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MADAME BANDAR'S THEATRE OF LOVE

by

Ghassan Abou-Zeineddine

A Dissertation Submitted in  
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at

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ABSTRACT

MADAME BANDAR'S THEATRE OF LOVE

by

Ghassan Abou-Zeineddine

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016  
Under the Supervision of Professor Valerie Laken

*Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love*, a comedic bildungsroman, follows the life of Omar Aladdine in the 1960s and '70s as he navigates the historic red-light district in downtown Beirut. At eighteen, Omar works at his father's grocery store on Mutanabi Street, which is lined with brothels. He becomes enamored with the prostitutes at Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love, where plays and musical performances are staged, and begins to write romantic plays for the brothel. But when civil war breaks out in the spring of 1975, Mutanabi Street is caught in the crossfire. The fate of Madame Bandar's and all the prostitutes is at risk, as well as Omar's newfound sense of home.

To my parents and sister

## Backstage

My night begins in an upstairs room at the Candlelight. I sit by the window overlooking a front courtyard shaded by the sprawling branches of a magnolia tree. Icy rain lashes the windowpanes, rain that has been scarce this winter. On the radio, Abdel Wahab sings about unrequited love, his mournful voice soaring above the rumbling thunder. I light a cigarette and lay the pack next to my glass of rum and Pepsi on the windowsill. Murrone MacClannough sits on the bed next to the gas heater, wrapped in a wool blanket. Her bleached blonde hair is parted down the middle and in the red glow of the lightbulb her face is pink. She's Madame Hafiza's new girl.

Years ago, I tell Murrone, when Baba came home from work in the evenings, he retired to the bathroom and took long steamy baths. He always sang as he bathed, favoring the sad romantic ballads of Abdel Wahab. I sometimes stood outside the door to listen to him sing, thinking his voice was as delicate as the sound of bathwater swishing about in the tub.

"I prefer pop music," Murrone says. "So what's the plan for tonight? Madame Hafiza told me you were in one of your moods. I don't know what that means."

"I've paid to tell you my story for the night."

"That's weird shit. No sex?"

"Just my story. At least for now. My only listeners are the girls in Hamra."

"What do you know about storytelling? You don't look like a hakawati."

Before the civil war, I tell Murrone, I wrote romantic plays for Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love. Madame Bandar's stood at the end of Mutanabi Street in downtown

Beirut. The street was named after an Iraqi poet of the tenth century, whose flowery verses I never much admired for their insistence on improbable metaphors. It was a narrow, one-way backstreet situated east of Martyrs' Square, up from the port and near a police station. Three-to-four story brothels of French Colonial style stood tall and proud on either side, boasting ornate balustrades and columned balconies, stylized arches and windows with slatted shutters. Sagging electric lines crisscrossed above. Beirutis referred to Mutanabi Street as the Market of the Virtuous, taking pride in the irony. Others just called it the Whores' Market.

"I miss hearing the catcalls of the Mutanabi girls," I say. They stood on their balconies in gaudy dresses, their faces powdered and their lips rouged, and blew kisses to the men down below. The nights sparkled with the neon lights of billboards. "But it's all gone. Mutanabi Street was destroyed in the first year of the war. Not a building was spared."

"I've never heard of the street," Murrone says. "But is that how you start a story? With an ending? No wonder you've got to pay your listeners."

I smile. Madame Hafiza said she had an attitude, and that like me, she loves movies. I crave the girls with attitudes, especially when I'm reeling from Diala, a Palestinian belly dancer who once reigned over Madame Bandar's stage in two-piece sequined outfits that flickered under the lights. It so happened that a young woman I interviewed earlier today for an opening at our bank was named Diala. I read her name on her CV only moments before entering the interview and was overcome with nostalgia. I washed my face in the bathroom to clear my head, but it was useless. I was in a daze throughout the entire interview, remembering my muse.

Afterwards, I told my secretary not to let anyone disturb me for the next hour. My melancholy swelled. Then Antoine, my right hand man, opened the door to my office.

“There’s been another bombing,” he said.

We hurried to the lunchroom and turned on the TV to listen to the breaking news, and were soon joined by others. A frantic young journalist was already on the scene, wearing a helmet and bulletproof vest, black smoke billowing behind him. With sirens wailing in the background, he yelled into his microphone: A suicide bomber had blown himself up in a hookah café in the Beirut suburb of Dahieh. It appeared to be another jihadist attack on Hezbollah, who controlled the area.

“There are body parts everywhere,” the journalist said, looking toward the flames.

“God rest them,” Antoine said, shaking his head. “This country will never change. If we’re not killing each other in the streets, jihadists are doing the work for us.”

I was still too somber to respond.

At home, I was unresponsive with my family, who realized I was in one of my moods. My son glared at me. The formidable basketball player that he is, he thinks I’m a pansy. My daughter embraced me. “Don’t be sad, Baba,” she said.

Mama gave me the silent treatment. My wife flashed me the same look as my son, her lips pursed.

As the night wore on and it started to rain, I sat with my family in the parlor, watching the news in silence. It became more difficult to breathe. I had to leave. I went to my bedroom to change clothes, oil my hair, and splash my face with Bien-être cologne. My wife entered the room and closed the door behind her.

“Where are you going?” she asked. Her dark hair was pulled tightly in a ponytail, stressing her widow’s peak. Like me, her black eyes had started to fade into a murky grey. Her skin was pale, her cheeks narrowing to a pointed chin.

“I need some fresh air.”

“It’s raining. Bombs are going off. Are you crazy?”

“Please, Ayda.”

“Please what?”

She never understood my story, no matter how many times I tried to tell it to her. She once said that if she had known about my life from the beginning of our courtship, she wouldn’t have married me. “Your past disgusts me,” she had said.

“Do you need all that cologne?” she asked. “What do you think our children are going to say when they see you dressed up? Think they’ll admire you?”

I became more desperate to leave. “You all are safe here.”

“Oh, very safe,” she said. “Nothing to worry about.” She left the room.

Since Candlelight is nearby, I walked with my umbrella in hand. The streets were empty, and it wasn’t only because of the pouring rain. The bombing had turned Beirut into a ghost town. Like my own family, Beirutis had flocked to their homes to sit in front of the TV to listen to enraged pundits spew threats and ominous retributions, making everyone more nervous and terrified. As I walked down the slick pavement yellowed by streetlights, seeking refuge beneath the awnings of closed bars and clothing stores, I couldn’t help but look over my shoulder. What if someone were following me? During the civil war the streets were always empty at night. We feared car bombings,



kidnappings, sniper fire, and the roving Volkswagen vans filled with militants who'd slit your throat depending on your religion, which was printed on your identity card.

I was a block away from the Candlelight, about to cross a small intersection, when a man called out, "Ya istaz."

I stopped and turned to my right. A man in a black trench coat stepped from the shadows of a store awning, holding an umbrella.

"Got a light?" he said.

My heart pounding, I reached for my lighter. He pulled out a cigarette, and with our umbrellas grazing, rivulets of rain sliding down our makeshift canopy, he leaned in and lit his cigarette. In the fleeting light of my flame, I caught a glimpse of his face. His bushy eyebrows connected above the bridge of his nose, which was red and bulbous. His black hair was flecked with silver.

"What do you think about the bombing?" he asked. His voice was gruff, his Arabic accented.

Standing this close to the Candlelight, desperate to relieve the ache in my chest, I told him I was in a hurry.

"You should be careful, my friend," he said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. "I hear another bomb is in the works. Maybe even tonight. Right here in Hamra."

"Where'd you hear that from?"

"I have my sources."

I looked across the street at my refuge, rain coursing down its pink, concrete walls.

"Ah," he said. "Now I understand. Which girl are you after?"

I had lived my entire life in this neighborhood on the West Side of Beirut, and had never seen this man until tonight. He had no business bothering me. I crossed the street as fast as I could, thankful I didn't hear his footsteps behind me.

In the red glow of Murrone's room, I finally feel secure. I'm lucky to have Murrone for the night. Unlike the rest of Madame Hafiza's girls, who have probably grown tired of my narrative even though I alter each telling, she hasn't heard my story. Most times, the girls keep themselves busy as I narrate, flipping through magazines and saying "Hm," or "that's so interesting," or filing and painting their nails and, not uncommonly, dozing off.

I take a sip from my drink and begin again:

I was born blue on May 4, 1956. I gasped for breath as the doctor uncoiled the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck. Once my lungs filled with air, Mama said I let loose a shattering cry that was louder than the howling of the wolves she had grown up listening to on sleepless nights in her village in Mount Lebanon.

"I grew up listening to the howls of jackals," Murrone says, interrupting my story. She throws back her blanket, gets up, and walks to the dresser, where she flicks off the radio. The sound of the rain fills the room. She pulls a cigarette from my pack without asking and lights it with the end of mine, engulfing me in the scent of her cheap perfume. Our fingers touch like shy lovers. She wears a pink camisole and matching lace pants. She looks down at me, her hand on her hip, taking in my three-piece suit and patent leather shoes, my striped red scarf loose around my neck. My overcoat hangs from a coatrack in the corner. The walls are bare save for a tattered movie poster of *Braveheart*. In the poster Mel Gibson stands before a raging fire, gripping his sword, body armor fastened over his kilt. Nothing else speaks of Murrone, except for her beauty products

lined on the dresser. She brushes my thick, black curls to the side and looks out the window.

“Shit,” she says, and quickly returns to the bed and covers herself.

I stand up and peer through the window and between the branches of the magnolia tree: The man in the black trench coat is standing across the street under his umbrella. I turn away, hoping he hasn’t spotted me.

“Do you know him?” I ask.

“He’s a new client—or was,” Murrone says, sucking on her cigarette. She folds her hair behind her ear, and then looks down at her palm. Her chin trembles. She tosses the loose strands onto the floor. “He calls himself Badr el Din—moon of the religion,” she continues, clearing her throat. “On his first night with me, he didn’t speak a word. Before we had sex, he got down on his knees and prayed in the direction of Mecca. He then took off his clothes, folded them neatly on my chair, and joined me in bed. He was cold, mechanical. His cologne was really strong; nearly made me cough. He left me a big tip. Crisp American dollars. He came back the next night, and the night after that, and still he didn’t speak. There was something menacing about his silence, like he was plotting a murder. On that third night, I—I clamped up, which has never happened to me before. I had to rub Vaseline between my legs for him to finally enter me...I’m not sure why I’m giving you all these details.”

I tell her to continue.

“The more he visited, the more he frightened me. I had to use a lot of Vaseline. One night he finally spoke, telling me he moved from Baghdad to open an IT firm in Beirut. Said there’s a good market here. But who knows if he was telling the truth. I told

Madame Hafiza I didn't want his business anymore. She tried to convince me otherwise, but I refused. Madame Hafiza offered Badr el Din other girls; he rejected them, demanding me. When she told him I was unavailable, he left angry. Since then, on some nights, he stands across the street, looking up at my window. It will be five in the morning and I'll find him out there. I don't know what he wants from me or what he'll do to me if he gets his hands on me."

I tell Murrone that he asked me for a light on my walk over, but I leave out his warning. I don't want to scare her.

"Maybe he's involved in the bombing," she says. "He once asked me if I had any political clients, which I don't. There are a lot of people who want to get rid of Hezbollah. I hope he's not a Mossad agent."

I sit back down in my chair and point at the *Braveheart* poster, wanting to move us away from politics. "Favorite film?"

"The best ever made. I was lucky to find that poster."

It's been years since I saw *Braveheart*, but I figure Murrone MacClannough is the name of Sir William Wallace's wife, who early in the movie is caught by English soldiers, tied to a post, and executed by the magistrate—the magistrate slits her throat with a clean swipe of his dagger.

Although I don't tell her, I've spotted Murrone a few times before at the Concord movie theatre above Hamra Street. I often go to movies alone, and I've seen her in the shadowy seats also alone, shoveling handfuls of popcorn into her mouth. I suspected that she was a prostitute, for despite the confident way she walked down the aisle in high heels, swaying her hips, the anguish on her face was unmistakable. It's a look I'm all too

familiar with from having been around prostitutes since my youth. I felt compelled to comfort her, if only to let her know that I understood the ravages of her red-lit world. But as soon as the film would start, I'd look back at her illuminated in the light of the screen and find that the anguish had been replaced with a fixed rapture. I imagined I had once looked the same as I watched Madame Bandar's plays all those years ago: my eyes widened, my mouth slightly open.

When I discovered that Murrone worked for Madame Hafiza, I immediately requested her—she'd be my audience on this rainy night. At first Madame Hafiza refused, saying a client had called in advance to reserve her for a couple of hours. I took out my wallet and placed several extra bills on the bar, insisting on Murrone.

"She's still new at this," Madame Hafiza said, pocketing the bills. "Started at Tico Tico before coming here."

If Murrone could be captivated by the hallucinatory power of film, and appreciated it as much as I did, I wanted to see if I could seduce her with my own story, if I had the ability to sustain her attention as I unburdened myself. Perhaps she'd prove to be different from my previous listeners, who never seemed fully invested in the life I once lived, in all those people I had met and loved on Mutanabi Street.

"Tonight you can sit back and relax," I tell Murrone. "You probably need your rest."

"I can't relax when bombs are going off or Badr el Din is across the street," she says. She reaches for her hair but quickly brings her hand back down. "But you think I should savor this night because tomorrow I'll have a new client, possibly several. One after the other like a line of dominoes. Lucky me."

“At least I can spare you that for a few hours. Maybe you can even forget about all the trouble outside.”

“In that case your story better be as entertaining and moving as *Braveheart*. Or else I’ll put a bullet in your head.” She blows out a puff of smoke. “I used to hunt birds in the south with my brothers, near the border with Israel. I once shot a hawk in midflight. I also nearly shot my uncle when the son of a bitch groped my breasts. He said he was just swatting a fly. I told the motherfucker that must have been one big-ass fly, and went out and grabbed my rifle and pointed the barrel at him. He burst into tears and promised he’d never touch me again, and left our house for the mosque for Friday prayers. Anyway, this is your night. Go on, I’m listening.”

Act One

## The Shooting Star

I was six years old when I first encountered a prostitute. She came into Baba's grocery store one summer afternoon to buy a kilo of sugar. I was struck by her flaming red hair and the swaths of freckles dotting her face and arms. Crusader blood.

"Isn't he a cute one," she said, and tousled my hair. Her long nails scraped my scalp. When she knelt to take a closer look at me, I hid behind Baba's leg.

"Don't be shy," she said.

Baba took a major risk by bringing me to his store that day. He knew Mama would be upset once she found out. For Baba's store stood at the top of Mutanabi Street.

That morning, I had woken up sweating. Sunshine streamed through my window, burning my skin. My mouth was parched and my arms and legs covered in mosquito bites. I had kept the window open throughout the smoggy night, hoping a breeze would cool me down and whisk me off to sleep. Instead, swarms of mosquitoes sucked me dry. At one point in the night, I stood at the window looking out at the concrete jungle that was Beirut. We lived on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Hamra. I was in search of the blue songbird that glowed in the dark. Mama said that while other birds slept in their cages or in their nests, the glowing songbird flew the night skies. It chirped lullabies to put the weary to sleep. All I saw before me, however, in the dim lamplight, were buildings like ours, with some balconies covered in orange drapes to block out the sun and others exposed to curious onlookers such as myself. Among my fellow insomniacs seated outside, one smoked a cigarette with his feet propped up against the



balustrade, which was lined with potted plants and flowers. A shirtless man with a hairy belly fanned himself with a newspaper as he looked up at the starless sky, as though beseeching the heavens for rain. But it never rained in summer.

Stray cats cried like tormented souls in the streets. The calls to prayer boomed from the minarets. The muezzins' voices drifted through the sky, filtering between curtains and seeping into the dreams of sleepers, who possibly stirred with unbeknownst revelation.

I had surrounded my bed with stuffed animals. I was afraid of the hooded men Mama spoke of, who haunted Mutanabi Street. They wore dark robes and smelled of ashes. You couldn't make out their faces, buried as they were in the shadowed recesses of their hoods. Mama said these men hated children, and that if they ever saw a boy or girl walking down the street, they'd grab them by their arm, stuff them into burlap sacks, and throw them onto the beds of their trucks and drive to a mountaintop far, far away, where they were never seen again.

