs jelly, his buttocks aquiver, but Abou Kees and his hooded assistants pulled him to his feet immediately. There was no reprieve.

Teta closed her eyes and when she opened them, the man had fallen. The crowd in the middle surged around him; their concerted movement was uniform, wavelike and joyous: he was

still alive. Teta watched in horror as slowly, in a choreographed movement that suggested they knew what they were doing, they pelted him with pebbles first, and then larger stones, till his crane collapsed on the asphalt in a crimson pool of plasma.

On the ground nearby, two boys not two or three years older than Ramzi lay next to each other, laughing. They appeared to be drunk, but surely they couldn't be. "Did you see that?" one of them asked, and Teta feared he was addressing her.

"So glad he didn't kick the bucket from the first drop. *Allahu akbar.*"

"Yes, indeed," said the other. "That's the fate of a *lūtī*. *Allahu akbar.*" They clawed at the air with their hands, cycling at nothing with their legs, like upturned cattle waiting to be righted.

The spectator passengers were escorted to the van, and allowed to depart. For the rest of their onwards journey, they huddled together with their belongings, and said nothing. The driver made many detours avoiding the highways, navigating instead the centers of various towns and villages, some of which appeared deserted. In some places, the only sign of habitation Teta saw was the streets strewn with cabbage and aubergines from pushcarts overturned in the blasts of recent bombings. The pavements there were slick with leavings, mainly cast-off rotten leaves, fruit and vegetables, which had met with disaster, in one form or another.

The next town marked the van's terminal stop, after which it would retrace its route to Damascus where other travelers awaited its return. Teta disembarked and walked furtively, feeling the gaze of strangers lacerating her skin like needles, the stoned man's crane still on her mind. People here were washing blood from the sidewalks. A shop's inventory of toys, from plastic dolls' houses to bright-colored straw-haired mascots, was scattered across the road. Women wailed and were scolded by their menfolk for being loud; the militiamen, like famished birds of prey, were easily provoked. She was able to hail a derelict, and expensive, cab whose progress through the next two villages was hindered by quiet throngs on the streets. Several processions had massed discreetly; they were ready to march to the cemeteries.

Half an hour remained before the cab reached Teta's village. "I'm starting to run out of fuel," the man grumbled. "Are you happy for me to drop you off at the outskirts, and then walk the rest of the way?"

"Yes, I'd prefer to do so, in fact," said Teta. "It shouldn't take too long. I think you might be in luck though."

A scene she had witnessed on the Aleppo-Damascus highway repeated itself here, a few kilometers away from Nanig's home. Most schools had closed and students not deemed fit to fight were providing fodder for daily life in other ways. Two lanky and underfed lads were standing by the roadside in front of their motorcycles, selling gasoline from labeled plastic bottles. The driver followed Teta out of the car and haggled with the boys over the price of petrol.

"Three thousand and one hundred liras for red diesel?"

The young vendors remained stoic as he ejected a stream of expletives, then fumbled in his pocket for the right amount. Only last year, it would have been three hundred and fifty liras. Even though these were the same boys Teta had seen flying kites with political slogans the summer before, they looked different now. War had aged them. They seemed to make up, in shrewdness and calculation, in their ability to suspect and condemn, whatever they might have lacked in looks and muscle or life experience, though, given the burrowed frowns they gave Teta, they did not seem, really, to lack much.

"What are you doing here?" the older, and taller, of them asked after the man had left.

"Why have you come back, Teta?"

"It's my village, isn't it? I have returned home."

A silent deliberation took place as the boys exchanged glances, then one of them jumped on his motorcycle and blasted away leaving behind a stench of dust and fuel.

The homebound walk took longer than Teta thought, and when an empty bus lumbered past, she waved, in vain, to get it to stop. Along the way sounded the barking of dogs, shrieking babies from makeshift tents, violent calling, coughing, spitting, the tramp of feet, the hollow beating of militiamen's boots on gravel and the grinding of their vehicles. Up, up it came out of the throat of the village, and finally, after an hour and a half of steady walking, she was there.

The sun was still out but a cold chill made Teta shiver as she stood by the cairn outside Nanig's house. A girl of around 24 or 25 stepped outside and walked up to her.

"Munira, is that you?" Teta asked, surprised to see her. "What are you doing here?" The last time they had talked was at school almost ten years ago.

"Teta, please," Munira said. "Do come in. Follow me."

Inside, three other women were waiting, clogs in hand. They were all her former students, the last to graduate before she retired. She began to understand. “So that is why your brother fled away so quickly on his motorcycle, Munira. Is this what the men decided?”

She turned her back to them and filled a glass of water from the tap. She drank it in a single gulp, replenished it and drank again, then turned to face them. They had started to inch closer to her, slow but determined. Teta put her hand out in defense. “You want to beat me up? To humiliate me? Kill me even?” She looked at each of them, her gaze shifting from one woman to the other. “Not before you hear me out.”

In a rising voice, Teta addressed them by name, in a manner that encompassed and challenged them all. “Remember the time I held you when you imagined your period was a disease and thought you were dying. You hadn’t wanted to tell your mother, Munira. The time you came over to my house, and I cooked for you and listened to your problem with your brother *ya Sitt* Joumana, your brother who vowed to kill you after you sucked your cousin’s dick when he convinced you it would taste like *sahlab* – you hadn’t wanted to beat me then. You will be next, I promise you. Bring your *qubqāb* to my face, Violette. Do it. Do it if you dare. For shame!”

She reminded them of the joy they would express when she read to them in class, the emotion they felt at the story of the Lebanese woman who bared her breasts in return for bread during the Famine of 1916, and was spat on for doing so. “You shed tears then, hadn’t you? No woman should be treated with such cruelty, you said, not even during a war. Especially if she hasn’t been able to tell her story. What do you know of me and Nanig, Nesrine? What makes you think you can get away with this? I remember each of you. Next year it will be your turn. Do it! Do it, I say. Hit me with the first clog. Hit me if you dare.”

The girls’ faces reddened, as if slapped. One by one, they spat on the kitchen floor, returned the wooden clogs to the pleated bathroom sacks they had carried them in, and walked out. It was only after the last of them disappeared behind the snaking path at the rear of the garden that Teta started to cry, discreetly at first, then louder when she was sure there was no one within earshot any longer.

The early morning sunshine seeping through the drawn curtain, the sting of a flea from the cot, and the hoarse sound of her fretting landlady brought her back to the room. “Are you

alright?” the woman Nohad asked. “You woke me up with your screams last night. It’s all that war you come from, no doubt.”

Teta’s apology appeased her. “There’s coffee and bread for you in the kitchen. I’ll have to get started on my rounds in the village soon. You wouldn’t care for a coffee cup reading before I go? It’s 5,000 liras only, and it works all the time.”

Samira

Nohad finished reading Samira’s mother’s cup, and waited. She didn’t have to do so for long; there was some fidgeting, and the question about the paying guest who arrived the night before was posed.

“She looked like a woman who has seen, and done, a lot if you ask me. Don’t hang yourself, don’t do it, she screamed in her sleep. Now what do you make of that?”

“Did she really say this?” Samira asked.

“Guilt, that’s what it is,” her mother said.

“She thinks I’m a charlatan. She wouldn’t believe I helped prepare magic tea balls for Madame Claudette before I retired.”

“You do bamboozle women into giving you money, or other things, don’t you?” Like my underwear in your hands, for instance. Samira remembered her efforts to curry favor with Nohad on the abysmal drive to the *bayt banāt*, how she had tried to draw a link between her predicament and Nohad’s own experiences, and how that ended with her parlaying her bra for a ride home.

Nohad, indignant, declined to comment.

“That was hardly a retirement, Nohad,” Samira’s mother said. “Madame couldn’t afford to keep you anymore. Not after she had to give up the finishing school!”

This was news to Samira. “But why would she do that? It makes no sense.”

With the Taef Accord concluding the Civil War in 1990, the Lebanese currency had greatly lost in value, and Claudette’s finances were no longer on solid footing. She had to close her school, now that most families were sending their daughters to university in Beirut where they hoped the experience, and the degrees earned, would help them find suitable husbands, or jobs, or both.

“Times have changed,” Samira’s mother said, not without a sense of mourning.

“Have they, really? And yet the laws remain the same.”

“True that. Although the *bayt banāt* in Baalbek has shut down, a girl there was killed by her brother last week, just as I had predicted.”

Both Samira and her mother shuddered.

“I still can’t believe Teta is related to you. Your mother hadn’t specified who it was. I didn’t believe it at first when she showed up at my door,” Nohad said, gesticulating. “There must be a mistake. Surely Samira and her mother could host you, I told her, especially now that there are no men in the house, what with her father taken by the war and her brother by marriage, and it would be perfectly proper!”

“Teta wanted her privacy, she would be more comfortable that way –”

“Which is why I left her to own, first thing in the morning. She said she was receiving someone later. I gathered it was a man.”

“Come now, Nohad. What are you insinuating?”

“It’s Ramzi,” Samira said. “He’s just gone over to bring her here.”

Teta and Ramzi

Seeing Ramzi again was like reuniting with a soldier returning from war. It stirred in Teta a warmth she hadn’t thought was possible after Rami’s and Nanig’s deaths. Though they had kept in touch after their get-together in Beirut after the race, this was the first time they met in person again since Teta’s return to Syria. In Nohad’s living room, Teta stroked his face impulsively, and repeated the movement every few minutes, as if she wanted to ensure he was real.

“Thank you so much for coming, Teta; this means a lot. I know it’s been hard.”

Teta shuddered; he couldn’t begin to imagine how hard everything was, how precarious; she had tried to sound brave over the phone, always. The harassment of the villagers, the militiamen, the *qubqāb* ordeal, the difficulty to settle in Nanig’s house, the haunting memories, Mazen’s and Jiddo’s threats – *we will come for you when the war finishes; we will return* – she had mentioned none of this, much like the truth of Rami’s drowning. There were things a grandmother must keep to herself.

“Is it wise that I’m meeting Samira in her village, considering everything she went through? I saw her in a dream at the finishing school yesterday; it was just as you described it.”

“She was keen to see you here, Teta. It was her suggestion...”

“It’s just that I’m worried that if she goes there, again, she might do something...She might hurt herself –”

“Why would she do that though?” Ramzi interjected. “She has no reason to go there.”

“Do you think she will receive me well?”

“She will, for my sake at least. It wasn’t only your relationship with Nanig that affected her, you know; she learned somehow that you were aware of my father’s affair and were quiet about it.”

Teta protested saying that Mazen had assured her this had stopped. “I couldn’t have known otherwise, eventually. It caused a great deal of tension between Nanig and me at the time. She wanted me to tell your mother.”

“In any case she knows I won’t fully reconcile with either of you till you have your talk. It’s long overdue now.” Ramzi noticed her red-rimmed, puffy eyes. “Have you been crying, Teta? Did you get any rest at all?”

Teta reached over to touch his face and dismissed his concern. “My landlady is the village witch. What more I could’ve hoped for? She was telling me about her last act before retiring from the finishing school; she said she baked balls that blossomed into flowers when soaked in water. I had to give her 5,000 liras after that, if only to get her to leave.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t find you somewhere better, Teta. It has all happened so fast, but it’s important you meet my mother before she changes her mind.”

“She still has Nanig’s necklace too,” Teta whispered. “It was the last thing she gave me. I need to have it back.”

Samira

In the parlor of her childhood home, Samira and her mother sat face to face. The grandfather clock struck the twelve strokes of midday. Nohad had left, and Samira had taken out Nanig’s necklace from her suitcase and wondered how readily she would give it to Teta, and where to keep it close to hand without appearing to fuss over it, arousing her mother’s suspicion. It was

bulky and didn't fit in any dainty bag or pocket. Eventually, she decided to wear it. It locked around her neck, covering most of it.

Soon Teta and Ramzi would knock at the door and Samira would have to talk to them. Ramzi had spent the night with her here and had woken up in excellent spirits. She'd never seen him this excited and at the same time didn't want to disappoint him, again. The thought of a forced conversation with Teta, let alone a confrontation, made her shudder.

Her mother was plying her with questions. "Are you trying to hide something under that collar? Was this your husband's idea of a tasteful present? Is it a Syrian stone?"

"I'm going to go for a quick walk before Teta and Ramzi arrive."

"Don't be late though. Teta makes me nervous. Why is she coming to visit me after all these years?"

"We're doing this for Ramzi, remember. She's his grandmother too; she hasn't seen him since she returned to Syria."

"But is there something you know that I don't?"

There was, not that Samira was planning to share it with her. That was why she had returned to the village after all, the very place her mother had banished her from as a girl. It wasn't to see her that she had come, even though she did do that occasionally, but to meet Teta. This had been Ramzi's only condition to move back into the house in Beirut with her. "It's time that all cards be laid out, Mama, and for you and Teta to finally talk."

After Teta left the house in Faraya, Ramzi had grown cold towards Samira again, much like in the aftermath of the disastrous dinner on the terrace in Teta and Jiddo's village. This time the distance was worse, not even any number of skating trips, or Corniche strolls, had been able to thaw the ice. He had wanted to know why she was leaving his father, why she had evicted his grandmother, why she was keen on hurting his grandparents still grieving Rami's death, and Samira knew that if she were to get him back, she would have to tell him everything. No more lies, no more family secrets.

Only one story remained:

"Samira's memories of her childhood were so scant and distant that they had become rigid to the point where she could no longer trust them. But this she remembered very well. It was the summer of 1984, towards the end of the Civil War in Lebanon..."

After hours of composition, her breathing was belabored, as if she had been scrambling uphill to the pond where Uncle Rami drowned. But she was very much alive, and Ramzi was too. Even as her eyes were numb, zigzagging across the clusters of words as if traveling through a time machine, there was something soothing and satisfying about the lines on the screen.

Samira had pondered them over for a while before pressing the ‘Send’ button. And for the first time, it was not from the email account of Deema, the fictitious environmentalist on Skype, that she did so, but her own. It was only later that she realized she had written about herself as if she were another person, as if Samira were not Samira but a sympathetic yet distant observer, gazing patiently at her reflection in Tante Claudette’s paintings and wondering when and how she had been inducted into them so seamlessly, without her knowledge or consent.

“Ramzi thought it would be best to reunite everyone here. It’s as close to the border with Syria as it gets and a chance for all of us to meet.”

“But with Jiddo and Mazen away, it’s not everyone, is it? Still, to travel under such hostile conditions, to have returned to that country in the first place even though you offered her a roof, and to come back now to visit, she must be mad.”

“I’m going to call on Claudette,” Samira said. “It’s time I did so. I won’t be long.”

The urge to revisit the finishing school had been growing on her for some time, but she never brought herself to ask about Claudette. Nohad’s conversation with her mother earlier was the tipping point. Samira had to see for herself.

When she got to the mansion, the first thing that caught her eye was the garden. It had become overrun by nettles, their shoots mingling freely with bracken and other tall weeds, and when her arm brushed against them by accident, she felt nothing – their leaves no longer stung.

A maid in cap and uniform answered the door. She was young and uncertain, and Samira had to speak to her in French. The girl admitted she had arrived from the Congo only recently, and Samira convinced her Madame knew her well and would be pleased to receive her. The walk through the rooms was uneventful, and the furniture was still the same, but the house had a tired quality. The sense of fatigue, of a design nearing completion, hung limply throughout the well-trodden path to Claudette’s anteroom, in the Flemish tapestries, the damask curtains, the cloisonné curiosities, in every nook and cranny. There were still houseplants in bronze cauldrons

and various urns and flower pots adorning the rooms, but none of them had nettles in them anymore.

The odalisque suspended between the fake curtains met Samira in the anteroom, as did the air suffused with the smell of rosewater. That too hadn't changed and was still in a vase on the malachite table. Next to it, on the divan, sat Claudette, a cane by her side. Samira didn't recognize her at first. She remembered their first encounter, here, and the impression Claudette left of being a living tableau. She was around 84 or 85 now, an emaciated figure wrapped in a teal silk kimono.

"Have you come to kill me?" she asked after the initial shock of seeing Samira waned and was gone.

"No," Samira answered equally simply, "I came for something else..."

"I knew you would return one day, *chérie*. All these years I've said to myself, Samira will want to see me, again. And you're here. You don't still hate me, do you?"

Samira looked at her frail and haggard frame, her eyes sunken in their sockets, her face bleached with white powder, her rouged lips quivering, and her breathing heavy. "There is nothing left to hate."

"What did you say, *chérie*?"

"I'm not here to remonstrate, Claudette."

"Why then? Wait, you will tell me all about it in a bit. But first, a treat." She rang, and the bell, a shrill electric one, reverberated across the house. "I'm a bit hard of hearing now. Better loud than sorry." When the maid brought in a transparent teapot and two cups, Claudette fumbled for something in her pocket and retrieved a venous-looking ball and dropped it in the water.

"I saw Ziad in Beirut last summer –"

"*Chérie*, you don't blame me for that, do you?" Claudette looked stricken, again. "I had to throw the javelin at him. A nasty and clever extortionist he was."

"I always thought he left the village when I did...and never came back."

"He did leave, but unlike you, he returned to ask for money. His aunts in Palestine were moved to a ghetto and he wanted to help them, he said. It was a different story every time, each more fantastic than the other. It was a hemorrhage, I could no longer afford it after a while, especially when I lost the finishing school."

“You still had the things in the attic, didn’t you?”

“He had his eye on those too. A very resourceful man, but he met his match.” The soupcon of a smile quivered on Claudette’s lips. “You can sell some of the items in the attic, he suggested...or just give them to me...and I did, some of them...Then his patience started to wane. I knew he wanted more, and that he would return. He wouldn’t stop till he took everything...the whole lot.”

A grimace distorted her face giving her a ghostlike appearance, decrepit but determined.

“One evening I could see him from the kitchen window creeping to the garage, and I followed him, prepared. I had to be close to see him move but far enough for the javelin to gain momentum. He shrieked like an injured hawk and toppled from the ladder to the ground, bleeding and in shock. He wouldn’t have thought I could do it.”

Claudette paused, catching her breath. She shut her eyes for a moment and Samira wondered if she had passed out. “It hasn’t been easy since you left, Samira, it hasn’t,” she said. “I’m sorry for what I did to you. I truly am.”

The tea was a special one as promised. The sinuous ball was starting to unfurl, and before Samira’s eyes a white rose surrounded by green nettle leaves was beginning to bloom. It was a thing of startling beauty, and she gasped at the spectacle in the teapot. She had never witnessed anything similar before.

“My very own flowering tea! A Chinese diplomat passed on the recipe to us as a wedding gift; I can see you’re taken with it,” Claudette said. “So much beauty preserved inside a ball. I’ve prepared a few of them for the day when I’ll no longer be able to step outside, and can’t touch either roses or nettles in the garden. And that day will come, *chérie*.”

When Samira remained silent, Claudette reverted to her former role as instructor. “The nettle leaves are sewn together with the rose into a ball. Flattened strips of dried nettles are then daubed around the ball to create an outer layer and the whole is baked on low heat. Nohad was still with me back then. It took time. We worked on one tea-ball a day.”

The tea-ball was still opening up before Samira’s eyes, displaying a colorful riot of green and white. It really was something to behold.

“An illness came over the nettles in the garden after Nohad left, you know. Her departure shepherded bad luck through the door, Ziad seemed stronger than ever before.”

“You’re becoming superstitious in your old age,” Samira said, finally, but Claudette didn’t hear her, and her voice was shaky: “Their leaves lost the pigment that makes them sting and they became harmless... Much like the ones in the teaball...”

“Much like you,” Samira whispered. She too tried to fight back tears.

“What did you say, *chérie*? Speak louder.”

Samira stood up and straightened her back. “Just give me the key, Claudette. That’s why I came, really.”

“The key?”

“To the attic.”

Claudette was agitated again, and frightened. “What are you going to do there? What do you hope to find? It’s almost empty. Ziad took much with him in way of keeping silent. But I suppose nothing matters any more now.” She slipped her hand into a pocket sewn inside an inner fold of her kimono. She placed the key next to the teapot.

“There,” she said. “Take it.”

Teta and Ramzi

At Samira’s mother’s house, an awkward trio had assembled.

Ramzi hadn’t been in the same room with his two grandmothers at the same time since early childhood. There was neither acrimony nor love in Teta’s relationship with Samira’s mother, only mutual dislike. Samira’s family had never gotten over the fact their only daughter had eloped after her exile to Beirut, let alone with a Syrian man. For this reason Ramzi had never really warmed up to his maternal grandmother. And here they were, all three of them, waiting for Samira to emerge from her room to receive Teta.

Instead, it was Mizwak who sauntered in, purring heavily. “Mizwak, look who’s here,” Samira’s mother said. “Would you like to pet him while I make the coffee? He survived the civil war with us, you know; he’s old as salt now, but still loves attention. I hear some families in Syria are killing their cats for food. It’s horrible!” Mizwak walked up to Teta and her color changed.

“I’m never touching another cat,” Ramzi said. “Not after what happened to me at the university last summer. Bloody racists.”

Ramzi's ordeal with the feline murders at the American University of Beirut, and the whodunit conundrum that followed, flustered his grandmother, as it had when she first heard of it over the phone: Samira's mother became contentious, and she tried, again, to put it in context.

"You can't blame the Lebanese for how they feel about the Syrians, *ḥabībī*. Not after all that we've been through when their spies and troops controlled Lebanon after the War. They only went packing after Hariri was killed, and even then made sure to leave their minions behind."

"Are you saying he should accept it then for what it is?" Teta asked. "He's your grandson!"

"No, it shouldn't have happened to him, or to anyone I suppose, since you can't accuse people without evidence. But he should be aware of the circumstances." Distress was etched on Teta's face too, and Samira's mother said, "I do hope you weren't offended. I only spoke the truth. Ramzi isn't a child anymore."

"Mizwak reminded me of Fatoom, Nanig's cat, that's all."

"And that's upsetting? Who is Nanig?"

"Just a friend of Teta's in Syria," Ramzi said quickly. He was aware of increasing tension and was keen to dissipate it. "Shall we have the coffee, please?"

"Nohad was saying you're staying at hers," Samira's mother said stiffly. "Please know though you are welcome here too."

"What is taking Samira so long? I came to see her."

"I thought it was me you came to visit." Samira's mother looked perplexed for a moment, and a bit offended herself, but disclosing Samira's whereabouts lifted her spirits. "She has gone to see her old finishing school. And to visit Madame. She hasn't been there in years." She didn't wait to see the alarm on Teta's and Ramzi's faces, and unaware of anticlimax, went into the kitchen to fetch coffee and fig jam.

"Is there real danger?" Ramzi said.

"We can only know if we act fast. Tell me how to get to Claudette's." She scribbled the directions on her phone, the same one Samira had given her when she left Faraya. "Stay here with your other grandmother," Teta instructed. "She doesn't know yet Mazen and Samira are separating, or any of the rest. If anything has happened, it will be a complete shock to her. You must be strong now."

Samira

Claudette's neglected garden was a treat to navigate. There was something reassuring in the very unkemptness of its appearance, an inkling of freedom in the way weeds and roses, nettles and ferns, and the overhanging figs had claimed the space as their own, now that all semblance of horticultural hierarchy had been erased.

Samira plodded forward, and though she lost her footing a few times in the uneven ground, her falls were not uncomfortable. The density of the nettles had a cushioning effect; more than once she lay face down upon them, letting them hold her as she rested on the lush bower they created, caressing their supple leaves, which would have been impossible in their stinging heyday. And then she reached the door to the garage.

It gave in as soon as she tried to open it, its rickety frame weathered by decades of exposure and near-absent maintenance. Nohad's gardening paraphernalia was still there, scattered among various rusting bric-a-brac. The sliding screen too had braved the brunt of time but it was no longer ominous now that Samira knew it for what it was.

When she had last stood gazing at the screen, Tante Claudette was next to her, urging her to appreciate its depth, its intensity. "*The technique is called the trompe l'oeil. It does exactly that, it deceives the eye... Always try to put yourself in the shoes of the characters in the painting Samira, whether it's an odalisque or a politician; it will make the art come to life.*" She pushed it aside now, and it thudded to the floor, resting atop a discarded pair of ornate floral sheaves she recognized from one of her finishing lessons.

The attic was still hot and stale as Samira had known it, but so much had changed. The once-burnished steps leading to it had surrendered their luster; the knickknacks in the alcove above had been dumped to the garage floor below making the attic door more obvious than before. The carpet-way was covered in lint, it had a threadbare feel as Samira crawled upon it, and the nails that kept it in place had lost their lacquered varnish. The sloping beams felt hollowed out and seemed to have augmented in size. Despite the dust and the heat, the trusses, relieved of much of their content, suggested a general airiness, much like a vessel unloaded of a cumbersome cargo.

Often, she had been stymied by the louvered screen above which she now stopped, by the seraglio on the wall below it, by Claudette's intrigues, by Ziad's stories, and Mazen's attentions. She had gone to him for the same reason she allowed herself to fall for Ziad: both had given her a fantasy of security and a provisional sense of home. The false pregnancy she announced soon after Teta left the house gave Mazen hope that was short-lived, just like Rania's life had been the summer before. Asking Teta to leave had felt less vindicating than she imagined; something inside Samira had finally given in: The concluding phase of her plan would need to be put into motion.

There would be no more phantom pregnancies, no more mockery of her marriage. It wouldn't be easy as a single woman in a city like Beirut, but Ramzi would be there, and would help make home with her. She had consulted a lawyer who advised her to halt the divorce proceedings till after the war. "The country is in shambles now; it won't be easy to get it," he'd said.

Mazen had pleaded with her to save face too, at least in the near future while the impact of his mother's affair simmered down. But Samira had already made up her mind; she would leave him and start her life afresh. She was her own self now. She looked down at the anteroom again. Claudette was still there, slumped upon the divan, her shoulder blades jutting out of her kimono like the fins of an undernourished fish. As Samira watched, she rose and forced herself forward to the piano, her gait slow and agonizing as her cane thumped upon the floor. Soon she was playing a piece Samira recognized, her concluding act perhaps. It was the same one she performed when she had staged the first encounter with Ziad in that very room, pretending it was Samira's idea to bring him to the finishing school to seek help.

Yet neither of them had the power to unsettle or vex her anymore; Claudette was now as harmless as the nettles she once doted upon and which had marked the house and garden, her kitchen and her bedroom... They spread free and wild, no longer hemmed in by Nohad's wires, and were all the more beautiful having lost their edge. Ziad was in Beirut, kilometers away, limping to his cab door in obsequious fashion, cadging a living. The riches he longed for all his life had eluded him; Claudette's javelin hadn't.

"It's Beethoven's Für Elise... Even an untutored ear should be able to recognize it." Samira allowed herself to get lost in the music. She shut her eyes, minutes passed, and soon the fantasy about returning to the attic years later with her beau, victorious, was upon her again. But

she had come back alone, and freer. She remembered the longing that had occupied her waking hours as a girl during the war, the dreams of escape with Ziad to Palestine, the idea that moving away from here, from the village, from her family, from Lebanon even, would be liberating, and she did change country eventually, not Palestine but Syria, and with Mazen, not Ziad. In her mind, both were gone.

The image of the nettle tea unfurling then closing into the entrapping ball and blossoming all over again unreeled in parallel to a collage of memories: Tante Claudette naked on the bed, the music from the gramophone, the nettles rubbing upon that area of her body Samira had been brought to believe was sacrosanct, the odalisque's hands curved in a similar position. Ziad was pressing upon her from behind, coaxing and storytelling, confirming that there was nothing to worry about, and impressing on her they must enjoy their moments in the attic *carpe diem*, that everything would be alright in the end. His tales of home in Palestine and the anecdotes about Aunts Maggie and Maud unwound and rewound as well; these too had served their role, keeping the fish hooked to the line.

Samira willed herself to pause the images.

One and all they froze in her mind. They chilled and pierced, then crumbled into smithereens like crushed ice, floating away as rats aboard a foodless ship wrecked at sea. They were hers no longer. A sheen of sweat covered her face, her reverie interrupted by the din of a commotion below, and an unexpected sight: Teta towering above Claudette who clutched her cane, trembling. "The Civil War is over, isn't it? You're not here to kill me, are you?"

"Not in Syria, it isn't. But no one is here to kill you, Madame."

"You must have come to ask for work then. I can no longer afford extra help I'm afraid."

"I'm Samira's mother-in-law. Where is she?"

Claudette sank further on the divan and whispered something inaudible. Samira then heard a phrase she herself had been taught to use with unwelcome guests. Sedulous care must be taken not to offend. "A quick aperitif perhaps? You'll forgive my feeling poorly today, but I am immensely pleased by your visit."

"This is not a social call. I must see Samira. You said she's in the attic?"

"I wish you wouldn't go there, really."

"Where is the attic, Madame?"

“*Chérie*, when the end is nigh, it is only memories that remain. You must leave Samira to hers.”

“What are you talking about? Whose end?”

The Congolese maid walked in to clear the tea, but Teta blocked her path. “Your mistress is not well I’m afraid. Seeing Samira after all these years has unhinged her. Call a doctor, but first you must show me the way. The attic, please.”

They exchanged a few more words, Teta’s voice getting louder and more urgent as she struggled to repeat her request in French, but Samira was no longer listening. Instead, she was looking through the louvers returning the intrusive gaze of the scheming sultan and feeling a rush of anger she hadn’t experienced before. If perhaps these odalisques had been less forthcoming about their situations, surely they could have done more than capitulate to the whims of their keeper? Why had Teta done nothing about Mazen’s affair? Could she have continued to see Nanig, even if she was no longer married to Jiddo?

Samira’s questions raced and wrangled in her mind. She unclasped the lapis lazuli necklace and let it dangle in her hand – there was no longer a need to hide. There was nothing left to hide. There were no scars on her neck, but if there were, she would bear them proudly. She could hear Teta in the garage, calling out, her voice hoarse and nervous.

“Samira, *waynik?* Where are you? Don’t harm yourself, *ḥabībī*. I know everything now. Ramzi told me.”

Teta grew silent, and Samira knew she must have found her way across Claudette’s debris to the ladder and was climbing the steps to the alcove, then the door to the attic squeaked and opened, and a portly silhouette was outlined through the door. Samira sat upright above her perch next to the vent and waited, loosening her grip on the necklace.

Teta would get it back.

II. Theorizing Home and the Flâneuse: Literary Criticism and Analysis

i. Introduction

While numerous commentaries on the flâneur in the social sciences and cultural studies are available, no literary study to date has flagged the connection between flânerie and home, let alone theorized the feminine version of the flâneur – the flâneuse – as a subversive figure that can be deployed in creative, and then critical, writing to make intelligible the possible iterations of home in fictions such as those of present-day Lebanon and Syria.

Most variants of the flâneur I was able to locate are aesthetic and effete, and thus lack an exploration of the subversive or political potentiality of the trope. According to Mike Featherstone, the male flâneur first appeared in 19th c Paris where the thirty arcades constructed between 1800 and 1850 invited Parisians to dawdle and enjoy the sights of the city¹. Representations of the flâneur have been at best, as the archivist figure, who records the sights and smells of his city and therefore “shows the characteristic reflexivity of the cultural specialist, of the artist, writer, and journalist,” or, at worst, the bourgeois “idler or waster.”² Similarly, for Andrea Mubi Brighenti, the flâneur is “a recorder of territorialities, combinations, variations and stratifications in the urban environment.”³

More recently, scholarship on the flâneur has taken on a more personal approach to flânerie in that the authors of these works consider and/or market themselves as the active agents of flânerie, and while their writings, part memoirs and part cultural meanders, shift the flâneur away from the realm of social theory and urban studies, they still epitomize, in different ways, the complacent and bourgeois intellectual sensibilities of the flâneur of yesteryear.⁴ Raymond Tallis opines that the flâneur is a leisurely but focused “mental stroller” for whom people and incidents witnessed during the course of a walk trigger a peripatetic trail of intellectual musings, in his words “the product of scattered occasions,” about a wide range of current affairs, such as medical ethics, euthanasia, philosophy, and classical music.⁵ Edmund White provides a more contextualized approach than Tallis’s, focusing his flânerie on the modern-day city of Paris, and reifying the figure of the flâneur as the perambulating observer, invested at best in recording, as well as unearthing, the hidden charms of an urban space, its disguised crannies and unknown crevices.⁶

Relocating the concept to postmodernity, Nicholas Nassim Taleb⁷ and David Frisby⁸ have theorized that flânerie extends beyond the transitory figure perambulating through the

intersections of the metropolis in search of urban dislocations, a representation most often examined in the writings of Baudelaire, Simmel, Balzac, Benjamin, and Sartre. They re-conceptualize *flânerie* as a sustainable individual lifestyle – a simultaneous production and consumption of narrative texts. These texts are borne by the gaze of the *flâneur* as it negotiates the ineluctable challenges of postmodern, and arguably postwar or post-conflict, environments with critical narrative intentionality.

In a similar fashion, Peter McLaren who aptly defines *flânerie*'s narrative intentionality as “a motivated way of seeing” believes that “both the world of academic science and that of everyday life need the agency required of the self-reflective *flâneur*.”⁹ By contrast, the Lebanese *flâneur* for Steven Seidman, the American sociologist, is “a battle-scarred, war-weary” urban dweller incapable of insightful analysis and self-criticism because the Beirut “self” remains manacled to “a war culture that is driven by paranoid fantasies of an ‘other’ plotting to bring about her annihilation.”¹⁰ And in 2014, Sofian Merabet coined the wary term “queer Lebanese *flâneur*” to designate the perceptive and cautious *drageur* (flirt) who “gazes at passing strangers” with the “gravitas but also the subtlety of *flânerie*” in the hope that the fleeting public moment is transposed into a private encounter, more meaningful or mutually satisfying.¹¹

Seidman offers a grim depiction of the “Lebanese *flâneuse*” who is anything but a recalcitrant figure; in addition to sectarian and political fear-mongering, the “state-enforced patterns of gender subordination” are paralleled by both “restricted erotic-intimate freedom” and the awareness that navigating the streets, especially at night, is not without risk.¹² Merabet offers no female cognate of the queer Lebanese *flâneur*, and scholarship on the Syrian *flâneur* and/or *flâneuse* is absent. While Janet Wolf¹³ and Deborah L. Parsons¹⁴ point out that modernist literary criticism has been singularly inattentive to women’s urban experiences in relation to a city’s gendered sights and locations, Syrine Hout explains this lacuna in reference to postwar and postmodern Lebanese fiction. She suggests that most literary outputs in the aftermath of the internecine fighting in Lebanon have been more concerned with sorting out the protracted hardcore realities of war rather than experimenting with stylistics of gendered representation.¹⁵ Within this configuration, there has been little to no space or presence for the *flâneuse*.

Lauren Elkin, whose socio-cultural memoir in which she self-identifies as a *flâneuse* wandering the streets of Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London was released in July 2016, is the first to call for birthing the *flâneuse* trope and tapping its feminist potential. For

Elkin, the flâneuse is “a resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city, and the liberating possibilities of a good walk.”¹⁶ By integrating in her memoir the stories of a range of female public figures, such as the artist Sophie Calle, the war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, and the film-maker Agnès Varda, Elkin posits that by voyaging “where she’s not supposed to, the [flâneuse] forces us to confront the ways in which words like *home* and *belonging* are used against women.”¹⁷

I too propose a redefinition of the term, a more nuanced interpretation than Elkin’s, in a way that may also apply to readings of the trope in literary fiction. If, as Ottmar Ette argues, 21st-century literary production should be “vectorize[d]” in order to apprehend the reality of cultures being in flux, a “vectorization [that] has comprised not only the themes and content of literature” but also “their various presentations and representations of movement,”¹⁸ then using female flânerie to vectorize the home-seeking trajectory of the culturally embattled flâneuse points toward subjective itineraries that transcend material movement alone. I therefore read the flâneuse as a determined woman whose acts of street-walking, or of movement from one place to another, are enacted on two levels in such a way that her physical journeys – in search of, or as a return to, her own conceived notion of home – intersect with, or complement, an emotional itinerary that traces her development against, and resistance to, a masculinist backdrop of conflict and oppression.