I was also frightened of a headless Turk, who once served in the Ottoman Army stationed in Lebanon during the First World War. On a cold December dawn, my Jidu led a band of village men down to the Beirut-Damascus Road and launched a surprise attack on a Turkish checkpoint on the outskirts of the city. He fought a Turk, a hulky soldier splattered in blood, in ferocious hand-to-hand combat as bullets whizzed through the air. The Turk slashed Jidu's abdomen with his saber. In return, my grandfather swung his club against the Turk's legs, smashing his kneecaps. The man fell to the ground screaming in pain. Jidu raised his scimitar and lopped off his head.

I saw the headless Turk stumbling about in my room, attempting to strike me down with his sword as he whispered my name in a gravelly voice: “Omar, Omar.”

Unable to control my fears, I padded down the hallway to my parents’ room. I crawled under the covers from the foot of the bed and made my way up to the pillows like a mole tunneling through earth and latched onto Mama’s back. Her hair smelled of fried cauliflower. She was on a cauliflower diet, and gorged on the vegetable boiled, fried, and raw. Unfortunately, the diet caused her gas. Whenever she broke wind, I cried with laughter.

My eyelids grew heavy and my breathing calmed. I looked across the bed at Baba, who was snoring, with his arm bent across his forehead. I didn’t dare get too close to him, fearing his skin was toxic. In the evenings, when he occasionally dozed off on the couch, I crept up to him and examined his face, looking for a change of skin color, or into his ear, expecting something to spring out of it. He worked on Mutanabi Street, among those hooded men, and so I suspected he was a different species of man, or worse, not of this world.

There were nights when I didn’t find Baba in bed and had Mama all to myself. She said Baba was working late and wouldn’t be returning anytime soon. I rolled back and forth across the wide empty space and made a tent out of the slack blanket. When I tired of my games I cuddled next to Mama, kissing her soft, flabby arm, and fell asleep. One night, she snuggled her face against my nape. I felt tears glide down my skin. I turned around and saw her sniffing.

“Mama has a cold,” she said. She spoke in a thick village accent.

On the night before my first encounter with a prostitute, I was drifting off to sleep when I suddenly felt rough bristles against my face and a tongue slither down my throat. I opened my eyes and saw Baba's face.

"Oh God," he said, opening his eyes. He quickly turned his back to me and folded the covers over him. Only later would I realize that he had mistaken me for Mama. At the time I thought he was trying to swallow my tongue. I rushed back to my room.

After Baba left for work in the morning, Mama told me she had to attend a funeral of a relative up in the mountains and was making the trip alone. She wore a long black dress and a white shawl over her shoulders. She had puffy cheeks, which looked as if they had been pumped with air. With a small and compact body like hers, the impact of overeating was readily noticeable: Her curves melted into the shape of a plump oval. I had inherited her curly black hair and round melancholic eyes.

It was rare that Mama went anywhere without me tagging along. Whenever we visited guests, I sat next to her on the couch in the parlor, refusing to play with the children in their room. I listened to the gossiping of the ladies, sipping on Pepsi-Cola.

The doorbell rang.

"That must be Lamya," Mama said. "She's here to look after you."

The fresh smell of breast milk pervaded the apartment. Lamya, a resident of our neighborhood, had been a wet-nurse for over a decade, ever since her husband became an invalid and spent his days slumped on a couch, listening to the radio. She worked odd jobs to support her family—babysitting, selling table-covers and clothes she knitted herself, cooking lunches for bachelors, and her most reliable moneymaker: breastfeeding.

As long as babies fed from her, she never went dry. Her milk was said to be medicinal. She traveled from door to door like a gypsy, offering her milk to the hungry and ill.

She had dark eyes and wavy black hair. Her breasts sagged to her belly button. Mama said that when I was four and ill with fever, I fed from Lamya's breasts and recovered the next day. Since then, ever grateful to Lamya, Mama maintained a relationship with her.

Once Mama left the apartment, Lamya joined me and Jidu in the parlor. My stuffed animals were laid out on the Persian carpet, including my favorite, Soula the Seal. She had protruding eyes and long whiskers. If you squeezed her midsection, she honked.

Lamya sat on the couch and watched over me as she knitted a sweater. Her breasts were leaking milk; two wet spots dotted her blouse. Jidu sat in a brown leather chair with wide armrests and permanent impressions of his body. The leather was cracked and oily. The chair was his first furniture purchase for the apartment when he moved down from the mountains many years ago. He sat puffing on a hookah of bitter tobacco as he listened to the transistor radio. The deep, melancholic voice of Umm Kalthoum reverberated from the speakers.

Jidu brushed off the ash from the coal burning on the head of the hookah with a clamp. Grey flakes fell onto the carpet, exploding into powder. Mama would be upset. She was tyrannical when it came to cleaning: Our three-bedroom apartment was virtually free of dust and cobwebs, and smelled faintly of diluted kerosene, which Mama used to clean and polish the tiles. I could see my reflection in the surfaces of coffee tables and vases. The mirror in the foyer was spotless, as was the sliding glass door leading out onto the balcony—I once bumped my nose into the glass. At night, Mama sprayed insecticide

in the kitchen, and in the morning, swept up the carcasses of capsized cockroaches. She slaughtered survivors and newcomers by stomping on them in her house slippers like she was dancing the dabke, and then wiped the green gore from her soles.

I focused on the world of my toys. They were climbing Mount Everest, which I constructed out of cushions. Soula the Seal was leading the way through a blizzard. At one point I looked up, saw the radio, and smiled at it. I turned to the coffee table and smiled at a box of tissues. I regretted what I had started. Now I'd have to look at all the objects in the room and acknowledge them with a smile, for I perceived inanimate objects as having souls.

“Stop that,” Jidu said.

“Is anything wrong?” Lamya said.

“He’s doing that again, smiling at everything.”

“Would you like to play a game?” Lamya asked me.

“No.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Jidu said.

“Oh. Um, I guess I can make you two something to eat.”

“I wouldn’t mind feeding on her,” Jidu said, once Lamya had left the room. He was enveloped in a milky cloud of smoke. “Come over here,” he told me. “I’ll tell you a story.”

I walked over to his chair and climbed onto the armrest. He turned off the radio.

Jidu was tall and stocky. He had a bad knee and walked with a cane. The only favor he ever asked of me was to find someone to shoot him in the head on the day he couldn't wipe his own ass.

Baba and I had inherited his long Roman nose and hollow cheeks. He waxed his bushy mustache and twirled up the edges into half-moons. His hair was silvery and thick. At night, he slept with nylons over his head to keep his hair slicked back. In the morning he rose with a perfect hairdo. He had a collection of different colored nylons, all of which he had saved from Teta's closet following her death.

Jidu had an oak chest with a brass lock in his room. I often pulled on his wrist to get him out of his chair to show me the contents of the chest. Inside were artifacts of his youth: photographs, letters, books, maps, a gold-nib fountain pen, a pocket watch, a Turkish pistol, a club, and my favorite item: his scimitar. He'd pull it out of its scabbard (I longed for the pinging sound it made) and let me wield it in the air. The blade was rusty. I imagined it had once been smeared with blood, for he'd beheaded the Turk with this sword.

At that time in my life, Jidu's stories were all about his adventures and heroic feats in Mount Lebanon, stories he told as he puffed on his hookah, his tone always casual, his eyes rarely widening at a suspenseful turn in his narrative. He made it seem as if heroism was a natural trait, and that there was nothing spectacular about beheading a Turk because he had beheaded dozens of Turks, swinging his scimitar in a three-hundred-and-sixty degree orbit of slaughter, heads dropping at his feet like swollen plums.

Jidu was born and raised in Ras-el-Metn. He worked on the land chopping logs, breaking stone, and tilling the soil. He hunted birds and wild boars in the pine forest.

Jidu exhibited his legendary strength at weddings. As was custom for Druze weddings, the groom and his party made a journey from his village to the bride's on the backs of mules and donkeys if the bride's village was far away, or on foot if it was nearby. The men were accompanied by a zeffe, a musical troupe composed of locals dressed in turbans, colorful jackets, baggy pants, and leather shoes with curled tips. The troupe sang and danced in circles around the groom at the front of the procession, twirling scimitars above their heads as they beat drums and blew reed flutes. Along the dirt roads women came out of their houses to offer their blessings and ululations and throw rice and rose petals at them. Children ran after the dancers, mimicking their steps. At the sound of the melodic chants, the nervous bride knew her man had come for her.

The men from both sides of the family faced each other in long lines and offered their blessings. Before the groom led his bride back to his home, whereupon a great feast commenced, the men would hold a strength competition. The groom's family had to prove to the bride's family that they were strong and capable of protecting the bride before they took her in. This was where Jidu stepped forward to showcase his abilities. The strongest men from both families competed in lifting stone mortars, flinging heavy limestone rocks across a distance, racing with buckets of water in their hands, and wrestling on a dusty pitch where the first to pin the other's shoulders on the ground won the match. Jidu won all the competitions. He competed bare-chested, and was careful not to mess his hair. Following a victory, he combed back his locks and poured water over his glistening body, which the women peeked at from the corners of their eyes. The sparkling water dripped from his chin and down his neck, coursing its way along the

swell of his hairy chest and sliding further down his abdomen, collecting briefly in the hollow of his belly button before spilling over the furry love trail leading to his bulge.

At one wedding up in Kornayel, Mama's village, Jidu met Teta. He had just won his wrestling match—he dislocated his opponent's shoulder—and was pouring water over himself when a woman approached him and slapped his face.

“That was my brother you injured,” she said.

Jidu handed her the jug and told her to get him more water.

“I'm not your damn wife,” she said.

“We'll see about that.”

Teta was a taboo. Villagers thought testosterone, rather than estrogen, ran through the fiber of her being. She was single to the chagrin of her parents, who blamed her spinsterhood on her brazen character. Three protuberant moles of increasing size arched across her cheek.

“She had a shooting star on her face,” Jidu said.

Apparently, she too fell for Jidu.

Jidu's fame spread across all of Mount Lebanon following that winter dawn he and a group of village men had attacked the Turkish checkpoint on the Beirut-Damascus Road. Poet-singers praised his valor in resonating lyrics for crowds gathered in main squares. But life was rough during that time. It was World War One. As soldiers fought and died in Europe, a terrible famine and plague struck the Levant. The sky turned black with locusts. Crops wilted and springs dried out. People began eating their mules, donkeys, and horses. They ate rats and wild dogs and chewed on boiled leather. Jidu recounted how one villager who owned an aviary roasted all his birds, including parrots



from India, to feed his children. Sleepless undertakers carted away the dead piled out on the roads.

After the war many men left the mountain and boarded ships headed to the Americas. Jidu almost joined them. There was no future left for them in the village. But Teta refused to sail the seas to a foreign land. She couldn't bear to live without the mountains of her youth. So they tried their luck in the city. They sold half their land and rented an apartment in Beirut. They also bought the grocery store on Mutanabi Street.

Perched on the armrest of Jidu's chair, I listened to the story of which I never grew tired: his battle with the Turk. Awash in Jidu's puffs of smoke, I could hear the sound of his club smashing against the Turk's kneecaps. Just as Jidu raised his scimitar for the final blow, and the Turk looked up at him from the ground with pleading eyes, Lamy entered the parlor carrying a tray of melted cheese sandwiches and salted tomatoes.

Jidu sniffed the air. "Smells delicious."

"I used kashkawan cheese," she said.

"I was referring to your milk."

Lamy blushed. She sat on the couch and resumed her knitting.

"Your Jidu was a horny bastard," Murrone says.

"He only gets raunchier over the course of my story."

"I live with raunchiness every day. Badr el Din once made me kiss his nose. I'm not sure if you noticed, but his nose is huge and pink and pitted like a sieve. When I

kissed it all around, little pecks here and there, he began to moan softly. I never kiss clients, but with him, I was scared he'd harm me if I didn't. Is he still out there?"

I stand up and look out the window, the rain pelting the panes. "He's gone," I say, returning to my chair.

Murron lets out a deep sigh. I'm also relieved. But who knows when he'll return, or if his prophesy will come true.

I was playing with my toys later that afternoon when I heard the front door open. I ran to the foyer, thinking Mama had returned. Instead, I found Baba.

"I have a surprise for you," he said.

"What the hell's going on?" Jidu asked Baba.

This was the first time Baba ever came home during the day. He wore a button-down shirt, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and pants with sharp creases. In the mornings, when I caught him before he left for work, I spotted small clouds of talcum powder emanating from his patent leather shoes as he walked. I inhaled the light, fresh scent of Bien-être, which he splashed on his face and behind his ears. Like Jidu, he slicked back his hair, but held it in place with brilliantine, not nylons.

He was obsessed with keeping his breath smelling fresh. He chewed gum after downing a cup of coffee or following a smoke. After meals he ate mint leaves. When he was at work and the day was slow, he reclined in his chair behind the register and brushed his teeth with a miswak, that all-natural toothbrush made from the roots of an arak tree.

Baba told Jidu not to worry. “Put on your shoes, Omar,” he said. “We’re going on a trip.”

I stood still in the middle of the room.

“Go on,” Baba said.

“I want to wait for Mama.”

“Mama’s coming home later.”

I sat down on the floor and held Soula to my chest and squeezed her. She honked.

“Where do you plan on taking him?” Jidu asked.

“To the store.”

Jidu sat up in his chair. “Salma won’t like it.”

“I’m the man in the house. It’s time Omar saw the store. The women are always asking about him. I don’t want him to grow up thinking they’re bad people.”

“They’re whores,” Jidu said.

“Don’t use that word,” Baba said. “They’re just as loving as anyone else. They saved my life.”

“Shit, not that story again.”

I flung Soula aside and ran to my room and shut the door behind me. I hid in the corner of my closet behind my hanging clothes and prayed as Mama had taught me how to pray every night before bed. I hoped God would send down Angel Gabriel to guide me, as He had done for Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, hundreds of years before in the deserts of Arabia.

I heard footsteps approach my room. The door opened. I wondered if Angel Gabriel had arrived. God truly was merciful. But I smelled milk and held my breath.

“Omar?” Lamya said. “Omar, where are you?”

There was silence, followed by a brief shuffling of steps. Suddenly, a flood of light broke the darkness of the closet. Lamya parted the clothes and peered down at me.

“Save me from the hooded men!” I said.

“The hooded men?”

“It’s his mother’s fault,” Baba said, standing behind her. “She’s been feeding him all this rubbish.”

Lamya held my hand and coaxed me out of the closet. I buried my face in her breasts and wept into her blouse. The overpowering scent of her milk made me woozy.

“Stop crying,” Baba snapped.

His words made me cry more. I recalled his attempt to swallow my tongue in the night.

I sat up front in Baba’s Volkswagen Beetle. As he drove through the congested streets of the city, he asked me questions about school. He was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of a song over the radio. I responded with the silent treatment I had seen Mama use with him. We were driving down the Corniche lined with palm trees, where the waves of the Mediterranean slapped into rocks and seagulls squawked and picked at scraps of food. Sunburned fishermen stood at the metal railings with their lines cast out at sea. Vendors sold grilled corn and cups of Turkish coffee. In the distance, the mountains towered over the coastline.

We drove through downtown, home to the labyrinth of the souks, and continued on into Martyrs’ Square, passing the Rivoli Cinema. Drove of people walked up and

down the streets lined with shops and food stalls. The square was outlined with palm trees and lampposts, in the center of which stood the bronze Martyrs' Statue, built in honor of Lebanese nationalists who were executed by the Ottoman Empire in 1916. The statue was of a Greek-looking goddess and a young, bare-chested man with a stern look on his face, standing together on a rock and facing in the direction of the sea. The goddess, significantly larger than the young man, was clothed in flowing robes and extended a burning torch in the air. Beneath the rock on either side lay two men in the throes of death. Pigeons congregated on the heads of the symbolic figures and shat without shame.

Dozens of young men had gathered by the statue to listen to a revolutionary standing on a makeshift platform and yelling into a megaphone. The men were waving Palestinian flags. I didn't understand what the speaker was saying, but I did hear the word Palestine repeated, as well as the name, Nasser. According to Jidu, Nasser was a great Arab leader who would one day unite the Arab world and liberate Palestine. A portrait of the Egyptian president hung in our parlor.

Baba parked on a side street. I looked to my right and left. I didn't see any hooded men. But they could be hiding.

"Wait till you see our store," Baba said. "It's filled with chocolate and candy."

I wasn't convinced that I could trust Baba but I had no choice. I climbed out of the car and held his hand. We walked down the side street and turned the corner onto Mutanabi Street.

A midnight-blue awning shaded Baba's store. Jidu had named it the Shooting Star in honor of Teta. The letters were painted in flashy silver across the edge of the awning. Baba unlocked the front door and let me through.

The enormous room was filled with treasures. I thought these rooms only existed in the tales Mama read to me in bed from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Many a night I had imagined flying on Aladdin's magic carpet or sailing the seas with Sinbad to secret hideouts where gold and pearls and dozens of toys were stored. I had rubbed Mama's teakettle in the hope a genie would swirl out of the spout. Now, I was suddenly in one of those hideouts. Canned and boxed foods and appliances lined the wooden shelves on either side of the store. On the left was a glass counter with assorted cheeses and cold meats, on top of which were stacked loaves of pita bread and jars of pickled eggplant and labneh. Two barrels stood at the edge of the counter, one filled with black olives and the other with green, swimming in pools of oil. A fridge stood in the corner. At the right-hand side of the entrance were buckets heavy with salt, sugar, and mixed spices, and massive jars of pumpkin seeds, almonds, and walnuts. The register was at the back of the store, facing the door.

Above the jars of nuts was a magnificent shelf of all the chocolates and candy and butter biscuits one could ever hope for. The candy, oh the candy: lollipops, gumdrops, mints, taffy, caramel, Turkish Delights, and various flavors of Chiclets gum. My mouth watered.

Baba lifted a rack pinned with bags of potato chips next to a ladder and hooked pole from the back corner and propped it outside by the entrance.

I stood staring at the chocolate and candy.

“You can eat from whatever you like,” Baba said. “As much as you want.”

I wondered if Baba was setting up a trap. He was tempting me before he did something horrible to me. But I couldn't resist. I reached for a chocolate bar and tore the paper wrapper and ate. I licked off the chocolate smudged on my fingertips and began on a chocolate-covered honeycomb. I stuffed pieces of Turkish Delights into my mouth, powdering my face with their sugar. I became thirsty; my throat was sticky. Seemingly pleased with himself, Baba grabbed a Pepsi from the fridge, popped its cap, and handed it to me. I sipped with merriment. But then my stomach grumbled.

“It's from all the candy you ate,” Baba said. “I'll make you a labneh sandwich. It'll settle your stomachache.”

It took a while before I was able to move around again without discomfort. I followed Baba to the register. He sat in a chair and carried me up onto his lap.

“Guess what's inside this machine?” he said.

“A cobra?” I thought. “The severed head of the Turk?”

“Money,” Baba said. “One day you're going to sit here and make plenty of money like your Baba and Jidu.”

He held my index finger and pressed it over the No Sale button. The tray burst open with a jingle of coins. He closed the tray and I pressed the button again, enjoying the sound.

I followed him around the store as he pointed out items on the shelves. There were bottles of fragrant oils and cans of hairspray, and packets of sanitary pads.

“These products are for the women,” he said. “You see, only women live on this street. They own this street.”

He named the cheeses and cold meats, and let me scoop up a handful of black olives with a perforated ladle. Thrilled at my productivity, I weighed a kilo of pastrami and a creamy slab of feta cheese on an ancient scale and then dusted the counter with a feather stick as Baba swept the floor.

I was gazing up at the top shelves when a woman with flaming red hair entered the store, her unruly locks cascading down her back like lava. She wore a floral dress and pink sandals. She resembled a heroine from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Was she as clever and brave as Marjanah, the slave girl who saves Ali Baba and kills the commander of the forty thieves?

“Karma!” Baba said.

“Halloumi!”

Halloumi was Baba’s nickname, after the cheese, halloum. A prostitute at Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love had named him Halloumi. At the time he was fifteen and had started working at the store. Only Mama called him by his real name, Halim.

Karma looked down at me, her face ringed with fire. “You must be Omar.”

I hid behind Baba’s leg. The woman warrior stepped closer, kneeling down. At least she wasn’t armed.

“Isn’t he a cute one,” she said, tousling my hair. She scrutinized my face. “Look at those big sad eyes. And the hair.”

I was hoping her inspection of me would be over soon. Surely she had battles to wage against thieves and greedy brothers and jinns. She kissed my cheek, which made my face burn.

“Karma is a great dancer,” Baba said.



“I woke up with two blisters on my right foot,” she said, rubbing her lipstick off my face. Her hand was warm and damp. “I’m not sure how much longer I can do this, Halloumi. I look twice my age, and I’m only twenty-six.”

“But you can’t go home. You hated home.”

She bought a kilo of sugar and was about to leave the store when I wished her good luck fighting against the thieves of the night.

“At least the thieves tip me,” she said.

“Halloumi!” a voice cried from outside.

“That must be Yasmina,” Baba said.

We stepped outside and saw a twine basket hovering over the pavement. On a third-floor balcony stood a chubby woman in a bathrobe gripping the end of the rope. She had platinum blonde hair puffed out like a blossoming dandelion. A neon billboard hung on the side of the balcony, and read: The House of Blondes. No matter how old or young, large or small, the women of the house were all blonde, their hair artificially colored.

“Who’s that boy with you?” Yasmina said.

“He’s my son.”

“How cute. Put him in the basket.”

I held onto Baba’s leg.

“She’s joking,” he said, stroking the back of my head.

Yasmina pulled up the basket and told us to wait for a moment, and disappeared into her room. When she returned and lowered the basket, I reached in and took out two slices of chocolate cake wrapped in cloth.

“I baked it this morning,” Yasmina said.

I gave one slice to Baba and took a bite out of the other.

“What can I get you?” Baba asked, looking up.

“I need half a kilo of salami and a pack of toilet paper. Lara’s as sick as a dog. She’s been shitting rivers all morning.”

We returned inside. Baba placed the cake over the glass counter and cut the edge of a roll of salami in the meat and cheese slicer. He wrapped the slices in brown paper, which he let me weigh. He pulled down a pack of toilet paper with the hooked pole. When we went outside, a dozen blonde women were standing on the balconies of the brothel, including Lara. They wore different colored chemises that hung loose or tight around their bodies. I had never seen so much cleavage on a street, and wondered if they were all headed down to the beach.

“What a cute boy,” one of them said.

“He’s as handsome as his father.”

“Look at his curly hair.”

“He’s so skinny. Feed him lard, Halloumi.”

“Say hello to them,” Baba told me.

I looked up at all those blondes and said, “I like your hair.”

They laughed, and in an off-key register, began to sing:

*Tell me, tell me,*

*oh where in Beirut can you stroke your fingers through golden locks*

*and squeeze the most sumptuous buttocks?*

*Tell me, tell me,*

*oh where in Beirut can you open your heart*

*and never feel torn apart?*

*Come upstairs, my handsome man,*

*before the night is over and where there's plenty of love leftover.*

*You've arrived where you belong,*

*at the House of Blondes.*

Baba and I clapped for them.

“Again,” I said. “Please, sing it again.”

This time they belted out their voices, so loud that I thought all of Beirut would hear them. I was ready to run up those stairs and join them in their song on the balcony. If I had to show more skin to sing, I would. Let the sun burn me and the mosquitoes feast on my blood. Let the flies stick to my sweaty limbs and the smog soak into my pores. I turned to Baba, who was mouthing the lyrics. We'd both dye our hair blond.

“Your son better love us as much as you have, Halloumi,” Lara said. She scrunched her face. “Quick, the toilet paper.”

We placed the contents inside the basket. Yasmina pulled it up and lowered it again with a lira.

“Omar can keep the change,” she said.

Baba gave me the money. “It's all yours. You've worked hard today.”

I held the lira in amazement. I was rich!

“I have an idea,” Baba said, and locked the front door. “Look down the street.”

Men were walking up and down the pavement. A short man with a potbelly approached us, swinging an empty silver tray. His black hair was sculpted into a massive,

shiny pompadour. I couldn't keep from staring at the biblical wave rising from his scalp, threatening to crash over me.

"Madame Danya is closing down her place," he told Baba. "She wants to buy a seaside house in Jounieh. Says this street is dying and wants to leave before it sinks."

"She's been saying that for years," Baba said.

"But this is the first time she mentions Jounieh. She told me she prefers to wake up to the sound of the sea instead of her whining girls."

He glanced at his reflection in the tray and patted the top of his pompadour. He wore suspenders over a short-sleeve collared shirt that was tight around his belly. A middle button was open, revealing a rhombus of hairy flesh.

"My name is Mohammed Al-Turk," he told me. "But the girls call me Elvis."

"Elvis makes the most delicious Turkish coffee," Baba said. Elvis pointed to his stall parked at the top of the street.

"When you're older," Elvis told me, "I'll make all the coffee you want. I'll also teach you how to grow one of these," he said, gently touching the sides of his pompadour. "The girls love my hair." He bent his head like a charging bull. "Go on, son, smell it. But hands off."

I sniffed a mixture of pomade and cologne.

"I'm not as tall or handsome as your father," Elvis said. "My pompadour is all I've got."

Once Elvis returned to his stall, Baba told me to look at all the buildings before us. "These houses are filled with the most caring women in the world. They all love good boys such as yourself."

“What about the hooded men?”

“There’s no such thing as the hooded men. Don’t believe your mother’s stories.”

He held my hand and pointed to a building at the corner of an intersection, across from a pub called Factory Bar.

“That’s Marica,” he said, “named after its Greek owner Marica Espiredone. She made this street famous. We owe our lives to her. During her time the richest men, including politicians, visited her house. It was a place to be seen. Your Jidu loved Marica. She bought her groceries from him.”

We continued down the street, passing Laurice and Bianca, the names of which Baba read to me in English from the neon billboards. A young man was sweeping the pavement by the Al Phalastini Restaurant. Baba was friendly with the owner, who bought his cigarettes from his store.

Down from the restaurant was a tire shop, a couple of grocery stores like Baba’s, and more brothels. Blondes were still standing on their balconies and waved down to us. Their laughter and commotion brought other prostitutes onto their balconies.

“Halloumi,” the prostitutes cried out, waving.

“Hi, girls,” Baba said. “This is my son!”

He carried me on his shoulders and held my ankles. I waved back at the women with both hands. They blew me kisses.

I felt like the most popular boy on earth. On this street women sang for me and fed me cake and gave me kisses. I was king.

The brothels were categorized as either first or second-class, offering men of rags or riches a wide spectrum. There stood Sandra’s Sweethearts, Marwa’s Muse, and

Danya's Delights; the Flying Rose, the Magic Castle, and the Olive Tree; Hikmat the Egyptian and Cathy the Cypriot; English Lucy and French Antoinette; Suzie, Salya, and Sonya; Mamia, Mercelle, and Violette. When I was older, Baba told me Aunt Roula's was haunted by Aunt Roula herself, the founder, who died years earlier from a poisoned glass of red wine. Aunt Roula's ghost, with its stringy black hair and wrinkled face, and its piercing yellow eyes, drifted in and out of the rooms, the tail end of her bridal gown billowing behind her. She hovered over the beds of her former prostitutes when they were having sex. She was visible to few, but for those clients who saw her, she frightened the desire out of them. One man shrunk to a nub and nearly jumped out the window.

At the end of the street, Baba looked up at a second-floor balcony of Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love and broke out into a ballad by Abdel Wahab, his melody coursing through me, his words my own, for I had become an extension of Baba. As he sang, I hummed along:

*When will fate allow you and I  
to spend the night on the banks of the Nile  
where the air is rich with silence  
and the flowers hang their heads in sleep.*

The first-class brothel had whitewashed walls and green French doors. Flowery vines wove between the intricate networks of the iron balustrades. I spotted birdcages hanging from the ceiling of the balcony Baba was singing to. The French doors opened, and a woman in a white dress stepped out onto the balcony. Her long, black hair glimmered in the light. "I'll come down," she said. Baba put me on the ground and took out a folded handkerchief from his pocket. Inside was a mint leaf, which he chewed.

The woman in white opened the front door and knelt down to kiss me, holding my face in her palms.

“This is Nisreen,” Baba said. When she smiled, dimples appeared on either cheek.

“I’ve heard so much about you, Omar,” she said. Her arresting green eyes distracted me momentarily from the creases across her brow and the pastiness of her skin. She smelled of gardenia. I recognized the scent from the garlands that peddlers and beggar children my age sold at traffic lights in spring. Mama always bought from the children, and tipped them extra. At home, she floated the flowers in a glass bowl of water she kept in the parlor, scenting the room with an exotic freshness, until Jidu overpowered it with the smoke from his hookah.

Nisreen kissed Baba on the cheek and led us inside a windowless room. The walls were red; the black-and-white checkered floor was red; the bar on the right was red; the bottles, the barstools, the curtained stage was red. Baba was red. Nisreen was red. My skin was melting red.

A red lightbulb hung from a wire like a suspended ruby. It was hotter inside, and I began to sweat. The air reeked of stale beer and tobacco smoke. Cigarette butts littered the floor. A cockroach clung to a leg of a wooden chair facing the stage.

It was the first stage I had ever seen in person. It radiated the promise of theatre; it sucked me into its orbit. Nisreen climbed up onto it and pulled the curtains open. A square of spotlights loomed above the stage floor. She helped me up and told me to stand in the center. She switched on the lights. I looked up and squinted. When I looked back down, the spotlights still burning across my retinas, I felt I was performing the role of Omar the six-year-old. A one-boy show.

“In a few hours, this room will be packed with men,” Nisreen said.

“Nisreen is a famous actress,” Baba said.

“Only Halloumi thinks that.”

I walked around the scratched stage, the wood creaking beneath my feet. I touched the red velvet curtains with gold fringe, which stunk of the mustiness of the room. I skipped across the stage, thumping my chest like Tarzan, but was too embarrassed to speak in monosyllables or yodel the wild man’s unmistakable call. Stopping to catch my breath in the infernal heat, I noticed several framed portraits of women hanging on the wall. One was of Nisreen.

“Those are the rest of the women who live here,” Baba said. “None are as special as Nisreen.”

I asked Baba to ask Nisreen if she had ever seen the glowing blue songbird.

“Ask her yourself,” he said.

I looked down at the floor.

“Go ahead,” Baba told me.

I asked Nisreen my question.

“I’ve seen songbirds,” she said, “but not a blue one that glows in the dark. Have you seen it?”

I shook my head. “I was looking for it last night. It sings bedtime songs.”

“Oh, I’d love to find that bird,” she said. “Would you like to see my birds?”

I nodded. She carried me down from the stage and held my hand and led me up a creaky wooden staircase to the second floor, where the red light disappeared. I turned around to make sure Baba was following us close behind. We walked down a hallway, on



either side of which hung red velvet curtains from the entrances of rooms, instead of doors. A rattling din of snoring emanated from these curtains, along with a murmuring of jumbled words.

“The aunties of the house are dreaming,” Nisreen whispered.

We entered through the curtains of the last room on the left. A four-poster bed with pink diaphanous curtains dominated the room. I had never seen such a regal bed, and imagined myself beneath its covers, surrounded by my stuffed animals. There was room for Mama, too. We’d all sleep together, enclosed in the pink curtains.

The brothel’s billboard hung above Nisreen’s balcony.

“At night, when the sign is turned on,” Nisreen said, pointing at the billboard, “my balcony turns into a sea of red.”

I was more interested in the birds, which were chirping loudly. Nisreen carried me and approached the cages.

“These are Parakeets,” she explained.

Her birds had the most beautifully colored feathers. In one cage, a pair of hummingbirds was perched on a swing. I poked my finger inside the cage. The birds remained still. Nisreen whistled. One suddenly began flying backward. The rapid beating of its wings produced a humming sound.