As a conceptual intervention for narrativizing, and responding to, patriarchy in a literary text, the trope’s inability to siphon itself into a discrete theoretical genre entails the need to curate the term further by coupling it with other strands of criticism relevant to the itinerant variants of flâneur culled from social theory. Since the flâneuse, as a gendered term, can be read as feminist from the onset as it implies an ethos of defiance, my deployment of the term in the literary criticism henceforth subsumes sundry theoretical strands that, as I show in the analysis, are contiguous with feminism since they help expose other aspects of patriarchy that constrain the existence or the life choices of the female protagonists in the texts I examine. Hence, I’m presenting, and reading, the feminist flâneuse, who emerges in my novel and the two others I’m examining, as a postcolonial flâneuse and a queer(ed) flâneuse, all three tropes un-encountered in extant scholarship.

The characterization of the flâneuse as feminist, postcolonial, and/or queer invigorates my twofold reading of female flânerie and allows the analysis to tease out different dimensions

of the fictional flâneuses' critiques. Moreover, the very nature of gender theory, if not postcolonial as well, is "capacious and inclusive"¹⁹ in its call for (anti)identity stances that resist the hegemonic and essentialist values of patriarchy,²⁰ as well as "imported patriarchy" in Lebanon and Syria. Imported patriarchy, or "postcolonial cosmopolitanism,"²¹ a term Benita Parry uses to describe a theoretical alignment between the hegemonic power relations implicit to both patriarchy and Western imports of globalization is one the street-walking flâneuse interrogates.

The colonialist anxiety for respectable class belonging, inculcated in the Lebanese/Syrian psyches, remains staunchly visible, undiminished by economic realities or security threats. In Lebanon, the reconstruction period after the Civil War (1975-1990) borrowed heavily from globalized Western culture, manifest everywhere in the daily life of the cityscape, whether in the architecture, the towering skyscrapers, and the competitive lifestyles of conspicuous consumption. This apparent cosmopolitanism that the Lebanese flâneur aspires to is, as Seidman argues,²² and as the fictional postcolonial flâneuse reveals,²³ an imaginary construct easily collapsed by the reality of recrudescing civil strife, and the corresponding male-led violence and *faits-accomplis* constraining women's home and/or mobility in this context.

These colonial anxieties, much like other aspects of the contested East-West relationship, are also transposed to the arena of gender and sexuality. In fact, a number of critics, such as Sahar Amer and Joseph Massad, have recently shown how hostile attitudes toward homosexuals and other gender dissidents in the Arab world are rooted in Western imports of homophobia²⁴ that entered the Middle East with the advent of colonialism and globalization. The latter is often a colonial legacy socially bolstered by fundamentalist or dictatorial regimes (Syria),²⁵ or a perpetually weak state replaced by religion and religious leaders who set the moral climate of the country (Lebanon),²⁶ and thereafter legally upheld by colonial laws from the 1940s that remain undisturbed to date (Syria and Lebanon).²⁷

Indeed, while a social science and cultural studies canon of ethnographic and sociological Middle Eastern queer studies is starting to emerge,²⁸ it has been met by a spartan production of literary works with central gay characters set in Lebanon and/or Syria, except for the works of Rabih Alameddine, *Koolaid's* (2000) and *The Perv* (1999), and *Guapa* (2016)²⁹, the newly published debut of Saleem Haddad, and almost no novels with lesbian, let alone older lesbian themes. Other novels of the 21stc Arab Levant sometimes feature a gay character but his

sexuality is experienced as an immigrant coming of age in the diaspora, as in the case of Sonia Saikaley's *The Lebanese Dishwasher* (2012), or is ancillary to the main conflict, such as Karim Dimechkie's *Lifted by the Great Nothing* (2015).

Considering the dearth in Syrian novels featuring homoerotic themes, whether in Arabic, English, or otherwise, it is quite remarkable that a novel featuring female homosexuality has been published, in Arabic first, then translated into English. For this reason, I perform a queer reading of the flâneuse in Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon* (2012) later in the analysis. Even as Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* published in Arabic in 1989 appears to be the first Lebanese novel to incorporate lesbian undertones, albeit covert and understated, no similar text in the last 15 years³⁰ discusses female homosexuality, but a collection of anonymous non-fiction vignettes/personal narratives was published by Meem in 2009: *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*.

By queering the flâneuse in *I Am Not Naked* through the character of a Syrian Arab grandmother, an unfamiliar representation in Lebanese and Syrian literature, my research contributes to this nascent body of creative writing and its corresponding criticism³¹ from a queer-female literary angle. That Eve Sedgwick has theorized that gay and lesbian sexual orientation alone is no longer perceived by default as antithetical to *all* shapes of patriarchy or exploitation has invited new formulations of queerness being synonymous with opposition to all forms of heteronormativity and masculinity beyond the scope of sexual orientation. Along these lines, Adrienne Rich has called for birthing within lesbian criticism an inclusive continuum of woman-identified experience, a notion valorized by Bonnie Zimmerman as she advances that "lesbian critical reading proposes the blurring of boundaries between self and other, subject and object, lover and beloved as the lesbian moment in any text."³² In this sense, a dissident queer or "lesbian moment" may be said to materialize in any narrative of unorthodox thrust or purpose.

Nonetheless, my deployment of female flânerie as a conceptual literary intervention distils various contiguous, but not congruent, hybrids of otherness manifest in the variants of the trope I have advanced. In theory, this means that Rich's lesbian continuum helps elucidate, both critically and creatively, the potential for reconciling different strands of feminist flânerie and their corresponding fictional flâneuses, but these categories do not, in my view, overlap.³³ While normative transgressions are symptomatic of the physical and emotional itineraries of the queer flâneuses whose lives I examine in the thesis, alternative sexualities or sexual preferences alone

do not constitute the entirety of border crossing and its sizeable set of particularities. To appraise the postcolonial flâneuse, for example, as queer would unreasonably dilute the term.

This approach to queerness as a subversive concept in which not all scripts dissonant with established norms and boundaries must be conflated is echoed by Peter Barry who writes that super-essentializing the term queer engenders a theoretical beleaguering since “it tries to make one kind of resistance stand for all resistance, and thus places a political and social burden on sexual orientation.”³⁴ Knowing that “queer” as I use it mainly describes aspects, and affects, of flânerie that directly respond to the urgency of nonconformist sexual/amorous inclinations – in a way that queerness no longer merely approximates otherness – unpacking motley moments of conscious defiance to the status quo and denoting them as queer would not be viable as such.

Notably, Rich’s lesbian continuum, which allows for a plurality of feminist viewpoints without seeking to homogenize them as queer, finds echo in Maria Root’s somewhat less discrete concept of “insidious trauma,” which conflates all “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit.”³⁵ This relatively new paradigm for describing the incidence (and progression) of trauma suggests that all women living in a highly patriarchal culture where they are socially and politically subordinate to men, as it is in the Lebanese and Syrian settings, are equally exposed to trauma.

And yet while displacement in Freudian and Lacanian literary studies also suggests the transference of the sequelae of trauma – negative or nefarious feelings or acts resulting from the escapist void Lacan puns as “*trou-ma*” – into socially condoned ventures,³⁶ hence Claudette’s displacement of her late husband’s economic, sexual, and domestic clout into the finishing school, I have eschewed a pervasive analysis of trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) theory in the discussion of the novels I examine. Much like my anti-essentialist perspective on queer theory, I avoid super-essentializing trauma in its iteration as inchoate “insidious trauma” theorized by Root to exemplify all traumas, such as class, sect and religion, postcolonialism, queer identities, and ultimately the very reality of violence experienced in one’s past (in this case Samira’s proto-traumatic molestation) within a repressive, post-conflict or war-ridden milieu.

As both Marc Barry Boucai and Rabih Alameddine’s flâneuse Aaliya Saleh have noted,³⁷ one trap, and trapping, of PTSD and trauma theory when applied to literature is the privileging of

causality at the expense of other parameters in the reading of fiction, even if trauma and causality may, as my analysis of the literary implications of Rich's nuanced continuum demonstrates, be correlated to and contiguous with other strands of repression that flânerie responds to. The multilayered and intertextual trauma that is patriarchy, arguably finding resonance beyond *I Am Not Naked* and operating across gender, national, socioeconomic, and generational barriers in the novel itself, makes it crucial to connect the *roots* of trauma, in its different forms, to the *routes* traversed to resist it, a process which PTSD theory and psychoanalysis only partly elucidate, namely in relation to the characterization of Teta, Samira, Ramzi, and the autistic Uncle Rami even. Hence, however tempting it might be, the propensity to apply a de facto reading of PTSD to the novel as a whole, even as several characters, whether in night dreams or daily conduct, showcase signs of disturbed psyches, would be to the detriment of a more nuanced etiology for the trauma inflicted at the finishing school and in the two Levantine cultures that have homed – and honed – the potential for perpetrating this trauma.

Compared to their Lebanese counterparts, Syria's writers are not particularly well known to non-Arab readerships with very few writing in English. As Mohja Kahf explains, this is due, in large part, to the state of extreme censorship and the punitive brutality with which authors deemed dissonant or seditious are meted. Traumatic events such as massacres, which usually generate context-based literature, are also too contentious to be rendered in creative writing – 25,000 citizens were murdered by the regime in Hama in 1982, and to date, no novelist has endeavored to revisit the event in fiction.³⁸

Instead, the Syrian novels in the past two decades are mostly written in Arabic and tackle four main themes: the ongoing war in Syria, immigration-led coming of age informed by cultural shock, forbidden interfaith love, and Arab nationalist hankerings to early and mid-20th-century tropes of negotiating lives and livelihoods under the French Mandate and Ottoman colonialism.³⁹ The latter, as Wen-Chin Ouyang argues, is a common ground between Arab nationalism and the contemporary Arabic novel,⁴⁰ and as Tarek El-Ariss points out, is a postcolonial critique deployed from a mostly male perspective, namely that of the Arab student studying in Europe and coming of age.⁴¹

If Syrian novelists, as Miriam Cooke describes them, have been too “drugged” by the authoritarian system⁴² to be able to respond discursively to a bloodbath euphemized by the Syrian state as “*aḥdāth* Hama” or the “events of Hama,”⁴³ Lebanese writers have tapped the

nationwide trauma in their country's recent history, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), to produce a substantial canon of trilingual postwar literature. As Hout indicates, the post-2000 Lebanese novel is still dealing with negotiating, and establishing, postwar variants of home in relation to issues of migration and/or exile and repatriation, as well as parsing the challenges of diaspora living in relation to contested binaries of longing and belonging. Lebanese women authors, specifically, as Roseanne Saad Khalaf reveals, have been providing in their novels "graphic glimpses into the tragic human consequences of violence" and were thus able to "transcend confessional and political loyalties in order to concentrate almost entirely on the omitted stories of pain and suffering."⁴⁴

Themes of Arab nationalism, diasporic homes in Europe and North America, and the transatlantic crossings that undergird them are absent in my own novel. Instead, the home journeys of the flâneuses, both literalized and metaphorical, are housed in the novels I look at (see below) within the homelands of origin, Lebanon or Syria, and, in *I Am Not Naked*, Lebanon and Syria together. Even as the artifact kneads two war-torn contexts into the narrative, knotting the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the Syrian Civil War (2011-present) to the plot, it is more interested in critiquing the constraints and abuses of patriarchy, which war, as I show, only exacerbates, rather than the scars of war as such. Typical manifestations of war, such as physical injuries, graphic experiences of armed violence, and battleground survivor accounts, are not exploited in the thesis as a whole, except in instances where I examine other works, such as Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*.

Ziad's injury, for example, is caused by the nettle-poisoned javelin of Claudette, who has benefited from the war to attract young women to the finishing school that launches the plot, rather than by a militiaman's gun or war-related ordnance. The aim here, as in other narrative moments I analyze, is to advance the plot, in theory and practice, rather than supply new insight on the atrocities of the civil war per se. Therefore, the storyline progresses structurally by providing closure to the finishing school incident, as well as thematically by continuing its critique of the patriarchy that has shaped and cushioned the collusive abuse enacted by Claudette and the javelin-mangled, rather than bullet-wounded, Ziad.

Furthermore, the literature reviewed above and its criticism, feminist or otherwise, makes no reference to the flâneur, let alone the flâneuse, as a distinctly separate and potentially subversive literary trope. Sexing the flâneur, so to speak, is then my attempt to fill this

theoretical gap by applying a dual creative/critical approach to investigating home in the Arab Middle Eastern novel – in specific, I have chosen to explore the emotional and physical itineraries of the 21st-century Lebanese and Syrian flâneuse by producing a creative narrative, *I Am Not Naked: A Novel of Lebanon and Syria* (see I. The Creative Artifact), and then juxtaposing a critical close reading of this intervention in my own novel alongside two apposite primary texts, as follows:

Since the artifact is also a first in marrying both the Lebanese and Syrian contexts, with a backdrop of civil war for both, I'm analyzing the intervention of the flâneuse in *I Am Not Naked* in relation to relatable readings of home in two other roughly coeval novels, one Lebanese, Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013), and the other Syrian, Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon* (2012). Knowing that my aim is not to survey the entirety of either the Lebanese or Syrian literary corpuses, which would be way beyond the scope of this thesis given the staggering and trilingual postwar literary canon in Lebanon alone, the novels read alongside *I Am Not Naked* are by no means claimants to representativeness. I write about these texts because they foreground a limpid locus of concern to women, gendered and queer(ed) home(s), and the intervention of the flâneuse I have theorized to read them.

Despite the acclaim both Alameddine and Yazbek have received in Western literary circles,⁴⁵ little to no academic scholarship exists so far on either *Cinnamon* or *An Unnecessary Woman*, and the scant material available does not address the feminist, queer, and/or postcolonial gazes at work through these artifacts, let alone explore viable iterations of female flânerie in the mentioned works. Jolanda Guardi, in her scathing critique of female homosexuality in the contemporary Arabic novel, writes that Yazbek's *Cinnamon* “does not achieve the expression of a homosexual character as performative;” in fact, she argues that the (paltry) portrayals of lesbian characters in recent Levantine fiction collude with the very patriarchy the novels claim to deplore.⁴⁶

I don't agree with Guardi's reading since, as I later show in my analysis of the queer flâneuses in *Cinnamon* and *I Am Not Naked*, even as female homosexuality is conceived as an alternative to an oppressive male world, it is queer (alternative, nonconformist, even sexual) desire for a feeling of homeness that drives the physical as well as emotional itineraries of the home-seeking (and love(r)-seeking) flâneuse in a way that clearly defies the patriarchy that fells its visibility. Within this context, home is presented as a queer-female space of wholeness,

succor, and intimacy, rather than an epicenter for LGBT activism, as Guardi suggests it ought to be.

Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* has received cursory mentions in recent critical literature by Syrine Hout, Marc Barry Boucai, and Sleiman El Hajj. Hout states that there are "no transatlantic crossings" in the novel,⁴⁷ a feature that sets apart the three fictions I examine in this thesis from much of the criticism as well as primary texts that deploy a diasporic reading of home in the contemporary novel of the Arab Middle East. Boucai's PhD thesis also cites *An Unnecessary Woman*, which he used with Alameddine's permission prior to the novel's formal release by its publisher. His overall thesis argues that cultural outputs (museum exhibits, films, novels, and pop music) in post-1990 America conflate and essentialize Arab-American and queer subjectivities so that they fit within the problematic melting pot of modern-day USA.

Midway through his analysis, Boucai isolates a passage in which the fictional Aaliya Saleh, as a translator, laments psychoanalytic readings of literature since they risk privileging causality, which he then links to normativity, over other potentially liberating narratives, queer, feminist, or otherwise.⁴⁸ Third, El Hajj mentions that *An Unnecessary Woman* "lambast[s] patriarchy but not from a queer perspective."⁴⁹ Indeed, as I also point out in this article, it is only one of two novels from Alameddine's oeuvre, the other being *The Hakawati* (2006), that lacks overt gay male overtones;⁵⁰ in retrospect it is also the only one that showcases a female protagonist as a flâneuse, along the lines this thesis examines.

Hence, in reference to these three novels – *I Am Not Naked*, *Cinnamon*, and *An Unnecessary Woman* – I argue that the notion of the flâneuse I have theorized is reified in characters who defy patriarchy by employing flânerie as a multilayered vector for fulfilling the "homing desire" that drives their respective journeys. The home sought by the figure of the border-crossing flâneuse in these texts comes closest to the "home-as-movement" approach generally espoused by diasporic-home theorists⁵¹ among whom Avtar Brah postulated the term "homing desire." The latter designates not sexual or amorous longings as such, even though as Syrine Hout points out, these are channeled not to the hunt for home,⁵² but rather "the desire to *feel at home* achieved by physically or symbolically (re)constituting spaces which provide some kind of ontological security."⁵³

As Hout indicates, in analyzing "the affective, cognitive and even aesthetic responses of diasporans, these critics are interested less in where one can 'be at home' than in how and why

one ‘feels at home’ regardless of location.”⁵⁴ Similarly, in the novels I look at, mental spaces of home are triggered as a conscious response to adversity and abuse suffered from in the past, often in childhood and early adolescence. These spaces are concretized by the places the flâneuse chooses to escape to, places whose identity, whether subversive or suppressive, is determined by the female, not male gaze.

Echoing Brah, but outwith a diasporic context, Roberta Rubenstein highlights the nexus between feeling at home and the emotional spatiality of home but grounds the latter within the amalgam of affects steeped in memories of childhood or past homes. She explains that

[n]ot merely a physical structure or a geographical location, but always an emotional space, home is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our psychic vocabularies, given its association with the most influential, and often most ambivalent, elements of our earliest physical environment and psychological experiences as well as their ripple effects throughout our lives.⁵⁵

If home, as Rubenstein argues, traces its origins to the emotional itineraries of affective past experiences, then the psychological tribulations Samira in *I Am Not Naked* experiences as she is buffeted from one escapist home to another are but a necessary component of her characterization as and transformation into a flâneuse. Clearly, Samira’s behavior as an adult is governed by the traumatic experience of the finishing school in 1984, and the narrative is alert to somatic manifestations of the latter⁵⁶ – in the numbing sensations, the repeated dreams/nightmares she experiences, and her irrational fear of Teta and Nanig as a couple – all of which add urgency to the need to understand the implications of this trauma through a scrutiny of its accommodating setup, hence the postulation of the flâneuse and the feminist, postcolonial, and eventually even the queer, criticisms through which the intervention is deployed.

In line with Cathy Caruth’s reading of traumatized literary characters “stubbornly persist[ing] in bearing witness to some forgotten wound,”⁵⁷ Samira’s emotional voyage toward a home unafflicted by patriarchal or exploitative taint intersects, as with Teta’s, with her various physical journeys both inside Lebanon, and between Syria and Lebanon, as she becomes in

practice, and with the advantage of hindsight, what she has been in theory throughout the finishing school: a flâneuse.⁵⁸ As her persona achieves, creatively, a full character arc once she assumes, conceptually, the full feminist potential of flânerie by severing her ties to the patriarchy that constrains her, only then is the trauma of her past, which as Rubenstein's notion suggests has had a formative impact on her pursuit of homes through male protection as an adult, finally transformed into what Caruth denotes as "an enabling narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated,"⁵⁹ to be re-imagined, redefined, and reclaimed, a process that draws closer to its conclusion as Samira discloses her story to her son and makes her ultimate peregrination to the finishing school.

Therefore, in establishing home, the flâneuses whose lives I examine invite, much like Brah and Rubenstein, a reading of space over place, even in instances when physical places – a postwar flat filled with books and a colonial mansion's attic in Lebanon, or an upper class female employer's bedroom or a modest village garden in Syria – are presented as contested spaces that are then seemingly reclaimed from exploitation or patriarchy, and become the comfortable emotional space that is home. Rubenstein's reading is propitious, moreover, for appraising and apprising emotional itineraries that seek to identify and describe home, or alternate homes, not only in patriarchal contexts but in home countries where war, civil or not, appears to be a constant.

As Claudette in *I Am Not Naked* aptly puts it, describing streets and homes in the early years of the Lebanese Civil War, "Life was like that back then... Completely random. You'd be gallivanting down the street to do your shopping in the afternoon and find yourself homeless or limbless in the evening." Hence, even on a practical level, the complex and inchoate emotional home that women negotiate and quest for, as Rubenstein suggests, would appear to be more sustainable on the long run than a fixed essence or geographical place.

The narratives demonstrate how it's a feeling of homeness, of wellbeing, of being-at-home that the flâneuses whose paths and lives I look at strive to achieve: First, on a physical, locomotive level, their itinerant journeys and the different hostile sights and sites they encounter as street-walkers revoke, rewrite, and critique the collusive socio-cultural and sociopolitical silences and constraints around which their predicaments as women are woven. Home for these flâneuses is then not the patriarchal haunts, or houses, they have left behind when they embark on their home-hunts, but the feeling of security and reassurance they often (but not always⁶⁰)

achieve in the intimate presence of other ostensibly like-minded women, such as Nanig and Claudette, or, in the final analysis, as far away from patriarchy as it is practicable to get. In Samira's case, for example, it becomes clear in the end that she has been searching for home in all the wrong places/people (Claudette, Ziad, Mazen), and she's willing to try living without seeking home with and through a man for the first time in her life.

A sense of contextualized malaise, what Christiane Schlote describes as the “disorientation, anxiety, and alarm”⁶¹ that is endemic to contemporary Arab fiction, pervades the three examined novels as the individual and gendered perspectives of the flâneuses therein interrogate the settings they inhabit on their home-seeking journeys. The texts differ from each other in geographic setting and in the iterations of female flânerie each deploys, even as, ultimately, all these different permutations are aimed toward demythologizing, challenging, and destabilizing the patriarchal power relations endemic to present-day Lebanon and Syria.

Iterations of the flâneuse the thesis explores are manifest through the characters of Teta and Nanig, and the black servant girl Aliyah,⁶² the queer(ed) flâneuses in *I Am Not Naked* and *Cinnamon*, respectively, and Samira and Aaliya Saleh the postcolonial and feminist flâneuses in my novel and Alameddine's – in particular, as Samira's and Aaliya's characters and memories unravel, I show how the feminist dimension of the female gaze can be contiguous with its postcolonial critique, whether of the postcolonial cosmopolitanism of her surroundings (Aaliya Saleh's narrative) or of a grittier and potentially more scarring (post)colonial presence (Samira's story).

While my novel employs Lebanon's and Syria's respective civil wars as a backdrop that enshrines a perpetual, and multilayered, sense of menace across the text, the violent conflicts don't constrain the movement of the flâneuses, whether locomotive or emotional, despite the hazards and the drudgery they face on the way. By contrast, the narrative of the flâneuse in Alameddine's novel, set entirely in Lebanon, employs a socio-historiographic approach, which links the different ills, indignities, and general malaise suffered by the ageing Aaliya Saleh to a discursive historical quadrant to which her critiques of patriarchy are attached: pre-Lebanese-Civil-War (pre-1974), wartime (1975-1990), postwar (1991-2006), and post-postwar Lebanon (2007-present).⁶³ The intertextuality between Lebanon's modern history and Saleh's story also informs my reading of her narrative as “a novel-as-memoir,” a term I reiterate in the analysis.

Unlike Alameddine's novel, mine foregrounds, in addition to a portrayal of the feminist flâneuse, a conspicuous queer-female dimension, subsequently referred to as the queer(ed) flâneuse, as well as a more visceral indictment of colonial attributes in relation to the plight of the flâneuse, especially in the first part of the novel. It is not the implications, and reifications, of globalization – the gated communities, conspicuous consumption, and social inequality – that as the female gaze in Alameddine's novel shows foment civil strife and subsequently even lesser mobility for an already culturally embattled flâneuse, but a more basic postcolonial reading that Samira in *I Am Not Naked* invites in relation to the predicament she suffers from at the finishing school in her hometown where French and society manners and, again, external appearances narrativize, and critique, home.

Finally, in *Cinnamon*, the emphasis on appearances, and on controlled female sexuality, means that, as Yazbek suggests, expressions of female homosexuality in Syria, much like elsewhere in the Middle East, are only condoned as long as they remain invisible.⁶⁴ Unlike *I Am Not Naked* and *An Unnecessary Woman*, Yazbek's novel does not chart the journey of its flâneuse against a backdrop of civil war but one of abject poverty and trenchant male violence, sexual or otherwise. In this sense, the narrative radicalizes the relationship between class (differences) and female sexuality, so that when the protagonists' interclass same-sex affair takes place, and helps satisfy their homing desire, it is aggressive, controlling sex – not love as in the case of the queer flâneuse in *I Am Not Naked* – which is key in carving the emotional space of feeling-at-home.

ii. The Feminist and Postcolonial Flâneuse in Sleiman El Hajj's *I Am Not Naked* (2016) and in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013)

Home and family in the novel-as-memoir: Alameddine's Aaliya Saleh as a literary flâneuse

The urban gaze of Aaliya Saleh, the critical flâneuse in *An Unnecessary Woman* may be a first in 21st-century Lebanese literature in contributing to a situated cartography of flânerie, but the institution in its crosshairs is not new. Grounded in resilient structures of kin and sect, the colonial legacy of patriarchy imparted by circa 400 years of Ottoman rule continued in 20th-

century Lebanon, surviving two world wars, the French Mandate (1920-1943), the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), and has spilled into the 21st century.⁶⁵

Social scientist Samir Khalaf remarks that the Civil War, and postwar, years shored up the institutional importance of patriarchy in protecting the individual. In the absence of a powerful, judicious, and secular state, this protection was a function of reasserting individual and collective loyalties to two main agents of patriarchy: kinship and confessional structures.⁶⁶ Postwar loyalties to the warring patriarchs, each claiming to represent and defend his respective sect, were reaffirmed as communities coalesced around confessional considerations re-entrenched by the Taef Accord which ended the Civil War. Even in the postwar “periods of relative stability and normality,” Khalaf writes, “confessional allegiances have almost always operated, touching virtually all dimensions of everyday life” in Lebanon.⁶⁷ In the absence of secular laws governing issues such as marriage, family, and inheritance, sects achieve “virtual mini-state” status and sustain the urban imaginary of security and solidarity among Lebanon’s tired and “traumatized citizenry.”⁶⁸

Similarly, Souad Joseph has argued that the potency of the family as an instrument of social control within patriarchy gains impetus from the postwar “minimalist,” sectarian, and continually “stalemated” Lebanese state ill equipped to meet citizens’ demand for services and protection.⁶⁹ Therefore, that the Lebanese urban topography, militarized or not, has been perpetually conceived as a male space in which women are subordinates has resulted in an emphasis in both creative texts and critical analyses on gendered postwar representations that reflect such conditions. Indeed, scaffoldings of home in 21st-century Anglophone Lebanese fiction have widely focused on postwar literary mappings of diaspora and exile,⁷⁰ and eschewed representations of home in relation to either *flânerie* in general or older women in particular.

Alameddine presents Aaliya Saleh, a 72-year-old isolationist and bibliophile who has sought and found home through literature and translation. Released in February 2014, the novel was praised for avoiding the “tragic figure”⁷¹ trope in characterizing the ageing Aaliya as a “proud outsider, monastically absorbed in her books, reflections, and memories.”⁷² Arguably, Alameddine’s construction of Aaliya’s home as the obsessive consumption and translation of literature, a mental act/space permeated with the occasional critical encounter with her urban surrounding and her family, suggests an in-between positioning between Taleb, Frisby, and

McLaren's vision of the "clinically observant flâneur" and Seidman's conception of the fearfully disengaged, and thus limited, postwar urban dweller.⁷³

This framing of Aaliya's first-person narrative allows Alameddine a nuanced use of flânerie since he avoids two assumptions undergirding readings of the flâneur in both modernist and postmodern literatures: that the "[bourgeois] flâneur walks idly through the city, listening to its narrative"⁷⁴ and that the mainstream agent of flânerie in a postwar setting is mostly male.⁷⁵ Therefore, I posit that Aaliya's novel-as-memoir employs flânerie or the flâneuse trope as a literary device to mitigate the soul-crushing effects of patriarchy on the narrator, both as a translator and a street-walker. The quotidian immersion in literary texts, in parallel to narrating purposeful incidents of street-walking that review the city through its gendered streets, provides an emotionally and psychologically fulfilling safe space that, for Aaliya, is home. In addition, flânerie as an artistic choice is empowering since by withholding her translations from the public gaze she feels is likely to reject her choices as esoteric, eccentric, or unfeminine, she minimises its critical effects not only on her "self" but also its output: "I create and crate,"⁷⁶ Aaliya writes, "books into boxes – boxes of paper, loose translated sheets. That's my life."⁷⁷

Finding sanctuary in art-as-literature evokes moreover a semblance of control relatively undiminished by the fighting of militiamen against sectarian others – violence over which she has no control, in the same way she is not allowed a say in choosing her husband decades before the war. While people kill each other outside her window, literary acts, albeit by candlelight,⁷⁸ crack the carapace of powerlessness by reclaiming a modicum of control. Hence, both in the pre-war and postwar years, as in the period of war itself, Aaliya juxtaposes theoretical instances of flânerie, concretized by creative translations-as-home, with more focused, practical incidents of street-walking. As Mike Featherstone has argued, flânerie may develop "an aesthetic sensibility in the swings between involvement and detachment, between emotional immersion and decontrol, and moments of careful recording and analysis."⁷⁹ Similarly, the emotional itinerary my iteration of female flânerie underscores allows for a needed detachment from constraining mainstream structures, as the flâneuse willfully seeks the viable spaces where she can thrive.

Hence, the theoretical dissociation intrinsic to the intervention cushions Aaliya's notion of an escapist literary home, and if as Parsons argues, flânerie approximates an itinerant recording of the city as "a text to be inscribed, read, rewritten, and reread,"⁸⁰ her street-walking encounters in Beirut expose and rewrite the city's main social, cultural, and political constraints,

kinship and sectarianism, in pre-Civil-War (1943-1974), wartime (1975-1990), postwar (1991-2005), and post-postwar (2007-present) Lebanon.

Negotiating the “narrative maze”⁸¹ of the city, Beirut’s urban dwellers and its streets, requires a process of destabilizing male conventions of sexism, violence, and sectarianism in the narrator’s quest for home. The family men and militiamen who uphold these structures of otherness are indicted for normalizing and reproducing patriarchy under a glossy veneer of postwar civility and “uneasy cosmopolitanism,” a condition reported in Seidman’s writings.⁸² By first situating Aaliya’s decision to become a flâneuse as a counter-reaction to patriarchy, and then examining a slew of urban encounters in which Aaliya negotiates home and self with a male presence or urban space, I show how a gendered analysis of flânerie in the novel makes intelligible Aaliya’s construction of home since her critique of the city’s cultural ills is predicated on her gaze as a flâneuse – a critique all the more potent given that her escape into literature as a makeshift sanctuary is a consequence of these male-gendered ills, both family and war-related, which have sought to proscribe her development as a woman. In doing so, the study reconnoiters the potential of a feminist sociology of flânerie in contemporary Lebanese literature, and supplements the findings of recent youth-narrative studies that reveal a high level of flânerie among Lebanese citizens;⁸³ like Aaliya, they too struggle to find voice and identity while interrogating the status quo in postwar and, after the 2006 war with Israel, post-postwar Lebanon.

That Lebanese discourse, both public and private, has habitually occupied male-dominated spaces in which women are either repressed or castigated nonconformist presences, gives impetus to my reading of Aaliya Saleh as a flâneuse, an ageing woman who childless and divorced is the narrative’s eponymous “unnecessary woman,” her family’s inconsequential “appendage.”⁸⁴ Aaliya writes, “My father must have been ill, for he died before impregnating my mother with another, as he was supposed to, expected to, particularly since I was female and first.”⁸⁵

Patriarchy’s kinship structures said to sustain women prove unviable in Aaliya’s case, her family having no wisdom or support to offer, from her childhood till her divorce, and she is largely neglected both as her mother’s orphaned child from a previous marriage, and as a girl. Her family couldn’t conceive of a world in which Aaliya’s husband, whoever he was, “didn’t hold all the cards” of her existence, and she is married off at age 16 to a man who, sexually

dysfunctional and “functionally illiterate,”⁸⁶ leaves Aaliya feeling isolated during their brief marriage, and divorces her four years later. He leaves Aaliya with their rented Beirut apartment whose lease she affords by working in a bookstore, and subsequently from her savings once the bookstore closes. To Aaliya’s family, “husbands were omnipotent, never impotent,”⁸⁷ hence the attribution of his ailment to Aaliya, even as he remarries and remains childless.

Although she pleurably recounts that as a child, Aaliya “slipped into art to escape life, sneak[ing] off into literature,”⁸⁸ and that “reading a fine book for the first time is as sumptuous as the first sip of orange juice that breaks the fast in Ramadan,”⁸⁹ her family discouraged her from this activity, lecturing that no man will want to marry an arduous reader and that she should try not to be “so different from normal people.”⁹⁰ Aaliya hadn’t realized that marriage meant she would be taken out of school. She likens herself to “a moth forcibly peeled from its chrysalis to face the world’s harsh lights and frightening storms,”⁹¹ adding that her “only hope was to fake [her] way to an education” and that she was “a page-turner long before [she] was a reader [...] worrying the surface till [she] penetrated the essence.”⁹² Clearly then, this narrative of sexism influences the search for unobtrusive trajectories⁹³ that narrate home, and Aaliya’s conscious decision at age 20 to embrace *flânerie* as an escape from her city and its people is thus steeped in a series of visceral experiences, all related to patriarchy, in her childhood and early adulthood, up till the early years of the Civil War in the 1970s.

Once she is divorced, Aaliya’s half-brothers state it is her familial duty as a woman and as a sister to relinquish her house in return for their approval, and implicitly their protection, as male siblings. The brothers, all married, have large families living in cramped apartments, and thus feel entitled to Aaliya’s more spacious flat. She notes that her “half-brothers, like so many men and boys, have the impatience of the entitled.”⁹⁴ Similarly, Souad Joseph argues that the socialisation of women as docile subjects in the brother-sister power dynamic is central to the reproduction of patriarchy in Lebanese and Arab societies.⁹⁵ Child-rearing, married men perpetuate the system and hence occupy precedence in both the 20th and 21st-century normative order in Lebanese society over a divorcee with no issue living alone.⁹⁶ Aaliya thus makes an informed, and qualified, life choice: “I am alone. It is a choice I’ve made, yet it is also a choice made with few other options available. Beirut society wasn’t fond of divorced, childless women.”⁹⁷ Her refusal to remarry or to leave home, the space housing her literary proclivities, is

thus construed as a non-conformist act leading to castigation by her family and abuse from her brothers who try to “break [her] door and [her] spirit.”⁹⁸ Aaliya writes:

More than once, my half brothers cursed me. More than once, each one banged on my door in an attempt to terrorize me. Terrorized I was, particularly in the beginning when I felt most vulnerable and the fear of losing my home nibbled at me... At times, during the early years of being alone, I felt as if my soul was withering, like a chestnut drying within its shell.⁹⁹

Brothers in Lebanon’s kinship structure, across variant social classes, define their masculinities in part by asserting control over their sisters who accept a submissive positioning in return for brotherly protection and family love.¹⁰⁰ Patriarchy so firmly attached to the latter is difficult to unseat, but given that Aaliya has received neither eases her dissociation from this often idealized and romanticized Lebanese narrative. As a gender dissident, Aaliya reacts by adopting a nuanced form of *flânerie* as a lifestyle and as a home. Clearly, the detachment intrinsic to *flânerie* allows her to construct an escapist notion of home through literature by disengaging from both the embattled (and male-dominated) cityscape and her family, which oppress her in different ways:

I long ago abandoned myself to a blind lust for the written word. Literature is my sandbox. In it I play, build my forts and castles, spend glorious time. It is the world outside that box that gives me trouble. I have adapted tamely, though not conventionally, to this visible world so I can retreat without much inconvenience into my inner world of books. Transmuting this sandy metaphor, if literature is my sandbox, then the real world is my hourglass – an hourglass that drains grain by grain. Literature gives me life, and life kills me.¹⁰¹

The sandbox/hourglass metaphor above is apt in describing the escapist and unconventional notion of home that Aaliya has devised for herself because it suggests that for

escapism to bear meaning, narrative intentionality, or even survival value, it needs to maintain a connection to the real world, however oppressive it might be. In narrating her memoir, the septuagenarian flâneuse interweaves passages of intrepid reflections on the art and act of translation, which “gives her life,”¹⁰² with numerous iterations of flânerie through which she critiques family and sectarianism, the institutionally oriented structures that have circumscribed her life in Beirut.