“All these birds remind me of my village,” Nisreen told me. “I’d wake up to the chirping of birds. I love the sound. But you see, something very bad happened to me in my village, and I had to leave for good. You’re still too young to listen to that story.”

I looked at Baba, who was frowning.

Years later, when I was a teenager and began to spend time on Mutanabi Street, Baba would tell me Nisreen's story and how she had saved his life. I'd then understand why he'd been frowning that afternoon. But I wonder if Nisreen had in fact destroyed Baba's life, or if he had let her destroy it. Either way, Mama got hurt.

"I'll keep my eyes open for the blue songbird," Nisreen told me, flashing her dimples.

On our way home in the early evening, Baba bought bottles of laban ayran (Mama's favorite drink) and falafel and shawarma sandwiches for dinner. Jidu struggled up from his armchair and joined us at the dinner table. He unfolded the greasy paper of a falafel sandwich and took a massive bite, the fried falafel crunching between his jaws. He ate a hot pepper and washed down the food with laban. A drop of tahini dripped down his chin.

He looked at me and grinned. "Did you enjoy your time?"

"I walked on a stage!" I said.

"Did you see Marica's house?"

"Yes. Baba said you loved Marica."

Jidu put down his sandwich, as though he had lost his appetite. "I miss Marica. I miss them all. But I've got nothing left."

"They still love you," Baba said.

"We've already been through this."

Mama walked into the dining room, still wearing her black dress. I smiled at her, and continued eating dinner. Baba passed her a falafel sandwich and a bottle of laban ayran.

“No, thank you,” she said.

“At least drink the laban. I got it just for you.”

Mama remained silent.

“Sit down,” Baba said.

“I have some work to do.”

“I said sit.”

Mama sat next to me at the table.

“Tell me about the funeral,” Baba said.

“It was fine.”

“Our day was great!” I said.

“When you’re done eating,” Mama told me, “please go to the bathroom. You need a bath.” She stood up from the table and left the room.

Jidu was about to say something when Baba stopped him.

“I know,” he said. “Let’s just eat.”

I sat naked in the tub. Mama frothed her hands with a cake of olive oil soap and washed my hair with vigor, digging her nails into my scalp.

“Ouch,” I said.

“Stand up.”

I stood up. She gripped my wrist and rubbed my arm up and down, inside and out, and over my armpit with a scrub, and did the same for my other arm.

“You’re hurting me,” I said.

This was the first time she bathed me with a scrub. She was skinning me alive. She scrubbed my back, my ass, and thighs. She turned me around and scrubbed my chest. She gave me the soap and told me to wash my privates. She rinsed off the suds over my hair and body and dried me down and led me to my room.

I wore my pajamas and sat next to Mama on the edge of the bed.

“Tell me exactly what you saw and did today with your father,” she said.

I spoke about the candy and chocolate I ate, Karma’s red hair, the blondes, Elvis, Marica, the stage floor I walked across, and Nisreen’s hummingbirds.

“It was *so* much fun,” I said.

She slapped my mouth. My face stung. Mama had never struck my face before, and at first I was too stunned to react.

“Don’t you dare cry,” she said. “If you cry I’ll slap you again.”

I breathed furiously out of my nose.

“Did you forget about the hooded men?”

“Baba said they’re not real,” I said, my voice breaking. “You weren’t telling me the truth.”

“They *are* real,” Mama said. “I heard over the radio that a poor boy was kidnapped just yesterday afternoon. He was riding his bicycle down by your father’s store when a hooded man yanked him from behind. They might come out to get you tonight.”

“But they don’t know where we live.”

“They probably followed you home.”

I held onto Mama’s arm. “Please don’t let them take me.”

“The women that you met today—they work for the hooded men.”

“But they gave me cake.”

“The cake might be poisonous.”

I gasped. “I ate an entire piece.”

Mama rose from the bed and switched off the light.

“Don’t leave me,” I begged. “Please, I can’t sleep alone tonight.”

“If you want me to sleep next to you, promise me you’ll never again visit your father’s store. Even if he asks you to, promise you won’t go.”

“I promise, Mama.”

She returned to the edge of the bed, where we extended our open palms and prayed the fatha. We then lay down. As soon as Mama began to snore and I could smell the fried cauliflower in her hair, I whispered a tune I forgot most of the words to. *Tell me, tell me, oh where in Beirut can you stroke your fingers through golden locks and squeeze the most sumptuous buttocks?* I sang to Mama’s back, my hand on her shoulder. *Tell me, tell me, oh where in Beirut can you open your heart and never feel torn apart?*

Murron stands up from the bed, leaving her blanket aside. She slowly walks toward me, swaying her hips, and finishes the song: *Come upstairs, my handsome man, before the night is over and where there’s plenty of love leftover. You’ve arrived where you belong, at the House of Blondes.*

“You’ve been following my story,” I tell her.

She stands before me with her hands on her hips, her breasts thrust out. Her slim arms look softer than velvet.

She'll soon get cold, unless I offer her the heat of my body.

I take a sip from my watered-down drink. Lightening flashes intermittently like an ungraspable epiphany. I still feel blue.

“Don't forget,” Murrone says, “that you're paying me to listen to you as I—how did you put it? Oh yes. As I 'sit back and relax.'”

As she walks back to the bed, I wonder if she'd rather sleep with me to get this night over with.

## Blue Bulbs

I returned to the Shooting Star on the first day of the Six-Day War. I was eleven and had the faintest trace of a mustache. Both Jidu and Baba had mustaches: the former sporting a thick one with curled tips and the latter a pencil-thin line resembling a plucked brow. I preferred Jidu's, equating his with the look of a hero.

I also wanted to be accepted by the boys at school, many of whom had impressive mustaches and hair under their armpits. Ali Zaidan, who was repeating sixth grade, had stubble on his face. You were lucky to be his friend despite the inferior hairlessness of your face. When he noticed my mustache during recess one day, he pointed at me and said, "Omar has grandmother whiskers."

The boys in his entourage looked at me. I forced myself to laugh.

Ali combed his fingers through his stubble. "I need a cigarette."

"Me too," I said.

"Oh, shut up. I bet you haven't ever smoked before."

"I've taken a puff on my Jidu's hookah."

"Have you ever kissed a girl?"

I remained silent.

I wasn't an outcast, nor was I popular. I was just there, in the background, on the fringes. I got invited to birthday parties—everyone in class did—but never over to a friend's house to hang out. If I was bored I listened to one of Jidu's tales, and if I wanted to see a film or visit the shopping center in downtown, I went with Mama.

“Get lost,” Ali told me.

I walked to a corner of the schoolyard and waited for the bell to ring.

I hadn't thought of Mutanabi Street in years. Baba never again attempted to sneak me out of the house. I don't remember him paying much attention to me. He'd pat my head or kiss my cheek when he returned home from work, and come into my room and say “Catch,” and throw chocolate bars at me, but that was the extent of his fatherhood, as if it were a scarce resource.

That spring, I conducted a private investigation of Baba. A few times a month, he left the house long after dinner and didn't return until midnight, sometimes later. He dressed well for his outings, in a button-down shirt and slacks, his patent leather shoes shined and powdered with talcum. He smelled of *Bien-être*, and his hair was slicked back and shining with brilliantine.

When I was younger, Mama attributed Baba's nighttime absences to working late at the store. I knew when he was out late because more often than not, Mama crawled next to me in bed and held me tight, compressing me into the soft jelly of her fat. She fell asleep still embracing me, with her arm draped over my chest. Her arm was heavy, and so as not to wake her, I maneuvered my body into a more comfortable position while keeping her arm secured over me.

“Most stores don't stay open that late,” I once said. We were lying next to each other in bed.

“He's meeting up with his friends,” she said.

“Which friends? I've never seen them before. Are they friends from work?”



“Stop asking me questions about your father,” Mama snapped, and got out of bed.

I pulled on her wrist.

“I won’t say another word,” I promised.

I eventually asked Jidu for an explanation.

“Your father’s at the theatre,” he said.

Baba enjoyed the theatre? How come he never took me or Mama along? We would have loved a night out at the theatre, which I had never been to before.

There were many questions about Baba I was determined to find the answers to. I had recently seen *The Child Detectives*, an Egyptian film about three best friends who solve the mystery of a missing girl from their Cairo neighborhood.

I kept a spiraled pad in my pocket, and noted the amount of time Baba spent bathing in the tub, the food he ate, the duration of his siestas. And once, I crept into my parents’ room while they were asleep to document his sleeping habits: He slept on his back, with his arm bent across his forehead. He was a snorer.

I stayed up late one night, long enough to hear Baba come home past one o’clock in the morning. He shuffled to the bathroom and urinated and washed himself in the sink. I tiptoed into the shadows of the hallway and hid in the entrance of the kitchen, where I still had a view of the bathroom. Baba finally came out. I was unable to document his expression, since he had switched off the bathroom light. But as soon as he went inside his bedroom, I snuck into the bathroom to look for evidence. In the mirror cabinet I found his brilliantine and 500-milliliter bottle of Bien-être with a green cap. I searched the sink bowl, peered into the toilet, and checked the contents of the trash bin. Nothing.

The next morning, I searched through my parents' laundry basket and found the clothes Baba had worn the previous night and sniffed them. They smelled of cigarettes and gardenia. I wrote down these details. Mama never used perfume. When I shared my notes with Mama, her face turned red.

"You better stop what you're doing," she said.

"I'm a detective, Mama."

"You're a boy."

Later that night, as I was trying to fall asleep, Mama came in.

"Is Baba out with his friends?" I asked.

"No. I just came to say goodnight." She sat on the edge of my bed. "Your father kept that evil street a secret from me. Only after we married did he reveal the truth."

Mama had replaced the terror of the hooded men with the evil women Baba worked amongst. I had no idea why the women were evil. I assumed they had bad intentions, like the hooded men. Mama now said these women hung boys from the palm trees in Martyrs' Square.

"I've never seen a body hanging from the palm trees," I said, horrified.

"The boys are hung at night and cut down in the morning by the cleaners."

Mama said if she had known Baba worked on Mutanabi Street, she would never have married him.

"But I wouldn't have been born," I said.

"You'd just have a different father. A better one who believes in God and doesn't do nasty things with those women."

"What nasty things?"

“You’re too young to understand.”

I pointed to my upper lip. “I have a mustache.”

Mama continued: “Everyone in the neighborhood knows where your father works. They say bad things about him. They also say bad things about you and me, which is why I never get any visitors. Only Lamyia understands. We’re being punished because of him. And guess what? He couldn’t care less.”

The next day, I looked at Baba with narrowed eyes and shook my head.

“You’re staring at me like your mother,” he said.

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A silver-framed photograph of my parents on their wedding day hung in the parlor next to the profile of Nasser. In the photo, Mama and Baba stood in the shade of an oak tree in the courtyard of my uncle’s house in Ras-el-Metn. Sunshine filtered between the leaves and illuminated their faces. In the background, a hawk flew over the valley.

Baba wore a white linen double-breasted suit with a pink carnation poking from his breast pocket. Mama was in her royal purple wedding dress. A flake of parsley was stuck between Baba’s front teeth. He was in his mid-twenties, Mama eighteen.

I knew everything about Mama’s life before that photograph was taken. She rivaled Jidu as a storyteller. She’d find me lying on my bed reading a comic book and pull up my desk chair and tell her stories as she knitted sweaters, scarves, hats, and gloves for the family. She seemed lost in a meditative trance as she knitted, her head slightly bent and her lips pursed, her hand looping across the other, drawing a stitch. The light, clicking sound of her metal needles provided a soundtrack to her tales, a subtle beat

that remained consistent no matter the drama of her stories, as if to reassure me of her narrative control.

Mama was the youngest of seven children. She had six brothers who worked in the fields and gardens of Kornayel. They were short men of broad shoulders and round bellies and huge, calloused palms. Whenever one of them caressed Mama's cheek or held her hand, his dry and hardened skin prickled her.

Mama loved the village. The narrow main road wrapped around the top of the mountain, and several side roads branched off and led to clusters of terraced fields and gardens and limestone houses with red-tile roofs and wooden-slatted shutters. Farmers rode their mule-drawn carts brimming with fruits and vegetables along the roads, hollering the prices of their produce. Boys and girls hiked in the shadowy forest or simply splashed themselves with ice-cold water from the communal spring.

On days free of fog and morning mist the view from any side of the village was of mountains and valleys dense with pine trees. It was a pastime for many villagers, especially the young folk, to walk to the western side of Kornayel on clear days to gaze at a stretch of sea in the distance beyond the mountains. Some imagined sipping cups of coffee at a seaside café or standing at the port to watch freighters dock in the capital they had never seen.

Mama wondered what lay beyond the mountains.

Mama fed on the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* and *Tales from Mount Lebanon*, written by the Halabi brothers. The latter book was separated into two parts, each written by a different brother. Although both parts involved heroes and

legends and indomitable women, they differed in tone. The first part was historical, and in the stretched limits of a folktale, retold famous battles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which villagers battled against thieves and bandits and Ottoman soldiers, and also against themselves in a merciless civil war in 1860 that left thousands dead. The second part was fantastical and occasionally morbid. This brother gave a voice to all things living. A flower had as pleading a voice as a damsel in distress.

Mama preferred the fantastical part. She believed in talking trees, clouds that rained pearls, tigers that smoked hookahs, sparrows that wept, princes who fought and died for love, a band of dwarves who snuck into homes in the dead of night and stole kisses from sleeping beauties, a man who woke up in a cave from a 100-year slumber to find his wife, unfortunately, still alive.

As a young girl, Mama wished that a prince would marry her—she spent nights sitting at her windowsill, waiting for him. She looked for the characters mentioned in *Tales from Mount Lebanon*, believing they lived among us. She left them notes around the village, telling them she wanted to be their friend.

One day, when she was eighteen, her father told her he had received news from Beirut that a man was interested in her.

“He owns a big store,” her mother said. “He’s rich.”

That this bachelor lived in Beirut was all Mama needed to hear. Could it be that her prince was coming for her, riding through the pinewoods on his Arabian horse? Perhaps he was willing to risk his life for her and fight off other suitors, even though no one had ever called on her.

On a Sunday afternoon, Mama waited nervously in her room. She wore a long-sleeve dress. Her curly hair was held up in pins.

Baba and Jidu had come over for lunch. They had been speaking with her parents and brothers in the front courtyard underneath a canopy for quite some time as she bit on her nails. She had yet to see Baba. Finally, her mother came in and said to serve the guests lemonade mixed with orange-blossom water. She balanced the pitcher of lemonade and glasses on a silver tray and walked outside.

She nearly dropped the tray when she saw Baba—he was a revelation, more handsome than any prince on his horse. He looked cosmopolitan in his three-piece suit and patent leather shoes, his hair slicked back. She poured the lemonade and served the guests. She and Baba were too nervous to speak. She smelled his cologne on a breeze and regretted not scenting her skin.

Mama's family had prepared a feast. The brothers set the table with dishes layered with pita bread inside of which kebabs and greasy lard and kafta and chicken and grilled vegetables fumed. There were sides of hummus and baba ghanoush and pickles and olives, as well as a big glass bowl of tabouli.

Mama's parents and brothers ate with ravenous appetites, barely swallowing between bites. They reached across one another to dip a piece of bread in oily hummus or to scoop up the garlic paste. They passed their plates back and forth and piled on mounds of food. They grunted and moaned and licked their fingers as they ate.

Mama was embarrassed to eat in front of Baba. She wanted to prove to him that she was in control of her appetite, unlike her family.

Baba and Jidu visited Mama's family for lunch over the next two Sundays. On the third Sunday, Baba asked my grandfather for Mama's hand.

Later that night, in the light of a kerosene lamp, Mama sat by her window, too excited to sleep. The wolves were howling under the moon. Her mother sat in a chair opposite. They were knitting, balls of yarn plopped in their laps like treasured eggs.

"I've never been in love before," Mama said, working on the collar of a wool sweater for Baba.

"Love isn't as important as you think," my grandmother said. "When I got married, I was told to like your father."

"And do you like father?"

"I've grown to like him, to respect him."