Beaus and mothers on the street: flânerie and the constraints of culture

Aaliya’s defiance of gender inequality probes and demythologises the sacred patriarchal institutions of not only brother-sister relationships, but also marriage and motherhood. The narrator’s depictions of her mother reveal a tortuous mother-daughter dynamic, a “noose... around [Aaliya’s] neck,”¹⁰³ both alienating and disabling.

Flânerie here plays a discursive role as Aaliya narrativises, in relation to her mother, specific street encounters that further her critique of patriarchy. Her narrative contrasts between her mother’s reactions to physical injuries sustained by Aaliya and her siblings as children roaming the neighborhood. While Aaliya’s falls become an opportunity for her mother to “rattle off all the hurts she’d sustained in her life,”¹⁰⁴ and in most times forget to tend to Aaliya’s cuts, the mother experiences hysterical fright when one of her male children is injured. Aaliya’s g(r)aze as flâneuse attests to her mother’s reaction on the street after her half-brother the eldest was injured having been kicked in the head by a mule while playing an imaginary war game with other boys. Her mother here had “wailed as if it were Judgment Day and she had been judged wanting.”¹⁰⁵

Another street incident the narrator rewrites is equally revealing. Swiftly street-walking pre-war Beirut’s thoroughfares, Aaliya’s mother ignores at first her daughter’s plea to let her pee. Aaliya, aged 4 at the time, excavates this scene at age 72, given the reason behind her mother’s reluctance to halt the march home: the need not to be perceived as “an imperfect wife”¹⁰⁶ in case of an untimely or tardy performance of her wifely duties – cooking, ironing, cleaning. Walking the same street again sixty-eight years later, Aaliya recollects her mother’s oppressive, sprightly pace, her calves “sliding like tectonic plates” with each determined step since like most women, the mother had been “suckled on the milk of patriarchy (the courage of men, the fidelity of

women)” and “sincerely believed that the world curdled if her husband held his breath, and if his every whim wasn’t met, the universe itself turned to ash.”¹⁰⁷

Gerda Lerner has written that patriarchy can only function with the collusion of women¹⁰⁸ and that it is conforming mothers who perpetuate the system by gendering their daughters as subordinates. Aaliya writes that the subjects her mother, who remains nameless in the novel-as-memoir, “specialized in, or was willing to engage in, were, in order: herself, her boys, her husband, and the inferiority of everyone else.”¹⁰⁹ Alameddine likens the mother’s exhortation to evict Aaliya from her apartment to UN politics when the state of Israel was born: “My mother was the young United Nations: leave your home, your brothers have suffered, you have other places you can go to.”¹¹⁰ In a hermeneutic instance of reconnoitering the grim and frightening real world terrain, fraught with the “anguish [for which] the word is just *mother*,”¹¹¹ a long incident of hesitant perambulation culminates with a visit to her mother whose feet she washes, paring her toenails:

Now in her seventies, Aaliya, pressured by her half-brother to take in and look after their elderly mother, is served a reminder of the exigencies of patriarchy that continue to encroach, literally, upon her home. Determined to excise her remaining parent’s lingering presence from her own ageing and wearied self, she hopes this instance of leaving home to reach out to the insidious presence that is her mother will have redemptive value akin to that accrued by connecting with the militiaman during the Civil War, an incident I discuss in the next section of the study. In both cases, exorcism of an abusive outsider, militiaman or mother, takes place following purposeful episodes of vividly narrated street-walking. “I’m going to wash my mother right out of my hair,” writes the flâneuse upon her return to her book-congested flat, “wash her out, dry her out, push her out, fly her out, cancel her and let her go.”¹¹²

Not surprisingly then, the predominant feature of Alameddine’s postwar texts is the quandary of patriarchal politics and the ways in which Lebanese women’s (and gay men’s¹¹³) lives – and homes – are perplexed by these. Beyond the above attempts at defensive exorcism, the flâneuse integrates street-walking references in her itinerant metaphor for contemporary women’s rights activism in Lebanon. She writes that Lebanese feminism “hasn’t reached espadrilles or running shoes yet”¹¹⁴ and that remaining single is not a choice. Aaliya even invokes biblical references as a feminist trope querying whether “Noah [would] have allowed a lesbian zebra aboard, an unmarried hedgehog, a limping lemur?” If Aaliya’s city, as she

observes, is hostile towards “the unpaired or the impaired,”¹¹⁵ then Hannah, Aaliya’s friend and confidante, is a case in point. Because of her clubfoot and her excessive shyness, Hannah is not a desirable candidate for marriage in pre-war Lebanon.¹¹⁶ She therefore delves into a make-believe world where she outlines different archetypes of prospective suitors/husbands; even in fantasy, she can only countenance a future in which matrimony is central.

The narrating flâneuse traces her friend’s attempts to concretize the fantasy, and when, in 1944, a well-mannered lieutenant rescues Hannah from an uncouth situation on the street, her dream topography of the city is sealed. In gallantly offering to walk her home, “a Proustian promenade,”¹¹⁷ the lieutenant has not only, to Hannah’s mind, proposed marriage, but also becomes the chivalrous beau she has often imagined meeting while street-walking the metropolis. Although the lieutenant dies shortly after without being able to clarify the intentions imputed upon him, Hannah remains faithful to the idea that under other circumstances she would have been his loved and cosseted wife. Hannah’s conception of happiness in abeyance is thus rooted in the would-have-been union with a man she fantasized had loved her, and her consequent lifelong attachment to his surviving family. The illusion of protection availed by marriage becomes most tragically evident in the way patriarchy shapes Hannah’s life choices since its repercussions are radicalized in the narrative’s portrayal of Hannah’s resultant suicide. Once the lieutenant’s mother reveals on her deathbed that her son never intended to marry Hannah, “the meaning she’d assigned to her life had come detached from its moorings” just as “the shrine of self-delusion had crumbled.”¹¹⁸

Hannah’s tenaciously imagined construct of home as quiescence in the putative belief that her life is to have been spent with a chivalrous savior from the past reminds us of André Aciman’s notion of home lodged in mnemonic arbitrage.¹¹⁹ This kind of memory, Aciman explains, spawns the present from the past and grounds the future on the past recaptured – Hannah, who genuinely believes her home has been destined as that of the happy wife of an army man had he lived, becomes “the dutiful daughter-in-law all her life”¹²⁰ until she kills herself. Her diaries, which she leaves to Aaliya, record entries describing the imagined first-time meeting with her future beau “strolling on the corniche where eyes glance in passing.”¹²¹ The Beirut streets as the recollected locus of the imagined future encounter are extrapolated in the diaries to a more private sanctum of domesticity. The latter, equally fictive, is “the future

drawing room where she and her husband would entertain,”¹²² a future home Hannah minutely describes.

Much like Aciman’s, Hannah’s home is not so much the past as herself “in the past imagining the future,” vigorously anticipating “not even the future, but [her]self in the future, retrieving the bone [s]he buried in the past.”¹²³ Accordingly, the novel-as-memoir engages with the female dream topography of pre-war Beirut typified by the patriarchal and matrimonial contingencies whose parlous illusions Hannah clings to. These, Aaliya rejects, narrating as flâneuse a feminist topography of the city in the subsequent throes of civil strife.

Negotiating home in a civil war: a feminist topography of resistance

The novel’s appropriation of flânerie as a tool for narrative engagement with Beirut spaces, public and private, presupposes that “all experiences of the flâneur/flâneuse be historicized” as “gendered practices.”¹²⁴ The novel deploys instances of street encounters to expose and critique the operative ills of the sect as a shaper of gendered constraints and (potentially) violent dislocations. These the narrative revisits through the gaze and memory of the solitary even if unsentimental flâneuse having to navigate her way and protect her existence in an urban maze of male-dominated, sectarian space. Hence, the experiences of the flâneuse in the novel-as-memoir apprise gender within a plethora of urban masculine presences, militarized or not, and reveals them as imbricating categories that inform and constitute patriarchy.

While Seidman’s argument that Beirut’s female urbanites “share the streets with men, but not their power”¹²⁵ holds true regardless of peace or wartime, a street incident Aaliya witnesses in the 1970s in the early days of the internecine, sect-based conflicts (1975-1990) provides fodder for her eldest half-brother’s chauvinism. Suspected by his manager of petty thievery, the half brother, working as a doorman at a three-star hotel, is routinely searched at the back exit for pilfered toiletries and related paraphernalia – a humiliating incident the homebound flâneuse is privy to.¹²⁶ Albeit fortuitous, and although the manager is eventually executed once the half-brother is recruited as a militiaman,¹²⁷ this voyeuristic incident’s temporary reversal in the brother-sister power dynamic cements, as Aaliya suggests, her half-brother’s generally overbearing behavior and his aggression in attempting to evict her from her flat, up until it

becomes known that she has purchased, and fired, a gun in defense of home in 1982 during the Israeli siege of Beirut.¹²⁸

Aaliya's perceptions and experiences of the Beirut streets are transposed into the dynamics of the narrative(s) she pens. As a literary flâneuse, she discursively challenges unwanted pressure in her text, and by extension, in her life, hence the constant flitting between narrating stressful encounters with the city and calming respites of literary and philosophical translations. The site of gender mapped by the flâneuse reveals that nationalist endeavors, which Aaliya's narrative indicates may extend to civil warmongering to preserve the future of the nation's constitutive sects, unequivocally "favor the standpoint of men and privilege the masculine."¹²⁹ She resists socialization into a passive target of the masculine groups she confronts and/or critiques over several periods of her life, before, during, and after the war: family men, as we have seen, and subsequently the Civil War's sectarian militiamen, and ultimately the postwar (and post-postwar) sectarian patriarchs – religious leaders and politicians.

Referencing the city at war as "a necropolis,"¹³⁰ the flâneuse examines the infamous "Green Line" sequestering the capital into sectarian zones of combat – a Christian east and a Moslem west.¹³¹ Aaliya writes: "There were probably more battles here, more snipers, more killings, more bodies, more decay and destruction, than anywhere else in the country – havoc and spoil and ruin."¹³² To navigate the belligerent topography of wartime Beirut becomes akin to what McLaren describes as the experience of the flâneur through "the streets and boulevards of the city in the thrall of violent urban dislocations"¹³³ for which the street, through its landmarks, becomes a portent. Since Mr. Azari is "intimately connected to various militia leaders," his grocery store on Aaliya's avenue becomes a "litmus test" of circulation potential.¹³⁴ Closed shutters suggest impending calamity but, when open, indicate danger to the neighborhood isn't imminent and that quasi-normal street flow may be resumed.

Confined by the fighting to her apartment, the restricted gaze of the crouching flâneuse observes "thanatophiles with semi-automatics running cockroach zigzags"¹³⁵ and is relocated to "the rodent-resplendent garage" beneath the building next door when the men's skirmishes escalate.¹³⁶ Her strolls through war-torn Beirut excavate the gendered sights, places, and smells of the city at war, and in more than one instance she narrativizes the challenge of navigating her homebound street through the corpses of men butchered by other men. "A man on the side of the road, thrown there, discarded, probably recently, blocked my path – not just a little in my way,

but ‘thou shalt have to step over me’ in my way,”¹³⁷ she writes, and that “during the war, breezes were nauseatingly fragrant with the odors of bodies hastily and haphazardly discarded – odors of flesh, both fresh and decaying, a city’s native perfumes.”¹³⁸

Pursuing the theme of street-walking the metropolis, the narrator avers that “every Beirut of a certain age has learned that on leaving for a walk you should never be too sure of returning home, not only because something might happen to you personally, but also because your home might cease to exist.”¹³⁹ Negotiating the perils of the male-led war becomes especially challenging for a woman like Aaliya living alone and defending her home without actively seeking a male protector. The narrator’s journey as a purposeful flâneuse in search of Ahmad, a militiaman and former volunteer at the bookshop she once worked at, takes her first through the convoluted, decrepit streets of Sabra, a Palestinian refugee camp. Warring men’s desecration of her home cues this street-walking quest for a real-world weapon in defense of home. Aaliya recalls: “A group of militiamen broke into the apartment, rummaged through my belongings, and one of them defecated on the floor of the maid’s bathroom...someone shat in my home. I procured a Kalashnikov.”¹⁴⁰

Her prose charts the trials of the flâneuse maneuvering her way through a militia camp while simultaneously capturing the landscape of the site in wartime:

What was difficult before the war, navigating the maze of alleys, had become tribulation. Puddles that used to form only after rainfall had become permanent lakes of sewer-brown, the stench suffocating. My thighs were sore from being unnaturally stretched with each lake-avoiding step.¹⁴¹

Aaliya discovers that Ahmad has moved from Sabra and when, by 1977, she manages to find him, he demands, and subsequently receives, sex in return for a gun. Aaliya’s approach to sex, much like elsewhere in the novel, is unsentimental. “I wanted a gun,” she writes. “I wanted a shower. I made a choice.”¹⁴² In parlaying her then 40-year-old body for a Kalashnikov, the solitary flâneuse defends her home. Aaliya thus negotiates the sustenance of this constructed space where she can escape the world by connecting with one of many who waged the war in defense against the sectarian other.

The postwar flâneuse: representations of gentrified space in an escapist cityscape

In a recent study, Samir Khalaf posits that the Lebanese nation moves on too fast and thus adopts escapist means that preclude a thorough examination of what constitutes and foments strife.¹⁴³ Although she herself produces an escapist construct of home through literature, Aaliya's conscious positioning as a flâneuse shows awareness of this escapism and of the need to connect to the outside world, not only to sustain this home, as seen above, but also to deconstruct the city's veneer of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Seidman argues that the polity of confessionalism in Lebanon cushions and mainstreams narratives of paranoia and otherness in modern-day Beirut.¹⁴⁴ Because postwar Lebanese citizenry and urban dwellers would rather, as Aaliya puts it, "ostrich life's difficulties" rather than face the confessional quandary,¹⁴⁵ they have "deluded [themselves] into thinking that [they'd] never fight each other again,"¹⁴⁶ assuming they had "buried [their] horror."¹⁴⁷ And yet otherness persists. In typical fashion, Aaliya introduces her commentary on the divisive and potentially lethal rhetoric of otherness with references to her literary mascots:

If you think that Marcello of *The Conformist* becomes a porcine fascist because he killed lizards when he was a boy, then you assure yourself that you can never be so... We all try to explain away the Holocaust, Abu Ghraib, or the Sabra Massacre by denying that we could ever do anything so horrible. The committers of those crimes are evil, other, bad apples; something in the German or American psyche makes their people susceptible to following orders... killing indiscriminately... Anything that makes them different from you.¹⁴⁸

Hence, the "uneasy cosmopolitanism" Seidman argues encapsulates and defines the urban topography of postwar Beirut¹⁴⁹ is (re)viewed by the gaze of the flâneuse as a critical abode to the rhetoric of otherness manifest in its public spaces, streets, and street encounters. Aaliya's text traces the urban manifestations of postwar society's escapism of the male-led

sectarian reality that shaped the war period and continues to shape the postwar era. Sami Zubaida spotlights the postcolonial attributes of these manifestations, arguing that while cosmopolitan milieus in the Arab Middle East continue to exist, they are “submerged by the two major forces of the metropolis: [...] urbanized masses [...] and [...] international capital on business and tourism and its towering buildings of hotels and offices, its media and the consumption goods [...] it caters for.”¹⁵⁰

Indeed, as recent studies show, any counter-narrative of anti-sectarian discourse created in the postwar years in Lebanon has been largely borne by a national preoccupation with status seeking and luxury-touting consumerism that have displaced, at least superficially, religious tropes with visible class emblems.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Roseanne Saad Khalaf, whose creative writing students showcase signs of post-operative rhinoplasty at the start of most terms, notes that the titivating discourse of conspicuous consumption is bolstered by city-strewn billboards advertizing access to bank loans for plastic surgery.¹⁵²

Aaliya’s street-walking identifies the prototype of the “Dioered woman sporting noteworthy high hair and wasp-stung lips,”¹⁵³ an indicator of the predilection for exteriorized aesthetics or beautified exteriors governing both urban spaces and urban dwellers in the postwar period. The gaze of the flâneuse discerns and critiques the emergence of Starbucks shops on the city streets. These ostensibly cosmopolitan haunts are described as populated by flirting, lounging, postwar youngsters who consume “lactescent swill” while in the street on the outside, the cleaners of Beirut are its underclass population of foreign workers, the “Sisyphuses of our age” working hard to remain invisible, and therefore a permissible presence on the city’s streets.¹⁵⁴ By avoiding an emphasis on existent or imagined sectarian cleavages or political schisms in the country, this class and status-seeking narrative diffuses a cosmopolitan appeal around which people can coalesce irrespective of sect.¹⁵⁵

If, therefore, as Ghassan Hage points out, consumerism and aesthetics engender “a sense of immunity from a traumatizing environment”¹⁵⁶ within which unfolds, as Khalaf argues, “the absurd dichotomy of life in a barricaded [yet] hedonistic society; at once a battleground and a playground,”¹⁵⁷ the street-walking images of a gentrified (and gendered) city, narrated by the flâneuse, reify the consumerist culture in postwar Beirut of which they are a byproduct. “To build is to put a human mark on a landscape,” Aaliya posits, “and the city’s men have been leaving their mark on Beirut’s streets like a pack of rabid dogs.”¹⁵⁸ She likens the rebuilding of

the city to a “virulent cancer” that has “devour[ed] every living surface”¹⁵⁹ and reduced public spaces in Beirut. Maha Yahya queries the process of escapist reconstruction downtown Beirut was subject to, arguing that efforts to obliterate signs of war from the city streets have accompanied the imbalance between an increasingly gentrified cityscape and a reduced accessibility to and availability of affordable public spaces.¹⁶⁰ Aaliya’s narrative gaze highlights this urban dislocation in relation to gentrified space. She writes:

I must keep walking. Onward. Two giant residential buildings are being erected on this tiny street. Billboards featuring ridiculously wealthy westerners shopping, swimming in private pools, and getting facialed in spas cover the construction sites. One slogan proclaims WE’RE BEIRUTING AGAIN. Hundreds of these buildings are going up all over the city, none of them less than super ultra deluxe.¹⁶¹

Such portrayals of urban space in the novel match David Frisby’s notion of *flânerie* as a nuanced appraisal of “metropolitan life” based on a city’s “spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations.”¹⁶² Frisby further suggests that acts of “observation (including listening),” which he associates with “a form of *reading the city*,”¹⁶³ contribute to practices constitutive of *flânerie*. The function of background music is likewise examined in the novel-as-memoir as an accoutrement of urban amnesia. The ears of the *flâneuse* are privy to the audible cornucopia of urban sounds and noises which, in permeating public spaces, signpost postwar escapism:

In the supermarket, along the corniche, in hospitals, on the street, in stores, elevators, everywhere in the city, insipid music erupts from tiny nooks to scramble and deaden Beiruti brain waves – an escapist catastrophe that rivals the Civil War.¹⁶⁴

Consequently, the narrative gaze in Aaliya’s text extends its usage of *flânerie* to question and trace the repercussions of postwar escapism on the construction of Lebanon’s urban

topography: sectarian enclaves coupled with an urban culture of mistrust and reciprocal loathing masked, as above, by a veneer of functional civility, gentrification, aesthetics, and consumerism.

The post-postwar flâneuse: recrudescing violence and urban paranoia

Religion is rejected early in the novel with Aaliya lambasting Muslim and Christian hajjis for being “masters of pious dissimulation who covet the title but not the path.”¹⁶⁵ Her narrative conflates the Muslim commemoration of Ashura with the Christian celebration of Christmas; both are equally dismissed, her narrative tracing manifestations of each as a burst of blood spilling, on one hand, and mindless decorations, on the other, in various neighborhoods of Beirut. Aaliya writes:

Let the people flagellate themselves into a frenzy of remembrance. Wails, whips, blood: the betrayal of Hussein moves me not. Let the masses cover themselves in gold, frankincense, and Chanel to honor their savior’s birth. Trivia matters naught to me.¹⁶⁶

Instead, as a self-proclaimed “non-religious woman,” the flâneuse states that as she matured, she had no use for a god beyond literature, writing that while Emmanuel Lévinas postulated that God left in 1941, hers departed in 1975, 1978, 1982, and in 1990 – in other words, the Lebanese Civil War years.¹⁶⁷ She lights two candles for Walter Benjamin and embarks on a new translation, Roberto Bolano’s unfinished novel *2666*, as the year (unspecified but post-2008), and the novel, start.¹⁶⁸

Paroxysms of urban amnesia and postwar cosmopolitanism, as Seidman advances, are unsustainable constructs, which perhaps explains why “the numbing silence and an almost conspiracy-like will to forget” have paradoxically reaffirmed the very sectarian dynamic they have sought to obfuscate in the hiatus after the war.¹⁶⁹ Craig Larkin writes that the “evasion of the historical memory of the Lebanese war” mediated in public discourse by a postwar culture of political amnesty, media censorship, and a complete absence from the Lebanese history curriculum has internalized and worsened sectarian resentments by “failing to provide space for critical engagement, contestation, and interaction.”¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Aaliya states in her text that “the

Lebanese do not wish to examine that period of [their] history” since “like most humans, [they] consider history a lesson on a blackboard that can be sponged off.”¹⁷¹ Since continuing post-postwar (post-2006) sectarian rivalries, occurring in May 2008 as Aaliya points out, are always in a liminal state threatening to spill into civic violence on Beirut’s streets,¹⁷² the urban dweller, as in the case of the war and postwar years, seeks home in the “enveloping world of the sect”¹⁷³ and of patriarchy which accommodates and protects it.

Given that sect continues to function as “the exemplar and indeed the only fully legitimate form of social otherness in Beirut,”¹⁷⁴ civil strife occurs when society externalizes tensions lurking beneath the surface. The cityscape in Aaliya’s narrative stands proof that escapism is not viable. Street-walking the warren of Beirut’s streets en route to the city’s national museum, a regular journey for the culturally driven Aaliya, reveals how acquiescence to this culture of sectarian otherness, and the corresponding inability to either reconcile with or forget a violent past,¹⁷⁵ allow fertile ground for tensions between men of different religious groups to flare, again, into violence. Her gaze as flâneuse identifies through the city streets and buildings visible signs attesting to the recrudescence of civil strife in the post-postwar years. She writes: “In 2008, the Shiites and Sunnis—a *plague o’both your houses*—clashed briefly and violently along these streets. Traces of the shooting can be seen on the buildings, a few bullet holes on one...residues on edifices that can’t afford plastic surgery.”¹⁷⁶

If as Aaliya notes, “we suppress trauma so very well” by “postpon[ing] the unbreathable darkness that weighs us down,”¹⁷⁷ these violent instances of inter-sectarian skirmishes reveal how “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”¹⁷⁸ This quote from Mark Twain, around which the urban dislocations Aaliya notes are spun, shows how her narrative deconstructs the urban dweller’s cosmopolitan veneer in “a moment of truth, a moment when individuals – be they soldiers or civilians – have to define their deeply held priorities and act on them.”¹⁷⁹ Aaliya’s narrative response is that “belief is murderous;” she curses the sectarian patriarchs who continue to restrict people’s existences today and wishes for “a Beirut Baruch, a knight to slay the ecclesiastical dragons, or at least declaw them.”¹⁸⁰

Navigating the streets of post-postwar Beirut is thus “loaded with emotional landmines and unexploded ordnance.”¹⁸¹ In depicting urban images approximating sectarian enclaves, Aaliya hints that this ordnance is that of the explosive potential of sectarian cleavages unresolved in the postwar period. She explains the “recent rise in puerile nationalism in [the city’s]

neighborhoods”¹⁸² as a function of the contending tensions between sects each seeking to market its image as the most Lebanon-loving. Her narrative references these tensions in relation to the birth of tenaciously protected spaces akin to sectarian enclaves, yet another legacy of postwar escapism: “Like foals born ready to run, new buildings are born gated, protected, able to force the city out instantly with their cadres of doormen and security guards.”¹⁸³

Commenting on the ways sect rules and shapes these urban agoras, Khalaf writes that on the micro level, an individual’s “salvation and victimization are by-products of the same [patriarchal] realities,” knowing that these realities are politically operational since “they give individuals shelter but mute their sensibilities and dampen their feelings of outrage.”¹⁸⁴ Aaliya indicates that in post-postwar Lebanon, the pining “to belong to a party, any party, is greater than the fear of appearing stupid once again.”¹⁸⁵ Sectarian political leaders, as do the ecclesiastical figures who support them, have thus relinquished both ideological politics and meaningful narratives conducive to navigating post-Civil-War realities. Instead, they secure the loyalty of their supporters, Aaliya suggests, by mining the urban imaginary of paranoia toward the constantly demonized sectarian other.

As Seidman has aptly noted, the sect also fosters and nurtures an urban culture of mistrust coupled with hostility toward outsiders, especially sectarian others generally perceived as threatening presences.¹⁸⁶ “The [museum] guard is Shiite,” Aaliya declares, “he probably thinks I am as well and I’ve yet to correct him – so he dislikes Saudis, and on the rare occasion that they visit, he delights in hissing their code, *camels*” and “puffs out his lips and chews on imaginary curd.”¹⁸⁷ By contrast, he rejoices when Iranians, fellow Shiites, visit, eulogizing them with the posh term “*shahs*.”¹⁸⁸ As this example shows, urban encounters as prosaic as a museum visit become in the narrative of the flâneuse occasions for experiencing (and exploring) the divisiveness of sectarian and political lines that must be re-entrenched and confirmed in the daily life of the cityscape. Accordingly, Hage writes that “Lebanese politics is a mean colonizing machine [which] devours everything and politicizes anything it touches, even that which desires to remain outside the political.”¹⁸⁹ Clearly then, Aaliya’s critique through flânerie of this colonizing machine and of the sectarian patriarchs involved with the machinations of its outputs – the Civil War and its aftermath – is contiguous with what Ken Seigneurie describes as a “criticism of the men in journalism and politics who perpetuate the war” that is simultaneously “an indictment of the masculinity that is associated with war.”¹⁹⁰ In yoking the ills of patriarchy

to the escapist postcolonial cosmopolitanism it has embraced, the flâneuse reveals the hazard of indulging these postcolonial homes unquestioningly.

Throughout the novel, Aaliya shows time and again that walking against the grain in a gender-infused context foregrounds issues of autonomy, self-worth, and individual dignity. Despite her professed loneliness as she ages, belonging in return for deference to mainstream gridlocks is not a working choice. She realizes though that the forte of her conscious positioning as a literary flâneuse is predicated on avoiding both a complete disconnect with reality, as well as the trappings of literary conceit.¹⁹¹ If it does not liaise with reality, the concept of art or literature as home will itself rigidify into a structure likely to crumble upon its occupant – her friend Hannah’s complete escape into a make-believe life with a romanticized beau and subsequently her suicide ratify this point. As the novel closes, Aaliya’s vulnerability following the water leakage fiasco that almost destroys her stocked loose-leaf translations reaffirms that the itinerary of the flâneuse in a liminal and masculinist setting with intermittent incidents of civil strife is not only physical but emotional and psychological – and will always be fraught with challenges and uncertainties that flâneuses must strive to negotiate in both peace and war, and in the checkered spaces of time and place in between.

Ultimately, Aaliya’s positioning as a flâneuse “coterminous with her country”¹⁹² collapses the “assumption of a public/private binary in civil society theory”¹⁹³ by identifying a collusive contiguity of male-related activities and urban spaces relentlessly negotiated in a historicized narrative: a novel-as-memoir subsuming the pre-war (1943-1974), wartime (1975-1990), postwar (1991-2005), and post-postwar (2007-present) years of Lebanon’s modern history. Her narrative attempts to re-conceptualize and sustain an untraditional home interrogate the masculinist discourse of the nation-as-home and its constitutive alliance of family men, wartime militiamen, and (post)postwar sectarian patriarchs and political leaders. Aaliya concludes:

No matter where I’ve been or how long I’ve been away, my soul begins to tingle whenever I approach my apartment... The pleasurable sensation of almost arriving and the impatience of not yet being there begin at those [street] markers... My home.¹⁹⁴

Different street signs and signifiers, such as a brown-and-gray tenement built in the 1970s, demarcate for the weary older flâneuse the home she pines to reach to resume her literary activities after discerning episodes of street-walking. Understandably then, home lodged in flânerie operates by seeking to disentangle and maneuver the barbed wire of dominant narratives through a simultaneous circumvention and reappraisal of the localized *idées fixes* or rigid structures of gender and culture.

The storyteller, the art(ist) and the flâneuse in I Am Not Naked: a critical reading from a feminist and postcolonial perspective

Unlike Aaliya Saleh, who incidentally appears in my novel as a meta-flâneuse during a dinner conversation on “fallen war women” in Beirut,¹⁹⁵ Samira, the postcolonial-feminist flâneuse in Sleiman El Hajj’s *I Am Not Naked* is more closely attuned to the aspects of patriarchy that have directly constrained her life than to the (male-led militancy of the) civil war and its aftermath, as such; in fact, the setting she occupies as a child seems remarkably peaceful in comparison to that occupied by Alameddine’s flâneuse. Instead, Samira presents Claudette as the exotic colonial figure – even the nettles, which play an important role in the plot and reemerge at its conclusion, are a French import of sorts – who molests her and marks her entry into a shamed adulthood and an exile to the city.

Even as France reluctantly ended its Mandate on Lebanon in 1943, French colonialist attitudes regarding class and normative sexual and gender behavior remain de rigueur in Lebanese society to date. The village community lionizes Madame Claudette as a moneyed, albeit eccentric, Western-educated *zaim*’s widow, which situates her at the highest echelon of the social order. The grounds have been set for Claudette’s seduction of Samira: the finishing school, the mansion, the art, the nettles, and the attic. But first, some storytelling...

The storyteller motif in the opening section of the novel helps move the story along in the transition it effects in the characterization of Samira’s beau, Ziad. First, we see him as a resourceful man who has escaped the violence in his country only to find himself in another conflicted setting, and is moved by memories of his family to whom he is devoted. One key

recollection, for example, is the Christmas miracle/episode he dwells on soon after it's suggested that the finishing school mistress might be other than what she seems.¹⁹⁶ The narrative later presents him as a manipulator when he uses his stories to induct Samira into Claudette's lechery since it's vital that she starts seeing her in a sexual way in the build-up for the molestation scene Part One climaxes with.

Ziad's stories function as a meta anchor of the patriarchal element (one repressive tale within another) that underpins, and is critiqued by, the novel as a whole. The meta-layering of concrete details also serves to tell the story, rather than act as a background to it. The complex history of the louvered screens is a case in point. Through the screens we not only see Claudette in a purposeful state of undress, and witness the crass of the squatters and/or militiamen whose intrusion on the house seems less forbidding since it is rendered visible, but also the story of the flâneuse as a conscious observer, or more precisely a seditious social and sexual voyeur.

The voyeuristic gaze is empowering to a certain extent as it enables Samira and Claudette to both expose and negotiate the constraints that surround them and, in doing so, find a viable, albeit tenuous and unconventional, permutation of home. For Claudette, the reinvented attic is more than a literal shelter or an observatory actuating a semblance of control in the masculinist environment of wartime Lebanon. It is integral to the plan to ensnare Samira's affections and loyalty, and cobble their potential relationship. "At least I have you," Claudette says,¹⁹⁷ and her art.

The way the story is constructed allows Samira, as a postcolonial-feminist flâneuse, to discover as she comes of age that deliberate voyeurism can be reversible, and sudden, so that a great deal of care must be taken to be able to resort to flânerie for empowerment or for escape – for negotiating home. Since the young and inexperienced Samira sees her relationship with Ziad as a portal of possibilities, sexual awakening, and emotional support, she imagines Claudette's house as a refuge from the straitlaced attitudes of the village. And yet the notion of art-as-life is enacted as the paintings reverse the gaze of the flâneuse, her fate approximating that of the characters in the artwork.

As the story closes, the reader imagines Samira, as she has been for most of the story, transposed from her perch in the attic, through the curtain bisecting the anteroom below, and finally through the *trompe l'oeil* (hence sham) curtain of the seraglio on the wall. The predicament of the naked odalisque, as she is gazed at unknowingly by the sultan, mirrors her

own structured fate. Hence, the narrative reveals the poetics of the attic as a tactical intersection of causative opposites – the tacit locus where vicarious escape and resultant downfall, home and hell, unwind.

Since Samira is aware of the cultural constraints of her setting which she tries to negotiate through the finishing school, and subsequently the attic where so many gazes intersect and expose hidden realities and ulterior motives, the attic-as-sanctuary becomes at one point a home lodged in mnemonic arbitrage, a notion encountered in Alameddine's novel as well. As Gaston Bachelard has noted, there is a strong link between home, being, and memory, so that he defines the "house image," which in this case can be extrapolated to Claudette's makeshift attic, as "the topography of our intimate being,"¹⁹⁸ an image that clearly connects with the emotional itinerary of the flâneuse. In this sense, home is not only an experienced site but also an imagined projection with a "composite image of 'protected intimacy.'"¹⁹⁹ This serves to enhance the conceptual home by "[firming] up the present by experiencing it as a memory, by experiencing it from the future as a moment in the past."²⁰⁰ At this early stage in the novel, Samira's fantasy of returning to the attic, older, stronger, and freer ratifies this point.

On her part, Claudette appears as a theatrical artist, whether inside or outside the house, calibrating her performance according to its audience, in a way that makes Samira's retrospective reflection on these episodes concomitant with Brighenti's depiction of flânerie as a vector for appraising performative spaces, in this case the village and its prime "performer" Claudette, as "a spectacle."²⁰¹ Madame's relationship to and interaction with the different segments of her home (the kitchen, the anteroom, the nettle coop, the attic) shows a symbiosis of sorts between her own self, an engaged and purposeful tableau-vivant, and these spaces. The *trompe l'oeil* technique deployed through the art in the house and in the garage undergirds a conflated double entendre: the deception of illusion, a key element of Claudette's plot, and the illusion of deception evident in Samira's assumption that her louvered gaze reveals Claudette as the object of scrutiny, or even pity. "She must feel lonely," she tells Ziad,²⁰² which, in a way, is also true.

The art in the house, like Claudette's approach to achieving her ends, is deceitful, a truth Claudette herself suggests, telling Samira the artwork presents an altered reality or realities (that of the Orientalist artist's), since in effect Claudette conjures the art, and the cultivated veneer of culture, art appreciation, and refinement, to skew people's perception of her own reality, directly affected by the patriarchal setup that has governed her life. In this sense, a postcolonial reading

of the *trompe l'oeil* exposes it as integral to the plot since it is the main artwork Claudette uses to recruit Samira to her favor, employing it first as a conversation opener, and a shaper of atmosphere, through which she flatters Samira and wins her over, and then refers to it at different intervals to guide Samira's sexual experiences with Ziad. She even creates a parallel between the odalisque in the painting and her own predicament with her husband, who watched her discreetly as she pleased herself with the nettles in her bedroom, and later Samira's own situation, after Claudette takes over the role of the "sultan" and becomes surveyor rather than surveyed.

The *objets d'art* themselves are of dual significance. First, they serve as props for Claudette's spectacles, whether hers or those she orchestrates through and in the attic. They are also imbued with meaning of their own since it's the cultivation of refined taste (Claudette even tells Samira that "art is like pets," the sole interest she shared with her husband), which sustains her own existence, hence the finishing school and, perhaps more literally, the artifacts that are her only belongings. The irony of Claudette's lifestyle and the values she professes in a setting tarnished by the reality of war provide context to the only sanctuary she knows well, that of the art and aesthetic sensibilities she teaches and preaches. From these she can draw solace and tease out a histrionic sense of home, which compounded with the invigorating possibility of a queer relationship with a younger woman, is ultimately all the more poignant for being quasi-deranged.

In a sense the obsession with or framing of art for self-seeking purposes has damaged Claudette as well. Samira's narration ironizes Claudette's use of the art since Claudette is always already aware of the contention, and oppression, implicit to the Orientalist tropes that much of this artwork embodies:

Tante Claudette called it *chinoiserie chic*, the product of Europeans' fancies of what the East looked like. 'And what an exquisite imagination,' she had said.²⁰³

As Claudette gazes with Samira upon the *trompe l'oeil* from the Spanish Civil War, or even that in the anteroom, one gets an impression that, to different extents, both women have been harmed by the militancy, repression, and violence that shape masculinist settings and shape lives and livelihoods in peace (the harem scene) and wartime (the Spanish Civil War lynching). The nuanced postcolonial-feminist gaze of the flâneuse makes it clear that there's more to

Claudette than a mere manipulator. It predicates the weight of her actions on the situation she finds herself in after her husband, even in death, exerts a control on her life and restricts her movement. Samira's memories juxtapose mysterious, and mystified, hearsay from the village with her own more intimate conversations at finishing school to reveal the couple's troubled relationship – Claudette has been in a sexless marriage for years, and her deceased husband, in his own respect, is arguably a patriarch keen on upholding the status quo. She describes him as “a stern man, and above all else an intellectual, but art isn't always life. I was lucky he consummated our wedding, *chérie*; in marrying me he had gotten what he wanted, a cultured companion at his service, not a wife.”²⁰⁴ He has used his money to calibrate his wife's, later his widow's, existence, the same way Claudette would subvert the “male gaze” years after.

Necessarily, finishing school run by Madame in her husband's home(town) would have been inconceivable during his lifetime. His agency in seeking to mould her role as his wife, later his widow, and her desires is clear from the way he treated her, wanting to control her sexuality to his satisfaction. His depiction as a presumed asexual whose main interest is art (he isn't drawn to women, particularly, and no hint is given of latent same-sex sentiments) does not undermine his position as a patriarch but endows it with a different coloring. The use of the nettles within the context of the village reveals the extent of his manipulations and the potential of creative thinking to harm and hem in. His amour-propre, enhanced by serving as town *zaim* with a cultured bride by his side, means that any inkling that his wife, even as a widow, might be deviant in any way would be injurious to the persona he has created for himself.

Through the communally acclaimed finishing school, Claudette reinvents herself and fulfills her fantasies. To do so, she exploits the same patriarchal parameters that have heretofore constrained her: the clout of money and social position. These she would also employ to recruit Nohad's loyalty, remunerating her enough to eke a living but not to indulge or feel secure (Nohad steals nettles to save for food), and later Ziad's cooperation. Inducting him into her plan is made believable by the very content of his stories of home – the reader has been privy to the fact that although his devotion to his family might be genuine, his moral compass has been skewed since childhood, a side-effect of his own rearing. Even the fiction he invents about Aunt Maud is staunchly patriarchal.

That Claudette uses one man's need of money to respond to a situation that shaped her adulthood due to a similar need completes, in theory, the reversal in the normative arc upon

which patriarchy operates in the Levant. Ironically, when she pleads with Samira not to forget the lessons she has learned during finishing school, she is also setting the tone for the events that transpire later. By excavating this very personal trove of lived experiences from the summer of 1984, Samira emerges as the ultimate *flâneuse* since the narrative voice privileges her insights across the entire section as she revisits her childhood and her village, its streets and its homes. In doing so, she challenges the oft-vaunted topos of the village/town as the nostalgic haven the Lebanese countryside is often depicted as in the postwar imaginary,²⁰⁵ and of childhood itself within this context.

Samira's memories bear story-worthy resonance since the impact of this episode remains indelible and moulds her life and home-as-*flâneuse*. In revisiting and rewriting the finishing school, she reveals how the world it represents – the various exhortations of manners and etiquette and appearances – which has engendered extensive status-seeking across Lebanon's pre-war and postwar checkered history,²⁰⁶ is defunct, much like the prized teaspoons of the Shah. In relation to lived experience, Samira exposes its hypocrisy and rewrites it through her observations as it truly was: The 'surveilleur' is 'surveilled,' ultimately, whether that be the 'school,' or the repressive hometown from which Claudette's antics, and the attic narrative, devolve.

The de facto role of patriarchy in (re)producing itself, and spawning (remarkably) flawed female personas, has been addressed in critical literature discussing the context of the Middle East.²⁰⁷ In this sense, the roots of Claudette's setup might have scaffolded her route to obtain social fulfillment and personal gratification ("roots and routes" being a staple of her idiolect), and yet the notion of preparing nubile mentees for their destinies by enhancing their matrimonial value is itself patriarchal. Even though her same-sex desires might have been a preexisting possibility, the emotional void in her arranged marriage has borne a toll of its own, and she admits her husband becomes aware of her tendencies, which must remain in check, if the content of his will is any indication.

Therefore, the contortions Madame devises are commensurate with the fact that indulging female desire of any sort – Samira's crusade as well – outside the sanctums of marriage and family would not be straightforward by any means. Within the cloisters of her setting, seducing a young woman like Samira who looks older than her years, and inducting her into a relationship of sorts, would seem more potentially achievable than finding leeway for her passions, or indeed

a theoretical partner, closer to her own age. Samira, in her own fashion, is no stranger to the paradox of exploiting aspects of patriarchy, even as she tries to resist it, to realize her ends. This becomes clear in the subsequent sections of the novel.

Reclaiming shame: the attic revisited

Eve Sedgwick argues that shame can actually be enabling as it provides the impetus for devising alternatives to overcoming the source of the shame, and that's something I analyze henceforth in relation to Samira's character(ization) and the decisions/journeys she undertakes as flâneuse (both intra, the physical, purposeful, journeys on the streets of both the village and the city, and inter, the journey between countries that is a decisive one and which we read about in Part Three, Risk).

Samira's urban experience of Beirut, like Teta's and Aaliya Saleh's, exposes through her gaze what Christiane Schlote describes as a "place in which apparent modernity is merely a front behind which class and gender inequalities, cosmopolitan arrogance and sheer cruelty remain dominant forces."²⁰⁸ Nowhere is this clearer than in her listless stroll of the city, trying to sort her thoughts before facing her husband with the truth about his mother's adultery. In the process, she witnesses a child bride refugee wedding and the cruelty of the police officers whose words evoke the shame of her own coming of age which was the very trigger that had started this journey to Beirut in 1984, and now in 2012 (novel time).

Helen Malson reads female dieting and weight loss from a feminist perspective, arguing that women who abstain from eating often feel isolated which worsens their predicament since the corresponding record of female experience is either absent or mainly read from a pathological, clinical angle. In Samira's case it's almost a statement she makes in the post-finishing-school years as a reaction to the constant pressure she is under to conceive. Thin women don't conceive, as Teta tells her. It's also a way of distancing herself, at least physically, from the traditional village girl image she has come to abhor. And in many way it works, even if it has the effect of othering her in the perception of her husband's hometown residents – "I could recognize that strange hair anywhere"²⁰⁹ (Samira herself is conscious of how her look sets her apart, hence her fear at meeting new people who would be likely to suspect her of wanton

behavior when she comes upon Nanig's house by accident and wants to seek help with directions) – or attracting prurient attention.

First, in seeking to digitally connect with Ramzi to whom she is attached, and thus revitalize a lost or weakened sense of home through her only child, Samira has to negotiate the city streets at night. This is a time frame that Seidman reveals is most risky to the street-walking flâneuse.²¹⁰ Accordingly, Samira tries to make herself as inconspicuous as possible downplaying her physical appearance, and even then, as the only woman at the internet café, a typically Beirut male haunt as Sebastien Abdallah tells us, her gender makes her stand out. In this endeavor to reestablish a lost connection in a virtual dimension, Samira approximates the figure of a digital flâneuse, or that of the virtual hacker, a term newly theorized by Tarek Al-Ariss to inform readings of Arab literature invested with literary explorations of the potential of “hacking the modern” in an increasingly virtual world.²¹¹

The contrast between Samira's journey to Beirut upon her disgrace in the village, and the more purposeful, even if frenetic, trip to the city upon finding that Teta has a female lover introduces the adult trajectory of Samira as a flâneuse. In both journeys, the actuating trigger is the same – the (re)lived experience of shame. Shame got her banished from the village in the first instance, and the trip was not her choice. The second journey however (2012) is one that reveals a certain level of agency and the start of a reclamation process of this long-hidden affective shame, therefore intersecting with her emotional itinerary as flâneuse, even as, up till this moment in the narrative, Samira still believes in the misleading home being one in which her husband can offer explanations and reassurance that “all will be fine,” a staple of his speech as an experienced salesman.

The reprisals she enacts in face of Mazen's deceit, and the shock of Teta's affair, vectorize, to borrow the term from Ette again, her affective growth as a flâneuse; in other words her emotional itinerary grows and develops as a result of the perhaps contentious plan she hatches to exact a kind of revenge on a family unit, and through it on a system, that has seemed to fail her both as a young girl/teenager and as an adult woman. The narrative traces the reversal in power dynamic as the closer Samira draws to the end of her plan, even as the timing for Teta's eviction was ultimately out of her hands, the more enfeebled and less trenchant the ability of patriarchy to constrain, and deceive, her appears to be.

The padded boy-doll shifts from being a sex toy and a conception mascot designed for Mazen's pleasure, and a parody of her spousal bed, to one that makes a mockery of Mazen himself, his bombastic talker approach, his prevarication, his expectations, and his conceit. And for the first time, Samira appears to have reclaimed a sense of personal agency, since it is her actions/choices which are propelling her, and the plot, forward, and sexual agency too as she assumes full control of the bed Mazen covets.

From age 15 to 42, Samira has had ample time to mature and fully comprehend the ills that constrain her, prompting her final decision to break from this system. She might have killed herself at the young and vulnerable age when her initial story of the attic unfolds, a story which Ramzi shares with Teta prompting her concern, but Samira's mindset has shifted by the end of the novel to more solid ground. If anything the attic becomes indeed the mnemonic home that cements her fantasy of a victorious return, even as the latter, with the advantage of life experience and maturity, is no longer a return associated with a once-empowering attachment to a man through whom she sought a vicarious escape from the different plights or predicaments she has had to negotiate all her life.

Always and throughout, the spatiality of the attic, and its different limitations (restricted size, reduced mobility²¹² – again – its intersection as an enabling meeting site for Samira's forbidden affair and Claudette's fetishized, voyeuristic home as well as storage space for the art that articulates her sense of home; in fact that the locality of the attic reduces the mobility of the flâneuse serves as a harbinger in theory of what will come after) conceptualizes home as a thought anchored in Aciman's understanding of mnemonic arbitrage, itself a notion Samira revises at the end of the novel as it coincides with her return to the attic, on her own, to reclaim her shame and evict the demons of her past.

Indeed, perhaps nowhere else in the novel is the symbiosis between the physical and emotional journeys that constitute the overall itinerary of the flâneuse more obvious than in the concluding scene. Samira's final act of street-walking to the mansion that is the finishing school – its now innocuous nettle garden and ageing mistress, the flowering tea, the discarded *trompe l'oeil* in the garage – parallels the culmination of her emotional trajectory from a shamed teenager to a defiant (would-be) divorcee in a way that finally allows her to conquer the memories of the attic:

Samira willed herself to pause the images.

One and all they froze in her mind. They chilled and pierced, then crumbled into smithereens like crushed ice, floating away as rats aboard a foodless ship wrecked at sea. They were hers no longer.²¹³

Hence, this mental act of “fixing the past,” as Rubenstein puts it, “enables her to move beyond it to authorize her life,”²¹⁴ a move linked to a new mental space/state in which the flâneuse attempts to remain aloft, and aloof, from the constraints of yesteryear. When Samira takes off the necklace that has once been imposed on Nanig as a way of concealing the violence meted against her and thus perpetuate Anwar’s perception as a forbearing and generous, even if unfortunate, community pillar, a necklace she has impulsively put on when entering the attic, almost as if it could somehow protect from the memories of the ordeal experienced there, the message is clear: she has fully exorcized the memories of this experience or at least redefined it according to her own terms as it was a stepping ground to realizing that protection by male association is in fact an illusion.

Samira is ready to forge her own path and bear its consequences rather than remain on the shadow in the periphery of unwholesome, if not abusive, relationships. Also, the suggestion the narrative ends with about Teta and Samira’s possible reconciliation and Teta getting her necklace back points in the direction of Samira’s evolving mindset away from patriarchy in that she is willing to let go of the last physical link (itself, as we shall see, an object that is negotiated and redefined in the novel by Teta and Nanig, even before it comes to Samira) to the past and thus move forward in her life unshackled by all its memories. It is only once Teta and Samira both abandon the normative masks they have worn all their lives, namely those of their prescribed roles as wives and mothers, that they’re finally able to achieve a sense of home derived from reclaiming their turbulent pasts. This is especially significant once the narrative reveals that they’ve been willing to reconcile with each other.

Teta, as we see in the next section of the thesis, no longer bound to a pillar of the community, is finally able to stand for herself and challenge the villagers’ verdict through an unequivocal, and honest, means: the integrity her past as a rigorous yet caring schoolteacher is marked with is the barrier that prevents the young women of the village, many of whom were her

students, from beating her with their clogs.²¹⁵ The timing of the conscious separation from their menfolk and trying to consolidate their wellbeings away from this repressive framework coincides with Samira's final return to Claudette's mansion, and to the attic where her ordeal saw light.

By cutting ties with Mazen and his family, and realizing this as the route to her new being-at-home persona, away from the vengeful plan that only caused her and her son more distress, Samira is able to visit the site of her preadolescent "home" that housed all the painful memories she is able to relinquish and evict just as the attic is about to house/home her final encounter with her equally beleaguered, and now similarly vindicated, mother-in-law. The act of exchanging the lapis necklace in return for Teta's apology is crucial. This final exchange is likely to grant them both a sense of peace integral to any state of mind concomitant with home, a home that ultimately returns by time and detours, tragedy and street-walking, to the contested site that is the attic.

The itinerary of the flâneuse is thus fraught with caveats imposed by the system through which she navigates, or walks, literally, but which seem to be necessary evils that underpin this intervention. In the end, having exposed the social and sexual hypocrisy of her respective milieu, and having tried to negotiate the latter to the best of her ability, each flâneuse is finally able to achieve a sense of freedom, and subsequently of home. Only Claudette, who never manages to break free of the patriarchal carapace where she has dwelled most of her adult life, having become attuned to the vices it both invites and operates, is portrayed in the lethargy of her old age, no longer able to employ the very resources that have once been foisted upon her by her controlling asexual husband, and which she subsequently taps into to appease her pining for passion, attention, and affection (the furniture, the paintings, the nettles, etc.). Her acquiescence in this lifestyle, and its (post)colonial underpinning, however challenging it was to relinquish it since her livelihood was attached to it, means that her progress, much like her movement, has been static and, ultimately, unviable.

The theme of coming of age culled from my creative narrative study²¹⁶ informs that of Samira and her son Ramzi in the novel. Both mother and son learn that unlearning romantic scripts – the danger of romanticizing or idolizing anyone, whether that be a role model, a public figure like Claudette, or a family member like Teta – is a key factor of coming of age. In a sense the cultivated unwillingness to pick up the signs that a person is not what s/he seems is rooted in

a similar aversion to questioning or challenging a status quo that a character has known all his or her life. In this sense, it has been inconceivable to imagine Claudette outside the image her husband's position has cast her in, the same way it's a personal and emotional challenge to Ramzi to see his grandmother other than the loving friend and mentor she has been throughout his childhood, even when there have been signs that Teta might have a life or interests or needs of her own. For example, one scene that illustrates this dissonance between Teta's visible role as a family backbone/a retired schoolteacher and the less visible intimacies of her private life is that in which she seems unaware, or at least less aware, of Ramzi and Rami during her argument with Nanig at the theatre.²¹⁷ Conversely, the process of coming of age also reveals how the image imputed by the status quo upon these women has harmed them in various ways, and therefore serves as a catalyst for an eventual redemption or rapprochement.

There is evidence in the novel that Ramzi, similar to Uncle Rami, is considered somewhat of a misfit by both his father, with whom he has an uneasy relationship, and his grandfather. Mazen, like Jiddo, doesn't seem particularly involved in the upbringing of Ramzi and has little contact with Rami, both loners due to their untraditional and eccentric subaltern masculinities. A strong thematic thread that permeates the narrative is the insistence and urgency of Samira conceiving another child – a boy – and we see that, almost graphically, when Mazen who has been having sex with Samira enters the bathroom of the apartment in Beirut to find Ramzi brooding over his grandmother's same-sex affair,²¹⁸ a topic Mazen refuses to comment on despite his son's need for some guidance or reassurance on, as Ramzi sees it, a major paradigm shift affecting his coming of age, much like Claudette's exposed same-sex desire marks Samira's in 1984.

Jiddo, much like Mazen, shares the view that Ramzi's proclivities for not-unwomanly pursuits (botany, as opposed to hawking, for instance) make him somehow inadequate. Even as Samira outs Teta to Jiddo, he shifts gear from responding to her direct need for reassurance that her own traumatic past, even as he is oblivious to it, will not somehow be revisited upon her son, to reminding her that she ought to look after her own family and bring another boy into the family. He thus dismisses her objection – “What about Ramzi? He's your grandchild too.”²¹⁹ Arguably, therefore, this representation of Ramzi's character extends Frank Lentricchia's theory about cultural feminization as a preliminary stage vital for the birth of a male feminist mindset. Lee Edelman explains this theory in his essay “Redeeming the Phallus: Wallace Stevens, Frank

Lentricchia, and the Politics of (Hetero)Sexuality,” writing that “[i]n submitting (or more pointedly in failing to submit) to the patriarchal demand to be masculine,” a male feminist “experiences ‘becoming masculine’ as cultural feminization.”²²⁰

If cultural feminization, as Lentricchia argues, creates in the male feminist an empathetic understanding of feminine concerns and of the once-othered female, textual feminization, namely the (not-so-)subtle perception of Ramzi as not masculine, or not mainstream or conventional enough, indicates that unlike most of the other male characters in the novel, he has not internalized the (hetero)sexism of patriarchy and is therefore able to not only overcome his initial shock at discovering that his grandmother had a female lover, and that his mother had resorted to devious means to reveal his discovery of exactly that, but also to catalyze a much needed, and theoretically apposite, reconciliation between the two women at the end. Because he is possibly the only male character in the novel unaffected by the taint of patriarchy, due to his young age perhaps,²²¹ he is able to mediate the necessary reconciliation through which it becomes evident that Samira’s emotional itinerary as a flâneuse has reached a full arc once her break from patriarchy is complete. Ramzi thus serves to anchor the narrative both structurally – Teta’s affair is outed on the day he runs, and wins, the race in support of the refugees – and thematically, since his coming of age keeps the plot aloft by forming a bridge between two flâneuses who have suffered inordinately from, and been pitted against each other by, a patriarchy they have sought to resist in their different ways.

It is important to remember that the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), which predated the ongoing Syrian Civil War that hovers over *I Am Not Naked*, created a great deal of covert resentment among the Lebanese regarding the Syrian state which sent its army into Lebanon, invited by the Lebanese Government to help establish peace towards the end of the war, only to take political control of the country after the war, through censorship and political persecution of dissidents;²²² in fact, many pointed accusing fingers at the Syrian regime in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination in 2005. The result of this resentment has been an almost generalized cloying disdain toward Syrian nationals in Lebanon most of whom worked menial jobs on postwar construction sites, namely in the ironic endeavor to rebuild a nation their home state had contributed to destroying. Sadly, this is an attitude common to most Lebanese, regardless of sect or social class.

Within this classist and xenophobic context,²²³ Samira's choice of Ziad (albeit a Christian Palestinian) and then of Mazen (a Syrian) as partners, and vectors, for her homing desire is therefore unconventional. Her main reason for choosing them was seeking the security and stability, emotional and even physical, that her own family home did not provide. In this sense, Samira's estrangement from home catapulted her into an even more insidious one, the promise of patriarchy to offer succor and wholeness to the individual female. All these influences end up shaping her as the determined character who, to adapt and feminize the term coined by El-Ariss, is a *faddāḥa*²²⁴ or an exposé whose gaze reveals and seeks a space, a situation, and/or a set-up where the feeling of being-at-home can be triggered and sustained.

iii. The Queer(ed) Flâneuse in *I Am not Naked* (2016) and Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon* (2012)

Much like feminist criticism, queer theory bears an oppositional design upon society, given that it is "informed by resistance to homophobia and heterosexism, as well as the ideological and institutional practices of heterosexual privilege."²²⁵ Arguably, therefore, queering the flâneuse extends the critique this gendered form of flânerie can perform in relation to representations of patriarchy in literary texts. Arab literature in the 21st century rarely narrativizes subversive themes related to female sexuality, even before the start of the Arab Spring in 2010 and the backlash on women's rights it seemed to trigger,²²⁶ a fact that has been noted by literary critics and cultural commentators alike.

Sahar Amer points out that although medieval lesbians achieved an appreciable level of prominence both in the literary and cultural life of the Islamic caliphate as early as the 10th century, at a time the Norman Invasion of England had not even occurred – they are almost always named in the literature of this epoch and were, in public life, authors and lawyers, traders and doctors²²⁷ – female homosexuality is practically absent from 20th and 21st-century Arab Middle Eastern literature. Amer argues that lesbianism in the Arab world is a centuries-old, even if a currently proscribed and often underreported, social reality. Accordingly, "Arab lesbians were both named and visible in medieval Arabic literature."²²⁸ Amer delves into medieval Arab fictions to show how female homosexuality, including lesbian-like women and transvestites, and homosexuality in general, was more tolerated in Muslim countries in the Middle Ages than in

contemporary times. In comparison, there is no similar material documenting same-sex love or desire among women in the literary canons of medieval Europe.

Queer readings of sacrosanct and traditional texts, such as the Bible and the Qu'ran, haven't entered the censorious Arab mainstream and thus receive some level of protection in the form of Anglophone academic scholarship;²²⁹ likewise, creative works, such as art installations and dystopian creative writing, have also provided leeway for surviving the censor's hatchet.²³⁰ Censorship on taboo topics, widely proscribed across the Arab Middle East, remains as high as societal attitudes to non-conformists, sexual or religious, are straitlaced. On 25 September 2016, as I was writing the final chapter of this thesis, a prominent Jordanian writer named Nahed Hattar was assassinated outside a courtroom in Amman where he was formally charged with apostasy for posting on his Facebook page a caricature of an Islamic State jihadist in heavens, lying in bed with two women and treating God as his servant.²³¹ It is perhaps not surprising then that mentions, let alone salient readings of subversive queer women in recent Lebanese and Syrian literature, and in Arab fictions in general, are sparse.²³²

Unlike Arab lesbians in the medieval Islamic caliphates, those in *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009), the only 21st-century written record available that collates female same-sex experience in the present-day Arab Middle East, are neither named nor visible. The non-fiction stories in the collection are anonymously penned to protect their authors' identities. Published by Meem in 2009, this is the only collection of narratives to date penned entirely by self-identified Lebanese and Arab queers. All the narrators therein, mostly lesbians, identify as queer and feel shame(d) for being as such. Dina Georgis argues though that in expressing their homosexual desire and the shame it spawned in writing, albeit anonymous, the writers' dissonant voices present the potential to revoke this shame by mapping a collective queer-female experience and therefore setting in motion a narrative thread of hope for change.²³³

In my novel, however, the "lesbian" flâneuses have been queered/othered as women from the onset, and only secondarily so as women who exhibit and seek a feeling-at-home through same-sex desire or relationships. The marginalization of Nanig and Jiddo's treatment of Teta almost as a housemaid illustrate this initial queering that unfolds at the locus of the oppressive home-as-place where the women live, as well as in the public imaginary, given the lies about Anwar the community is primed to endorse. Moreover, the tradition of queering same-sex desire by ostracizing it as deviant means that the acceptance of queers in the Arab Middle East is often

congruent with a passive aesthetic of invisibility.²³⁴ Georgis and Alameddine present a lesbian and gay perspective, one critical, the other creative, respectively, on the exhortation to suppress non-heterosexual desire in public life.²³⁵

Accruing a queer dimension to feminist criticism is therefore necessary, as both Rubenstein²³⁶ and Barry remind us, since most feminist studies in the last century tended to “universalize the experience of white, middle class, urban, heterosexual [Western] women,”²³⁷ and therefore colluded with what Bonnie Zimmerman has described as “the perceptual screen of heterosexism.”²³⁸ Neither Teta in my novel nor Yazbek’s Aliyah conforms to this paradigm of heterosexist whiteness. Aliyah in particular is its antithesis – a black, lower class, marginalized non-heterosexual Arab female. The fact that Teta and Aliyah are Arab also means that a queer reading that privileges the Western inclination to foreground pride visibility in defying patriarchy is unviable. Instead, I show how Dina Georgis’s queer postcolonial approach to *Bareed Mista3jil*, the only work of lesbian creative nonfiction in post-postwar Lebanon, is useful in my own reading of *I Am Not Naked* and *Cinnamon* since it responds to the local realities of the characters.

Georgis’s postcolonial insight finds echo, novelistically, in Alameddine’s early fiction, especially in *Koolaid*s and *The Perv*. As I argue in my article (see Appendix 3), it is this very yearning to Western ideals of queerness which paradoxically serves an emasculating role in the diaspora. It is, as Alameddine aptly puts it, a “European complex,” a visceral tension exemplified by “an unhealthy fascination coupled with simultaneous disdain.”²³⁹ I thus marshal key concepts of anti-essential queer and gender identity by Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Adrienne Rich to read the characterization and treatment of the queer flâneuse in Yazbek’s novel and my own.

As Sedgwick suggests, the rerouting of same-sex desire in queer feminist theory, from an appraisal of the lesbian experience to a kind of theoretical resistance that stands for all resistance, threatens to revert, in theory, to the very essentialism that lesbian critics have theorized against. Hanan al-Hashimi, the upper-class but (still subordinate) queer flâneuse in *Cinnamon*, reveals the dynamic involved in female homosexual encounters in modern-day Syria:

Most of the girls had married young and each of them had a female lover. Very few people knew exactly what was going on,

since their gatherings were monopolised by women, and the men felt quite secure when the wives were in female company, even if there was something unsettling about their friendship. So long as the relationship remained a secret, there was no problem, but as soon as rumours started, the husband would sever the relationship between his wife and her companion.²⁴⁰

This contingent acceptance of queer-female relationships would coincide with what Sedgwick describes as the essentialist “nimbus of the sexual” not being amenable for extension, as is clearly the case in the patriarchal settings I examine, beyond “the boundaries of discrete” and discreet “genital acts,”²⁴¹ in a way that disbars the formation of a full-fledged queer identity. The latter, or an openly queer lifestyle within a patriarchal context, becomes especially problematic, both in theory and practice, even if female homosexuality as both Guardi and Habib indicate, and as Hanan’s narrative suggests, often unfolds in Arab societies as a byproduct of the very patriarchy it aims to escape.

Since compulsory heterosexuality, as Sara Ahmed argues, is “a mechanism for the reproduction of culture,” then “queer as a sexual orientation ‘queers’ more than sex, just as other kinds of queer effects can in turn end up ‘queering’ sex.”²⁴² These “queer effects” in relation to Aliyah are the multiple facets of otherness that, as I argue, are in line with the hetero-normative contingency of invisibility, which, albeit an affront to queer desire, perhaps explains the high level of quasi-aggressive physicality in Hanan and Aliyah’s relationship, and the maneuvering of this (almost addictive) physicality in the pursuit of a mental space of “home.”

Yazbek’s novel has no mention of war or militancy but is still within a painfully hypersexed and hypermasculine context, modern day Damascus possibly right before the war started. Unlike Alameddine’s it has a very strong theme of female homosexuality, which is not to say that it’s a proto-queer, or queer-by-default, text since it makes use of a nuanced approach to queering the lead characters Hanan al-Hashimi and her black maid Aliyah, both Syrian. It first equates queerness with otherness, which both women experience and suffer from regardless of their very different class affiliations, and then redefines the term as an enabling one once they start a same-sex affair, one they are conscious is taboo but at the same time conducive to a

mutually much-coveted feeling of wellbeing and being-at-home aligned with Rubenstein's version of home.

Indeed, the gaze of class/capital in *Cinnamon* is both gendered and ubiquitous, and imputes attributes of queerness as otherness, so much so that, for the female characters, it is more disabling than empowering, even in the upper class set-up of the unhappily married Hanan. Hanan has been forced by her family to wed her wealthy cousin Anwar al-Hashimi whom she describes as an old “crocodile” only interested in “mount[ing] her” to procreate and thus keep the al-Hashimi wealth within the family – the very *raison d’être* of the marriage in the first place.²⁴³ Yazbek writes: “The crocodile would put his hand over her mouth, telling her to be quiet as he mounted her. He would stay there in silence a few minutes then get up, wash and curl back into his shell.”²⁴⁴

The problematic of the mother-daughter relationship in Lebanese and Syrian households is one we have also seen in *An Unnecessary Woman* and in *I Am Not Naked*. Hanan’s mother has trained her to be subservient and avoid critical thinking,²⁴⁵ an attitude and expectation exacerbated by her marriage to Anwar, who, like Aaliya’s husband, is also impotent. The mother figure here, as in Alameddine’s, is indicted for her collusive role in enforcing hetero-normative conformity. The role of mothers in raising their daughters as subordinates to their menfolk is highlighted in the narrative:

After her marriage, the only way Hanan knew how to keep within the limits laid down for her was to become more subservient to others and steer further away from any internal reflection.²⁴⁶

As Hanan’s mother tells her, “Any man is better than no man at all,”²⁴⁷ hence her botched attempts to instruct her daughter the art of seduction in the bedroom to please Anwar, her son-in-law. Notably, there is a need here to be a conscious and artful seductress/temptress who, in using “coquetry and prudence”²⁴⁸ simultaneously, negotiates the fine line between the desirable wife and the lascivious prostitute. This, in a sense, is also a cultural anxiety foisted upon the mother of Hanan’s maid Aliyah: if she doesn’t appease Aliyah’s father or satisfy him sexually, it will result

in her being excoriated by the community, as she will be perceived as having pushed him toward a sinful path – into the arms of a prostitute – having been unable to meet his desires.²⁴⁹

Hanan's background resonates to a certain extent with that of Aaliya Saleh, Alameddine's feminist and postcolonial flâneuse. Like Aaliya, Hanan has had to contend with the guilt, nurtured by her mother, of not having been born male and is raised to adhere to her family's expectations: a well-mannered "finished" type of girl reminiscent of Madame Claudette's pupils, pliable to their families', and subsequently their husbands', wishes. The brunt of these constraints sometimes (nearly) elicited screams from Hanan at the idealized image of femininity cast for her. Earlier in the text, we learn that punishments for her childhood mishaps are akin to solitary confinement in her bedroom, which convinces her that less civilized measures such as beatings are enviable since they involve some kind of emotional content.²⁵⁰ Her mother, having suppressed her maternal instincts, never even hugged her,²⁵¹ and her husband, impotent, only seeks to produce an heir. Arguably, this background, exacerbated by its grassroots gaze of class and capital, has produced the Hanan al-Hashimi the novel opens with: an upper class Syrian woman, overwrought and hysterical at the idea that her maid, also her lover, has been sleeping with, or at least has attempted to arouse, her husband and is therefore betraying her.

Hanan's decision to evict Aliyah from the house aggravates her condition. She has demonic nightmares accompanied by bouts of vomiting, appears in a state of delirium almost as if deranged, and is described as lifeless.²⁵² These somatic symptoms of the macro-narrative that is patriarchy might be in line with Root's notion of "insidious trauma" discussed earlier in the thesis; novelistically, they serve both to reinforce Hanan's estrangement from a husband and a sexless union, in parallel to her own psychological need of and sexual desire for Aliyah, with and through whom, I argue, she achieves a sense of home, and whose eviction she regrets and, by the close of the novel, seeks to revoke. Hanan, as Yazbek characterizes her, is therefore a stunted flâneuse – her class and social positioning enforce stasis on her, and yet it is the sexual and psychological rapture that attaches itself to her queer relationship that is associated with the liberating aspect of the emotional itinerary intrinsic to queer flânerie as I read it, an intervention that achieves a fuller arc in *Cinnamon's* creative treatment of Aliyah's character.

Discussing the Lebanese war novel of the 1980s, Evelyne Accad demonstrates how "sexual relations conceived in a system of power struggles and a structure of submission and domination will obviously result in rape and abuse of women."²⁵³ The relevance of the war

context Accad examines resonates with that in *I Am Not Naked*, forming a backdrop that cushions the abuse Teta is subject to upon her return to the village – Jiddo is chided for seeking to eschew “normal procedure” at the inquest into Teta’s “unnatural relations” on October 10, 2012, but is reminded that “in some ways [the ongoing war] makes things easier.”²⁵⁴

Even as Syria’s civil war is not represented in *Cinnamon*, the struggle to subsist in the al-Raml slums is a war in and of its own, and is often played out in the arena of sexuality where men impose their sexual agency, the only aspect of their lives they seem able to control, on women. This translates into daily incidents of sexual harassment, rape, beatings, and other forms of turpitude that the women in the novel, especially the black girl Aliyah, her mother, and her elder sister Aliyah Senior, are routinely subject to amidst a setting of abject poverty.

Before her father, an abusive man who hit his five children regularly,²⁵⁵ practically sold her off to the al-Hashimis,²⁵⁶ Aliyah used to live in the al-Raml slums in Damascus. Her only photo of her family is her most prized possession. She was beaten up by her father the day the photo was taken. Followed and attacked by a bushel of hungry boys for having a small bit of chocolate given to her by the foreign journalist who took the photo, Aliyah defended herself and, for this very reason, was subsequently pummeled by her father since the boys’ families had complained about her un-girlish behavior.²⁵⁷

Hence, Aliyah’s narration showcases a landscape of exceptional emotional and psychological aridity, right at the heart of her first home: Aliyah’s mother and siblings. Their dire socioeconomic conditions are only outmatched by the level of abuse enacted by the men who surround them, whether that be their father or the young boys or adult men in the surrounding neighborhoods. Age in the novel proves irrelevant to male abuse, which is to say that males, whether teenage, middle-aged, or even young boys, assert their precedence via a “phallogocentric model” for constructing and asserting masculinity, a notion bell hooks argues is a most “accessible way to assert masculine status” by “what the male does with his penis.”²⁵⁸

In the one-room tin structure that is their house, Aliyah’s father has aggressive sex in front of his children every night.²⁵⁹ Her mother has, by and large, been the family’s breadwinner and yet has no say at all in the running of the household. Like Aliyah, Aliyah Senior daydreams about their father’s death so that their mother’s physical and, especially, sexual suffering can be alleviated, a suffering extrapolated to the work setting as well – the mother has to let her boss at work fondle her but not have full intercourse so as to avoid incurring shame and family dishonor.

We later learn that Aliyah's father has beaten her sister Aliyah Senior, rendering her paralyzed for life, for having withheld her wages from him. When concerned neighbours tried to intervene, "he pulled down his trousers and thrust his genitalia in front of them," threatening that "if any of you sons of bitches come any closer, I'll make you eat... this!"²⁶⁰

The phallic notion of masculinity hooks presents, and *Cinnamon's* menfolk embody, applies to the Lebanese and Syrian contexts, as evidenced in literary criticism that explores gendered representations of men in Arab fiction.²⁶¹ Within the spirit of hook's argument, it is the impoverished Syrian woman in *Cinnamon* who is the "mule of the world." It is no surprise then that when Aliyah reclaims her agency, her cultivated ability to make a conscious decision to give her life a new thrust and direction through her new home, it is very much in the equally aggressive, and carnal, arena of sexuality – not with a man but a woman, her employer Hanan al-Hashimi. In doing so, she also collapses, albeit temporarily, the maid/mistress binary, a dynamic upheld by her abusive former male employers, as she inducts Hanan into aggressive sexual role play:

Who was Aliyah? Hanan wondered. Her servant? Really?
Who is she? Aliyah was the mistress of the house and Hanan knew
 it, but at what point their roles had reversed she couldn't recall.²⁶²

Yazbek even polarizes the physical depictions of Hanan and Aliyah, constantly reminding the reader that Aliyah's swarthy complexion stands in contrast to Hanan's whiteness and pallor, which in a sense heightens her fascination with and fetishization of Aliyah's maiden body and her dark-colored hands and fingers that "had once transformed Hanan al-Hashimi's nights into eternal pleasure, before she had turned her out into this new unknown."²⁶³ Aliyah, albeit reluctantly at first, comes to accept the fetishization Hanan imputes on her within the maid/mistress dynamic since it gives her leverage to negotiate and establish her own position in the household, and in doing so achieve a sense of security that creates a mental space of home.