"Do you *love* him?"

"There's no such thing as love, my dear. There's only obedience. You need to cook for him and wash and iron his clothes; you have to wake up in the mornings before he does to prepare his breakfast; you have to smile and never question anything he asks you to do; you have to pray for him; you have to accept him into your bed when he's in the mood; you have to bear him children. Do you understand, my dear?"

Mama looked up from her knitting. "I love him."

Mama had been an obedient daughter. But she stood her ground on one particular point. She had no interest in wearing the traditional white dress. She preferred a purple dress like the one Shireen wore.

Shireen was her favorite character from *Tales from Mount Lebanon*. She lived in a palace tower on a snowcapped mountain, and had long, black hair that was elastic. When her lover came to visit her at night, she flung her hair down from the window. He held onto the ends of her locks, pulled, and was propelled upwards.

On the morning of her wedding, clothed in a long-sleeve purple dress, Mama waited in her room for Baba to arrive. She was both terrified and thrilled to be leaving the village.

She heard the beating of the drums from her open window. She peeked outside and saw Baba at the top of the road, perched on Jidu's shoulders and surrounded by a ring of dancers stomping their feet, their scimitars glinting in the sunshine. Baba's arms were lofted in the air; he was snapping his fingers. He looked exquisite in his white linen suit.

Mama was about to faint.

On their way to Ras-el-Metn, my parents sat on the back of a mule, Mama up front. A relative held the reins and directed the beast of burden down the road. The troupe led the way, singing and dancing and beating on their drums. Villagers stepped out of their homes and onto their balconies and showered my parents with rice and rose petals and blessings and ringing ululations. At one point, Mama tilted to a side and nearly slipped off the saddle when Baba caught her by the waist. He kept his arm around her for the rest of the journey.

"I had no idea what I'd gotten myself into," Mama told me.

"I haven't been down to my village in the south in years," Murrone says.

"Do you miss it?"



She shakes her head, covers herself tighter in her blanket.

“My wife’s also from Kornayel,” I say.

“You married a village girl?!” Murrone says, her mouth agape. “I thought for sure your wife was a Beirut.”

“It wasn’t exactly my choice. I got married during the civil war, when I was depressed and lonely and had no one to confide in. I was miserable at work. I—I’ll get to that part later on. For now let’s return to 1967.”

Ms. Tabet, my English teacher, prophesied the Six-Day War. She was one of the younger teachers and taught us English in a French accent. A hooked nose protruded from her narrow face. When addressing us, she had the odd habit of looking down at some arbitrary spot on the floor. If she made eye contact with any of us, it was unintentional.

Since winter, in the final minutes of class, she occasionally had us practice bomb drills. She timed us and thought we were still too slow. She wanted us under our desks in three seconds or less. A second too late could be the difference in our survival, she warned. Her paranoia of war terrified us.

“We live in a dangerous world, boys and girls,” she once said. “If America and the USSR go to war, the entire world will be reduced to ashes by nuclear explosions.”

“Nasser will protect us,” a boy said. “He protects all Arabs.”

“Speaking of Nasser,” Ms. Tabet said, looking down at the floor, “he might declare war on Israel. What do you think will happen to Lebanon in the process? It will be bombed by the Israelis! The Arab world will go up in flames!”

A girl started to cry. "I don't want to die."

"On the count of three," Ms. Tabet said, "I want everyone to duck under their desks and cover their heads with their hands."

She counted to three. I slipped off my chair and sat hunched beneath the desk with my head between my hands.

"Four seconds," Ms. Tabet said. "You're improving."

On a Monday morning in early June, Ms. Tabet was teaching us grammar, which left us half asleep. A knock on the door interrupted her lecture. Mr. Saad, the principal, walked in. His tie was undone. He scanned his eyes over us and said, "Pack your belongings and line up in the schoolyard for the buses. You're all going home."

We were too inhibited to cheer in front of Mr. Saad. This was the most unexpected of surprises.

"What's going on?" Ms. Tabet asked the principal.

"War has broken out between Israel and Egypt."

As soon as Mr. Saad left the classroom, Ms. Tabet zoned in on a spot on the floor as if she were trying to light it up in flames with her piercing gaze.

"Hurry," she said. "There's no time to waste."

"Is there going to be a nuclear explosion?" a girl asked.

"God forbid! But if there is, do you remember what to do?"

Everyone remained silent.

"Don't you remember?!"

"We have to hide under the tables," the girl said.

"And pray," Ms. Tabet said. "Hide and pray."

We sang songs on the bus ride home. School had been cancelled indefinitely. We drowned the voice of the driver yelling at us to settle down with this folk number:

*Everybody has a car but my Jidu has a donkey*

*He gives us rides on its back while others think it's wonky*

*The policeman waves and blows his whistle loudly*

*And all the cars honk: Pap! Pap! Pap!*

I found Mama and Jidu sitting by the radio, listening to Voice of the Arabs.

“Omar!” Mama said, rushing over to me. I slipped off my satchel and sat on Jidu’s armrest, explaining that I had been let out of school early.

“Israel launched an aerial attack on Egypt at nine o’clock this morning,” the radio announcer cried out like a sportscaster. “But fear not: The Egyptian air force has repelled the attack! Thousands of demonstrators have poured into the streets of Cairo, chanting: ‘Down with Israel! We will win the war!’”

“How long will this last?” I asked.

“Shh,” Jidu said.

“Thanks be to God,” the radio announcer said, “the counterstrike has been a success. With the glowing spirit of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, guiding them, Egyptian forces have shot down a total of eighty-six enemy planes and a U.S. bomber. We fight with God on our side!

“The Egyptian Army has mounted an offensive attack from the Sinai. Tanks and planes are moving to the border.”

A little while later, on Radio Lebanon, the announcer read a communiqué from the government: “Citizens are urged to remain at home. Cover all windows with blue

paper and paint your lightbulbs blue to prevent Israeli jets from spotting you from above at night.”

“In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful,” Mama said.

I repeated her prayer.

“You heard the news report,” Jidu told me. “We’re winning the war.”

I wasn’t convinced. “Is our army strong, Jidu?”

“It’s small. But Nasser will protect us, don’t you worry.”

“Halim should come home,” Mama said, and went to the foyer and called Baba at his store. She tried several times, but couldn’t find him.

“Is there any other way of contacting him?” she asked Jidu.

“There’s only one way.”

“I’m not going down there.”

An hour later, Mama tried calling Baba again to no avail.

“We need to cover the windows and paint the lightbulbs blue,” she said.

I stepped out onto the balcony to check the sky for jets.

“Come inside!” Mama said. “It’s dangerous out there.”

Finally, Mama decided to go to the store. Now I really panicked. Mama risked encountering the evil women and hooded men.

“I need your help, Ammi,” she told Jidu. “I can’t go there alone.”

“I haven’t been down there in years. I can’t go now.”

“We’re in a war. We should all be together.”

I had never seen Mama so concerned for Baba.

“We need to save Baba,” I said.

Jidu grunted. “Go get my shoes,” he told me.

We took a taxi to Mutanabi Street. As we drove through the streets to downtown, I looked out the open window, the humid air blowing against my face, tinged with the smell of exhaust and the sea. The city had already begun to empty out, its dwellers barricading themselves at home. The construction cranes piercing the sky seemingly around every block had been abandoned. Drills lay on the ground. It was eerie how quickly a city that was so loud and boisterous and expanding at the seams, buildings sprouting like fungus after a heavy rain, could turn quiet in such little time.

“Listen,” Mama told me. “When we get down there, I don’t want you speaking to anyone. Stay close by my side.”

The prospect of a rescue mission invigorated me. We’d fend off the women who hung boys at night from the palm trees in Martyrs’ Square and storm into the Shooting Star and save Baba from the jets. I’d finally become a hero.

We got out at the top of the street, where a very short man wearing suspenders stood on a footstool before a wooden cart parked at the curb, selling coffee. His pompadour was as big and shiny as I had first seen it.

“Mahmoud!” he said, spotting Jidu laboring down the street with his cane.

“Shit, Elvis,” Jidu said. “You’re still growing that thing on your head?”

“It’s for the girls, my friend. They love my hair.” He hopped down from his stool, his belly jiggling, and waddled up to Jidu, embracing him.

“Where’ve you been all these years?” Elvis asked.

“At home, waiting to die.”

I looked down the street at the buildings and their neon billboards. The balconies were empty of women. I recognized the midnight-blue awning with the store's name painted in flashy silver across the edge. Mama held my hand. I shook her loose.

"Is that Halloumi's son?" Elvis asked Jidu. Jidu nodded and introduced Mama and me. Mama didn't bother to offer her hand in greeting.

I hurried to the front door of the store.

"Wait for us," Mama yelled.

The store was swarming with women. They were reaching across either side of the aisle for food and products.

"I need flour!" one said.

"We're out of flour."

"How can you be out of flour, Halloumi?"

"I need two kilos of salami," a big woman said.

"I'll take the rest of your goat cheese."

"Are you out of soap?"

"He's also out of tuna."

I had yet to see Baba. There were too many women in the way. One grabbed a handful of chocolate bars. She looked at me and said she had no idea how long the war would last, and that she needed enough chocolate to satisfy her sweet tooth.

"Don't listen to her," Mama said, gripping my hand.

We made our way to the back, where Baba was ringing up a customer. I was shocked at the size of the store. I had expected it to be much bigger—in my memory it was enormous—and not as claustrophobic as it was now.

When Baba noticed us, his eyes widened. “What are you doing here?”

“There’s a war,” Mama said. “I tried calling you but you didn’t pick up.”

“I haven’t had the chance to breathe ever since the news broke out.”

“We need to buy blue paper and paint. And groceries.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Can we leave now?”

“I can’t. I have to attend to business.”

“But there’s a war.”

“Give me that!” a woman screamed at another, pulling a jar of fig jam from her hands.

“It’s not yours,” the other said.

“I had it first.”

“Ladies!” Baba said, separating them. “We’ll split the contents in half.”

When Baba returned to the register, Mama asked him again if we could leave.

“Don’t you see how busy I am?!” he said. “If you want us to leave sooner, you can help bag the groceries.”

Mama and I walked behind the register and took care of the bagging.

“Mahmoud, is that you!” a squat, dark-skinned woman in a low-cut dress said.

“Hanan, how good to see you again,” Jidu said.

A group of women circled Jidu and kissed him.

“We miss you,” one said.

“You don’t visit us anymore.”

“I’m sorry, girls,” he said. “But I’ve gotten old.”

Jidu walked to the back and told Baba he'd take care of the register. "You can handle the girls," he said.

As Mama and I bagged the groceries, Mama told me to avoid eye contact with the women. But when a tall brunette in a tight blouse and skirt asked for my name, I spoke out.

"Are you Halloumi's son?"

"Shh," Mama told me.

I bit on my tongue. The woman's blouse was open down to the parting of her suntanned breasts, her nipples poking through like acorns.

"You must be frightened by the war," she said.

"I'm ready for the Israelis," I said, my heart pounding. "I've got a scimitar at home."

"Omar," Mama said, "keep your mouth shut."

I told the prostitute that my scimitar was stained with the blood of Turks.

"Omar!" Mama said.

The prostitute caught me looking at her breasts and smiled. Her front tooth was missing. I ran the tip of my tongue across my mustache. When she walked away, swaying her hips like you, Murrone, I noticed the outline of her bra through her blouse. The sound of her high heels clicking against the floor soared above the clamor.

The women continued to pour into the store, some in lacy nightgowns damp with sweat. They pulled at Baba's sleeves and asked him if they'd be safe in their homes.

"This is the safest street to be on," he said. "Why would anyone want to bomb the district?"



“Because it’s evil,” Mama muttered.

The women were anxious, not evil. They seemed incapable of hanging someone like me from the palm trees in Martyrs’ Square. Mama was startlingly out of place in her long dress that stretched at her hips. Unlike the Mutanabi women who spoke in a Beirut accent, Mama still hadn’t lost her mountain lingo, and I was embarrassed by it.

A black-haired woman with green eyes entered as we were getting ready to leave.

“Nisreen!” Jidu said. He walked around the counter and embraced her.

“It’s been a long time,” she said.

“Too long.”

“You look good. Are you still wearing those nylons at night?”

“Of course.” Jidu pointed at me. “There’s my grandson.”

“I remember him. Do you remember me, handsome?”

Mama squeezed my hand, a command to remain silent. I waved with my free hand. “It’s time to go,” she told Baba.

“He’s a little Halloumi,” Nisreen said, smiling. Her dimples winked at me. She was the bird woman, I remembered.

She said hello to Mama. When Mama didn’t respond, she turned to leave. Baba reminded her to keep her French doors closed. “Don’t worry about me,” she said.

We packed Baba’s Beetle with food he had put aside for us. On our drive home, we bought a roll of blue translucent paper from a stationary store. The blue paint was out.

“We’ll make our own paint,” Baba said.

As soon as we entered the apartment, Baba turned on the radio. We sat by it like campers around a fire. The announcer barely breathed between his impassioned reporting: “Egyptian forces continue to counter-attack the Israelis in the Sinai. We’re winning the fight, thanks be to God! Oh, God is great! Our Syrian brothers have been shelling Israeli positions along their border. President Hafez al-Assad has declared that the enemy’s airpower is nearly all destroyed. Sixty-one Israeli planes have been shot down and the oil refinery in Haifa destroyed! Who dares stand before the mighty fist of the Arab world?”

“Our Jordanian brothers have launched air raids on Israeli towns, and are shelling Jewish Jerusalem as I speak. Mashallah, mashallah!

“We call on all Arabs to avenge our defeat in ’48. We will march into the enemy’s den and crush them. Allah wa akbar! Allah wa akbar!”

A patriotic song boomed from the speakers, a chorus of men singing of Palestinian freedom.

*We are the proud people of Palestine*

*We will break down the walls of Zionism and reclaim our stolen land!*

Neighbors cheered from their balconies. Gunshots rang out in celebration.

We covered the windows with the translucent paper, not leaving an inch. Baba dissolved a blue cube of hardened laundry detergent in water, turning it into a blue paste. I had a few paintbrushes handy from school. Baba unscrewed the lightbulbs from the rooms and gathered them in the parlor. The four of us sat together, each with a paintbrush, and coated the bulbs in blue. Once they were dry, Baba screwed them back on

and turned on the light. We were cast in a blue haze, as though we were creatures of the sea.

We ate dinner in front of the TV, watching Egyptian tanks rumble through the dust of the Sinai. Mama was worried about the glare of the TV, and favored the radio.

“Turn it off for your mother,” Baba said, and turned the dial on the radio.

I got up from the floor and switched off the TV. A corner of the translucent paper had unfurled from the window. I rushed over and pasted it to the glass.

“Don’t be scared,” Jidu said. “You come from a line of warriors.”

He was smoking his hookah. Puffy blue clouds levitated in the air.

“Druze warriors are the bravest in the world,” Jidu said. “We don’t fear death because we know we’ll return in the next life through reincarnation. And besides, you’ve already experienced war. You must have been two or three. It was a civil war.” Jidu exhaled another blue cloud. “What was the name of the American?” he asked Baba. “Your friend.”

“John Patashnick, God rest him.”

“Who was he?” I asked Jidu.

“Let your father tell you the story.”

“You’re the storyteller,” Baba said.

“He’s *your* friend.”

Baba turned off the radio. I looked at him with surprise. He rarely assumed the role of narrator. I knew nothing of his youth or upbringing.

1958 was a political mess, Baba said. Nasser was attempting to unite the Arab world. Egypt and Syria had formed a union, and both countries wanted Lebanon to join, but not everyone in Lebanon agreed with Nasser's plan, especially President Chamoun and his Christian followers. Chamoun tried amending the constitution so that he could run for a second term. This got people upset and led to a civil war between the Christians and Muslims. Chamoun asked for America's help, and Eisenhower listened. He sent fourteen thousand soldiers to Lebanon. The war only lasted a few weeks, but over a thousand Lebanese were killed.