The fetishized flâneuse, namely Aliyah and her orgasm-inducing fingers, is, in contrast to Anwar who is likened to a crocodile and to a coffin,²⁶⁴ nevertheless a child at the time the same-sex act first takes place. Aliyah is eleven when Hanan starts touching her intimately. She is apprehensive at first and then increasingly more pliant as years pass and she settles into the

relationship. Knowing that insects have fed on Aliyah's and her siblings' flesh as children,²⁶⁵ the gentle albeit purposeful prodding of Hanan's fingers against Aliyah's feels pleasurable and is laden with potential. Unlike Samira's trauma at the finishing school, and contrary to the abuse suffered at the hands of the men in Aliyah's past, physically, mentally, and sexually, Yazbek shows how the sexual acts in the protective confines of Hanan's bed (and bath) bear a liberation of sorts for the affection-starved, resourceful, and home-seeking Aliyah, even as she is sexualized by her employer who first uses an exotic gold-rimmed heirloom teacup and the novel title's cinnamon tea to seduce her.

In a sense, even as Aliyah doesn't choose in the first instance to be fetishized, she actively reinvents herself as such as she gets older, and her journey as a flâneuse thus takes a significant detour – embracing her sexualized persona imbues her with a sense of power and control over Hanan who becomes “an obedient child” in her embrace:

In bed, Hanan's features were quite different, as if the djinn had taken possession of her. She became like an infant, her eyes shimmering as her body began to relax.²⁶⁶

As Aliyah becomes nominally the “mistress” of the mansion and is allowed long leisurely hours to herself, a regimen fairly distinct from the fears and stressors of her past, the self-reinventing flâneuse through the “reparative imaginative vision” on which Rubenstein's conception of home is predicated²⁶⁷ is able to indulge a vicarious escape disbarred from her childhood, discovering the pleasure of reading and doing so voraciously using her employers' library as fodder for plotting homes different from what she has known.²⁶⁸ For example, Aliyah would imagine that “she was a spoilt granddaughter, whose grandmother would put on her gold-rimmed reading glasses, sit next to her copper-framed bed and tell her stories. In the middle of the night, she turned her fantasy to reality.”²⁶⁹ Hanan, in turn, finds home in Aliyah's body, a proximity she pines for and graphically recollects after prompting Aliyah's departure:

Every pore, scar, mole and hair, she remembered clearly.
Each curve, the roundness of her breasts, the arching of her
buttocks, the rise of her backside, her long thighs, she knew every

bit of the girl's body by heart, down to the glint in her eyes, which frightened her sometimes when their roles reversed.²⁷⁰

Thus, the narrative act of exploring the two women's same-sex relationship, and its implications on Aliyah's quotidian, shows how

*Hanan al-Hashimi had turned Aliyah's life on its head. She had cleansed her of her old self and purged her fears; she had removed every layer of anger and rubbed away the images of al-Raml with her fingers.*²⁷¹

Arguably, then, the very reversal in the fetishized maid/mistress dynamic establishes for Aliyah a semblance of home as a state of mind since the apparent safety, security, and quiescence in the role she has assumed at the al-Hashimis provide the emotional, or at least psychological, prowess needed to exorcise the fears of her turbulent childhood and the demons of her past, in such a way that even as the latter are exhumed in the homebound journey of the estranged flâneuse, around which the novel is structured, they have seemingly lost their former ability to vex and intimidate her. The process of self-reinvention Aliyah goes through, from slum girl to a female employer's lover, is crucial for her survival in the aftermath of the smorgasbord of traumas that have accompanied her journey. Aliyah recognizes Hanan's craving for intimacy and companionship, an urgency which aptly finds sex as its physical manifestation since Aliyah's own background is emotionally barren.

Similarly, this emotional and/or psychological itinerary of the flâneuse, which her mistress-cum-lover has unwittingly initiated, reminds us of Rubenstein's notion of home achieved as a contingency of female protagonists "fixing the past"²⁷² as a precursor of authoring home as a state of mind in the present. Even as she loses favor with Hanan and has no choice but to return "home," Aliyah is primed to face the latter's vicissitudes and the various scars it has imprinted on her in a way that makes it possible for the very narration of the novel to unfold. In other words, it is essential that the story is structured first as a function of Aliyah's emotional trajectory as a flâneuse, even if the plot itself unwinds as a physical return journey to the Damascene slums of al-Raml, where in a sense the story originates, as its final destination.

As Peter Simatei remarks, home is “not merely a place of origin but also a displacement of movement [where] consciousness is hence predicated on a paradoxical process of home-haunting and home-hunting,”²⁷³ in which a loss of home, whether in one’s own homeland or not,²⁷⁴ informs a perpetual fear of losing a new one. Notwithstanding that this sense of movement intrinsic to the home-hunting/home-haunting dichotomy Simatei theorizes is evident in the different journeys of the queer flâneuse in Yazbek’s novel, especially in Aliyah’s initial horror at the prospect of returning home to the site of childhood traumas, I don’t agree with Jolanda Guardi’s reading that *Cinnamon*’s denouement is desolate. Yazbek does indicate that there is still some hope to resuscitate the two women’s relationship. She suggests that Aliyah is seeking to return to Damascus at the same time that her estranged lover Hanan has taken her car out to search for her and return her home (and to a state of “home” they both need).²⁷⁵

The invigorating idea of possibility is one the reader is left with, and yet, if the ending were to be analyzed as disenchanting, it is because its lead-up has been marred by the hierarchized class relations Hanan has internalized, themselves a legacy of French and Ottoman colonialism. This class-based caveat, much like the case with the ageing Claudette and the decrepit finishing school, is fully tapped in Yazbek’s novel.²⁷⁶ Nonetheless, it should not undermine the journey Aliyah has been able to achieve prior to her eviction, evincing a sense of hope that through a conscious act of reclamation the young flâneuse can achieve her home-seeking end.

Although both have been victims of sexual and/or domestic abuse by family men, Aliyah in *Cinnamon* and Nanig in *I Am Not Naked* reroute this aggression in different ways as their emotional itineraries as queer characters propel their quests for feeling-at-home. If anything, Aliyah’s experiences have taught her that sexual energy is purposeful and domineering, and inside the emotionally and sexually barren household of the affluent al-Hashimis, she puts this energy to good use. Effectively, the “lesbian” dynamic and the role reversal intrinsic to the affair epitomize Ahmed’s notion that the queer-as-other dimension of queerness prior to its reclamation ends up “queering” the sexual rapport itself²⁷⁷ by fetishizing and intensifying it, as I have shown. The queer narrative that emerges configures the transformative agency that disturbs and thickens the macro-narrative of patriarchy and class relations in the examined context. In continuing to acquiesce in Hanan’s seduction, Aliyah creates for both of them the possibility for an emotional and/or psychological space that can act as a safe zone away from patriarchal intrusions, even as

she later exploits this possibility to her advantage to fortify this feeling-at-home by taking sexual charge of their relationship:

That this construction of home, and the emotional itinerary it underpins, has reached a full arc is evident in the passionate reactions each of the two women displays in face of apparent slights from her lover – Hanan’s berating of Aliyah,²⁷⁸ which makes her seduce Hanan’s husband, not as a way of reclaiming, an already reclaimed, sexual agency by controlling a phallically challenged man’s bed/fantasies, but as a reprisal against Hanan’s offense. In turn this sets into motion the action which frames the novel from beginning to end, namely Hanan’s remorseful eviction of Aliyah from the house. Nonetheless, in the time and space in between, it is Aliyah’s relationship with Hanan which ultimately allows her to not only achieve home by reclaiming her sexual agency – both despite and because of her lover’s unorthodox gender – but also to dissolve or heal the memories of her emotionally arid first home-as-place (the al-Raml slums) where even maternal instincts had to be suppressed in the presence of the patriarch, the father.

Always and throughout, whatever iteration or form the flâneuse takes, hers is a purposeful forward movement from one place to another, or one constrained state of mind/being to a freer one, where she can achieve a sense of being-at-home. Flânerie in its most rudimentary form (street-walking) provides in Yazbek’s novel a pivotal spindle through which the narrative’s key events are structured since street stops on Aliyah’s way home after she leaves the al-Hashimi household – the dingy alleyways, the pretentious mosque, the weary urban landscape, the architecture of poverty, the connected Shami slums – trigger formative recollections that complete her character arc and lend credibility to her story. Aliyah writes:

The place was arid, isolated and languishing in dust: the glass windows covered with cardboard; the rusty iron doors; the walls made of tin and iron sheeting; the little shops like bandits’ grottos; the houses on top of houses.²⁷⁹

Indeed, different street landmarks, such as the slums’ alleyways, factories, and mosque, are used in the novel to tell the story, rather than serve as a backdrop to it. The treacherous

alleyways that Aliyah must navigate are said to be so narrow they circumscribe women's mobility, literally. The flâneuse writes that the alleyways functioned as

a sort of boundary, no more than half a meter wide, which kept the women inside as their bellies swelled year upon year. During the final months of their pregnancy, the women were prevented from leaving the house, since their inflated stomachs couldn't possibly fit through the tight alleyways all at once.²⁸⁰

The factories Aliyah describes on her return journey are actually small workshops thriving on the manual labor of underpaid women seeking to support their families without having to resort to prostitution. Again, these small landmarks dotting the landscape of poverty attest in the narrative of the flâneuse to the deep-seated gender inequities she and the other women in her family, and her cohort in general, are imbrocated in. Aliyah writes that the women were "happy to complete the tasks their bosses gave them without insurance since, after all, it was better to work morning and night than to loiter on the streets of Damascus in search of a late-night punter."²⁸¹ This is a reality that gains further significance once Aliyah reveals the panoply of turpitudes – shame, indignity, trauma – that women in underprivileged Damascene setups are subject to, often accepting sexual harassment from their bosses as a reprieve to the ultimate pall of this "punter."

As a young, perpetually dirty girl, bathing water being scarce, Aliyah thought of herself as a free-roaming animal untainted by convention, and she used to find a sense of home, of security in this self-view or fetishized sense of home achieved by embracing a feeling of animality²⁸² that gives her the gumption and fierceness she needs on her treacherous walks home, and which subsequently is an organic force, instinct, or spiritedness that Hanan has found compelling and that allows for the reversal in situation of their relationship.

Different landmarks on Aliyah's way home signal memories that narrate the story through flashbacks. Yazbek vividly describes the neighborhood and alleys where Aliyah ran as a child to scratch her insect-bitten face and where she felt she was an empowered animal, hence an invigorating, self-animalizing gaze, perhaps itself spawned by the Spartan conditions she lived under.²⁸³ Aliyah reveals that by and large she has had "nothing for company but her fingers,"

which fetishized by Hanan, become the resource for securing her position in the al-Hashimi household, her new home, but after Hanan makes her abscond and she is back in the slums, her fingers must grab the very knife which years ago she'd kept in her hand, guarding the small family room where her crippled sister Aliyah Senior lay.

In the drudgery, fear, and insecurities of the slums, with the potential for male violence lurking at every corner, it is the knife, given to her by her mother, which has been instrumental in safeguarding a sense of home (as dignity perhaps), however tenuous that might be. As she walks back to the slums the morning after her eviction, Aliyah's stare is revealed "as sharp as her knife, which had not left her side since the day her mother had hidden it in her school dress. It was her mother who had taught her how to use the blade to ward off the boys, or the men, who harassed her from time to time in the alleyways."²⁸⁴

Read this way, Aliyah's animalistic proclivities hold survival value for negotiating the squalid state she spent her childhood in. Her sister Aliyah Senior, first paralyzed by her father is then raped repeatedly by the neighbors' son Abboud against whose advances Aliyah has to take out a knife, attacking him to protect her sister. In doing so, she is described as "a wild beast" by the men who do nothing to chastize Abboud, much like they turn a blind eye earlier in the novel to the boys who attack Aliyah in an attempt to steal the piece of chocolate she has been handed by the foreign journalist. Aliyah Senior subsequently commits suicide²⁸⁵ to avoid incurring family dishonor due to Abboud's assaults.

The uncanny presence of a marble-decorated mosque in an otherwise decrepit environ is further marshaled by the flâneuse to signpost a threat to the female street-walker, not from the boys and men who have harassed Aliyah, and driven her sister to swallow poison, but from the very institution that consecrates men as gendered protectors. Aliyah reveals how the lustful imam of the mosque, a middle-aged man already married to two wives, spots a fifteen-year-old girl walking down the street and makes of her his third wife, having "felt a shiver run straight through his body as he leered at her curvaceous backside."²⁸⁶ Aliyah's street-walking thus impugns the change in women's street attire (wearing headscarves for the first time) as the slums become increasingly religious once the mosque is erected. The imam would bless the covered women during his Friday sermons and "beseech the other women to join them in rejecting sin."²⁸⁷

Aliyah herself has been told that she “could burn in hell”²⁸⁸ for baring her head in public, and her father’s only injunction after practically indenturing her to the al-Hashimis²⁸⁹ is that, outside her employers’ house, she must not be allowed to remove her scarf.²⁹⁰ The perambulating headscarf noted by the flâneuse becomes a symbol of an oppressive milieu where the brunt of maintaining family honor (evidenced in the case of Aliyah Senior) is almost exclusively attached to the female body, and to sexuality. Aliyah and all the women in her family must wear headscarves whenever they leave the house to walk down the street; the imposed headscarf in this sense becomes a precursor to locomotivity.

Aliyah’s home-hunt is explored in the al-Hashimi household, which, as we have seen, allows for fixing the haunting of her past whose ills so close to a what-should-have-been-home, right at the heart of childhood and family, are resurrected in different nooks and crannies that evoke in the street-walking Aliyah memories of nightmares she is now able to articulate. That on this particular journey, after her fall-out with Hanan, she is bareheaded is not merely a result of her hasty departure from the al-Hashimi mansion. Rather, it is a significant reflection on – and of – her journey, if the veil, as we have seen, has come to stand as a litmus test for female circulation potential. Aliyah no longer fears the rancid judgment of her home community, even as her imminent future, whether with Hanan or in al-Raml, remains uncertain as the novel closes.

In theory, therefore, queer and feminist flânerie may be seen as contiguous on Rich’s continuum, since they both signal the urgency of women taking the conscious decision to undertake a challenging and often perilous journey from one state of mind or being to another, in the pursuit of the sense of security or feeling-at-home, even if queer flânerie foregrounds same-sex desire (in its different manifestations) as a route for achieving home, or at least an inchoate form of home-as-wellbeing. In a more physical sense, these journeys – or literary peregrinations given the methodology of close reading creative writing entails – are often structurally steeped in acts of street-walking that allow the flâneuse leeway to negotiate and critique her surroundings through the very act of locomotion endemic to flânerie. As we have seen, this is evident in Aliyah’s, rather than Hanan’s, negotiations and recollections of her childhood “home’s” streets, hostile to the presence of females, so that the very act of street-walking becomes a means of revisiting and challenging the male dominance of these public spaces.

Aliyah’s return to the Shami slums of her childhood appears, at first glance, to collapse her reclaimed queerness, returning her to the original state of queer-as-other, an assumption my

analysis refutes. It is then, in theory at least, an affirmation of Sedgwick's anti-essentialist notion that marginality versus centrality is mandated through a composite of factors other than sexual orientation as such. Being the more affluent of the two, Hanan has had the upper hand always and throughout, or at least the dormant potentiality of the upper hand, even when Aliyah imagines she has become in charge of their very sexual relationship and its dynamic inside the house they occupy with Hanan's upper-class husband. By the same logic, Teta as a retired schoolteacher is not easily ascribed the stigma of – the unnatural – other. She marshals the mantle of esteem her profession has inculcated in the otherwise insular village psyche so that, eventually, the efforts of the clog-bearing women aren't concretized.

It is noteworthy that the humiliation and gender factors in this scene are interlinked; even as Teta emerges unscathed, physically at least, the portrayal of Teta's former students, as well as the content of her speech, serves as an indictment of the collusive role Gerda Lerner argues many women play in patriarchy. In queering Teta, who is also a first as a queer representation of an Arab grandmother in Lebanese and Syrian fictions, I use queer theory carefully since her character, predicament, and actions are not a textbook correlation with those of typical female queers in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots in the West. In other words, hers is a character that responds more closely to the geographic and cultural milieu that encapsulates her so that her presentation as a queer flâneuse is curated accordingly. Neither Teta nor Nanig (or even Hanan and Aliyah), in this sense, would identify as or possibly even recognize the term lesbian, which appears nowhere in the novels, and yet can still be read from a queer perspective.

Despite the fragile character she first appears as in the aftermath of Anwar's death, Nanig in *I Am Not Naked*, like Aliyah in *Cinnamon*, also reaches a full arc in terms of her character growth through her queer(ed) emotional itinerary as a flâneuse, while she lives. From the frightened woman scared of a hawk statue at a hairdresser's parlor – even Ramzi's childhood memories excavate this motif²⁹¹ – she seems to blossom, not so much through sex but love, into a seemingly healthy woman who can perform sit-ups in her garden, watched over by her lover.²⁹² As Judith Butler argues, female same-sex desire never correlates with a stable, essential identity, so that “identity can become a site of contest and revision.”²⁹³ In fact, it is Nanig who makes the conscious shift from an oppressive heterosexual identity to a more fulfilling non-heterosexual one; textually, this is mandated by the fact that she is the one who makes the first move toward shifting her relationship with Teta from a nurturing friendship to a love affair. El Hajj writes:

Nanig stepped closer. She turned off the tap, and when Teta started to say something, she placed for a moment her hand on Teta's mouth. The airy smell of coarse olive soap and water freshness made Teta dizzy. "Can I kiss you?" Nanig asked. "Yes," Teta whispered. And they did.²⁹⁴

As the pair's relationship develops and Nanig's emotional itinerary grows stronger and more vivid, so does her fear of losing it, and she therefore becomes anxious again. She is worried that Teta will leave her if the war worsens, a predicament that comes to pass, and her patience with Teta's family, who make domestic and time demands on her, starts to wane. This tension is especially evident in the drowning scene as she forces Teta to divide her attention between Uncle Rami who is sitting by the pond and Nanig who wants to kiss her underwater.²⁹⁵ Jiddo can't take care of him, Teta confirms – Jiddo as patriarch sees Rami as somewhat ungainly, unable to fulfill a conventional role of marriage and spawning a family; Jiddo, as noted earlier, urges Samira to bring in another son since Rami is a non-starter and the family must grow.

Even though Nanig herself is able to have children, the communal perception of her is that she is barren, so within this communal attitude, which can only feign grief for Rami's passing as Samira suggests, both Uncle Rami's and Nanig's experiences as misfits/subalterns are aligned. This reveals how the emotional itinerary of the queer flâneuse, albeit unconventional and oppositional, as Ahmed and Butler contend,²⁹⁶ is not inscribed within a fragile moral armature. Love is what has redeemed Nanig from the abject state she was in prior to her amorous relationship with Teta, and that love, the way she conceives it, is not impure. The dramatic altercation at the theatre, Nanig berating Teta over her disinclination to disclose Mazen's affair with Georgine to Samira, ratifies this point.

Teta felt light-headed, her thoughts muddled and lost before they were articulated. "I'm not as unscrupulous as you make me," she said. Majnun's tribe was closing in on him discretely. Another minute, and she knew he would be told Layla was said to be dying. Teta was the one trembling now. "Aren't we

doing the same thing, anyway? It's not that different. Why should anyone get hurt?"

"But it *is* different," Nanig said. Majnun's grief thundered across the room. "I love you."²⁹⁷

Their relationship triggers a reclamation of home, in other words the emotional and psychological iteration of *flânerie* through which a formerly oppressive place is reclaimed as an emotionally fulfilling space: Nanig's house and garden, and the cupboard in its corner, the lapis lazuli necklace. As Teta curates her experience as a queer *flâneuse*, she also queers her role as (grand)mother/lover since as Butler demonstrates, postmodern queer identity is contingent, and in fact thrives, upon the ability to switch among a range of different roles and positions. In a way, this approach may factor into Rich's lesbian continuum. Rich defines the term as

a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.²⁹⁸

Hence, we see the queerness of Teta's emotional journey as *flâneuse* who is shackled by family and domestic duties, Jiddo's keenness on cleanliness and hygiene and, especially, Uncle Rami's condition, and yet receives little to no support from her family – no one listens, except Ramzi²⁹⁹ – and so Teta seeks and finds home through her relationship with Nanig, first as a friend with a similarly patriarchal, even if also physically abusive, husband, and then as a lover. A contention in lesbian criticism that "breaking the norm is always potentially emblematic of norm-breaking in general"³⁰⁰ is not unreservedly applied to Teta's character and actions. Much like the female authors of the stories in *Bareed Mista3jil*,³⁰¹ Teta is aware of her same-sex relationship as a normative transgression, and much like these authors she is unwilling for most of the novel to sever her ties completely to the very unit behind her repression, both as a woman and as a queer woman – the patriarchal family.

And yet since, in a way it is her son Rami who is perhaps her strongest link to the system that constrains her life choices and renders her love/home for Nanig an invisible space, his

absence, would, in theory liberate her. Since his death, however, is an autistic suicide it only shackles her to the system even further; Teta hits her lowest point in the novel with Rami's drowning, but still manages to salvage, for the moment, her relationship with Nanig, beseeching her to return home, even as she, herself, lying by the pond next to Rami's wet body, waiting for the men to come upon her, is maddened with grief.³⁰²

After Rami's death, Teta's ties to her husband's house/place-as-home dissolve and eventually disappear – she spends almost all her time with Nanig now, which in a way makes it easier to have the inquest into their affair unbeknownst to either of them – as the only home where Teta can grieve the loss of her younger son is Nanig's reclaimed house/place-as-space. The separation between the two women as a result of Teta's forced relocation to Lebanon is one she actively resists as soon as she arrives in Faraya, a resistance manifest through several physical iterations through which she is able to critique different insalubrious aspects of the present-day home cultures in both her home country (Syria) and her host country (Lebanon). On one occasion, for example, Teta notices a pedestrian selling drugs in view of children whose jaded mother casually brushes them aside on the Corniche.³⁰³

Consistently, however, the emphasis remains on the queer end of these journeys, the attempt to reestablish a lost sense of home by reuniting with a lover or, after Nanig's death (announced via a text message), with the vicarious presence of the lover through her home, which she has appositely left to Teta. In translating the lived war experiences of Syrian women for the Syrian Bureau, an under-project of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Lina Mounzer describes a determined type of Syrian women who, like Teta, approximate my own notion of the wartime flâneuse and are reminiscent of the wartime Lebanese flâneuse Aaliya Saleh. Mounzer's flâneuses

march in the streets calling for change, bury loved ones, resuscitate strangers, defy soldiers and snipers, wait in breadlines, pack their whole lives into vans and cars, undergo daily humiliation at checkpoints on their way to and from work, to and from university, which they have refused to leave or discontinue.³⁰⁴

This sense of resilience in face of militant and often potentially life-threatening adversity is a landmark of Teta's own physical journeys as flâneuse. In line with this aspect of the trope, the aim of these journeys is to find Nanig who, as I have argued, emblemizes Teta's "homing desire."³⁰⁵ While searching for Nanig in various refugee camps, both in Faraya and Beirut, her quest serves several purposes. First, it connects her narrative not only to the squalid reality of the Syrian Civil War and the resultant refugee crisis but also to that of Samira who has a similar experience of the city when she escapes her discovery of her mother-in-law's "lesbian" affair to Beirut. This both foregrounds the reality of war novelistically and theoretically liaises the experiences of the two purposely "flâneusing" women – to borrow the participial from Elkin³⁰⁶ – in a way that inscribes them within Rich's queer continuum; this is an observation whose significance culminates with Teta's final physical journey when she returns to Lebanon one last time to reconcile with Samira.

Second, in reenacting the encounter with the refugee girl Uruba, the combined analysis reveals the racist attitudes inculcated in the Lebanese psyche towards Syrians, even as Samira's mother tries to whitewash it as an inevitable byproduct of Syria's hegemonic politics in the aftermath of Lebanon's own civil war. In other words, the theatrical cat-killing episode Teta witnesses is then transposed to that of the wedding of the child bride who Samira's encounter reveals is Uruba's friend. In both cases, the Lebanese bystanders, or passers-by, are too detached to be impressible,³⁰⁷ in a way that the (gendered) plight narrated through the female gaze interrogates the nefariousness of both home and host country cultures, and the male-led war which spawned and then accommodated such conditions. Third, the cat-killing fiesta on the Hamra street makes its way into the narrative again to critique racist attitudes as Samira reveals that a similar fiasco at the American University of Beirut has singled out her son Ramzi for suspicion.³⁰⁸

This sociopolitical critique of male-led current affairs becomes especially evident in Teta's return journey to Syria where she hopes to give Nanig a decent burial and move into her house. The lapidation scene she witnesses when the van she has boarded is intercepted by armed Islamists makes her recoil in horror at the theatrical brutality of the execution, and yet does not diminish her resolve to return to the village, to Nanig house – home. Similarly, even as the condemned's sexuality exacerbates narrative tension regarding Teta's impending fate, queered/othered in the aftermath of the inquest in October 2012, the outcome of her own botched

execution reclaims her queerness that now renders visible to all the similarly reclaimed queer place-as-space that she is determined to make her home despite all the threats and contingencies that remain – the harassment from the villagers, her husband and son’s invectives, and the precariousness of the (still) roiling war.³⁰⁹

Unlike the case in *Cinnamon*, the gaze of class or capital is not a factor that helps articulate the queering of the flâneuse in my own novel. Teta, as feminist flâneuse, is both queer/queered and postcolonial, and unlike the flâneuses in the other two novels is not interested in cutting off ties completely from the source of shame/patriarchy (the family, the community, the village), but seeks instead to assert herself, and her right to live, or be let live, within this very context. This approach to queering her character incentivizes her odyssey from Faraya to the slums in Beirut in search of her lover, followed by that from Beirut to her hometown in Syria, and the confrontation with the woman clog-bearers, and finally the journey from Syria to Lebanon at the end of the novel, when she realizes her own experiences, albeit different, are somewhat aligned with those of Samira, whom she comes to understand better after Ramzi’s intervention.

The significance of the two flâneuses, feminist and queer feminist, coming together at the end can also be read as a subversive positioning on Rich’s lesbian continuum, now that the two women are brought to see they have more in common than they imagined. That “Teta would get [Nanig’s lapis necklace] back”³¹⁰ suggests that the possibility for reconciliation, paved for by their respective ruptures from patriarchy, is to be actualized.

iv. Conclusion

At the beginning of this program of research, I postulated three questions: Can the extant notions of the flâneur be re-conceptualized from a literary angle? In particular, how does this intervention invigorate readings of female flânerie as a vector for home in 21st-century novels of Lebanon and Syria? In what ways do fictional female characters in contemporary Lebanese and Syrian literature employ flânerie to inform their home-seeking trajectories and their resistance to patriarchy?

The thesis findings reveal that regardless of the medium, socio-theoretical or literary, it is inscribed within, flânerie can function as a catalyst for critical narrative reflection on gendered

and unconventional constructions of home in volatile places, both urban and provincial. If a consciously escapist home, as Alameddine demonstrates, is a construct mediated by a critical, prescient urban self, then both selves and homes are continuously “thickly layered with social markings and bear the weight of history.”³¹¹ Therefore, it is not only postmodern but also (post)war (and post-postwar) flâneuses who “negotiate spatial and temporal narratives” in both private and public arenas and “wrestle with the tension... between temporal disjunctions and historical trajectories, and between implosions and explosions in subjectivity.”³¹² The disjunction between postwar escapism, on one hand, and the realities of post-postwar sectarian tensions, on the other, engenders barely concealed implosions of civic mistrust and hostility, as in the example of the museum guard in *An Unnecessary Woman*, and more visible explosions of exclusionary subjectivities manifest in the sectarian, male, and/or street violence of recent years that we also see in *Cinnamon* and *I Am Not Naked*.

As I have shown, the theoretical intervention of the flâneuse in my reading of all three novels unmoors the traditional Lebanese and Syrian topos of home from the discourse of austerity governing female comportment to a more liberating feminist sociology of “surveillance” and street-walking that confronts and critiques the very cultural constraints on which home is predicated, questioned, and revised. The protagonists’ construction of home through a critical conceptualization of flânerie allows for reframing and re-presenting the set concepts which scaffold the prevalent hetero-normative constructs of family and society in Lebanon and Syria. Thus, my twofold reading of the flâneuse makes space for relocating lived experiences from the intimate sphere of kinship structures and private life to the wider sphere of societal exigencies by whose yardsticks the pre-narrative street-walkers, and their corresponding real-life cohort, have been judged. Flânerie, in this sense, becomes an important means for reviewing and dismantling, in and through creative narrative, normative benchmarks of kinship, class, and cultural injunctions conscripted into the service of patriarchy.

The triangulation of the emotional trajectory of the feminist flâneuse, in relation to both queer and postcolonial theory, allows for an enhanced reading of the trope; as my literary analysis demonstrates, this approach teases out significant nuances to the critiques of the fictional flâneuse. In the novels I examine, narrative representations of the latter have succeeded in jettisoning at least some of what Rubenstein refers to as “the negative baggage associated with

home in its incarnation as confining domestic space;”³¹³ consequently, the flâneuses’ various emotional itineraries illustrate this process.

Aaliya’s flânerie, which finds its leeway through her literary proclivities, segues into the individualism she has cultivated to protect herself from, but also to denounce, “collective moods and insanities, helping [her] float above familial and societal riptides.”³¹⁴ Samira reclaims her home-narrative by confronting the shame of her past and the emotional pain of her present by exposing the fraudulence of both its perpetrators and that of the deceptive homes they had inducted her into, whether marriage or an older woman’s friendship, so that her final physical return to the attic completes her (almost)midlife journey of healing. The emotional itinerary of Teta and Nanig establishes a feeling-at-home using love as a means of border-crossing, and as a riposte to patriarchal authority inside and outside their conjugal houses, while Yazbek’s Aliyah reclaims her agency, and with it a sense of home, by journeying from maid to mistress within the confines of her employers’ spousal bedroom(s).

My novel, experimental and exploratory, emerges, in the final analysis, as a realist artifact. It suggests hope for its female protagonists, a potentiality they have forged for themselves through a resistance to patriarchy mandated by their homing desire, and yet the titular defiance of *I Am Not Naked* does not portend sunny imaginations for either of its surviving flâneuses. Teta is aware as the novel closes of how precarious her situation in Syria is, but is ready to handle it, and Samira’s future in Lebanon remains uncertain. In reference to its queer dimension, the novel is therefore a nuanced embodiment of the theoretical underpinning of queer texts since it suggests that while the constraints of an oppressive setting like wartime and/or postwar Lebanon and Syria are not irrevocable, its creative treatment and critical analysis do not wholly endorse what Barry describes as “the anti-realist leanings of lesbian/gay criticism.”³¹⁵

When they are reunited in the same place, where in a sense the story starts, Teta and Samira are shown to share the same (emotional) space, a home as a state of mind they have both arrived at through their respective rifts with patriarchy. Notwithstanding the different geographic places, whether urban or rural, this liminal healing space is shared, ultimately, by all the flâneuses in their quests for a home that only seems to burgeon once past homes, and the men who have shaped them in places pockmarked by war, are exorcized. At the itinerant intersections of time and space/place, both physical and emotional, the flâneuses discover – as their authors render in creative writing – the multiple ways in which home journeys matter.

III. Appendices

Appendix 1

I Am Not Naked (The Short Story)

First, do no ill. The phrase had haunted Meramo's mind every time adversity struck anyone in her hometown. But these had usually been her fellow villagers who had mocked her own misfortunes and never showed her kindness. Mrs. Amouri was different.

Although she had confiscated Meramo's passport upon arrival—you won't be needing this here, poor child—Mrs. Amouri had comforted Meramo in the few instances when, stumbling upon her, she had seen Meramo sobbing, perched upright in a kitchen chair.

“Not that story of the tango problem again,” Mrs. Amouri would say, clucking her tongue.

“Tangena, Madame, Tangena,” Meramo repeated every time. Her mother and her grandmother, and their mothers and grandmothers before them, had incurred lasting shame on all female-line descendants of their family. Although trial by the Tangena ordeal had long been banned in Madagascar, its cultural implications meant that the women in Meramo's tribe were still viewed with scorn.

Meramo liked Mrs. Amouri who was less difficult than her son, and also more amenable, she later discovered, to the only concession Meramo desired. Mrs. Amouri had been reluctant to allow Meramo a day off. None of her friends in Beirut allowed their maids a full day off, not outside the house at least. “And besides, you really have it easy here,” Mrs. Amouri would say. “It is only a house with a respectable widow and her son, not a large family with babies in diapers and old people with needs. And husbands too!”

“Please understand me. I don't want to spoil you and then lose you.” Mrs. Amouri had looked stricken. “And who will cook Jad's lunch as he studies in the basement? He has assignments all the time—work, work, work. And those African canapés you make, my love, a blessing.”

Mrs. Amouri thought a mention of the newest suicide bomb or that story of the virus scare among the Syrian refugees might serve as a deterrent. “The streets of Beirut are not the

safest place right now. Why can't you have a nice day in, love, watch television and eat custard?"

Mrs. Amouri relented eventually, the second winter after Meramo's arrival, and a pattern was established. On Saturday nights, Mrs. Amouri went out to dinner with her friends, ladies only, Meramo noted. Jad too went out with friends, both men and women. And Meramo cleaned the house, ironed Jad's shirts and Mrs. Amouri's dresses, set out the breakfast table for the following day, and went to bed.

The mornings after, titillated by the notion of spending time on her own, Meramo would awaken at dawn. Ensuring that Jad and Mrs. Amouri were still steeped in slumber, she wrapped herself in a hoodie and blanket, and walked out to church. After the service, she treated herself to a two-dollar croissant whose shape she liked and a one-dollar cup of tea. Undeterred by the early-day cold, Meramo savored these morning antics; her delight was so keen it hurt.

Meramo had just collected the rubbish from the master bedroom in the house and was understandably startled when, reaching Jad's room, she raised her hand to knock and heard his mother sobbing inside. Meramo knocked anyway, not knowing what else she could do.

"Go away," screamed Mrs. Amouri in between sobs.

Instead, Meramo stood listening apprehensively a while longer. She wondered if there was any appropriate way she could help. The sobbing continued, then morphed into less audible crying, but whether her employer's tears were out of grief, or pain, or both, Meramo could not discern.

Earlier in the day, Jad had summoned Meramo to the basement to clean it. The spacious den at the bottom of the house was a makeshift photography studio which Jad used occasionally for university assignments, freelance work and for leisure too. Leisure, Meramo knew, mostly involved Jad spending time in this room not with friends, as he told Mrs. Amouri, but with the young women Meramo had to prepare snacks for—canapés and chilled wine—girlfriends who

never showed any reticence when Meramo would come upon them, sparsely clad, and thanked her for nothing.

Meramo stood still in front of the back wall of the basement. On the wall hung a banner, which wasn't unusual, given Jad's predilection for various iterations of street art, but in this case the hash-tagged inscription made Meramo sigh. It must be another of those days, she thought. The neon lights of the basement gave the inscription a prurient appeal: I Am Not Naked #.

Come one, come all, most of Jad's friends had responded to his call, and a significant number of strangers too. Jad had launched a campaign on Facebook to reclaim the right to nudity as a personal freedom, which was mainly in support of alpine skier Jackie Chamoun.

Old photos of Jackie in the nude, on the snow, wearing nothing but a backpack and holding ski poles which covered her breasts, were part of a shoot she had done years earlier. But, somehow, a video of the shoot had found its way to the internet the week before Jackie's slalom was scheduled and had caused an official furore in Lebanon. The international media also hastened to report the story, and for the first time many Lebanese, unaware they were being represented in the winter Olympics, learned otherwise.

Jad, along with his friends at the Lebanese American University, had been appalled. They decided that the mainstream media's criticism of the political leadership over its priorities was not enough—not when suicide bombs, corruption and sectarianism were being rated by the government as less insidious and less damaging to the country's reputation than an attractive athlete's nudity. A more viral campaign was concocted, one which would emphasize the true definition of a person while seeking to reappraise the country's priorities; and so Jad, his friends and numerous other Lebanese decided, in support of the alpine skier, to strip.

But Meramo could not know this. She did not know the shoot was to take place in Jad's studio so that the professional photographs could then be captioned and uploaded online—maids weren't privy to such matters – and as the first of the activists arrived for the shoot they passed her like a breeze and walked straight up to Jad who greeted them warmly and offered them drinks. He dismissed Meramo with instructions that were familiar: she was not to disturb them unless expressly summoned.

The summons came sooner than she would have liked, for she was in the middle of preparing the batter for the crepes Jad had requested, and with so many people in the basement, she needed to concentrate. Preparing less than was needed would be an error of judgment most unacceptable. In any case, somebody had spilled a drink, and then stepped in it by mistake; Meramo had been called to clean up the mess.

She was mystified by what she saw: a number of young people in various states of undress and a camera on a tripod. Jad had just finished shooting some photos of a classmate whose stomach wobbled liberally as he sauntered over to the designated changing space. Then Jad looked over at Meramo and asked, as casually as possible, if she minded having her photograph taken.

She was still wearing her kitchen apron which was stained with batter, and Lara, who was Jad's girlfriend that month, asked her if she wanted to remove it. So that's what my life has come to, Meramo thought. They will undress me, rape me, and take pictures. She recalled the advice her grandmother had given her back in Madagascar: when there is no mistaking the threat, she had said, always aim for one area—the testicles.

Lara noted Meramo's fright. "Chill man," she said laughing. "We won't rape you."

Somebody threw Lara a shiny cotillion hat, a relic from the last New Year's party held in the basement, and she placed it over Meramo's head.

"Fine," Lara said, "keep the apron."

Meramo, who still looked flummoxed as the camera flashed, felt oddly relieved.

And then it was dusk. The light was stark and was illuminating the glass-paneled windows of the Amouri house with a force and clarity that was deceptive; it suggested a Lebanese mid-autumn even though the country was already steeped in winter.

Mrs. Amouri had finished crying and called for Meramo to help her dress. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Amouri left for a game of bridge and a glass of lemonade to remedy her woes with the girls, as she liked to dub the garrulous sexagenarians who were her friends. After an afternoon of labor, the last of Jad's recruits, and Jad himself, had also vacated the premises.

Meramo loved this time of day and times like this when she was alone and could tread lightly across the house and try to imagine it was her home. It was mainly curiosity which drove her to Jad's bedroom. That, and the fright he had given her earlier. It was not unnatural that she

might suspend her scruples for a moment, she told herself. Still, she would not stoop so low as to search his drawers, and anyway, had already a fair idea of what those held. There was only his computer that could possibly be of any interest she decided, glancing across the room.

Meramo only needed to touch the screen gently to bring it to life. She discovered, piecemeal, the reason for Mrs. Amouri's distress. First, there were the reams of photographs featuring full-frontal male nudity. The female posers, the photos revealed, had a pattern of their own. Each had covered her breasts with her hands and was still dressed from the middle down. Jad's and Lara's pictures were in this set too: individual shots first, and then a few of them together.

Poor Mrs. Amouri, Meramo thought. Poor, poor Mrs. Amouri. She rocked her head, unwittingly, back and forth, staying composed. She forced herself to go through the remaining photographs. To her relief, the bare loins in the earlier images were soon replaced with white circles on which was inscribed the cryptic "I Am Not Naked #," she remembered seeing in the basement. Underneath each picture a caption had been added to complete the message on the loins.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am a Writer.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am a Medical Student.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am a Film Director.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am a Sportsman.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am an Activist.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am a Woman.

I Am Not Naked #—I Am Who I Am.

Meramo's picture was there too: the party hat, the confused look, the apron. She, alone, was fully clothed.

I Am Not Naked #, her caption read—But I Could Be...

Appendix 2

Synopsis of *I Am Not Naked* (The Novel)

The novel, around 76,000 words, will consist of four parts: Finishing School, Risk, After the Race, and Lapis Lazuli. They span a period of 29 years (1984-2013) and two civil wars, the Lebanese War (1975-1990) and the Syrian War (2011-present).

In 1984, in an unnamed village in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, Samira, 14, is having an affair with Ziad, the Palestinian gardener at her school ten years her senior, much to the consternation of her family. Samira's father, like other able-bodied men, has joined the fighting in Beirut, but although the civil war in the city is at its peak, the violence has not yet infiltrated the countryside. Samira's mother serves as her guardian, and when the slander escalates, she takes the brave and expensive decision to send her to Madame Claudette's for finishing.

Madame Claudette is the French-educated mayor's widow and enjoys considerable standing in the community. Her decision to accept Samira among her pupils elicits suspicion at first. Samira is quick to ingratiate herself with her mentor but must deal with the unsettling presence of the village fortuneteller, a gypsy called Nohad who serves as Claudette's charwoman and envies Samira.

Samira is intrigued by various details in Claudette's mansion: a painting of a seraglio featuring the *trompe l'oeil* (deceive-the eye) technique, a set of functional javelins hanging in the dining hall, a hideaway-attic to which Claudette has added viewing vents to spy on potential squatters or militiamen, and, in the garden, a coop of imported, cultivated nettles that Nohad has set off by barbed wire. Samira questions the use of the nettles, but Claudette's response is vague.

Claudette, prodded by Samira, agrees to meet with Ziad. Soon after, Samira and Ziad begin using Claudette's attic for their trysts, and make a startling discovery that appears to be a ritual – through a vent above Claudette's room they see her in the nude touching herself with a sprig of nettles. Ziad eases Samira into a pattern of voyeurism involving the naked antics of the seemingly oblivious Claudette.

As Claudette's protégée, Samira gains confidence, and her hometown's grudging respect, but Claudette herself grows restless as the summer, and Samira's lessons, draw to a close.

Claudette invites Samira to a nettle soup party in the attic, and Samira finds their proximity in the cramped space uncomfortable. The next time she climbs there with Ziad he is unusually surly, pinning her down and lying on top of her. Samira feels a pair of hands, gentle and un-calloused, caressing her back. Even as Claudette molests Samira while Ziad watches, she insists they continue meeting and promises that what appears unfathomable at present will become more enjoyable. Samira refuses to cooperate and threatens to expose Claudette.

Samira's mother is about to dismiss Nohad after a regular coffee-cup reading when she receives a call from Claudette announcing that the lessons must cease, claiming Samira has made a move on her. Samira is met by her mother with slaps and screams, and she sends her with Nohad to a workhouse in Baalbek. Although Samira pleads to be returned home, she has no money, and Nohad wants payment for her services: she requests Samira's bra, which she purports to sell. Samira's mother decides to send her to live with an aunt in Beirut. Samira leaves the village the following day.

By 2012, the Lebanese War is over, but the Syrian War has begun. Samira, 42, is now married to Mazen, a Syrian salesman she met in Beirut, and they have a teenage son named Ramzi. The family lives in Damascus and Ramzi is spending the summer with Jiddo and Teta, Mazen's parents, in their hometown in the Syrian countryside. Samira finds herself pregnant, no thanks to the conception mascot Mazen believes will bring him another boy, and makes a visit to his parents' village to share the news with Ramzi.

Although her city airs put her at odds with her in-laws, especially with Teta, Samira is determined to make the weekend a success. She overhears Teta and Jiddo bickering over Nanig, Teta's friend and the widow of Anwar, a schoolteacher who was a colleague of both Teta and Jiddo. It is Anwar's annual wake, a somber occasion, and Jiddo asks Teta not to receive Nanig. Teta defies his wishes and when he returns, they wrangle again. Samira faints and is roused by Teta. Alarmed by her presence, Jiddo sends Samira to the village pond where Ramzi and his autistic uncle Rami sunbathe.

Samira finds Rami holding a tray over Ramzi's head and is told that it is a solar panel, a parting gift from Rami to his nephew – Ramzi is spending his last summer in the village before moving to Beirut to start a course in botany, a passion he shares with his uncle. Uncle Rami is disturbed by the news of Samira's pregnancy and leaves the pond abruptly. Samira feels faint

again and urges Ramzi to return to the house with her, but a racket ensues in the woods. A bird has gotten mangled by a stray kite's strings and Ramzi insists to rescue it.

Samira gets lost and uses markers in the dense vegetation to find her way. She stumbles into a snaking path leading to the back of a house where she hopes to ask for help; instead she sees Teta and Nanig embracing in Nanig's garden. Nanig clasps a lapis lazuli necklace around Teta's neck, saying that Anwar had had her wear it to conceal bruises resulting from aggressive sex, but that she no longer fears him. Samira, shocked, is reminded of her experience at the finishing school and the abuse that followed. Back at the house she tells Jiddo what she has seen; he admits awareness of the affair and promises to take action provided Samira is discreet.

Uncle Rami asks Jiddo if his mother and Nanig are lovers. Jiddo chides him for eavesdropping and dismisses the story. Samira experiences day visions recollecting the calamitous summer at Claudette's mansion. She seeks to remove Ramzi from the village. Uncle Rami announces that Samira is pregnant, and in the quarrel that unfolds over dinner, his solar panel cracks. Ramzi blames his mother and refuses to return to Damascus with her.

Samira feels the need to share her findings with Mazen and with Georgine, a childhood friend who showed support during her affair with Ziad and introduced her to Mazen in 1990. Samira travels by coach from Damascus to Beirut where Mazen is painting the newly leased apartment in preparation for the family's move in September.

In Beirut, the driver of the taxi that takes Samira to the apartment turns out to be a much-weathered and hobbling Ziad. Although the recognition isn't mutual, Samira is petrified. He explains his injury has been inflicted by an older woman who owes him money, mangling his leg with a nettle-poisoned javelin. Samira realizes he has been blackmailing Claudette.

At the rented apartment, the conception mascot, which Mazen has been using as a sex toy, lies on the floor, and a game of Risk is underway. Mazen has altered the rules so that Samira must take off a garment every time she loses a soldier, but it is Georgine who has disrobed now. Mazen, like Jiddo, is dismissive, claiming they were only having a nightcap to celebrate the lease. Samira feels hollowed out and joins in the drinking. The morning after, Georgine is contrite, revealing that Teta has known about her dalliances with Mazen. Samira stumbles on a piece of wallpaper stripped by Mazen and suffers a miscarriage.

Samira considers divorce, but worried that Ramzi who is close to his father's family may be affected, she outlines a more protracted plan. As war in Syria intensifies, she will invite her

in-laws to stay at a house she has inherited in Faraya in the Lebanese mountains, only to evict them at a later time after ousting Teta and cutting ties with Mazen.

Back in the village, Ramzi and Uncle Rami are joined in their daily excursions to the pond by Teta and Nanig. Ramzi notes the women's closeness but suspects nothing. He joins Samira in Beirut in August. On 21 September 2012, the last day of the summer, Uncle Rami walks into the village pond, wearing a rucksack filled with his favorite botany tomes. Teta and Nanig find his body covered by minnows and trails of ink. Jiddo links Rami's drowning to Teta's affair. The village remains unaware that the death is an autistic suicide, not an accident.

With Samira privy to Teta's secret, Jiddo confers with the mayor who, in turn, discusses the matter with the town leaders. That Teta, once a revered schoolteacher, is not only having extramarital relations, but is also unnatural, incites anger and agitation – Teta, oblivious, grieves Rami's loss with Nanig. The village hall holds an inquest into their affair on 10th October 2012: Nanig is to be beaten to death by the clogs of Teta's former woman students, but only when Teta and Jiddo leave the village. If Teta returns, she will receive a similar fate.

Samira grows closer to Ramzi after his move to Beirut, but he becomes reclusive after receiving a racist accusation in the aftermath of a cat killing spree at his university. He withdraws into sports, qualifying for a race in Faraya in support of the Syrian refugees. Ramzi visits Teta and tries to convince her to join them in Lebanon. Teta refuses.

Kites with Koranic verses, coupled with rumors of impending chemical attacks, trigger Jiddo's decision to flee, forcing Teta to accompany him. They arrive in Faraya on 28th March 2013, the morning of Ramzi's race. Teta tries in vain to reach Nanig. Ramzi overhears Jiddo calling Teta a whore, and is told not to meddle being only eighteen. While running, he pieces together memories of Teta, Nanig, and Uncle Rami by the pond, and his realization of the truth disturbs him greatly.

After the race, Ramzi's change in behavior, which involves spending hours online and watering his potted plants in the bathtub, drives Samira to action. She poses as an environmentalist on a digital botany forum Ramzi engages with; they grow closer online as strangers than as family. Following a conversation on Skype whereupon Ramzi shares Teta's story, Samira evicts Teta from Faraya. The decision is met by silence from Mazen and Jiddo, and in the frenzy that follows, Teta forgets Nanig's lapis necklace behind. Hoping that Nanig has managed to escape, Teta searches for her in the refugee camps in Beirut.

Ramzi moves out of his parents' apartment. Nanig's death, confirmed by the village hall, prompts him to reconnect with Teta. She announces she will return home to give Nanig a decent burial, and move into her house which Nanig has left for her. Teenagers selling gasoline at the outskirts of the village make it known that Teta is coming. Four clog-bearing women, all of them Teta's former students, await her at Nanig's house. Teta addresses them by name, reminding them of their own turbulent pasts in a manner that challenges them all. The women, angry but shamed, pack their clogs and leave.

In July 2013, Teta and Samira find themselves in Samira's hometown. It's as close to the Syrian border as Samira is willing to get, and Ramzi insists she meet Teta there as the two have more in common than they realize. Samira has filed for divorce, and in an attempt to win Ramzi back, she discloses the real reason she evicted Teta. Even as she wants Nanig's necklace back, Teta wonders if the village, so close to the finishing school, might affect Samira's sanity – she fears Samira will hang herself in the attic:

Samira visits Claudette's mansion, taking Teta's necklace with her. The migration of girls to Beirut after the Lebanese War has forced Claudette to close the finishing school. The nettles have overrun the garden but they no longer sting. A frail Claudette asks Samira if she has come to kill her and laments the predicament of the nettles. Samira climbs the attic one last time. Lying above the vent looking down on Claudette, she experiences a surge of memories – of Ziad, Mazen, Claudette, and the different homes she has sought refuge in.

Samira wills herself to pause the images.

They freeze, chill and pierce, then crumble and fade. A sheen of sweat covers her face, her reverie interrupted by a commotion below; Teta stands towering above Claudette.

Teta makes her way up the attic. Samira adjusts her posture, loosening her grip on the necklace. Teta will have it back.

Appendix 3

Between Validation and Emasculation:

Paradox of the West as Architect of Queer Autonomy in Rabih Alameddine's *The Perv*

Abstract

*Unlike his more recent novels such as *The Hakawati* (2006) and *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013), which also lambast patriarchy but not from a queer perspective, the early fiction of Rabih Alameddine, Lebanon's only openly gay writer to date, seeks to destabilize hetero-normative boundaries by a critical engagement through creative narrative with the homo-politics of diaspora. In resisting the coercion of the Lebanese and, to a certain extent, the Arab or Middle Eastern homosexual into calibrated, conformist social moulds, his narratives present the West as a plausible refuge in which his exiled gay characters can thrive.*

*In this article, I argue that a nuanced reading of this refuge is needed since the exilic sanctuary in Alameddine's *The Perv* (1999), his only short story collection to date, is paradoxical. Its illiberal sexualized response to queerness as a form of otherness is extrapolated to similar issues of marginalisation and sexualized abuse enacted by the patriarchal polity that has othered Alameddine's queer(ed) exiles in the first place. The Western sanctuary's seemingly antithetical notions of emasculation and empowerment become, ultimately, the very qualities factoring into his usage of strong sexual language in his explicit depiction of the coercive sexuality into which the encounter with the gendered and/or queered other has been relocated in different texts and cultural contexts in *The Perv*.*

Given the infrequency of male homoerotic themes in the post-1995 Lebanese exilic novel in English, the first-time circulation of fiction by Rabih Alameddine (1959—), Lebanon's only openly gay writer to date, understandably created quite a stir in the literary, artistic, and social scenes of turn-of-the-century Lebanon. The political situation dominated almost exclusively by the Syrian military and intelligence forces to whom postwar Lebanon had been "entrusted"

instigated a new wave of censorship played out on different levels of cultural production (Traboulsi, 2007, p.245, 246). Cultural outputs, such as documentaries, movies, novels, television shows, or even newspaper articles that went beyond nugatory or idle distractions, were perceived as a breach of the status quo and a threat to the postwar imaginary of national security (Seigneurie, 2011, p.100, 215; Traboulsi, 2007). Gay in the middle of a raging civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), the majority of the chief male characters in Alameddine's debut novel *Koolaid: the Art of War* (1998) and his story collection *The Perv* (1999) find themselves transposed overnight into an exile that, for most of them, proves long-lasting and becomes eventually their sanctuary, posited at an enabling distance from the brazen stranglehold of the fatherland.

Public morality in the Arab world is experiencing an identity crisis of sorts. The Arab public code of ethics to which Lebanon is careful to adhere to has “deeply evolved since the colonial confrontation with the West” (Lagrange, 2000, p.190). However, it remains riddled with ambivalence when it comes to tolerance of alternative sexual preferences. As Jared McCormick (2006) explains in “Transition Beirut: Gay Identities, Lived Realities,” homosexuality in Alameddine's fatherland is still a largely proscribed topic despite the thriving gay social scene in Lebanon and the “perceptible increase in gay men who are not only openly gay but also defend their lifestyle with more audible voice” (p.174). Hence, with the Taef Agreement ending the protracted paroxysms of the Lebanese Civil War, the prevalent postwar mentality, which allowed a tentative (and tacit) exploration of sexual boundaries firmly repressed during combat, remains staunchly patriarchal. The social masquerade of tolerance is thus premised on a power asymmetry—the subordination of homosexual visibility to the hetero-normative requirements of the status quo.

Recent studies reveal that since patriarchy in Lebanon invites and maintains a strong ethos of compulsory heterosexuality, Lebanese society remains hostile to the notion of an openly gay lifestyle (Merabet, 2006; Moussawi, 2008). Despite the country's less inhibitive socio-cultural positioning in comparison to other Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan where homosexuality is still punishable by death under Islamic *shari'a* law, acceptance of gays in Lebanon is congruent with a passive aesthetic of invisibility. The full-fledged “formation of identity-based sexual communities” cannot, as Seidman (2012) notes, be assumed in Beirut, the same way they can in other cities such as New York and London (p.20). In fact, Moussawi

(2012) argues that contemporary travelogues marketing Beirut as a gay-friendly destination allegorize the coercion of Lebanese men's "dispositions and sexual identifications" whereby "they are described as both discreet in public and sexually open in private" (p.868). Many practicing queers are compelled to obscure their sexual preferences by leading covert lives, particularly in relation to their fathers, the family patriarchs who are kept uninformed of their sons' non-heterosexuality (Khalaf, 2012, p.190). This monolithic interpretation of masculinity foisted upon the queer community has been met with literary representations that reflect this condition in Lebanon and the wider sphere of the Arab Middle East in which it is culturally and geographically inscribed.

In the wake of the 21st century, two main studies have focused specifically on representations of men as gendered subjects in Arab fiction, mainly in the literatures of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt: *Imagined Masculinities* (2000) is a collection of essays on Arab male identity. Frederic Lagrange, one of the writers therein, argues that modern Arabic literature affirms a hetero-normative ontology of male identity by presenting queer men at best as tolerated subordinates in service of their heterosexual counterparts. Clearly, this predicament approximates that of conforming women in patriarchy. In a similar fashion, Samira Aghacy's *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967* (2009) explores patriarchal masculinity's functions as a form of "male power," a term she appropriates from R. W. Connell to show how patriarchy "naturalizes hierarchy and domination" through acts that may involve or extend to violence (p.1, p.17).

Accordingly, patriarchy premised on male heterosexuality is perpetuated by "the subjection of women and subordinate males," namely sick, old or disabled men, and men such as "androgynous subalterns," easily clued as queer (Aghacy, 2009, p.17). Not surprisingly, Alameddine's exiled characters in his debut fiction return to their closets when back in the dominions of the Lebanese fatherland; tellingly, many of them lose contact with their families once news of their homosexuality starts emerging. This is Mohammad's case in *Koolaid's* as he learns from the maid that he is never to call back home. Likewise, in *The Perv*, Roy in "My Grandmother, the Grandmaster" and the Syrian protagonist Jim in "Duck" are shunned in varying degrees by their families.

In Jim's case, the stigma is exacerbated by the fact that he is dying of AIDS, which he has contracted through homosexual contact. In any case, the patriarchal expectation of

conformity is unshakable and dictates the precarious double lives Alameddine's protagonists find themselves leading. A visible collusion, then, with the "deceptive politics of normal mimicry" (Merabet, 2006, p.233) is the slippery slope brokered by the families of non-heterosexuals as an acceptable reprieve to nonconformity. In his book *Deadly Identities*, Paris-based Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf argues against such a unified vision of identity, writing that "identity cannot be compartmentalized; it cannot be split in halves or thirds, nor have any clearly defined set of boundaries" (23). That is precisely what is demanded by the families of exiled homosexuals who were fortunate enough not to be completely shunned by friends and family in the fatherland. In *The Perv's* "A Flight to Paris," this is the case with the unnamed gay man whose mother complains about to the complete stranger, Jerry, a middle-aged homosexual flying on the same plane as the mother herself. She vociferates on the family misfortune and her expectations of her son's gay identity. The woman asserts:

"You can sleep with whomever you want. But do you have to be blatant about it? I told him the first time he told me he was gay. I said it's okay. Lots of people are. Lots of great people. They don't advertise it. You can get married, have a nice family, and do whatever you want discreetly. Of course he doesn't listen to me. Not only does he live a gay lifestyle, as he calls it, but he writes a book. He wants the whole world to know." (p.170)

Consequently, critics and literary scholars, such as Syrine Hout, Andreas Pflitsch, and Steven Salaita have extolled Alameddine's fictions, namely *Koolaid's* and *The Perv*, for their enabling narrative engagement with the homo-politics of Lebanese and Arab diaspora. They read these texts as embodiments of a queer perspective that questions hetero-normative boundaries by revisiting the construction of an exclusionary Lebanese identity, queried from a distance through the safety net the West as sanctuary has provided for both Alameddine (a self-proclaimed "errant non-conformist" [*Koolaid's*, viii]) and his characters. Hout (2012), a leading scholar of Lebanese and Middle Eastern fiction in English, writes that Alameddine's gay characters receive acceptance of their sexual identities in the West, which becomes "a comfortable place for a diasporic existence, if not the [characters'] only viable home(land)" (p.60). Hout's views generally find echo in Pflitsch's, even as he acknowledges that the "cultural diversity" Alameddine's characters experience in exile can instigate feelings of inner conflict, "maybe even schizophrenia" (p.277). In a similar fashion, Salaita argues that Alameddine's fiction subverts

mainstream discourses about homosexuality (2007, p.80) and that the very notion of boundaries, social, ethnic, or cultural, is “anathema to Alameddine” (2011, p.45).

Hence, while the merits of the West as a validator of queer identity in Alameddine’s fiction have been chanted repeatedly, the vicissitudes of the exilic experience have not been extensively probed in relation to issues of emasculation in the diaspora. In reference to key episodes in *The Perv*—especially the title story itself as well as “The Changing Room”—I posit that the gay exile’s relationship with the West as sanctuary is paradoxical because it embodies the provocative antinomy of empowerment as freedom and of emasculation as otherness. These contending topoi are transposed in the stories to the hetero-normative Lebanese mainstream that castigates, and may avail to abuse, non-closeted queers and supposedly nonconforming women as others.

It is noteworthy that the entirety of Alameddine’s literary output to date has been penned in English, and not only out of a desire “to be part of the Anglophone cosmopolis” (qtd. in Nash, 2007, p.28). English as the writer’s language of preference, even if in retrospect clearly implied by his Western education, suggests that Alameddine’s freedom of speech, his earnest and direct approach to his non-conformist sexual preferences and to those of his narrators, as well as his lucid portrayals of sexuality in general, cannot be conveyed by his mother tongue, which as a product of the fatherland, becomes necessarily inadequate. The intercultural and inter-textual geography of otherness in *The Perv* is then the fulcrum upon which Alameddine’s usage of strong, almost pornographic language is predicated. Thus, his graphic portrayals of subordination are effected by the coercive sexuality into which the encounter with the gendered and/or queered other has been displaced. I also qualify Alameddine’s depictions of sexual encounters as not entirely constrained by abusive sexualized responses to gendered and queered subordinates, even if explicit counter-narratives of queer male desire reclaimed through visibility are not the salient focus in *The Perv* per se.

Ironically, it is not the modern Arab world or the Middle East that has been perennially homophobic and critical of homosexual identities, as evidenced by the hostile attitudes of the exiles’ families back in the fatherland. Assad Abu Khalil who has conducted research on homosexuality in the Arab Middle East writes that “the advent of westernisation in the Middle East brought with it various elements of *Western ideologies of hostility*, like...homophobia. This is not to say that there were not anti-homosexual...elements in Arab history, but these elements

never constituted an ideology of hostility as such” (qtd. in Massad, 2002, p.369, italics mine). Alameddine suggests that not only homophobia but also other derogatory attitudes towards homosexuals of different colour or nationality seem to be rooted in the West in spite of its more redemptive characteristic as an enabling sanctuary serving as the alternative home the fatherland has disbarred.

In *The Perv*, this is illustrated in both the opening story and in “The Changing Room.” In “The Changing Room,” the narrator, gay and Lebanese, studies at a boarding school in England where Arab boys are referred to as “wogs” whereby “queer wogs” becomes, ultimately, the worst kind of humiliation. Read in this critical light, Alameddine’s fiction intimates that the West exacerbates the already oppressive patriarchal conservativeness of the fatherland by equipping it with the exported virulence of anti-queer sentiment, and, in doing so, relocates the shock of the encounter with the West into the arena of coercive sexuality—The plight of the gay thirteen-year-old Cyrus is a case in point. Early on in the story, Alameddine (1999) establishes through his narrator that Cyrus is a homosexual—“I knew he liked boys, just like me” (p.70)—and indicates the exhortation to please, which Cyrus has acquired to ingratiate himself with any subordinating patriarch, be it his father or the English student prefects, as a portent of his downfall. Gay Cyrus is ordered to fellate Brattleby, an older student. In retrospect, Brattleby is considered sufficiently wily to receive sexual gratification from a “queer wog” who subsequently hangs himself in the titular changing room to avoid the shame of confronting his ultimate patriarch, his father.

This move from the shock of the cultural to the ‘infringement’ of the sexual is painfully inevitable and proves the traumatic nature of cultural collision because of its irrevocable impact on one of the most intimate elements of a gay person’s life, the relationship to the body and to sexuality. In “The Changing Room,” both the narrator and the Persian student-boy-toy find themselves in exile by parental default. Neither has made the choice to spend time in England even though, for Cyrus, England is not a temporary site of banishment from the fatherland but rather “a step in the right direction” (Alameddine, 1999, p.76), however illusive, toward becoming a world-class engineer. The queer narrator here is the anti-thesis of the obsequious, voiceless Cyrus. Sensitised to the shock of the cultural encounter with the “West” or with England as a microcosm of the West (p.64-65), he externalises his personal trauma as a queer-identified “wog” by assertively putting in their place wog-dissidents, for instance the lascivious

“slag who likes to fuck young [English]boys”(p.73) and the upper-class “twit called Brattleby” (p.77) who ultimately causes Cyrus’s downfall and then taunts the narrator barely two days after Cyrus’s suicide, while reciprocating the same vicious and/or violent language these characters have initially used to mark the inferiority of the incoming exiles. At this moment, the narrator’s masculinity as a queer wog is validated by his violent encounter with his counterpart, queer Cyrus’s tormentor (and in a sense executioner), the almost pathologically callous Brattleby.

The legacy of vulnerability impinged on the psyches of Alameddine’s exiled protagonists by the socially programmed constraints of the homophobic fatherland runs skin-deep in his fiction to the extent that, even on the metaphorical level of sexuality, the Middle Eastern homosexual in exile, be it by parental default or personal choice, becomes at times the victim of the Western phallus. Cyrus, unlike the more resilient narrator of his tragedy, sublimates the shock of his first-time encounter with the West into a puerile fascination with the ostensibly infinite possibilities of improvement, both educational and social, subsumed by a temporary (in his case terminal) exilic experience in England. Alameddine writes that Cyrus literally maintains an almost suicidally positive outlook on his new life at Milfield where he would ideally “learn more than just schoolwork” (Alameddine, 1999, p.76). In his attempt to impress his father, yet another patriarch whose unassailable authority dictated that his son be stripped of any familial or social networks of support in order to be fully “immersed in English culture” (p.76), Cyrus sublimates feelings of trauma and abuse by a sense of discipline acquisition and a ‘successful attitude’ supposedly fostered by Milfield. Domination and submission here are symbolised through sexuality, and Alameddine describes the latter’s effect in its pathological dimensions. Therefore, the Middle Eastern male, Persian as his author would have him be, is both symbolically and physically abused by the West.

That Alameddine entitles Cyrus’s story “The Changing Room” is significant. He thus posits that while the West might function as a sanctuary—even if a transient one, the case with this story’s narrator who is sent to England to escape the vicissitudes of the internecine war in Lebanon—it can also acquire the sinister qualities of the emasculator through the inferiority imputed on the exiles themselves. England, and the Western world it belongs to, become the changing room where exiles are required to acquiesce to the rules and expectations prescribed by the newfound ‘sanctuary.’ When Cyrus crosses the thin line between conformity (bending to the wills of his English tormentors) and non-conformity (performing fellatio upon a prefect’s

command), he fails the challenge of surviving the trials and tribulations of the “changing room.” The latter proves Cyrus’s ineligibility for receiving breathing room or space, be it for character growth or development of a stable gay identity, and thus quickly becomes the hanging room, with the ingenious deletion of merely one letter.

In “The Perv,” which spearheads Alameddine’s short story collection, a comparable derogatory attitude toward foreigners is voiced by one of the fictitious narrators posing as a gay teenager and admitting that “for most pedophiles, fucking a foreigner seems to be more acceptable. You know, American kids are so immature. We foreign kids have a more accepting attitude toward sex. We foreign kids look forward to getting fucked by fat old men” (Alameddine, 1999, p.47). Here too the author repeatedly, even if not frequently, acknowledges this metaphorical phallic subordination of Middle Eastern, and by association, Lebanese queers, embodied in the twisted paradox of the validating yet emasculating power relationship with the West. Indeed, he seems to suggest that this outcome is a necessary evil that has been inculcated in the psyches of his gay Lebanese protagonists as an always-already state, catalyzed by the advent of colonialism and Western capitalism in the Middle East in general and especially in the Arab world. While these currents have obviously transformed most aspects of daily life, efforts to impose a self-proclaimed ‘liberal’ lifestyle on Arab men have succeeded among only the upper classes and the increasingly Westernised middle classes (Massad, 2002, p.372), precisely because these wealthier segments of society could indulge in or adopt the lifestyles suggested by the West.

Alameddine’s debut fiction presents exiled narrators who admit this so-called “European complex,” a mimetic directive that is arguably a precursor for the paradoxical subordination exacted by the exilic experience. Mohammad, possibly Alameddine’s autobiographical parallel in *Koolaid*s, speaks:

“We all had what some would call a European complex. We wanted so hard to be European. This manifested itself in a couple of ways. There were those who mimicked everything European. They ate European, dressed European, watched European movies. It was a sign of sophistication if one intermixed difficult English words with the predominant French... [They] even developed a relationship to America similar to what the Europeans have, an unhealthy fascination mixed with simultaneous disdain.” (p.28)

Later, in *The Perv's* examined "The Changing Room," the narrator who remains nameless throughout the story even after he acquires strength and voice after managing to reclaim and redefine both parts of his assigned label "queer wog," writes about his own European complex and his fascination with Western culture while growing up in Lebanon: "Like many Lebanese boys, I grew up thinking of myself as European...I did not want to write how a doghouse in the mountains of Lebanon was better than a villa in Monte Carlo...I couldn't imagine listening to Arabic music, so I grew up with English bands" (p.66). Ironically, this fascination, the narrator soon discovers, is short-lived and is not necessarily reciprocated by the West where racism and bigotry, at least in the England Alameddine describes, run high. To this effect, the narrator writes that he "moved from a war zone directly into hell" (p.64), insinuating that even the outwardly least bigoted of the 'Western' people, namely Miss Collins his English teacher, is bigoted at heart and is thus pleasantly surprised by the narrator's outstanding mastery of the English language. Alameddine's fiction discerns bigotry as a precursor of emasculation, hence Brattleby's lack of remorse at sexually subjugating "a wog". The boundaries of English culture, and by implication, Western culture, albeit less emasculating than its English component, if the narrator's relative 'prosperity' in the U.S. is any indicator, are thus queried in creative narrative.

Alameddine's "The Changing Room" is not the only story in *The Perv* in which the encounter with the West, or with a trend or lifestyle associated with the West, is dislodged by or displaced into the arena of sexuality. Other narratives in the collection, and in Alameddine's subsequent writings, explore how the hetero-normative configuration that shapes and cushions abusive masculinities in the Lebanese fatherland matches the similarly illiberal treatment of the fatherland's queer(ed) exiles in the West. The violence associated with this displacement, or more accurately, patriarchal aggression that demands its right for rapture, comes out through the character of Akram in the short story "Whore." Just because he assumes his sister-in-law Rana is promiscuous based on the rumors surrounding her alleged lesbianism, clearly a Western "lifestyle" as perceived by her bucolic Druze compatriots, he gives himself the right to use her for his own pleasures, abusing her vulnerability brought about by a state of numbness and confusion following the mass hysteria prevailing over her father's funeral. The bitter irony of the matter turns out to be that the so-called "whore" had never even been with a man. In both contexts therefore, in the fatherland and in exile, a "phallogocentric model" for constructing and

asserting masculinity is deployed in what bell hooks (1992) argues is a most “accessible way to assert masculine status” by “what the male does with his penis” (p.94).

Furthermore, the graphic description of Akram’s sexual encounter with his artistic sister-in-law, Alameddine’s casual depiction of the abuse heaped by Brattleby on Cyrus, and his generally detailed portrayals of sexuality in *The Perv* call into question his usage of what Anglophone literary critics of the modern “Arabic” novel as well as some of Alameddine’s readers have interpreted as pornographic terminology. Frédéric Lagrange (2000), in his essay on homosexual encounters in contemporary literature by writers of Arab origins, echoes Alameddine’s perhaps more subtle evocation of the West’s emasculation of its male exiles. He purports that the loss of faith in the present, induced by a variety of social, cultural, and political factors, has gone so far in the novel of the 90s, be it exilic or not, that numerous Arab characters in fiction have become metaphorically victimised by the Western phallus (p.189).