"You see, Omar," Baba said, "Lebanon was suffering from an identity crisis, and it still is. Are we more Arab or Western? Can't we be both? Unfortunately, Christians and Muslims are still at odds with one another. Anyway, at the time, handfuls of those American soldiers visited your Jidu and me at the store. I—"

"Omar is too young to listen to this story," Mama interrupted.

"He's got a mustache," Jidu said.

"Please, Halim. I'd appreciate it if—"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd let me speak to my son," Baba said.

"But if it concerns those...."

"Those what?"

Baba stood up from his chair and walked out onto the balcony and lit a cigarette. He kept the sliding door open, leaving us exposed to the night sky and the prowling Israeli jets.

In this way Mama deprived me of Baba's story.

My room was hot and stuffy; I didn't dare open the window. The city was disturbingly silent. Even the cats were quiet. I got up to get a glass of water and noticed the door to the balcony open. I went to close it but found Jidu sitting outside. He was in his pajamas, with pink nylons over his head. His scimitar lay on his lap and his club by his feet.

"I'm waiting for the Israelis," he said.

I sat in a chair next to him. "Is it safe to be out here?"

"You've got me to protect you. Remember what I did to the Turk?"

"You chopped off his head."

"No one fucks with me."

The street was dark with shadows; the lampposts had been turned off. Glowing blue light dotted the buildings, reminding me of the blue songbird I had searched the night skies for in times of fright. The songbird was in danger, I thought, flying in the clouds amid the soaring jets.

"Were you ever scared when you were a warrior?" I asked Jidu.

"Never."

I had inherited Jidu's Roman nose and hollow cheeks, but not his courage. I wasn't coordinated and nor was I an athlete. I was always chosen last, or delegated as referee, whenever the boys picked teams for a match of football.

I asked Jidu if he'd tell me the rest of Baba's story.

"The story about your father's friend, John Patashnick, isn't as interesting as *where* it took place. John must have been nineteen or twenty. He had white, freckled skin and copper-colored hair. The back of his neck was always burnt red.

“Whenever John visited the store, your father popped open a bottle of Pepsi for him—John preferred Coca-Cola, but Coke is banned here because they support Israel—and lit him a cigarette, and the two would stand outside under the awning, looking down at the brothels.

“Your father’s favorite was Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love. That’s because Nisreen lived there. But John never liked going there because he couldn’t understand the plays since they were in Arabic. And he really didn’t care to understand them, he said, because they all seemed ridiculously sentimental in the way the actresses wept hysterically on stage. Of course your father took offense to this. He thought Bandar’s plays were the best in Beirut.

“Your father and John kept in touch over the years, sending each other postcards and pictures. John eventually married and had three boys. The poor guy was killed last year in Vietnam.”

Jidu scratched his crotch.

“What’s a brothel?” I asked.

“A whorehouse. A place where men pay women for sex.”

“You mean Baba and John Patashnick paid for sex?”

“Yes. And so did I.”

I wondered about the scent of gardenia I had smelled on Baba’s shirt.

“I’ve been thinking about all the lovely women I slept with,” Jidu said. “Marica Espiredone. In 1912 she arrived on a boat from Greece. The poor girl was an orphan. When she stepped down in the port, Ottoman soldiers surrounded her. One officer fell in love with her, and took her home....”

“I’d make love to Marica throughout the night,” Jidu continued, looking dreamily at a blue light across the street. “She’d whisper to me in Greek.”

The Mutanabi woman with the missing front tooth surfaced in my mind. I was caressing her honey-colored breasts. My penis hardened.

“Are you hard now?” Murrone asks, and slides her tongue across her lower lip. She has thick, beautifully shaped lips.

“No,” I say, shifting in my chair, eager to continue my story.

“You’re a bad liar. What were Bandar’s plays about?”

“Be patient, Murrone. We have all night. And try not to interrupt me as much.”

“We’ll see about that. Remember, a bullet in your head if I lose interest.”

“Do you even have a gun?”

She smiles. “No one fucks with me.”

In the morning, a softer blue illuminated the apartment. The radio announcer reported that the Egyptian Army had crushed enemy attacks on Kuntilla and Khan Yunis, and were plowing through the Negev. Once again, gunshots rang out.

Later, we learned that the Egyptian Army in the Sinai was retreating to defend the Canal.

“Praise be to God, this is a brilliant tactical maneuver,” the announcer said.

“We’re sucking the enemy right into our lair.”

“How can a retreat be seen as an advantage?” Baba asked.

“Nasser knows what he’s doing,” Jidu said.

The announcer continued: The Jordanians were close to victory in their battle for Jerusalem. The Syrians had occupied Israeli territory in the north and had shot down five jets.

“The Jews are running for their lives,” the announcer said.

The hours passed with us sitting by the radio. We snacked on nuts and chocolate bars. Mama began dusting the tables, clearing the ash from Jidu’s hookah.

“Can we go out for a walk?” I asked her, feeling restless.

“You never know when an Israeli jet might fly over us.”

“Let’s play cards,” Baba said.

Baba taught me how to play blackjack. When we tired of cards, he taught me how to play backgammon, and when I tired of that, I helped Mama shine the dinner table.

It was impossible to know it then, but those restless days trapped inside our blue apartment would only serve as a warm-up for what was to come years later—the civil war. In that war we’d spend days upon days stuck at home, lest we risked being slaughtered by militias in the streets. That’s one of the worst things about war, the inertia. It makes one feel so small and insignificant.

“I know the sound of Israeli jets,” Murrone says. She doesn’t elaborate.

In the evening we watched the news on TV.

“The Egyptians’ retreat in the Sinai is proving to be a great success,” the anchorman said.



Mama made us maté and then sat down to knit. As we took turns sipping on the tea and passing it around, Jidu spoke of Uncle Youssef, a legendary figure in his village who had introduced the people to maté.

“He was my mother’s first-cousin,” Jidu said. “In the late eighteen-hundreds, he sailed to Buenos Aires with a handful of his childhood friends in search of fortune. Years later, he returned to the village with hemp sacks overflowing with gold, and his skin blistered by the sun. He built an Arabian mansion with marble floors and arched windows.”

Uncle Youssef, Jidu said, was addicted to maté. He sat on his balcony and sipped from his cup, which was made out of a hardened squash. He used a metal straw with a perforated end. Villagers shared a few cups with him, and soon craved it day and night.

One morning, as Uncle Youssef was hunting birds in the forest, he was attacked by a pack of wolves. They ate him alive. The remains of his body were found two days later, a swarm of flies hovering over the bloody mess. Nearly a thousand villagers attended his funeral. The tumultuous sound of weeping became unbearable, especially for his grieving mother, who hired huntsmen to kill and skin all the wolves in Mount Lebanon.

I passed Jidu the maté.

“Do you have another story?” I asked.

“I have one,” Baba said. “Would you like to hear it?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe we should each take a turn,” Mama said, looking up from a hat with tassels she was knitting. I was surprised. Mama wasn’t one to recite her tales to anyone but me.

“Let’s have a story competition,” Jidu said. “We’ll each tell Omar a story and he’ll vote on the best one. You can start us off, Halloumi.”

“Well,” Baba said, “there was once a woman named Bandar.”

“Bandar?” Jidu said. “You’re going to tell *her* story?”

“Don’t interrupt me, father,” Baba said.

Mama put down her needles. “Halim, I—”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Salma,” Baba said. Mama resumed knitting; the clicking of her needles was more aggressive, as if her hands were sword fighting.

Bandar was born and raised in Beirut, Baba continued. She came from a wealthy, Christian family and was a good student, but what she enjoyed most was performing in school plays. She was a star on the stage. Her only problem was her size: She was a big girl. Some said she was ugly. Boys never made fun of her because they were terrified of her; she once punched a boy in the face for teasing her, busting up his nose.

Bandar’s life forever changed when she saw her first film at the Roxy in Martyrs’ Square. It was a black-and-white Egyptian picture called *The Well*. Over the years she became obsessed with Egyptian cinema and began speaking in an Egyptian dialect, which drove her parents crazy. The films were melodramatic and starred the biggest singers in the Arab world: Umm Kalthoum, Abdel Wahab, Leila Mourad. Bandar dreamed of becoming a lady of the screen.

At eighteen, she ran away to Cairo. She rented a room at a run-down hotel near Khan el-Khalili. The noise from the bazaar kept her up at night, as well as the stench of urine and garbage wafting from the streets. The electricity in the hotel was often cut, and she had to share a bathroom with a drunk and his mistress.

She found a job as a waitress at a second-rate Lebanese restaurant near Tahrir Square. The owner gave her the mornings and early afternoons off to audition for roles.

After almost a year of unsuccessful auditions, Bandar landed a role as a domineering spinster in a low-budget film called *The Lone Sisters*. She was thrilled. A casting director had been impressed by her performance, and he invited her to audition for a part in a film scheduled for production in spring. The film was called *Leaving Cairo*. The part was for a domineering mother-in-law who terrorizes her son's wife. Bandar won the part. Her performance was noted by many more casting directors, and soon she was acting full-time. She eventually left the Lebanese restaurant and moved into a flat in Zamalek overlooking the Nile River.

Although she had made a name for herself, Bandar grew tired of her roles. She was being typecast as an authoritarian figure that the audience despised. She believed she had a wide acting range, and wanted to try out new roles. Unfortunately, the directors thought she was too large to be anything different. Bandar insisted. They refused.

Bandar rejected countless offers to play the part of the domineering woman. Eventually, the directors grew tired of her antics and replaced her with another big-boned woman. She was unemployed and depressed, and started to hate Cairo. She returned to Beirut defeated. Her parents were furious with her. They said she had disgraced them,

first by leaving home and secondly, by becoming an actress. Bandar felt more miserable at home than in Cairo. She had lost her independence.

She auditioned for different roles at the Grand Theatre in downtown, but was told she was too big and ugly for the stage. One day, as she was wandering the city streets looking for work, she happened to meet an old woman named Omayma, who owned a house on Mutanabi Street. Several women lived inside the house.

“It was a kind of—hotel,” Baba said.

I looked at Mama. She had ceased knitting.

Omayma took an immediate liking to Bandar, Baba said, and hired her to help run the house. When Omayma died, Bandar transformed the house into a theatre.

Baba cleared his throat. “That’s the end of my story.”

“Is Bandar still alive?” I asked, wishing Baba had more to tell.

“Yes.”

“Can we see her?”

“It’s my turn,” Mama said. “Once upon a time, in a mountain-village covered in pines, there lived a dwarf and his wife....”

At the conclusion of the first round of storytelling, I was forced to cast my vote. I felt I had no real choice.

“I liked Mama’s the most,” I said.

“It figures,” Baba said.

Later that night, I joined Jidu on the balcony. He was wearing beige-color nylons.

“May I hold your scimitar?” I asked.

“Careful,” he said, handing it up to me.

I unsheathed the sword. The pinging sound was mesmerizing.

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered, cutting the air into pieces.

“That’s my boy,” Jidu said. “You’re becoming a man.”

The image of honey-colored breasts surfaced again in my thoughts.

“Jidu, when is a man old enough to have sex with a woman?”

“Well, I was in my early twenties, when I was with your Teta. But your father was fifteen. He slept with Nisreen, who became his obsession. He wanted to marry her but I told him he couldn’t marry a whore.” Jidu scratched his crotch longer than usual. “You know that wedding photo of your parents?”

I nodded.

“Nisreen plucked that pink carnation for him. He wore it in honor of her. I’m thankful for her. She helped me convince your father to marry.”

At the time, Jidu explained, Baba was satisfied with his life. He had become an institution in the district. Nonetheless, Jidu pestered him about the importance of having an heir.

Jidu made phone calls to his relatives up in the mountains. They said there was a beautiful young woman from Kornayel who came from a well-respected family. Baba was interested: Kornayel was where his mother was born and raised.

“You know the rest,” Jidu told me. He held his cane and stood up from his chair, his knees cracking. “Let’s go to bed.”

“I’ll stay out here for a bit.”

“If you spot Israelis, wake me up.”

I stood at the balustrade, gripping the scimitar, the night silent and glowing blue. For the first time in my life, I felt fearless. I could battle against anyone, not only the Israelis but also the hooded men or the headless Turk. And once I was done fighting, I'd take a taxi down to Mutanabi Street and find my sweetheart with the missing front tooth.

In the afternoon of our third day of captivity, Baba stepped out of the apartment. He had been quiet and irritable all morning despite the good news on the radio, smoking one cigarette after the other. It was burning hot inside the apartment; we were all sweating. I urged Baba to take me with him. Maybe we could drive to an ice cream parlor or even down Mutanabi Street.

"I have to go alone," he said. He seemed so anxious, which was unusual. He had oiled his hair and splashed himself with *Bien-être*. I loved his smell, and wondered if I'd grow up to be as handsome as him.

"It's not safe out there," Mama said.

"I won't be long."

"Where are you going?"

"To buy some groceries."

"But we have enough."

He returned hours later with a plate of sesame cookies, as happy as ever. Jidu and I scarfed them down. Mama refused to take one, and remained silent for the rest of the evening. She ignored the news and occupied herself with cleaning our bedrooms and scrubbing the floors on her knees. When she began making dinner, I sauntered into the kitchen. Her hair was pulled back, her cheeks rosy.

“Can you believe your father?” she whispered.

“What about Baba?”

“Those cookies. Where do you think they came from?”

It was then that I realized where Baba had gone.

Mama shook her head in disbelief. “We’re in the middle of a war, and instead of protecting us, your father leaves us to visit those whores. That’s the kind of man he is. I wish you and I could live up in the mountains, far away from this awful city. We’d have so much fun together.”

“But the village is boring, Mama.”

“You’d make friends.”

“What about Jidu and Baba?”

“We’d leave them here.”

“I’m not sure I like this plan.”

“We couldn’t move even if we wanted to. The entire village would spread rumors about us. They’d think your Baba and I were separated or divorced, which is a disgrace.”

Mama took out an onion and began dicing it on the cutting board.

“When I moved down here with your father, I began a new life. I dressed like a city girl and tried my best to speak like a Beirut. I visited the local salon at least once a week. I wanted to make your father happy. He was my prince. We loved each other. But you know what? He was more interested in spending time on Mutanabi Street.”

She was cutting the onion with such force I feared she’d slice her fingers.

“Be careful,” I said.

Tears were streaming down her face.

“Are you crying, Mama?”

“It’s the onion.”

Later, when I joined Jidu on the balcony, I found Baba sitting next to him, and hesitated. I was furious with Baba, but I wasn’t sure if it was because he had upset Mama or because he had visited Mutanabi Street without me.

“Come,” he said.

I sat on the floor between them.

“Do you know who baked those cookies?” he asked me. “A nice woman named Farah. She works at Bandar’s theatre house.”

I pretended not to care.

“Nisreen asked about you,” Baba said. “I told her you’re a brave boy.”

The mentioning of Nisreen’s name made me angrier.

“Have they had any clients?” Jidu asked.

“No. Beirut’s a ghost town.”

Baba laid his hand on my nape. I almost brushed it off.

“You know that story I told you about Bandar?” he said. “Every bit of it is true. She used to love films as much as you do now. She performs shows every night at her theatre, which include one-act plays that she writes and directs herself.”

I perceived actors as being as magical as the roles they performed. I thought they were too rich and famous to be acquainted with someone like Baba.

“The men enjoy Bandar’s shows,” he said

I figured the men enjoyed more than just the shows. I licked my mustache, feeling myself harden.



“But the problem,” Baba continued, “is that the theatre house, and the rest of the houses on Mutanabi Street, may not survive for much longer.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Times have changed.”

“I’ve already heard this sad news from you,” Jidu said. “It depresses me.”

“I’d like to know,” I said.

“The houses are losing money,” Baba said.

The rich clients, he explained, were filtering out, replaced every day by lower classes of men: sailors, blacksmiths, and taxi drivers. Politicians only dropped in out of nostalgia for the Golden Age of decades earlier. During that time the rich frequented the brothels for a fine time of sex and drinking and lounging. The district had been a place for important men to be seen and heard, puffing on their Cuban cigars and sipping on whiskey. A former prime minister once held unofficial meetings in Marica’s lounge.