Stephen Guth (1995), discussing the increasing frequency of sexual passages in contemporary Arabic literature, namely in Egyptian novels, goes further than Lagrange in his analysis of graphic representations of phallic subjugation and power dynamics. He observes that “the taboos which are broken, however, are only aesthetic taboos, taboos on a linguistic level,” adding that the discursive representation of sexuality does not aim at “calling for a system of ethical values which is really new” (p.189). In his essay “Sexuality, Fantasy and Violence in Lebanon’s Postwar Novel,” Maher Jarrar (2006) also examines whether eroticism can be differentiated from pornography in literature, but although he queries whether experimentation with literary form can “give license to a vulgar language” that describes aberrant manifestations of sexuality, he acknowledges that so-called pornography serves a purpose “to awaken, to usher in a sense of reality” (p.286) by probing subjects untitled in traditional Lebanese narratives: child molestation, rape, and homosexuality. On the contrary, Guth indicates that in terms of traditional sexual mores, even the “pornographic” passages in postmodern Arab fiction re-entrench, but do not critique, notions of patriarchy.

Guth’s statement is repudiated by the satirical backdrop of Alameddine’s narratives, precisely in the graphic scenes in which sexualised abuse is enacted on either the male (Cyrus) or female (Rana in *The Perv* and Sarah Nour El-Din in *I, the Divine*) body. Both inside and outside the fatherland as a conformist home, the machinations of otherness these texts deride are a shaper of lives, livelihoods, and personal destinies. The traditional patriarchal morality so closely

attached to the polity of otherness is revealed by Alameddine's writings to consistently permeate dual contexts of peace and war in modern-day Lebanon, and the checkered times and spaces in between (Alameddine, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2008, 2013). This polity is questioned and radicalised to such an extreme that the venom of patriarchy becomes almost indigestible, even to jaded readers. The allegedly "pornographic" depiction of Nour El-Din's rape by three men of different generations, for instance, is thus meant to expose the reader firsthand through the protagonist's own eyes to the crippling impact of patriarchy, which has pervasively shaped Alameddine's literary output in more ways than we can imagine. Inviting his reader to align his field of vision with his protagonist's and gaze helplessly at the eye of the oppressor, Alameddine (2001) stipulates that "what [Sarah] saw [in her rapists' eyes] froze her" (p.195). Much like the uninhibited masculine desire which moved *The Perv's* Brattleby and Akram to unleash their sexuality on their victims, what *I, the Divine's* Sarah "saw" was the wildly and widely patriarchal "primitive desire, dominance, aggression" (p.195).

Even as it is only within the formidable and cloistered context constructed by patriarchy that Guth's statement is valid, Alameddine's ostensibly pornographic depictions of sexuality as a form of satire is not confined to sex that is abusive, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and cultural context. The applicability of Guth's observation regarding the implications of the pornographic element inscribed in contemporary Middle Eastern literature stops at the patriarchal boundaries, duly collapsed by the subversion embodied by the multiple representations of gay physicality in other works of fiction by Alameddine, such as *Kooloids*. The narrative inclusion of this kind of unmitigated sexual references, easily perceived as carrying pornographic intentionality, does not necessarily aim at arousing the reader. Rather, it is a distinctly overt form of validating gay male sexuality within the restrictive socio-political context of the fatherland his writings aim to destabilise. Lagrange (2000) argues that contemporary Lebanese and Arab writers, whether supportive of, opposing, or neutral toward the patriarchal regimes in their respective homelands, cannot but recognise that an approbatory reception of their literature is contingent on the absence of potentially subversive elements, however understated in the text they might be (p.190). Hence, the enabling proximity between the writer (Alameddine) and the referent (his homeland) allows him to indulge homoerotic themes envisioning full-blown male desire in a way that seems to vindicate this desire against the long-established tradition of social and sexual conformity which has heretofore rendered it invisible.

Unlike his more recent novels such as *The Hakawati* (2006) and *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013), which also lambast patriarchy but not from a queer perspective, Alameddine's early fiction has largely sought to resist the coercion of the Lebanese (and in some stories like "Duck" and "The Changing Room" the Arab or Middle Eastern) homosexual into calibrated, conformist social moulds by presenting the West as a plausible refuge in which his exiled gay characters can thrive. As I have argued, a nuanced reading of this refuge is needed since the exilic sanctuary as changing/hanging room seems paradoxical. Its illiberal sexualized response to queerness as a form of otherness is extrapolated to similar issues of social castigation and sexualized abuse enacted by the hetero-normative patriarchal polity that has othered Alameddine's queer(ed) exiles in the first place.

The Western sanctuary's seemingly antithetical notions of emasculation and empowerment become, ultimately, the very qualities factoring into his usage of strong sexual language in his explicit depiction of the coercive sexuality into which the encounter with the gendered and/or queered other has been relocated in different texts and cultural contexts in *The Perv*. Nonetheless, given the manifold constraints of compulsory heterosexuality in the Lebanese fatherland, deconstructed and debunked in Alameddine's narratives, the general impression that the ostensibly more tolerant West is more empowering than emasculating seems, at the moment, to settle the dust surrounding the paradox of the West as architect of queer autonomy in Rabih Alameddine's fiction.

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Appendix 4

Rewriting Home: A Creative Writing Study in Post-Postwar Lebanon

Abstract

*This paper argues that creative writing in a post-conflict environment such as post-postwar (post-2006) Lebanon can serve a visceral role in navigating dominant discourse. To engage through creative text the views of Lebanese youths on home matters that shape their lives, I examine 62 personal narratives written by creative writing students at the University of Balamand in Beirut, Lebanon, over a three-year period (2013-2016). Produced against the backdrop of a fractious political climate worsened by military tensions roiling the Middle East, the texts focus on two portmanteau groupings: *Coming of Age in an Unstable Home Culture*, and *Rewriting Home*. These I disaggregate into constituent sub-themes, namely the sectarian and patriarchal gridlock, dim prospects, non-conformist choices, the plight of domestic workers, alternative communities and activism, and green texts. *Coming of age amidst risk and turmoil compelled students to develop contact zones and counter-spaces where non-sectarian initiatives can both circumvent and resist the political and patriarchal clouts that prescribe life choices and reproduce mainstream followings.**

Context

Creative writing research in the Middle East is relatively uncommon. The paucity of student or youth narrative studies in Lebanon, or indeed most of the Levant and Arab world, is perhaps contiguous with despotic legacies of patriarchy and censorship designed to sustain the status quo in socially conservative countries. Even as they form a demographic ‘youth bulge’,¹³

¹³ Youssef Courbage, ‘The Demographic Youth Bulge and Social Rupture’, in Samir Khalaf and Roseanne Saad Khalaf (eds.), *Arab Youth: Social Mobilization in Times of Risk* (London: Saqi, 2011), pp. 81-82.

the potentially dissonant scripts of disillusioned young Arabs are systematically discouraged to prevent tilting the balance and entering the mainstream, especially in the contentious aftermaths of recent Arab uprisings.¹⁴

In Lebanon, in particular, the voices of youths remain largely inaudible, if not conveniently ignored, even as they constitute roughly half the population.¹⁵ Youths have no say in governance; they cannot vote in elections until the age of 21. Often, they are perceived as receptive consumers of the post-Civil-War and continuing post-postwar¹⁶ culture of hedonism around which Lebanese society is said to construct itself.¹⁷ To explore the role or discursive dimension of creative writing, specifically creative non-fiction, in a volatile post-conflict environment, and to engage through creative text the views of Lebanese youths on ‘home’ issues that complicate their lives, I examine the personal narratives of thirty-one students enrolled in creative writing classes at one Anglophone university in Beirut, the University of Balamand, over the course of three consecutive fall semesters (2011—2013). The questionnaire respondents were given before the crafting of personal narratives identifies a cohort of 14 female and 17 male students, aged 18 to 21.¹⁸

Although the students, all of whom were born in the 1990s, were not firsthand witnesses to the atrocities of the Lebanese Civil War (1975—1990), they were privy to subsequent manifestations of its sectarian legacy. In the reconstruction period, postwar tensions disguised by a veneer of aesthetics and false cosmopolitanism¹⁹ remained unresolved, often prevented from reaching boiling point by the Syrian intelligence to which Lebanon and its security had been entrusted after the Taef Accord ended civil fighting officially in 1990.²⁰ The cracks in the

¹⁴ See Anne Sa'adah, “‘Homeless in Tahrir’: From Hope to Anguish in the Middle East”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (1) (2015), pp. 153-168.

¹⁵ Roseanne Saad Khalaf, ‘Idealistic and Indignant Young Lebanese’, in *Arab Youth*, p. 162.

¹⁶ The term ‘postwar’ refers in general to the period after the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990. With yet another war happening on Lebanese ground, the Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006, I use the term post-postwar to describe the social and political setting after this war.

¹⁷ Samir Khalaf and Roseanne Saad Khalaf, ‘Introduction: On the Marginalization and Mobilization of Arab Youth’, in *Arab Youth*, p. 27. Also see Samir Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift: From Battleground to Playground* (London: Saqi, 2012).

¹⁸ The University of Balamand runs several campuses: its Beirut campus houses the Faculty of Health Sciences, which operates the English Programme offering the creative writing electives the respondents in this study were enrolled in. See Appendix for more details.

¹⁹ Steven Seidman, ‘The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut: From the Stranger to the Other’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 29 (2) (2012), pp. 3-36.

²⁰ Fawaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

kaleidoscope of Lebanese politics previously restrained by Syrian censorship became more apparent after the removal of Syria's tutelage; the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 unleashed epochal demonstrations resulting in the withdrawal of Syrian troops. A year later, despite apparent shows of solidarity among different tiers of the population during the Israeli attacks, the Hezbollah-Israel War in 2006 quickly became, after it finished, a politically expedient wedge issue, with the Shiite party's paramilitary accused of unilaterally embroiling Lebanon in yet another war.

Given Hezbollah's vehement refusal to disarm, the ostensibly inequitable power dynamic consolidated the post-postwar concept of a habitus informed by sect, and subsequently by occasional spillovers of sectarian violence, such as the clashes of May 2008 in various Lebanese neighbourhoods.²¹ An already divided postwar society was thus catapulted in the aftermath of the 2006 war and the 2008 events into more polarised post-postwar factions shaped by the deadlocks of Lebanese politics and the pressures of regional conflicts, never far from home. It is against this backdrop of civil strife and a turbulent security climate that the respondents in this creative writing study have crafted and discussed their personal narratives.

Conceptual Framework

The interdisciplinary nature of narrative research invokes a rich crop of theories of what constitutes narrative, how to study it, and how its material or methodological significance frames the researcher's understanding of social phenomena.²² In this study, exploring how lived detail infuses the data constitutes the overarching 'narrative'²³ I scrutinise in the writings of my students. The experience-centered texts become, in theory, a nascent form of satirical social

²¹ Shiite-Sunni fighting broke out in Lebanon in May 2008 after a protracted political crisis culminated with government decisions clashing with Hezbollah interests. The conflict concluded with the Doha Agreement on 21 May 2008. See Fouad Makhzoumi, 'Lebanon's Crisis of Sovereignty', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 52 (2010), pp. 5-12.

²² Molly Andrews, Corrine Squire, and Maria Tamboukou, *Doing Narrative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2013).

²³ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

code, addressing subjective storytelling as dialogically constructed,²⁴ and the stories themselves as spaces that respond to the broader cultural narrative that encapsulates them.²⁵

In fact, creative writing analysis as a methodological route for tracking changes in the postwar perceptions of Lebanese youths has largely underpinned non-fiction narrative inquiries in the field. Over a period of fifteen years, Roseanne Saad Khalaf has investigated the autobiographical expression of creative writing students' subject positions: how students write within the contexts of their lives, and how inscribing their texts within the conditions of their own lived, subjective place responds to the repressive superstructure in postwar Lebanon. Her cumulative research describes a paradigm shift in narrative themes, a move from activism to hedonism,²⁶ possibly explained by the social status of many of the students in all her samples.²⁷ Nicolien Kegel's analysis of the contemporary discourse of Lebanese upper-class youth reveals results commensurate with Khalaf's findings.²⁸ A new strand of salient themes emerges in my study, which expands the scope of existent creative writing research by examining a narrative cohort from another, very different, university in Beirut.

Albeit a private Christian university, the student body at the University of Balamand subsumes mixed sectarian colourings and myriad socioeconomic backgrounds, largely less affluent than those of the respondents in Khalaf's studies. Activism in the texts I examine is a present endeavour rather than a bygone phase. Students' perceptions of a home culture constantly in flux elucidate the ontological significance that attaches to their narratives. In addition, the role of armed conflict and civil strife in the post-postwar period is addressed for the first time in youth narratives as a motivating learning experience. Although the crippling effect of the political system remains a common denominator in all creative writing studies in postwar

²⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

²⁵ Jackie Abell, Elizabeth Stokoe, and Michael Billig, 'Narrative and the Discursive (Re)Construction of Events', in Molly Andrews et al. (eds.), *Uses of Narrative* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004); Michael Bamberg, 'Stories: Big or Small. Why Do We Care?', *Narrative Inquiry* 16 (1) (2006), pp. 139-47; Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007).

²⁶ Roseanne Saad Khalaf, 'Lebanese Youth Narratives: A Bleak Postwar Landscape', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 44 (1) (2014), pp. 97-116.

²⁷ Khalaf's studies discuss narratives written by students at the American University of Beirut, an elitist private university renowned for its significant tuition hike over the past decade. For a creative writing analysis of youth conspicuous consumption, including hedonism and plastic surgery, see Khalaf, *Lebanese Youth Narratives*, pp. 105-113.

²⁸ Nicolien Kegel, 'In Good Times or Bad? Discourse on the Identity of Lebanese Upper Class Youth', in *Arab Youth*, pp. 176-193.

Lebanon, other thematic concerns, such as migrant rights and green texts, enter the discussion here. Hence, the data resuscitate neglected or forgotten narratives that construct and affect home while probing alternatives to the country's necrotic sectarian fold threatening to spark another civil war.

Using lived story analysis in order to understand how permutations of homes and selves are conceptualized in times of risk places creative writing research in a new terrain of scholarly inquiry: in examining the views of Lebanese youths in the post-postwar period, my study also appraises the potential of creative writing as a liberalising medium where enabling counter-narratives are explored. Since two personal narratives were required per student in the non-fiction segment of the creative writing module, a total of 62 narratives became available. Students were asked to narrate and reflect on incidents or matters of significant influence on their lives. Germane to the thrust of their different texts is the premise that selves and homes in Lebanon are fashioned out of a set of social and political exigencies that both shape and are re-shaped by youths in the post-postwar period as they expose and rewrite their personal surroundings and cultural landscapes as texts answerable to critique.

I organise the recurrent and salient ideas in the narratives of students into thematic groupings, or sub-groupings as needed, each of which I analyse, in relation to other creative writing studies or to contemporary Lebanese and Middle Eastern cultural criticism, along with excerpts taken from students' manuscripts in an attempt to capture in their own voices their perspectives on the issues discussed. Knowing that the exploratory nature of creative writing studies can incur bias on the researcher's part, I have used textual analysis as the main route for scaffolding the study and informing the theoretical borrowings. The distinct findings in the study reiterate another limitation I am aware of. The relatively small samples of creative writing studies to date suggest that conceptual restrictions may follow since a more diverse empirical study would potentially actualise a more expansive range of viewpoints.

All narratives were made anonymous immediately after submission—relevant extracts appear under pseudonyms.²⁹ Students were prompted to alter names of real-life characters whose privacy they would like to maintain in our workshops; this helped emphasise the nature of the classroom as a safety net or judgment-free zone where creative ideas are exchanged and

²⁹ At the start of each course, informed verbal consent was received and subsequently approved by the English curriculum coordinator who oversees that research conducted in writing classrooms conforms to the University of Balamand policy on research ethics.

assessed. Indeed, a student narrative study asserts the existence of a concept—and an awareness—of a creative writing classroom as a contact zone or ‘fluid space’³⁰ in which students can assume some of the enabling attributes of a diminutive ‘public sphere’ or ‘third space’.³¹ A seminal aspect of creative writing workshops in a conflicted environment is then the implicit commitment to a pedagogy of engagement which, through the development of their personal narratives, gives students ‘agency to actively pursue topics they find compelling and meaningful’.³²

If creative narrative voice is conducive for understanding and subverting ‘patriarchy and other oppressive formations’,³³ the students’ narratives feature a timely interrogation of home matters in a post-conflict setting. Joseph Harris hints at the potentially transformative power of inhabiting a plurality of discourse communities in the composition process of border-crossing writers³⁴ who, like my post-postwar creative writing students, willfully or circumstantially find themselves having to negotiate the boundaries between distinct discourse communities, sectarian, secular, or otherwise, which stand aloof from one another. Thus, the flexibility of creative writing and the different settings writers occupy at any given time allow them to recreate themselves as critical polyglots, vacillating from one narrative space or discourse community to another and, in doing so, ‘reposition[ing] [themselves] in several continuous and conflicting community discourses’.³⁵ This notion is particularly suited to the Lebanese home culture in which politics and patriarchy intersect with constants of kin and sect to ‘impose enveloping and inflexible identities on all individuals’³⁶ since it explains the need to negotiate the scripts students seek to unlearn as they probe alternatives to the culture of otherness.³⁷

³⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000).

³¹ Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); Jürgen Habermas, ‘Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere’, in Craig Calhoun et al. (eds.), *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (London: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 358-376; Roseanne Saad Khalaf, ‘Breaking the Silence: What AUB Students Really Think About Sex’, in Samir Khalaf and Roseanne Saad Khalaf (eds.), *Arab Society and Culture: An Essential Reader* (London: Saqi, 2009), pp. 427-446.

³² Barbara Kamler, *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 38.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁴ Joseph Harris, *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997).

³⁵ Harris, *A Teaching Subject*, p. 105.

³⁶ Seidman, ‘The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut’, p. 22.

³⁷ See discussion under ‘Non-conformist choices’ in the paper.

The process of reshaping the creative writer's surroundings as revisable texts partakes of a 'collective biography'³⁸ embodying counter-narrative possibilities which 'cannot be written out or ignored' and 'will not be silenced'.³⁹ Most creative writing studies in Lebanon's postwar period have drawn on Elaine Scarry's notion that a shift in the 'power dynamic that transports ideas out of the realm of imagined spaces and into the realm of reality' can be actualised by the concerted thrust of 'collective mediums'.⁴⁰ Although Khalaf argues that creative writing is a medium that can cobble this shift, she also acknowledges the difficulty to measure it adequately.⁴¹ Hence, in theory, a reversal in mainstream scripts is contingent on cutting-edge, disjunctive narratives confronting and challenging those that sustain the status quo. Given the scarcity of venues where this interaction can occur in a context dominated by otherness, a new culture of public discourse that cushions the entry of young voices and a plurality of discourse communities is urgently needed in Lebanon. As creative writing advocates discursive spaces for scaffolding alternatives to mainstream texts, Scarry's shift from discussing to creating change can then be triggered.

Post-Postwar Narrative Engagement

Students identified the politico-sectarian scripts around which lives and livelihoods are predicated in modern-day Lebanon as the main challenge informing the unflinching negotiation of their positionings within a post-postwar setting their narratives critique. To disaggregate the narrative cluster, I have organised the findings of this study along two portmanteau themes—Coming of Age in an Unstable Home Culture, and Rewriting Home. I use the latter as a window into the analysis of six sub-thematic elements that emerge in the examined narratives: *The sectarian and patriarchal gridlock, dim prospects, non-conformist choices, the plight of domestic workers, alternative communities and activism, and green texts.*

³⁸ Bronwyn Davies uses the term 'collective biography' to explore how juxtaposing personal narratives simultaneously reflects and transcends subjective experience by making intelligible the cultural mechanisms that make us individuals. See Davies, *Poststructuralist Theory and Classroom Practice* (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1992).

³⁹ Kamler, *Relocating the Personal*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Roseanne Saad Khalaf, 'Youthful Voices in Postwar Lebanon', *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 63 (1) (2009), pp. 65-66; Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴¹ Email interview with Roseanne Saad Khalaf, 17 April 2015.

Coming of Age in an Unstable Home Culture

The fears and uncertainties of Lebanese youths are informed and complicated by the restraints of patriarchy and partisanship, as well as the unbending political convictions of the post-postwar period. Although students are aware that their aspirations for change outdistance the pace at which Lebanon is likely to implement secular improvements on the short run, their disillusionment with a confessional political structure that resists non-sectarian movements signals the defiance in their texts. The contortions their narratives discern assume relevance in the collective mapping of the coming-of-age experience in an ambivalent post-conflict setup.

The sectarian and patriarchal gridlock

Normative values of patriarchy, enhanced and informed by religious considerations, were repeatedly reaffirmed in the postwar years, with sect becoming after 2006 a crucial bastion of the political environment around which communities renewed themselves and declared allegiances.⁴² Students are acutely aware of how religion can impede citizenship and also exacerbate tensions in a way that precludes narratives of post-postwar reconciliation.

Basic rights like civil marriage between a man and a woman, let alone a same-sex partnership, are still denied the average Lebanese citizen; the secular rights of a non-Lebanese, such as access of a migrant worker to state protection, aren't but a pipe dream. (Rawan)

We still live the impacts of the Civil War till now. We will never live in peace till the Lebanese people learn how to live with each other without one religion dominating the other, or one political party prevailing over government. (Ahmad)

It's funny and sad how some Lebanese people completely forgive and forget all the horrors the Syrian regime did in Lebanon by saying that they 'pulled out' in 2005 and that the past must be dropped, yet cling to all the grudges they have towards fellow Lebanese more than twenty years after the Civil War. (Gerard)

⁴² Seidman, 'The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut', pp. 9-12.

The texts describe the stranglehold of political stalemates and sectarian affiliations on interpersonal relationships and identity formation. Often these realities strike close to home.

People here are grouped as religious-political subjects rather than citizens. The most appalling situation is when somebody asks you about your religion as soon as you meet them, which happened to me once. I was at my friend's house when a friend of hers, whom I didn't know, asked her about my sect to determine whether he could consider knowing me further. (Lamis)

In Lebanon, I cannot be both: I cannot be Muslim and Christian. I cannot be Arab and Western. I cannot be religious and secular. In my country, I am merely a sect, a family name, a region. My name, my past, my experiences are all irrelevant. In the eyes of others I am Druze, and no more need be said. (Samer)

If the secularisation of society is a prerequisite for secularism, then how is it possible to institutionalise the political doctrine of secularism in deeply religious societies like the Arab ones? (Rafik)

Dim prospects

Not surprisingly, the vagaries of the political terrain have led to both youth disenchantment and the propensity towards immigration as a working choice. The tangible uncertainties of post-postwar Lebanon are indicted by the narratives as instigators of brain drain in a context one student described as 'a powder keg of potentially violent disorder'.

There is nothing encouraging that makes me want to stay in Lebanon. I think my future will be outside Lebanon due to the already scarce job opportunities complicated by *wasta* (personal connections), nepotism, and the political situation. Most graduates spend years looking for a job in their field and they end up accepting a random job to make a living. I don't want to end up like most Lebanese university graduates. (Firas)

Six years after the 2006 war, the images of dead Lebanese citizens remain in my head [...]. Such incidents make me fearful of recurring unrest. The security situation in Lebanon will never be stable since every party and its sect want to dominate the political scene. (Raji)

I am an ordinary Lebanese citizen but different from the rest of our countrymen. I do not believe in sectarianism, especially political sectarianism, which is the main obstacle to social and economic development, leading to the loss of opportunities for progress and the exodus of young Lebanese to various countries around the world. (Hussein)

Rewriting Home

Even as students' narrative engagement lays bare the ills of home, social and cultural constraints are relocated in their texts to potentially redemptive venues of activism, voluntarism, and civil awareness. As their narrative choices reveal, home in a post-conflict setting can be rewritten by carving unthreatening secular spaces, itself an act of resistance to the limitations of convention and sect.

Non-conformist choices

A surprising counter-legacy of the 2006 war is revisited in creative writing. Students' personal narratives tapped the 'positive potential' of war in that it helped reveal the insidiousness of religious scripts governing the home culture. The wide-scale dislocation of people from their hometowns signaled a major demographic change in sectarian distribution. For the first time in their lives, many youths were brought, by virtue of necessity, in very close contact with people of a different faith.

The non-conformist unlearning of the postwar legacy of sectarian otherness is discussed in relation to the de facto contact with people of another religion during this war. In some cases, a romantic affair resulted from this contact and helped alter students' ways of thinking about the viability of interfaith relationships in Lebanon.

The time I spent with our impromptu guests, who became our friends, made me feel firsthand how petty Lebanese politics is. If people just took the time to get to know the 'other' that they are so afraid of, they would realise that we are all the same, we are all Lebanese. The religious divide in my country now seems more incomprehensible and ridiculous than ever before. (Lea)

My best friend's love affair with a Moslem refugee in the Bekaa that summer is only one of many examples of true love, but when you live such an experience, your reactions are different from those of someone who learns of a similar story by hearsay. Rabih and Maria's relationship has affected me a lot; five years have passed, and they are still together. Both of them changed my thinking about life; now I think that people should do what makes them happy because life is short. Why should we let religion get in the way when we could be enjoying every minute of our lives and relationships? (Rita)

Research on the changing views of Middle Eastern youths across a broad spectrum of socioeconomic strata reveals that forging alternatives to traditional social patterns and normative sexual scripts helps demythologise and deconstruct political systems posing as necessary conveyors of religious and moral values in post-conflict situations. 'Perhaps there is nowhere in the world where the stakes of having [sexual] fun are higher than in present day Iran', writes the Middle Eastern anthropologist Pardis Mahdavi.⁴³ Similarly, Lebanese students also show how young people invoke inclusive views of variant gender and sexual identities and unconventional personal relationships as a way of challenging orthodox constructs confining their life choices.

As they navigate the tetchy field of dating and sex, the theme of sexuality emerges in students' personal narratives. Recent creative narrative research shows that many young Lebanese reject overtly conservative views on sexuality that condemn expressions of female sexuality or denote sex as taboo. They critique what they view as parental hypocrisy and argue that discouraging discussions of sex in postwar households has lent the topic an arcane nature that can fascinate youngsters in unhealthy ways.⁴⁴

Interestingly, the respondents in my study perceive a nuanced need not only to disrupt the exclusionary scripts fostered by their conservative upbringings, but also to acknowledge the direct influence of religion and patriarchy on their perceptions of non-conformist dating or sexual choices. They discuss the brunt of conformist expectations, both sectarian and hetero-normative, that they feel they have internalised even as they try to enact a dissociation that would enable them to progress in their lives and their relationships.

⁴³ Pardis Mahdavi, 'The Politics of Fun in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Re-creation and Recreation', in *Arab Youth*, p. 149.

⁴⁴ Khalaf, 'Breaking the Silence', p. 431.

Maria, my best friend, had gotten very close to one of the Shiite boys and their relationship was growing fast, until the day they were totally falling in love with each other. No one knew about them except me, and even though I was helping them meet in secret, their relationship, at first, made me jittery. (Rita)

If the acceptance of difference is a non-conformist choice in a repressive context, students are willing to undertake the challenge of achieving this acceptance. The stories they share, individually and as a group, underscore the need for tolerance in a postwar society marred by its inability to integrate multiple discourse communities. Discussions of personal narratives that secede from conventions of gender and sex reveal how the creative writing workshop, a recurrent discursive platform, can be a liberalising medium. One student who professed to be actively homophobic at the beginning of a semester wrote in a peer response at the end of term that although he still did not feel comfortable in the presence of out-homosexuals, this was a personal issue or challenge that he wanted to process and work on. Another narrative highlights the dissonance between the homophobic environment a student had known all her life prior to her university studies and the coming-of-age encounter prompting her to rethink this exclusionary script:

What on earth had happened? Did the beer and music flip my mind? Then to make my cultural shock even worse, a tall muscular handsome guy with sharp green eyes approached Ralf, giving him a passionate kiss on the lips[...]. Where I come from, if a homosexual crosses the road he might get shot. A man should be strong and courageous and macho[...]. Honestly, I had a tough time accepting Ralf's sexuality, but I knew I had to get used to it for the sake of our friendship[...]. Why should he have to hide who he is only to make other people feel comfortable? (Raneem)

Indeed, in Lebanon's postwar era, homosexual invisibility is often suggested as a reprieve for non-conformity.⁴⁵ Limitations of this social directive are manifest in the double lives non-heterosexuals are compelled to lead. In her memoir, a collage of post-postwar dating narratives, young author Jasmina Najjar revisits the politics of the closet in one of her relationships:

⁴⁵ Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift*, p. 190.

I broke it off. I couldn't bear the thought of confronting him with my doubts[...]. He is now married to a woman who looks like a guy in drag and has an adorable two-year-old kid. While I'm not sure about her closet, his is definitely full of stylish clothes...but I wonder if he ever came out of it.⁴⁶

Students' narratives likewise note the dismaying consequences borne by the conformist ethos of invisibility foisted upon the queer community. They impugn the hypocrisy of repentance scripts informed by religion. On cutting ties with Lebanese friends he used to be close to, one student writes:

One of them was the most beautiful transvestite in the country; he repented and became a 'son of Jesus' but almost a Salafi-Christian with all the moralising and the preaching that comes with it! But how can it be that someone is able to hate that much his past, judge and renounce himself as well as all those who loved him the way he was? (Gilbert)

Even as authoritative sectarian support remains the precursor of change in relation to gender issues and sexual rights,⁴⁷ students attempt to embrace a more progressive view towards their understanding of sexuality in general and how they would like to express their own sexualities in particular. In their narratives, they broach other issues, such as intergenerational dating and premarital intercourse, still contested in the wider public sphere. Albeit more audible than in prewar Lebanon, nonconformist voices, and the decisions they entail, still invite public opprobrium across all sects and segments of society alike. Hence, the sense of narrative intentionality that adheres to the choices students make confronts the complexities of daily life in Lebanon as they continue being diluted into one defining category—a hetero-normative status quo often guided by sexual double standards.

Age shouldn't be a barrier in my relationships with people. Neither is it a barrier for me to fall in love with someone older than me. I mean, the first man I fell in love with was sixteen years my senior. And I had loved him truly. (Sarah)

⁴⁶ Jasmina Najjar, *Beirut Knights* (Beirut: Turning Points, 2013), p. 37.

⁴⁷ See Sherifa Zuhur, 'Empowering Women or Dislodging Sectarianism? Civil Marriage in Lebanon', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 14 (2002), pp. 177-208.

Sex is overrated. I think that it is sexual pleasure that one should try before marriage, not something sacred. (Jawad)

The reaction guys get when they date and mate is quite different from the scorn girls receive when they have premarital sex. When I first did it, my friends were so happy for me for a reason I failed to understand till later. (Hani)

The plight of domestic workers

Clearly, students shake the mould by presenting dissonant narratives outwith the encouraged biography of Lebanon. Apart from the taboos of nonconformist choices, and the quandaries of sex and faith, my students' writings reveal the civil rights of those in service of home as an important secular narrative conveniently ignored by the nation-as-home after the Civil War. The International Labor Organization records 250,000 migrants working in Lebanese households⁴⁸ under the *kafala* or sponsorship system, which makes migrants directly accountable to their employers, rather than to the state.⁴⁹

A significant segment of people living in Lebanon are hence catapulted into near servitude with little state protection. Bridget Anderson compares the general global situation of contemporary ethnic household helpers to historical accounts of antebellum slavery, whereby abuse of domestics still unfolds at home 'despite its construction as a haven of domesticity'.⁵⁰ Students' narratives chart the dissonance between the selective cosmopolitanism⁵¹ the nation-as-home employs to construct a postwar veneer of civility, and the underlying hypocrisy and/or illiberal attitudes that people seem to share regardless of sect.

Next to the *makhfar* (police station) in my neighbourhood, two Asian women were being roughly pushed up the stairs [...]. I was told they had escaped their employers and were caught working

⁴⁸ International Labor Organization, 'Lebanon: Migrant Domestic Workers', <http://www.ilo.org/beirut/countries/lebanon/lang--en/index.htm> (accessed 10 April 2015).

⁴⁹ Gwennan S. Manseau, 'Contractual Solutions for Migrant Laborers: The Case of Domestic Workers in the Middle East', *The Human Rights Law Commentary* 3 (2007), pp. 29-30. Also see Bassel Habbab, 'Lebanon: Migrant Workers Face Ignorant Officials, Negligent Prosecutors in Battle for Justice', *Al Akhbar English*, 13 June 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20177> (accessed 20 March 2015).

⁵⁰ Bridget Jane Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work: the Global Politics of Domestic Labor* (London: Zed Books, 2000), p. 131.

⁵¹ Seidman, 'The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut', pp. 3-36.

without permits. I can only imagine what prompted those poor women to run away in the first place, but the occasional crackdown on such workers here is to remind us that state authority actually exists. The irony is we are able to arrest a housekeeper, but big-shot criminals remain on the loose. (Sandra)

Despite the storm raging outside, I decided to take the twenty-minute walk home from work to avoid the ninety-minute traffic. I walked on non-existent sidewalks, sidestepping over construction sites and dog poop only to land in mud. The pedestrian light turned red, and as I looked at the shop window next to me, I saw an iteration of the ad that recurs every year and gets my blood boiling: 'For Mother's Day, indulge your mom and offer her a housekeeper. Special offer on Kenyan and Nepalese nationalities. (Bilal)

Much like other aspects of daily life, the dilemma of sect has undergirded the extensive recruitment of foreign domestic workers in the postwar period. Most household helpers in the pre-war years were Lebanese and Palestinian women from rural or underprivileged areas, but the postwar culture of sectarian otherness popularised the trend of migrants assigned domestic chores.⁵²

My mother always talks about her grandparents' helper leaving them in the lurch during the war because she no longer felt safe in a household not of her own religion. I was born after the war, so the first time I heard this story, I thought it was a joke. (Sabine)

The novelist Rabih Alameddine describes migrant workers in Lebanon as the 'Sisyphuses of our age'.⁵³ Inscribed within a racialised discourse the Lebanese seldom acknowledge in public,⁵⁴ domestics approximate 'a free-floating mass' devoid of nationality.⁵⁵ Such attitudes, the study suggests, similarly permeate the country's pop culture.

When TV series use the same Filipino extra to play the role of the maid in two different households, assuming the audience cannot tell that this is in fact the same person, even when the

⁵² Ray Jureidini and Nayla Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of 'Contract Slavery'?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30 (4) (2004), p. 589.

⁵³ Rabih Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* (New York: Grove Press, 2013), p. 87.

⁵⁴ Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers', p. 586.

⁵⁵ Seidman, 'The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut', p. 17.

scenes are consecutive, the tacit justification is that ‘they all look the same!’ Apparently, Lebanese script writers write the part with an entrepreneurial multi-tasking maid in mind. (Sarah)

Students noted the link between the perception of the country from the outside and the illiberal constructions of home against rigid boundaries of self and other. Their narratives concur that any political space conducive for pushing the envelope can only be secular.

Only with secular laws that are based on accepted common values like human rights and progressive patterns of thought, rather than rigid traditions or essentialised identity values, can we even begin to think of moving on as a people. (Sam)

We complain of discrimination at foreign embassies and airports, and yet we participate in the same racism we claim to deplore. How can we expect people outside Lebanon to treat us as equals when so many in this country are keen to mark the foreigners who work in our homes as inferior? (Amin)

Always and throughout, there was an emphasis in texts on the need to dismantle superiority scripts that ‘make us feel better about ourselves’ by consigning others to the margins. One student shared an optimistic narrative along these lines.

Discovering this little restaurant earlier today reminded me of the individuals who raised me. Some of them are still living here. A few have been able to move away from the racist and classist idiots of Lebanon whose outdated notions of identity make this a very harsh place for people who don't share their bleakness and ignorance. It is beautiful to see individuals who are considered inferior in this country prosper. There's a sense of genuine happiness in this tiny Indian-Sri Lankan restaurant that many Lebanese are incapable of detecting or producing. There is no bitterness here, and no place for hate. It is never too late to unlearn. (Anthony)

Alternative communities and activism

In the aftermath of the Cedar Revolution,⁵⁶ narrative research suggests that Lebanese youths have come to privilege self-seeking trajectories and hedonistic pursuits over civic engagement and activism,⁵⁷ but the respondents in this study tell a different story. Students seek to carve out venues of voluntarism and civil society that distance their interactions from restrictive discourse communities of sect and patriarchy.