The matrons blamed their decline in business on the looseness of the new generation of women who were spreading their legs without qualms. They blamed the nightclubs and cabarets around the city for stealing their clients. They blamed the despised streetwalkers, who were licensed prostitutes working independently of the brothels and could be found lurching for men in the dark. They also blamed themselves. Their prostitutes were aging.

It was rumored that the government was contemplating relocating the district to the suburbs, to cleanse from the heart of the city the houses of ill repute. No matron or prostitute wanted to leave Beirut.

“Will the Shooting Star survive?” I asked Baba.

“Not without the women.”

We were all accustomed to the routine of life in the blue. Days four and five stretched endlessly. There seemed to be more hours in the day. Mama continued to clean.

At six-thirty in the evening on the fifth day, we watched the news with horror. A pale-faced and exhausted Nasser looked into the camera and said: “I have decided to resign totally and finally from all official positions. I shall return to private life. I shall perform duties like any other citizen....”

When Nasser completed his speech, a terrible look of dismay appeared on the faces of Jidu and my parents.

“They were lying to us,” Baba said. “It was all lies.”

I turned to Mama.

“I think we’ve lost,” she said.

My heart began pounding. “The Israelis are going to attack us?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

We heard people shouting from the streets.

“Jidu!” I said. “They’ve come.”

He stepped out onto the balcony. “You’ve got to see this.”

We stood next to him and looked down below. Masses of men wielding burning torches were pumping their fists in the fiery air and crying, “Long live Nasser! Long live Nasser!”

They didn’t look Israeli, which calmed my nerves.

“They’re protesting against Nasser’s resignation,” Jidu said, and joined in: “Long live Nasser!”

“Long live Nasser!” Baba and I said, pumping our fists. Mama was whispering the same words.

As we soon found out, Nasser rescinded his resignation.

On the sixth day, Israel had control over the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The war was over. The Arabs had been humiliated.

Jidu and my parents sat in demoralized silence for the rest of the day.

The next morning, we pulled down the translucent paper from the windows and unscrewed the blue bulbs. I returned to school the following week.

## Intermission

My glass is empty, my ashtray filled with cigarette stubs. The drumming of the rain surges on.

“We’ve been in the shits since ’67,” Murrone says. “I thought things would change after the Arab Spring—who ever thought Arabs would actually take to the streets to fight for their rights—but look at what’s happening now in Egypt and in Syria. Bashar Al-Assad is slaughtering his own people, and the fighting is spilling over the border. I was in Achrafieh last year when the Christmas-time bomb went off. Yeah, I was browsing the stores at the ABC mall—I can’t afford anything over there, but I like to window-shop, you know? I heard the blast and everyone around me in the mall started to scream. It reminded me of the 2006 war with Israel.” She licks her lips, giving me a seductive look. “Tell me, tell me, am I as pretty as those fake blondes on Mutanabi Street?”

“When you were singing their chorus about an hour ago, I thought you were the prettiest blonde I’ve ever seen. You have a nice voice.”

“You sound like the rest of my clients. The other day one proposed to me. I said I’d only marry him if he were rich and had heart trouble—or terminal cancer. That made him sad. He’s a pudgy little man. I love pinching his cheeks.”

I rise from my chair with my glass and ask if she wants something from the bar.

“An Almaza. Make it quick; I want to hear the rest of your story so that I can go to bed.”

I walk down the stairs and order our drinks at the bar. Two young men sit at a table behind me. I wonder if they’re students from the American University of Beirut,

which is two blocks south on Bliss Street. Like me, they seek the solace of the red light, undeterred by the bombing.

“She’s not going to bite you,” one says to the other. I turn around and look at the man being spoken to. He must be a virgin.

I wonder if my son, Nadim, is a virgin. Probably not. He’s always had girlfriends. And now that he’s a first-year engineering student at AUB, where there’s an attractive girl around every corner, I’m sure he’s having sex. We’ve never spoken about these matters. In fact, we’ve hardly spoken at all. I only ask him if he needs money, which he usually does—he parties hard with his friends from the basketball team. He looks typical Beirut: short, spiky hair and stubble on his face; tight polo shirt with the collar turned up; slick jeans and sneakers; and when he’s out walking, a pack of Marlboros, his iPhone, and wallet sandwiched in his palm. He uses too much cologne.

Madame Hafiza enters the bar and sits on the stool next to me. “Are you enjoying Murrone?”

“Yes, thank you. She’s a different kind of listener.”

Madame Hafiza is a small woman with dyed brown hair and a wrinkled face. She’s perpetually cold, and wears a faux fur coat and fingerless mittens.

“What’s her story?” I ask.

“Tragic. She lost her entire family in the 2006 war. An Israeli jet struck her house. Murrone happened to be out visiting a cousin or friend. She spent a few years with an uncle down in the south; didn’t care too much for him, so she hopped on a bus to Beirut. She came to me about a month ago, said she had some experience. A pretty blonde is good for business. But every so often the grief gets to her and she locks herself up in her

room and doesn't speak a word. Doesn't even touch the food I leave at her doorstep. Just watches DVDs on her old laptop all day."

"Does she have any family here? Any friends?"

"We're all she's got."

Malik, the bartender, places my drink and an Almaza bottle on the counter. He's in his fifties and wears a wool cap indoors because he's still insecure about his bald spot. A toothpick hangs from the corner of his mouth.

"What do you think about all these bombings, ya istaz?" he asks me.

Every year brings its fare share of explosions. Before the one this afternoon, the last two came days apart. Before the New Year, a car bomb went off in downtown, killing the Minister of Finance, who opposed the Syrian regime. Two days later, another car bomb ripped through the southern suburbs of Beirut, Hezbollah territory.

"What's new?" I say.

"That's the sad part," Madame Hafiza says. "Our history is a history of wars and political assassinations. No one cares about the country. It's all about the tribe they belong to—Sunni, Shia, Maronite, Druze. And what makes matters worse is that we've got over a million Syrian refugees. You know as well as I do that refugees never leave. Just look at the Palestinians. Lebanon is about to burst." She blows into her cupped palms. "You should move to Paris or America, Omar."

"If he leaves you'll lose your most loyal client," Malik says, rolling his toothpick to the other side of his mouth.

"Lebanon will always be unstable," I say. "I've accepted this reality."

"But you've lost so much here," Madame Hafiza says. I've told her my story, too.

Madame Hafiza asks Malik for a bag of pumpkin seeds, which when he hands her, she passes to me.

“Murrone is addicted to these,” she says. She asks me where I am in my story. We’re about to begin in 1969, I say, when I was thirteen and obsessed with film.

“So you haven’t reached El Señor yet, that son of a bitch,” she says. “What he did on Mutanabi Street was gruesome.”

All these years later, I still cringe at the sound of the murderer’s name, even though I’ve uttered it countless times to the girls of Hamra.

“By the way,” I say, “what do you know about Badr el Din?” I mention bumping into him.

Madame Hafiza rubs her shoulders as if a cold draft has swept into the room. “I’m usually good at reading people, but he’s a mystery. A silent, brooding man.”

“If you ask me he’s plotting something,” Malik says. “We told the police about him, but they were too distracted to care. They’re looking for jihadists. But what if Badr el Din is a jihadist in disguise, or a ring leader?”

“He came in about a half-hour ago asking for Murrone,” Madame Hafiza says. “I told him he’s not welcome here anymore.”

At this news, I turn around to see if I had missed spotting him at one of the tables, but only the two young men are present.

“Relax,” Madame Hafiza says. “He’s gone.”

“He said a bomb might go off in Hamra,” I say. “Please don’t mention this to Murrone.”

Malik removes the toothpick from his mouth, walks around the bar, and opens the front door.

“He’s not out there,” he says. He returns to the bar and pours himself a shot of vodka and downs it. “We should move up to the mountains, Madame Hafiza. It’s safer there.”

“We’re safe here,” Madame Hafiza says. “No one’s bombing a brothel.”

I return upstairs. Murrone opens the bag of pumpkin seeds and begins cracking them open between her front teeth. I sit in my chair by the window. I feel sorry for her loss, but am hesitant to bring it up. She’s all alone in this world.

“When I was younger,” she says, “I used to swallow these seeds with the shell. Mama said it wasn’t good for my stomach. But I never listened to her—well, until now.” She reaches for her beer on the dresser, takes a big gulp, and burps. “Excuse me!” She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and places the bottle on the floor. She removes her blanket and leans forward on the edge of the bed. The front of her camisole hangs loose. A plump mole on the curve of her right breast reveals itself like a secret.

I ask if I can join her on the bed.

“It’s your time,” she says.

I sit next to her, gently cupping her triceps in one palm while the other glides down her forearm to the tip of her pinky finger. I stroke her arm, brushing her soft fuzz back and forth. She remains quiet, familiar with the fanciful peculiarities of clients. Among the women I ever longed for, I tell her, there was a part of the body they all shared that set me afire: their slim arms, the way they tapered into delicate hands. A gold or silver bracelet hanging loose around a woman’s wrist, crossing the edge of her palm,



mesmerized me. There were girls with beautiful faces I had no interest in for the thickness of their arms or the stubbiness of their hands.

“Do I have pretty arms?” Murrone asks.

“They’re magnificent,” I say, inhaling her flowery scent, feeling myself harden. But I have a story to continue, my blue mood to vanquish. I leave the bed and sit back down in my chair and light another cigarette. Murrone cracks pumpkin seeds.

“This next part concerns my first kiss,” I say.

“I had my first kiss when I was sixteen, and it wasn’t with my father.” She pauses, waiting for my reaction. I give her an amusing smile. “The lucky man ran a DVD store in the village and introduced me to *Braveheart*, his favorite film. You see—go on.”

“No, tell me more.” I want to at least know the lucky man’s name.

“Forget it. Go on.”

I feel a pull at my heart. “It was the worst kiss of my life,” I continue. “It turned me off from eating chestnuts. I still can’t stand the smell of roasted chestnuts.”

“What do the two have in common?”

“A good storyteller is a patient one.”

“Let me tell you something,” Murrone says. “There’s nothing more romantic than a kiss with plenty of tongue. But beware: I don’t kiss clients. Well, except for that night with Badr el Din.” She turns grim.

“You’re safe here. No one’s going to harm you.” I wonder if I’m also trying to reassure myself.

“We don’t know what the night may bring.” She spits out a shell into her palm.

## Roasted Chestnuts

Few boys ever spoke about masturbation at school. We feared God would zap our penises to ashes if He caught us stroking them. Ali Zaidan, however, had a different take on the act. Ali was the most revered boy in class. He experienced puberty on an unparalleled level, hurtling over adolescence and diving straight into manhood. He now had a full-grown beard. He kept his button-down school shirt half open, revealing the fur of his chest. During recess, I overheard him speaking to his pack of followers about his preferred method of masturbating.

“I use globs of shaving cream,” he said.

That night in the bathroom, I took a tube of Jidu’s shaving cream from the mirror cabinet and squeezed its contents over my palm and began masturbating on the toilet seat. I felt an icy tingling. Once I was done, I waited in anguished silence. God was about to strike. When He didn’t, I recited a prayer, pleading for forgiveness—it was only after masturbating that I felt closest to Him. I bathed in the tub, cleaning off the sticky, foamy mess from my body, and then walked into the parlor, where my parents and Jidu were watching a news program. I sat down on the couch, my mind on Jidu’s shaving cream.

“I can’t believe they signed the Cairo Agreement,” Baba said, shaking his head.

“Why not?” Jidu said. “The Palestinians have every right to fight the Zionists.”

“Let them fight, but not from our land.”

“The Palestinian struggle is our struggle.”

“The Israelis will retaliate, and it’ll hurt *us*. Think of all those Lebanese villages along the border.”

“This agreement will upset the Christians,” Mama said. Jidu and Baba looked at her. She wasn’t one to talk politics, at least not in front of them. “Not all Christians care about the Palestinian cause,” she continued, “and with Palestinian freedom fighters coming in with Muslim support, it’ll make them feel even more insecure.”

“What do you know about politics?” Jidu asked her.

“I know more than you think, ya Ammi,” she said.

Baba smiled.

“If we beat Israel first we won’t have any problems,” Jidu told Baba. “Arafat will lead his men to victory.”

“Did you forget ‘67?” Baba said.

“We’ve learned from our defeat,” Jidu said. “The Arabs will rise again and conquer all!”

“What’s wrong, Omar?” Mama asked, uninspired by Jidu’s Arab nationalism. She was more concerned about my silence. Baba and Jidu turned to me.

“You’re not scared of the Israelis, are you?” Jidu asked.

I shook my head.

Later that night, still feeling guilty over my transgression, I crept into Jidu’s room. He was snoring loudly. I sat on the edge of the bed and tapped him on the shoulder.

He sat up with a fright. “Quick, get me my scimitar.”

“No one’s attacking us.”

“Why are you still awake?” he asked, adjusting the nylons on his head.

I wanted to mention my bathroom activity, but held back. “I had a dream.”

Months before, I had had a special kind of dream. I was sucking hard on Lamya’s breasts, milk frothing at my lips. (The wet-nurse had become a frequent visitor to our house; she and Mama chatted over tea in the parlor.) She rocked me back and forth as I guzzled down her milk. When I relayed the content of my dream to Jidu, he asked me if I had had an orgasm. I nodded.

“Sticky dreams are my favorite,” he said. “Wish I had them more often.”

“They’re not sinful?”

“Why would they be? And who the hell cares?”

“God.”

“God?! I wouldn’t worry about Him. Enjoy what your cock has to offer.”

As the winter approached, I became a seasoned masturbator. I masturbated squatting, standing up, supine in the tub, and on my bed where I humped the mattress. I stuck my penis into toilet rolls, into a jar of Vaseline, and rubbed it against Soula the Seal, who honked once or twice as I mounted her. I masturbated during downpours, on windy or calm nights, and as the calls to prayer rang through the sky.

One afternoon, while Mama and Baba were out of the house, I approached Jidu, who was listening to a Beatle’s song on the radio.

“I don’t understand all the hype about this band,” he said. “They’re shit. This Rock and Rolling is shit. I prefer Abdel Wahab. He’s a handsome son of a bitch. I’m sure he gets all the women.”

I seized my opportunity: “Did you get all the women when you were younger?”

I was after vital information.

“Your Jidu was a stallion,” Jidu said. “But I only really got to have fun with women when I moved down to Beirut. That was a golden time. When I first opened up the store in the early twenties—I got a great price for the place—Mutanabi Street was taking baby steps. Soon enough, brothels began sprouting down the street. One day I stepped out of the store and saw that I was surrounded by them.

“At night the street was swarming with men. The whores had more work than they could account for. Men drunk from the bars stumbled down the street and lost themselves in one of the brothels; there were even village men—I recognized their accents—that came down from the mountains. One villager carried a basket of fruits from his garden for the whores. There were also plenty of politicians; they dressed in Italian suits and fedoras and entered their favored brothels as if they owned the place.

“I got to know these notables on a first name basis. But my preferred friends were the French soldiers, who were stationed in Beirut. I still remember their names: Christian-Pierre, Julien, Xavier, and Philippe. They’d come into the store every now and then to buy a pack of cigarettes. We visited the brothels together. Any homesickness they felt was soothed over with plenty of fucking.”

However, Jidu explained, the popularity of the brothels was accompanied by venereal diseases. The city needed a cure. The government, which had legalized prostitution, stepped in and imposed laws and regulations on the district, including the mandate that prostitutes had to visit clinics for routine examinations.

“Anyway,” Jidu said, “I was this big, handsome young man whom the whores drooled over. They’d come into my store just to take a look at me. I...”

“Why’d you stop?” I said, clinging onto his words. This was the best story he had ever told me.

“Don’t tell your mother about this.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“Son, your Jidu had the biggest damn cock those women had ever seen. They called it the Beast from the Middle East. Most whores fake their orgasms, but with me they were genuine. They came buckets.

“I performed tricks that I wasn’t able to do with your Teta. I especially liked blowjobs. I also liked it when they talked dirty. They’d say, ‘Fuck me, Mahmoud, fuck me hard,’ or ‘give it to me’ or they’d cuss at me. I called them nasty things.