Engagement in civil work accounts for narratives that help counter abusive scripts and illiberal attitudes suffered by vulnerable groups such as migrants marginalised by the home culture. Some wrote about volunteering their time and using social media to help revoke the silence and appease the ordeal of foreign workers they were brought in contact with:

It is Sunday afternoon, and a wave of colour ripples across the room as women of different faiths and ethnicities, a mix of flashy armbands and floral headscarves, mill around rehearsing their parts in a scene they were assigned... As a volunteer assistant at these drama therapy sessions, I usually stay and chat with the participants after the sessions. The stories they share are often heartrending, but they find the sessions comforting because they give them courage to speak their minds, hear each other, and be heard. (Lina)

I used to always see her nearly in tears, and one time we chatted and she said she had a baby in Bangladesh when she was nine and had moved to Lebanon to support him. The meager salary she now receives as a janitor leaves her with less than \$4/day for food and basic needs [...]. Within minutes after sharing her story on my Facebook page, support started to pour in, with people donating and offering additional employment options. (Jihan)

In joining alternative communities of their choosing, students assert agency in spheres they can colonise. Engagement in non-sectarian institutions that thrive upon youth activism becomes an opportunity to sideline the vicissitudes of politics and sect. Red Cross activism is a case in point:

⁵⁶ The Cedar Revolution, featuring a surge in youth activism demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops, was ignited by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. See Christian Gahre, 'Youth Networks, Space, and Political Mobilization: Lebanon's Independence Intifada', in *Arab Youth*, pp. 277-300.

⁵⁷ Khalaf, 'Lebanese Youth Narratives', pp. 97-116.

You cannot join the Red Cross if you are politically active or belong to a specific political party. Their goal is to serve civil society not a partisan group of people. That's why I was attracted to it. (Wassim)

The armed clashes in Lebanon made me realise how important and heroic the volunteers at the Red Cross are. I remember one time watching the ambulance going into the battlefield to help a couple of civilians who were shot. They would go in and help regardless of the victim's religion, political views, or ethnicity...I wanted to be part of a movement that great and international. (Joe)

Having a higher goal in life, helping society, helping people regardless of sex, colour, or religion was something I wanted in my life. I don't classify people based on gender or religion, neither does the Red Cross. (Randa)

I have been a member for two years now. I needed to feel more useful, and the Red Cross being about collaborative team work has helped me feel less cynical about the society here and the idea that reconciliation might be possible. (Tina)

The choice of creative alternatives is guided by the premise that any such alternative must be inclusive. In this way, recreational outlets that meet this requirement serve as respites from societal exigencies and sectarian mappings⁵⁸. The convivial character of these spaces allows for a subversive ethos to take root as social injunctions are seemingly ignored. One student writes that her creative means of escaping the ravages of war, taking tango lessons, signaled a lifestyle change that continues to affect her positively to date.

It was another gloomy day. I was returning from Bekaa via Dahr el Baydar while the fear of the Israeli bombing was haunting me...I was relieved to be, at least physically, far removed from it, glad to be back in Beirut among the old buildings of Hamra, the heart of the capital. Walking sadly in the cramped streets of the unusually silent Hamra, I saw a small traditional restaurant that was open, ignoring all security threats. It was not just a restaurant, but, in fact, an intimate house where the lights are soft and the music of Buenos Aires accentuates the nightlights smoothly, and the

⁵⁸ Leisure spaces in Lebanon are not exempt from political divisions. For a discussion of how recreational outlets, such as athletics, are governed by politics and sect, see Danyel Reiche, 'War Minus the Shooting? The Politics of Sport in Lebanon as a Unique Case in Comparative Politics', *Third World Quarterly* 32 (2) (2011), pp. 261-277.

menu is whatever ‘Madame Wardeh’ is cooking that night...I hadn’t expected that there would be such a warm dance floor in the middle of the battlefield. In fact, it proved to be a place full of peace and the Argentinean music of bandoneon, the famous tango instrument. Everyone seemed to mix happily here, people of different ages and backgrounds. It was as such, ‘a garden in the middle of the desert’[...]. When I entered this new community, I lost some friends, but I found a whole new set through tango. (Alissar)

Another student discussed her involvement in narrative workshops that integrate writing with various traditions of movement, such as yoga, music, drama, and dance.

You don’t have to be a member of this or that group, and I don’t care on which side you pray; what matters is that people come with an open mind. Through reflecting, we share our stories, which by extension presents an opportunity of reconciliation and healing through the relationship we create between our minds and bodies, channeling it through writing. (Renée)

Green texts

The politics and poetics of gardens-as-home have been explored in several works of 21st century Lebanese literature⁵⁹ but not in narrative research or literary criticism to date. The findings of this study reveal how in their own way gardens plot post-postwar plots, especially in the aftermath of the 2006 and 2008 condensed episodes of violence students witnessed firsthand. An oft-ignored secular narrative, students find the development of green spaces integral to the process of post-postwar reconciliation, a fertile common ground whose dividends everyone can reap.

The general post-civil-war apathy towards protecting forests and woodlands from arson, vandalism, and natural disasters meant that large swathes of green cover, as well as public gardens, had become highly flammable and increasingly destroyed by manmade fires; yet none claimed the public loss of these green spaces.⁶⁰ Research into Lebanon’s postwar urban landscapes similarly notes the absence of ‘green texts’ sidelined during the reconstruction of

⁵⁹ See Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*; Jad El Hage, *One Day in April* (Cornwall: Quartet Books, 2011); Nada Awar Jarrar, *A Good Land* (London: Harper Collins, 2009).

⁶⁰ Salma Nashabe Talhouk, ‘Introduction’, in Amy Zenger (ed.), *Trees of Lebanon* (Beirut: Nature Conservation Center, 2014), p. 12.

Beirut after the Civil War. Efforts to obliterate signs of war from the city streets have thus accompanied the imbalance between an increasingly gentrified (and sectarian) cityscape and a reduced accessibility to and availability of affordable public spaces, green or otherwise.⁶¹ Students' plots note this reality.

In Beirut today it's hard to get your bearings. Traditional landmarks and green areas are disappearing. Everything is either being destroyed or rebuilt; it has become impossible to tell the difference. Once there was a constant sea, but that, too, has been swallowed up and drowned in concrete. (Elie)

If reconstruction politics have eschewed considerations for inclusive public spaces, they also re-entrenched the clannish notion of sectarian communities residing in middle-class sect-based agoras or enclaves.⁶² Students' narratives highlight these potentially violent urban dislocations, and the religious culture that nourishes them, in relation to green spaces specifically:

As I approached the small hole in our garden, my green tea 'twin plant' my grandfather had planted the day I was born had become a pile of ashes, another casual victim of the May 2008 clashes. I had been caring for that plant since childhood. (Adel)

Every so often I'll leave my study desk for a short break and come back to find a fallen leaf or petal on my keyboard or desk. I have covered the window sill of my rented studio with pots of flowering plants to block out the view of the pockmarked wall of the adjacent building. It might not be a textbook garden, but it hides at least the scars of sect and war. (Zeina)

The events of May 8 are still on my mind, but gone backstage for now. I watch in silence the sprawling meadows of the Bekaa Valley that I've been driving to reach all morning. The crispy wind plays across my entire body and dangles up my thinning hair. I am at peace. (Ahmad)

⁶¹ Maha Yahya, 'Let the Dead Be Dead: Communal Imaginaries and National Narratives in the Post Civil War Reconstruction of Beirut', in Alev Çınar and Thomas Bender (eds.), *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 236-265.

⁶² Seidman, 'The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut', p. 26.

Understandably, many delve into their (makeshift) gardens to diffuse the tension that dwells in their respective contexts. The green texts students produce respond to the exclusionary narrative prevalent in post-postwar Lebanon by reading gardens as a secular referent that can transcend parochial groupings.

Olive groves in Lebanon are dearly passed from generation to generation, father to son. As luck would have it, I'm an only child, but, I found it difficult to buckle up and tow the line; I wasn't convinced that breaking up with Fadi, whose family also grows olives, would solve any problem in the long run [...]. Watching as he helped us separate the olives from the tree by gently pulling on the branch from its base to its tip to yield its offering of fruit, even my grandmother could see that Fadi wasn't all that different, despite his faith. In that moment, he was no longer an outsider; he was one of us. (Salma)

I chose to be a public health student because I think that an awareness and responsibility towards protecting green spaces is not only closely linked to physical wellbeing but also extends to our shared humanity. Shortly after my parents moved us back to Lebanon, I gave the small garden behind our house a major re-haul, a process I've found to be soul-cleansing. (Ranim)

Cultivating a tolerant mindset is like pruning a garden. I think Lebanese people should stand guard to their gardens with pride and make sure no source of contamination plagues them: Imagine how much lethal waste we put in our gardens every single day, our collective frustrations, the continuous fear of the other, and the corresponding troubles of our past and uncertainties of our future. (Marwan)

Closing Remarks

As much as the personal narratives I have examined are about inclusion, tolerance, and tapping the conciliatory potential of unthreatening spaces, they are also, and necessarily, a foray into exclusionary scripts of intolerance shaped by the sectarian ills of Lebanon's home culture today. Our creative writing workshops prove instrumental for staging this discussion, even as it must find more pervasive entry into the wider public discourse to realise substantial, long-term change.

The study's distinct thematic findings underscore the need for further creative narrative research to achieve a more comprehensive mapping of the views of Lebanese youths in the post-postwar period. If disillusionment over prospects of imminent change is the strung-out discourse community trodden by young writers and non-writers alike, the subjective experience of navigating the sectarian cloture, and of the patriarchal system that attaches to it, is a collective one and offers the potentiality for plotting and rewriting home, relocating the current reality of what is, to a possible configuration of what could be. Widening the scope of narrative research can thus rescind the methodological caveats of creative writing studies to date. More importantly, it can contribute to a cogent, 'collective narrative' that can effectively disentangle, and destabilise, the 'narrative maze'⁶³ problematising constructions of home and civil society in Lebanon. Youths can then shift more effectively from creative narrative exploration to actualising and assessment of redemptive counter-spaces deflecting the political system's blighting grapple on their young lives.

Judging by subsequent conversations I have had with students, they continue in their different ways, life choices, and activism to subvert hetero-normative dogmas of the sectarian superstructure. Flânerie emerges as one of these choices, a post-postwar topos ratified by the findings of previous creative writing studies as a common survival strategy among Lebanese youths at the end of the Civil War⁶⁴. My students' texts show how flânerie as a narrative choice is enabling since the skilled movement between conflicting discourse communities, imposed scripts versus secular aspirations, can engage and promote active youth citizenship. As post-postwar flâneurs and flâneuses, students' street encounters help them expose, negotiate, and potentially subvert the cultural turpitudes of, and at, home. Meanwhile, the civil fighting in Syria, military tensions in Palestine-Israel, and the encroaching threats of the Islamic State surround the country on all its inland borders. Within this liminal framework, the study confirms that creative writing in a post-conflict setting is significant. Tenuous as it may seem, it can be a vector for probing secular loci where pluralistic initiatives may unfold.

⁶³ Ivor Goodson and Scherto Gill, *Critical Narrative as Pedagogy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁶⁴ Khalaf, 'Youthful Voices', pp. 61-62.

Appendix

Table I: Age of Respondents

Age	Number	Percent
18—19	16	51.61
20—21	15	48.39
Total	31	100%

Table II: Gender

Gender	Number	Percent
Male	17	54.84
Female	14	45.16
Total	31	100%

Table III: Course of Study

Major	Number	Percent
Nursing	4	12.9
Nutrition	1	3.225
Medical Laboratory Sciences	12	38.71
Public Health and Development	13	41.94
Majorless	1	3.225
Total	31	100%

Table IV: Academic Class

Academic Class	Number	Percent
Sophomores	15	48.39
Juniors	8	25.8
Seniors	7	22.58
Majorless	1	3.225
Total	31	100%

Acknowledgement

This study was made possible in part by the collaboration of colleagues in the English Department at the University of Balamand who authorised access to the data I have analysed.

Notes

¹ Featherstone, 912-913.

² *Ibid.*, 913.

³ Brighenti, 135.

⁴ Wallace Runnymede's *The Great Flâneur Narrative*, a new novel written in drama/play form and published in June 2016, satirizes the trope as having become vacuous among various bombastic intelligentsia in academic circles.

⁵ Tallis, ix.

⁶ See White.

⁷ Taleb, 25-32.

⁸ Frisby, 81-110.

⁹ McLaren, 143.

¹⁰ Seidman, "Streets of Beirut," 18.

¹¹ Merabet, 79.

¹² Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut," 14.

¹³ Wolf, 37-46.

¹⁴ See Parsons.

¹⁵ Hout, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*.

¹⁶ Elkin, 22-23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22; italics in original.

¹⁸ Ette, 42.

¹⁹ Georgis, 249.

²⁰ Numerous critics, essayists, and social scientists have written about patriarchy as a social and political system in the contexts of Lebanon and Syria, and in the Middle East in general. Here are the sources I looked at: Aghacy, *Masculine Identity*; Ghousoub and Sinclair-Webb, *Imagined Masculinities*; Haddad, *Superman Is An Arab*; Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift*; Khalaf and Saad Khalaf, *Arab Society and Culture*; Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens*; Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, and Antoun and Quataert, *Syria: Society, Culture and Polity*. Sarah El-Richani's recent monograph, *The Lebanese Media: Anatomy of a System in Perpetual Crisis*,

presents an extensive analysis of how sectarian and political stakeholders, which as my thesis shows are constitutive of patriarchy, have shaped the cultural outputs of the Lebanese media in the 21st century so far.

²¹ Qtd. in Schlote, 525.

²² Seidman, “The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut.”

²³ See ii. The Feminist and Postcolonial Flâneuse in Sleiman El Hajj’s *I Am Not Naked* (2016) and in Rabih Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013).

²⁴ Amer, “Naming to Empower,” 387; Massad, 361-85. Also see Appendix 3: As its title indicates, I explore in this article how gay male identity envisioned according to Western ideals, and with an aspiration toward the West as a redemptive queer space (and place), can be problematic.

²⁵ Cooke, *Dissident Syria*; Kahf, “The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature,” 228.

Mohja Kahf relates the silences in Syrian literature post-1963 till present to the state of emergency that was declared in 1963 when the Baath Party seized power and shaped “the rise of a police state with great repressive powers.” Writing in a similar vein, Miriam Cook has argued that the regime often co-opted or appropriated art and literature bearing dissonant or anti-status-quo narratives, whether social or political, thus turning works which were originally subversive into agitprops for the government.

For critical discussions of the repressive socio-political setting of Assad’s Baathist Syria, and/or the civil war this has spawned, I have looked at John McHugo’s *Syria: A Recent History* and Richard T. Antoun and Donald Quataert’s *Syria: Society, Culture and Polity*. For creative nonfiction examinations of the Syrian context, I found the following war diaries useful, in particular since they combine personal lived experience, often involving journeys of physical border-crossing, with the public record of censorship, oppression, and war. All three are works of creative non-fiction:

Nujeen Mustafa and Christina Lamb’s *The Girl From Aleppo: Nujeen’s Escape from War to Freedom*, Diana Darke’s *My House in Damascus: An Inside View of the Syrian Crisis*, and Samar Yazbek’s *The Crossing: My Journey into the Shattered Heart of Syria*. Yazbek’s *Cinnamon* is one of the novels I analyze in the thesis.

²⁶ Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift*.

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- ²⁷ Articles 520 and 534 which criminalize “unnatural sexual acts” in the Syrian and Lebanese Penal Codes, respectively, have been used to justify the harassment and persecution and prosecution of queers in both Lebanon and Syria. See “Homosexuality in Syria” and Reid, para.4. and para. 15-16.
- ²⁸ Moussawi, 858-75; also see Merabet and McCormick.
- ²⁹ Haddad’s *Guapa* takes place in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in an unnamed Arab city. In a personal interview I conducted in June 2016, the author revealed that he had refrained from identifying the city since his narrative’s critique extends equally across different settings in the Arab Middle East and North Africa region, and also for issues of personal security. Haddad is of mixed German, Iraqi, Lebanese, and Jordanian parentage.
- ³⁰ In 2000, *Ana Hiya Anti (I Am You)*, a heavily criticized novel written in Arabic and featuring female homosexuality, was published by Lebanese writer Elham Mansour. The novel was only reviewed in a handful of local newspaper articles but not in any Arabic literary criticism, with critics identifying the book’s poor language and “the distasteful and unnatural” topic of lesbianism as its main liabilities. See Habib, 91.
- ³¹ Alameddine’s gay novels have received queer readings by a number of critics, namely Syrine Hout, Wael S. Hassan, and Dervla Shannahan. See Hout, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*; Shannahan, “Reading Queer A/theology,” 129-42, and Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*.
- ³² Zimmerman, 11.
- ³³ For example, I was disinclined to read Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman* as a queer text, though according to Rich’s “lesbian continuum” it might be considered as such, since while queering the flâneuse, in my novel as well as in Yazbek’s, partakes of the oppositional design of the trope, it also foregrounds this critique of normativity in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity.
- ³⁴ Barry, 142. Also see Butler, “Critically Queer,” which argues that the meaning of queer must remain flexible to avoid the fixity of labeling when referring to queer identity. I agree with this view of subject identity since it allows for what Barry describes as “a complex mixture of chosen allegiances, social position, and professional roles,” rather than a fixed inner essence dictated by sexual preferences alone (140). And yet if queer identity is an aggregate of

variables transcending sexual orientation, gay and lesbian activism has, in great part, worked in the post-Stonewall era toward achieving civil rights for groups/individuals of same-sex affinities, regardless of the other factors that problematize identity. Hence, on both practical and theoretical levels, vectorizing variant oppositional movements as queer is reductive.

³⁵ Qtd. in Brown, 107.

³⁶ Hartman, 539. Also, *trou* means gap/hole in French.

³⁷ Boucai, 84.

³⁸ Kahf, "The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature," 229.

³⁹ See Sukar's best-selling novel *The Boy from Aleppo Who Painted the War*. Also see Jarrar, *An Unsafe Haven*; Azzam, *Sarmada*; Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*; Tavalazzi, *Looking into the Sun*, and Kajjo, *Nothing But Soot*. Among these, the only two novels written originally in English, and whose authors are Syrian or of Syrian origin, are Kahf's and Sukkar's.

⁴⁰ Ouyang, 9.

⁴¹ El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity*, 88.

⁴² Cooke, 138.

⁴³ Qtd. in al-Sarrāj, 73.

⁴⁴ Khalaf, "Introduction to *Hikayat*," 13.

⁴⁵ Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* was the winner of the French Foreign Femina Novel Award (*Le Prix Fémina Etranger*) in 2016 and a finalist for the prestigious U.S. National Book Award for Fiction in 2014. See Pujas. Also see "2014 National Book Award Finalist," National Book Foundation.

In 2012, *Cinnamon's* author Samar Yazbek was awarded the PEN/Pinter Prize as the "International Writer of Courage" in recognition of her war memoir *A Woman in the Crossfire*. Not surprisingly, Yazbek has received death threats in Syria and is now living in exile. See Flood.

⁴⁶ Guardi, 25.

⁴⁷ Hout, "Sex and Love as Routes for Border Crossing," 356.

⁴⁸ Boucai, 84.

⁴⁹ See El Hajj.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 78. Much like his earlier novels, Alameddine's newest novel, *The Angel of History*,

released on October 4, 2016, features queer desire from an Arab male, and transcultural and diasporic perspective.

⁵¹ Across the humanities and the social sciences, theories of home abound, mainly in connection to migration and diaspora studies. For the home-as-movement, rather than home-as-place, approach, which both my thesis, as well as critics of home matters in the diaspora, valorize, please see the following sources: Alison and Dowling, *Home*; Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, and Cho, 11-30.

For specific readings of home in diasporic Anglophone Lebanese fiction, see the most recent monograph by Syrine Hout, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*. Also see Fadda-Conrey.

⁵² Hout, “Sex and Love as Routes for Border Crossing.” Also see Peter Simatei’s analysis of home post-trauma as the interaction between a haunting home and the hunt for new functional homes. Simatei, 56-67.

⁵³ Brah qtd. in Fortier, 409-10; italics in original.

⁵⁴ Hout, “Sex and Love as Routes for Border Crossing,” 345.

⁵⁵ Rubenstein, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Cathy Caruth describes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as “basically biphasic, that is, consisting of alternating flashbacks and numbing,” adding that this description of the experience has stayed the same over time “both in clinical and theoretical accounts and in survivor stories.” See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 130.

Along these lines, what I refer to as somatic manifestations of PTSD, as experienced by Samira, are outlined by Caruth as “repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.” See Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” 4.

⁵⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.

⁵⁸ This “advantage of hindsight” is closely associated with the coming of age process Samira achieves; hindsight, so to speak, informs her conceptualization theoretically as a flâneuse, in such a way that the apparent stasis (lack of physical movement) of her positioning in the attic eventually facilitates, rather than works against, her revamped female gaze as it strips the

vener of the *trompe l'oeil*, and its metaphorical variations in the text, and propels the development of her emotional trajectory.

See ii. The Feminist and Postcolonial Flâneuse in Sleiman El Hajj's *I Am Not Naked* (2016) and in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013).

⁵⁹ Caruth, "Recapturing the Past," 153.

⁶⁰ Aaliya Saleh in *An Unnecessary Woman* is the exception in this case, since, as I argue later, she finds home in the intimate company of her books, rather than that of women who, in fact, tend to view her as a reclusive curiosity, without really seeking to understand her as an individual. Apart from Hannah whom patriarchy drives to suicide, the other females in the novel, whether Aaliya's relatives or her neighbors, are generally portrayed in an unsympathetic manner.

⁶¹ Schlote, 530.

⁶² Aliyah, Hanan al-Hashimi's maid/lover in Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon*, must not be confused with Aaliya Saleh, the literary translator/protagonist of Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*. Coincidentally, they are both flâneuses, albeit of different paths, and share the same name – I've kept the original spelling for each.

⁶³ The term "postwar" refers in general to the period after the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990. With yet another war happening on Lebanese ground, the Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006, I use the term "post-postwar" to describe the social and political setting after this war.

⁶⁴ See Yazbek, *Cinnamon*, 71. Also see Habib.

⁶⁵ Joseph, "Civil Society, the Public/Private."

⁶⁶ Khalaf, "On Roots and Routes."

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶⁸ Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut," 11.

⁶⁹ Joseph, "Brother-Sister Relationships," 282-83.

⁷⁰ See i. Introduction.

⁷¹ Tobar, para. 14.

⁷² Kellman, para. 5.

⁷³ See note 69.

⁷⁴ Parsons, 3.

⁷⁵ Seidman, “The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut,” 8.

⁷⁶ Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*, 107.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁹ Featherstone, 913.

⁸⁰ Parsons, 3.

⁸¹ See Goodson and Gill.

⁸² Seidman, “The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut.”

⁸³ Khalaf, “Lebanese Youth Narratives.” Also, see Khalaf, “Youthful Voices in Postwar Lebanon.”

My own findings in the empirical creative writing study I conducted at the University of Balamand in Beirut (see Appendix 4) reveal a level of *flânerie* among the respondents, in that, for many of them, incidents they witnessed on the streets shaped their critiques of and subsequent notions of home. When and if the war in Syria concludes, a similar narrative study there might be useful to gauge the usefulness of *flânerie* as an intervention, in theory and in practice, in a postwar environment.

⁸⁴ Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*, 13.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹³ See Asseily.

⁹⁴ Alameddine, 64.

⁹⁵ Joseph, “Brother-Sister Relationships.”

⁹⁶ Tobar, para. 10.

⁹⁷ Alameddine, 7.

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- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 252.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., 19.
- ¹⁰⁰ Joseph, “Brother-Sister Relationships,” 284.
- ¹⁰¹ Alameddine, 5.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., 4-5.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 147.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 144.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 95-96.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 201.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 198.
- ¹⁰⁸ Lerner, 217.
- ¹⁰⁹ Alameddine, 143.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid., 217; italics in original.
- ¹¹² Ibid., 258.
- ¹¹³ Alameddine’s early fiction, namely his debut novel *Koolaid: The Art of War* (1998) and his collection of short stories *The Perv* (1999), address the vicissitudes of patriarchy in relation to Lebanese queers.
- ¹¹⁴ Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*, 126.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid., 260.
- ¹¹⁶ Ibid., 119.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., 141.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid., 248-49.
- ¹¹⁹ See Aciman.
- ¹²⁰ Alameddine, 155.
- ¹²¹ Ibid., 125.
- ¹²² Ibid.
- ¹²³ Aciman, 151.
- ¹²⁴ McLaren, 167.
- ¹²⁵ Seidman, “Streets of Beirut.”

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- ¹²⁶ Alameddine, 68.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid., 69-70.
- ¹²⁸ Ibid., 20.
- ¹²⁹ Göçek, 5.
- ¹³⁰ Alameddine, 28.
- ¹³¹ Ibid., 175.
- ¹³² Ibid.
- ¹³³ McLaren, 146.
- ¹³⁴ Alameddine, 28.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid., 27.
- ¹³⁶ Ibid., 26.
- ¹³⁷ Ibid., 149.
- ¹³⁸ Ibid., 175.
- ¹³⁹ Ibid., 174-75.
- ¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid., 30.
- ¹⁴² Ibid., 41.
- ¹⁴³ Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift*.
- ¹⁴⁴ Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut."
- ¹⁴⁵ Alameddine, 194.
- ¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 99.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁹ Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut."
- ¹⁵⁰ Zubaida, 32-33.
- ¹⁵¹ See Kegels. Also, see Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift* and Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut."
- ¹⁵² Khalaf, "Lebanese Youth Narratives," 112.
- ¹⁵³ Alameddine, 89.
- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

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- ¹⁵⁵ Kegels, 192.
- ¹⁵⁶ Hage, 8.
- ¹⁵⁷ Khalaf, “Lebanese Youth Narratives,” 109.
- ¹⁵⁸ Alameddine, 237.
- ¹⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁰ See Yahya.
- ¹⁶¹ Alameddine, 212.
- ¹⁶² Frisby, 82.
- ¹⁶³ Ibid.; italics in original.
- ¹⁶⁴ Alameddine, 178.
- ¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.
- ¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 207.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.
- ¹⁶⁹ Seidman, “The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut,” 11.
- ¹⁷⁰ Larkin, 143.
- ¹⁷¹ Alameddine, 194.
- ¹⁷² Ibid.
- ¹⁷³ Seidman, “The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut,” 11.
- ¹⁷⁴ Seidman, “Streets of Beirut,” 16.
- ¹⁷⁵ See note 166.
- ¹⁷⁶ Alameddine, 193; italics in original.
- ¹⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 194.
- ¹⁷⁹ Faust, 377.
- ¹⁸⁰ Alameddine, 212.
- ¹⁸¹ Ibid., 175.
- ¹⁸² Ibid., 251.
- ¹⁸³ Ibid.
- ¹⁸⁴ Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift*, 18.

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- ¹⁸⁵ Alameddine, 252.
- ¹⁸⁶ Seidman, “The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut.”
- ¹⁸⁷ Alameddine, 177; italics in original.
- ¹⁸⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁸⁹ Hage, 11.
- ¹⁹⁰ Seigneurie, 55.
- ¹⁹¹ Alameddine, 113.
- ¹⁹² Kellman, para. 6.
- ¹⁹³ Joseph, “Civil Society, the Public/Private,” 169.
- ¹⁹⁴ Alameddine, 254.
- ¹⁹⁵ I. *The Creative Artifact*, 65.
- ¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 34-36.
- ¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 71.
- ¹⁹⁸ Qtd. in Booth, 379.
- ¹⁹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁰ Aciman, 151.
- ²⁰¹ Brighenti, 131.
- ²⁰² I. *The Creative Artifact*, 61.
- ²⁰³ Ibid., 60.
- ²⁰⁴ Ibid., 49.
- ²⁰⁵ See Akerman. Also see Seigneurie.
- ²⁰⁶ See earlier section on Aaliya Saleh (ii. *The Feminist and Postcolonial Flâneuse* in Sleiman El Hajj’s *I Am Not Naked* (2016) and in Rabih Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013)).
- ²⁰⁷ See Joseph, “Brother-Sister Relationships.”
- ²⁰⁸ Schlote, 527.
- ²⁰⁹ I. *The Creative Artifact*, 151.
- ²¹⁰ Seidman, 14.
- ²¹¹ El-Ariss, “Hacking the Modern.”
- ²¹² See note 57.
- ²¹³ I. *The Creative Artifact*, 208.

²¹⁴ Rubenstein, 76.

²¹⁵ I. The Creative Artifact, 196.

²¹⁶ See Appendix 4.

²¹⁷ I. The Creative Artifact, 103.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 166.

²²⁰ Qtd. in Edelman, 39.

²²¹ Note that Yazbek's *Cinnamon*, in comparison, stacks all male characters into the same critical category, regardless of class or age.

²²² Traboulsi, 245-46.

²²³ See *The Arab Weekly*.

²²⁴ El-Ariss posits the term "*faddāh*" to signify the "exposer" or "scandalizer" trope in present-day Arab fictions. Also, as a "*faddāh*," an author within the trope is one "who exposes and hacks political models and literary tradition" by venturing into new kinds of writing, such as blogs-as-novels, that make use of technology to circumvent censorship. See El-Ariss, "Fiction of Scandal," 510.

Note that El-Ariss only uses the masculine form of the term in his analysis.

²²⁵ Abelove, Barale, and Halperin, xvi.

²²⁶ See Eltahawy and Sa'adah.

²²⁷ Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians."

²²⁸ Ibid., 215.

²²⁹ See Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*; Jamal, "The Story of Lot," and Shannahan, "Some Queer Questions."

²³⁰ Citing recent fiction by Layla al-Zubaidi, Mohammed Rabie, Nael Eltoukhy, and Basma Abdel Aziz, Alexandra Alter states that literature coming out of the Middle East in the 21st century is invested in futuristic, surreal, and dystopian explorations that elude the scrutiny of censorship in the Arab world. According to Alter, the dystopian genre "has proliferated in part because it captures the sense of despair that many writers say they feel in the face of cyclical violence and repression. At the same time, futuristic settings may give writers some measure of cover to explore charged political ideas without being labeled dissidents." Alter,

para. 6 and 10.

Similarly, creative artwork has been used, in Lebanon in particular, as a form of protest against social and political oppression. Mireille Honein's sculptures and art installations are a case in point. On April 22, 2017, Honein set up 31 wedding dresses to appear to float, each dress suspended from a rope with a noose on top, above Beirut's famed seaside promenade, the Corniche. The installation was a form of protest against the country's archaic rape law: Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal Code, largely unchanged since the French Mandate, stipulates that a rapist is exonerated of rape-related charges if he shows willingness to marry his victim. In an interview with Marwan Naaman, Honein revealed "she had worked on the dresses for two years, in 2012 and 2013, first as a form of critique against the institution of marriage and later as a statement against the subjugation of women in patriarchal societies." Naaman, para. 5.

²³¹ Sanchez and Williams, para.5. Other Arab writers have also faced persecution along these lines. The poet Ashraf Fayadh, whose verses were perceived as atheist and "spreading some destructive thoughts into society," was first sentenced to death by Saudi authorities on November 20, 2015. Following an international outcry from fellow writers, the punishment was reduced on February 2, 2016 to an eight-year prison term and public flogging (800 lashes). See PEN International, para. 4.

²³² See the corresponding literature review, 214-15, and note 30.

²³³ Drawing on postcolonial theory, Georgis makes the case that, for Middle Eastern queers, it is the dissonance of articulating shame – rather than the post-Stonewall culture of foregrounding queer pride and stifling or even excoriating shame – which is a resource for imagining change. Georgis, 233-51.

²³⁴ See El Hajj, "Between Validation and Emasculation;" Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, and Whittaker, *Unspeakable Love*.

²³⁵ See Alameddine, *The Perv*; Georgis, "Thinking Past Pride," and El Hajj, 66.

²³⁶ Rubenstein, 2-3.

²³⁷ Barry, 135.

²³⁸ Zimmerman, 8.

²³⁹ Qtd. in El Hajj, 74.

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- ²⁴⁰ Yazbek, *Cinnamon*, 71.
- ²⁴¹ Sedgwick, 25.
- ²⁴² Ahmed, 161-62.
- ²⁴³ Yazbek, 48.
- ²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ²⁵² *Ibid.*, 6, 49-50, 59, 61.
- ²⁵³ Accad, 38.
- ²⁵⁴ I. The Creative Artifact, 149.
- ²⁵⁵ Yazbek, 25, 56-57.
- ²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28, 32.
- ²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18, 21.
- ²⁵⁸ Hooks, 94.
- ²⁵⁹ Yazbek, 34.
- ²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁶¹ See hooks; also see El Hajj, 75, and note 20.
- ²⁶² Yazbek, 46.
- ²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-52, 61.
- ²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 55-56.
- ²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ²⁶⁷ Rubenstein, 66.
- ²⁶⁸ Yazbek, 26-27.
- ²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

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- ²⁷⁰ Ibid., 99.
- ²⁷¹ Ibid., 66, italics mine.
- ²⁷² Rubenstein, 76.
- ²⁷³ Simatei, 58.
- ²⁷⁴ Hout, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 21-51. Hout uses Brah's concept of "homing desire," which is aligned with Simatei's, in her reading of the home hunt among uprooted queer men in Alameddine's *Koolaid*s.
- ²⁷⁵ Yazbek, 122.
- ²⁷⁶ Ibid., 27. Hanan even outlines different stereotypes of how a maid's face can look like: "Most maids had a generic expression, somewhere between doltish sadness and patient sorrow. Their cheeks, thought Hanan, were not pronounced like Aliyah's; most were red and puffy, like the cooks' faces, or pale and sagging, like the housemaids."
- ²⁷⁷ Ahmed, 161-62.
- ²⁷⁸ Aliyah almost exposes their clandestine affair by falling asleep in Hanan's bed, rather than returning to her own by dawn, a tacit ritual in their affair.
- ²⁷⁹ Yazbek, 38-39.
- ²⁸⁰ Ibid., 39-40.
- ²⁸¹ Ibid., 41.
- ²⁸² Ibid., 58.
- ²⁸³ Ibid., 58, 66.
- ²⁸⁴ Ibid., 63.
- ²⁸⁵ Ibid., 64-65.
- ²⁸⁶ Ibid., 40.
- ²⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸⁸ Yazbek, 28.
- ²⁸⁹ Ibid., 38. Aliyah's predicament as a servant is not uncommon, Yazbek suggests: The "people of al-Raml turned their daughters into servants, just as they had done over a hundred years previously when the girls were pawned to Aleppan tradesmen."
- ²⁹⁰ Yazbek, 24.
- ²⁹¹ I. The Creative Artifact, 131.

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- ²⁹² Ibid., 113.
- ²⁹³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 19.
- ²⁹⁴ I. The Creative Artifact, 103.
- ²⁹⁵ Ibid., 191.
- ²⁹⁶ See Butler, *Undoing Gender*, and Ahmed, 161.
- ²⁹⁷ I. The Creative Artifact, 108; italics in original.
- ²⁹⁸ Qtd. in Zimmerman, 184.
- ²⁹⁹ I. The Creative Artifact, 113.
- ³⁰⁰ Barry, 146.
- ³⁰¹ See Georgis's analysis, 247.
- ³⁰² I. The Creative Artifact, 192.
- ³⁰³ Ibid., 143.
- ³⁰⁴ Mounzer, para. 7.
- ³⁰⁵ See note 53.
- ³⁰⁶ Elkin, the most recent flâneuse theorist, describes the physical act of flânerie as "flâneusing."
- ³⁰⁷ See commentary on Lebanese attitudes toward Syrians at the end of the previous section.
- ³⁰⁸ I. The Creative Artifact, 184.
- ³⁰⁹ Ibid., 198. As of the date the final version of this thesis was submitted, 30th April 2017, the Syrian Civil War was still ongoing.
- ³¹⁰ I. The Creative Artifact, 209.
- ³¹¹ Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut," 12.
- ³¹² McLaren, 150.
- ³¹³ Rubenstein, 3.
- ³¹⁴ Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*, 187-88.
- ³¹⁵ Barry, 143.

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