“In the daytime the whores visited me at the store. They all whined about their sad pasts and how they had been deprived of love or taken advantage of. They loved making themselves the tragic heroes of their own stories. Most of their tales smelled like my underwear in summer. I told them at least they had a roof over their heads.”

From that point on, whenever Mama was out of the house, Jidu spoke about his favored prostitutes: Tamara, who sat naked on his back and massaged his shoulders after sex; Riwa, who fucked with a reckless fury reminiscent of the Palestinian freedom fighters, leaving his skin covered in scratches and claw marks; Dana, who always swallowed; Khadija, who wept as she came; and Ward, an ambidextrous dwarf who gave him blowjobs with her stubby middle finger stuck up his ass like a cork in a bottle.

I began kissing Lamya in my fantasies. I held her arm and kissed her from her shoulder down to the edge of her palm. I kissed her on the mouth, too, the old-fashioned, Hollywood way, without tongue but with plenty of passion, similar to the kiss

Christopher Plummer gives Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. I had never seen a couple kiss in public, and only had the big screen for inspiration. Thus, when I went with Mama to see *Doctor Zhivago* at the Saroulla in Hamra, I was happily surprised by many onscreen kisses.

Mama had missed the release of *Doctor Zhivago* in '65. She was a fan of Omar Sharif, had seen all his Egyptian films and was swept away by his performance in *Lawrence of Arabia*. I think she had a crush on him, as I'm sure many Arab women did. He was a handsome movie star with unmistakable Arab looks who spoke fluent English. When Mama learned that the Saroulla was re-releasing *Doctor Zhivago*, she said we had to see it.

“Omar Sharif plays the role of Yuri, Doctor Zhivago—a doctor *and* poet,” she said.

We spent most Saturdays at the movies. Luckily, as Beirut continued to expand, more theatres opened up in Hamra. There was now Saroulla, Hamra Theatre, Strand, and Eldorado, each one catering to different genres. I saw my first James Bond movie at the Hamra Theatre. We'd sit in the middle of the theatre with our popcorn and Pepsis and forget ourselves in the cool darkness.

But I was also embarrassed to be seen with Mama. I was wary of students from school spotting us in the theatre or in one of the stores or cafés on Hamra Street. I wanted to be seen with friends, not a mother who relied on me for company as much as I did on her.

Mama never saw a film without eating popcorn. She bought the large-sized paper bag and ate most of it before the first half-hour of *Doctor Zhivago* was over.

“Why aren’t you eating?” she whispered.

“I am,” I said, munching on the salty kernels left at the bottom of the bag. I felt sorry for her without understanding why.

I was bored by *Doctor Zhivago*, at least in the beginning. The plot was too slow for my liking. But I had fallen hard for Lara, played by Julie Christie, who wore a red evening gown with black lining that complemented her bosom and curves. She was a blonde with deep blue eyes and an innocence that made me worried for her.

A scene soon grabbed my attention. Victor and Lara have left a dinner reception and are riding in a carriage down an icy avenue in Moscow when Victor forces himself on her and kisses her.

“That brute,” Mama said. She quickly covered my eyes with her buttery hand. She was too late. The kiss was over. I wondered if that was how men and women kissed. Was the man supposed to lunge at the woman?

Mama was too late for the second kiss, too. As in the first kiss, Victor forced himself on Lara, only this time they were at her place and on her bed. I was starting to enjoy the film.

“Cover your eyes when you see a kiss,” Mama said.

The passionate kisses between Yuri and Lara made me in love with the idea of falling in love. They were alone with Lara’s daughter in the deserted house in Varykino, in fear of the Reds and the howling wolves. Outside their frosty windows was a dangerous, winter world. Inside, they made love. Yuri returned to writing poetry, invigorated by his love for Lara and memorializing her in his verse. This time, Mama didn’t bother covering my eyes.



When the film was over, we were both heartbroken.

“Poor Yuri,” Mama said. “He died from a lonely heart.”

“Poor Lara,” I said. Love, I thought, was deadly. And still I craved its spell.

“Julie Christie looked stunning in that red gown,” Mama said with a touch of sadness. She was wearing a shawl over her long-sleeve dress, which was wide at her hips. “Western women are gorgeous,” she continued, sucking in her belly.

Mama didn’t want to return home so soon, and took me to Wimpy Café on Hamra Street for dessert. She barely touched her crème brûlée. I devoured mine.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

She was looking out the window. Two young women got out of a taxi, laughing.

“I was just thinking about the way that Yuri and Lara looked at each other, how their eyes glowed,” she said. “Yuri was willing to give up his wife and son for her. And his wife Tonya was so caring, always encouraging Yuri to write. She had to struggle to help her family survive, what with little fuel and hardly any food and all those common folk who overran her house. I know Lara was beautiful and magically never aged, but Tonya was pretty, too. Maybe not as pretty as Lara, but who is?”

“Yuri and Lara were in love,” I said.

“But Yuri was also in love with Tonya.”

“Maybe that was a different kind of love.”

Mama rested her hands on the table, looking down at them.

“You should finish your crème brûlée,” I said. “It’s delicious.”

She shook her head.

“Please, Mama. Finish it.” I felt like a parent desperate to relieve his child’s suffering, wishing he could take away the pain by inhabiting it himself.

“Omar, remember that day we had to go down to your father’s store?”

I nodded.

“Were the women pretty?”

I told her what she wanted to hear. “They were hideous.”

“But not that woman with the green eyes. She was different, no?”

“You’re much prettier than her, Mama.”

“Hm.” She called the waiter for the bill.

Later that night, long after Jidu and my parents had gone to bed, I kissed my reflection in the bathroom mirror, pressing my tongue against the cold glass, tasting metal, fogging it with my breath.

“Oh Lamya,” I said. “My sweet Lamya.”

\*

I dreamed of becoming a filmmaker. I’d move down to Cairo, which was the Hollywood of the Middle East, and become a household name.

*Doctor Zhivago* inspired me to write my first screenplay. I stayed up all night writing a film about a handsome poet who abandons his wife and escapes to the mountains with his lover, a beautiful blonde named Nadine Al-Awar. I stole shamelessly from *Doctor Zhivago*. All the scripts I wrote that year were copycats.

When I informed Mama of my ambition to be a filmmaker, she said the movie business was not a respectable industry. According to her, I had the potential to be a lawyer, a businessman, an engineer, or a doctor.

“We’ll send you to the American University of Beirut,” she said, “where you’ll learn your trade. Imagine being a student there. It’s the best university in the region. That’s what I call a dream.”

It sounded more like her dream. She had once told me that her high school teachers encouraged her to pursue a degree in Arabic literature. “You have so much potential,” they told her. But she saw more potential in starting a family.

Jidu read a few of my scripts and thought I was wasting my time writing about such boring matters.

“You want a really good story?” he asked me.

I knew where he was headed.

“I can’t think of a better film than one about my life,” he said. “You can set it in the First World War, during the famine. Villagers are starving to death. They need food from Damascus, but the road to Damascus is unsafe. That’s where I come in....”

When Baba heard of my ambition, he said there were other professions to consider.

“Like what?” I asked.

“The Shooting Star.”

At school, I levitated toward Ali and his friends, eager to eavesdrop on their conversations about masturbation and sex. One day, I overheard something spectacular in the schoolyard.

“So,” Ali told his friends, “guess what my Baba gave my brother Jad for his eighteenth birthday? A whore. He took him to Mutanabi Street and bought him a whore.

He said bedding a woman would turn him into a real man. Jad fucked a fake blonde—twice.” Ali noticed me. “What’s your problem? You’re always hanging around us.”

“Your father and brother must have visited the House of Blondes,” I said. “A blonde once fed me a slice of cake. She said I was really cute. ”

“Bullshit.”

“I know another brothel called Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love. The women act in plays.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“My father owns a store—the Shooting Star—in the area. I’ve been there plenty of times. I know Mutanabi Street like my own neighborhood.”

Ali and his friends circled me.

“If you’re lying I’ll beat the shit out of you,” Ali said.

“I’m not.”

“Then take us there.”

“I’m free on Saturday,” I said.

On Saturday afternoon, I told Mama I was going out with friends. She gave me a bewildered look.

“Which friends?”

“From school.”

“You haven’t mentioned them to me before.”

“They’re my new friends,” I said. “Really nice guys.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the souks downtown.”

“I thought we were going to the movies. I’ve been waiting all week to see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* at the Rivoli. Robert Redford is in it!”

Mama also had a crush on the American actor with golden locks.

“We’ll go some other time,” I said.

Mama looked upset. “I’ll accompany you.”

“No! I mean, I’ll go alone.”

“You’ve never been alone before.”

“I’m a man.”

“You’re a teenager.”

“Let the boy go,” Jidu said from the parlor. “He has to discover the world on his own, or else his you know what will shrink.”

Mama gave me money from her purse. She called a particular taxi driver whom she always used and trusted and asked him to drive me to downtown.

“I want you back here by the early evening. Make sure one of your friends’ parents drives you home.”

On my way out, she told me to be careful. “I only have one Omar.”

I met Ali and his friends at the port down from Mutanabi Street. Ali stood smoking a cigarette against the railing. His hair resembled a shiny black bowling ball, drenched as it was in grease. He wore a half-open shirt and slacks and a white shark tooth necklace. His friends, Rashad and Ziad, were also dressed in nice clothes and had greased their hair.

I was wearing a wool sweater Mama had knit, everyday pants, and black Converse high-tops, my favorite sneakers.

“What the hell’s going on on your sweater?” Ali asked, peering closer. In all the sweaters Mama had knit for me, she included characters from *Tales from Mount Lebanon*. In the lime green sweater I wore, a weeping sparrow was perched on a branch twisting down from my shoulder. On the opposite side a dwarf’s lips were pursed for a kiss. Around my kidney area, Shireen’s long elastic hair hung down from a palace tower, sweeping across my lower abdomen like water bursting from a hose. I was the only one in the family who wore her sweaters, and although they were tight around my neck and in my armpits, I never had the heart to complain. Jidu, however, said that Mama’s sweaters were like a suffocating lover.

“I can’t be caught wearing these monstrosities on the street,” he told Mama. “Men would laugh at me.”

It was rare that Jidu left the house. As for Baba, he didn’t wear sweaters.

“You’ve got some weird looking people on your sweater,” Ali said, staring at the dwarf. “What the fuck’s going on with that woman?” he said.

“That’s Shireen,” I said. “Her hair is elastic. At night she flings it out her window so that her lover can pull on the ends of her locks and be propelled upwards.”

“That’s gay,” Rashad said.

“Really gay,” Ziad added.

I folded my arms across my chest, trying to hide the sparrow and the dwarf.

“My brother said Mutanabi Street is up from the port,” Ali said.

“That’s right,” I said, as if I knew.

A coffee peddler passed us down the promenade tinkling two small porcelain cups in one hand and swinging a silver urn in the other. We waited until he was clear of us before we resumed our conversation, as though we were trading classified information.

“How much do the women cost?” Ali asked, squinting as he took a drag on his cigarette.

“They’re affordable.”

We walked up from the port and began looking for the street. Eventually, we came upon a man with a pompadour selling coffee at the top of a narrow street with billboards hanging from the buildings. I spotted a midnight-blue awning.

“This is it!” I said. “Follow me.”

I waved at Elvis, who stood on a footstool at his coffee stall. “Remember me?” I asked. “I’m Halloumi’s son Omar.”

Elvis stepped down from the stool and waddled up to me, thumbing his suspenders. I knelt to let him kiss me thrice on the cheeks. The top of his pompadour glinted in the winter sun, big flakes of dandruff suspended between his frozen locks. I introduced the guys, who were clearly impressed with Elvis’ hair and my association with someone from the district.

“I’m showing my friends around,” I said. “They want to see the women.”

“Ah, well, most of the girls are asleep. But you should see how much they love my hair, especially Ayesha, my African Queen. She’s the most beautiful woman on this street. She works at Aunt Roula’s, which is haunted, so don’t go near the place.”

I led Ali and the gang to the Shooting Star. Baba was sitting back in his chair brushing his teeth with a miswak. A striped scarf was wrapped around his neck. Mama never knitted striped scarves.

“What brings you here?” he asked me, standing up.

“These are my friends,” I said.

“Does your mother know where you are?”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t want Baba embarrassing me in front of the guys. I was my own man.

“You guys want a Pepsi?” I asked Ali.

Ali nodded.

Baba retrieved four Pepsis from the fridge, popped their caps, and handed us each a bottle.

“What are you boys doing here?” Baba said.

“We’re just strolling in the neighborhood,” Ali said. He pulled out his cigarettes and offered one to Baba.

“Aren’t you too young to smoke?” Baba asked.

“I’ve been smoking for years.”

Baba took me aside. “I don’t like these guys.”

“They’re my only friends,” I whispered.

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I wanted to show them the store.”

“Is that all?”

I crimsoned.



“Go back home. You’re not at a zoo.”

He opened the front door. “You boys need to leave this street.”

“Please, Baba,” I said. I was on the verge of losing my newfound friends.

“Out,” he said.

We filed out of the store. Ali and the guys looked up at the brothels.

“Go on ahead, boys,” Baba said.

We returned to the port. A freighter was gliding across the horizon.

“I could be fucking right now,” Ali said.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“What do you know about women?” Rashad asked. His face was ravaged with acne.

“He knows shit,” Ziad said, the shortest and heaviest of us all. Although he tried sounding tough, his words folded with the cracking of his voice.

“I know a lot,” I said, and mentioned the various sexual positions Jidu had been in. “Some women like to swallow and others like it from the back. But of course it depends on what the man prefers. And the women like to cuss.”

“How do you know all this?” Rashad asked.

“Common knowledge.”

We walked to the Rivoli in Martyrs’ Square and bought tickets for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and sat in the back row. We spotted a young couple kissing in the dark.

“You could have a blowjob here,” I said. The guys stared at me, grinning.

It was dusk when we left the theatre. I had to return home, or else Mama would start worrying. But Ali and the guys were just starting their night. Ali lit a cigarette and walked into the direction of the souks. We followed him.

A labyrinthine world opened before us, where the three main narrow streets of the souks, Ayyas, Jamil, and Tawileh, twisted and turned down to the sea, leaving behind them tentacles of alleyways lined with shops and cafés and restaurants and coffeehouses and patisseries and bakeries and boutiques and shoe stores, and street corners from which performers danced or sang or staged puppet shows, and fortune tellers read palms for a lira. A man in a top hat pulled blue songbirds out of his coat pockets and released them into the air. As I stood there watching the birds circling above the man, chirping incessantly, a heartwarming sensation crept over me. Perhaps these were the blue songbirds of my childhood, the ones I hoped would land on my windowsill and sing me to sleep. For years I had longed to listen to their songs, and now they were finally here, borne from the pockets of a man in a top hat. Only now I didn't care to sleep but rather lose myself in their twittering melody, wishing they'd form a blue halo above me. My eyes watered, and fearing Ali and the gang would spot my tears, I turned away from the birds to find that my friends had moved on ahead. I caught up to them and walked through the alleyways that crisscrossed and led from one to another. Aromas of cumin and cinnamon mixed with perfumes, and the stench of body odor hung in the air with sharp smells of meat and fried sausages and the drifting scent of roasted coffee. We resigned ourselves amidst the bustling crowds to the course of the streets and into quarters where all imaginable goods were sold, including the latest fashions from Paris.

At a street corner a man sat in a chair in the center of a wooden platform illuminated by a suspended lamp. Men sat in a semi-circle around the platform, sipping on coffee and smoking hookahs.

The man on the platform was a professional hakawati, the first I had ever seen. He wore a red tarbush with a black tassel, a white-collared shirt, and wide black pants. A large book lay in his lap. He held a wooden rod which he stomped on the floor. The hakawatis came out in the evenings to entertain men weary from a long day of work, infusing them with the scintillating escape of a story before they made their way back home and woke up to another morning of drudgery.

“What do you think King Farouk decided to do?” the hakawati asked his audience. His eyes were glimmering in the whispery smoke swirling from the smokers’ mouths.

“He went to war!” the hakawati said, thumping his rod. “He planned to avenge his father’s defeat by Abdullah the One-eyed. He rounded up his soldiers and led them into the desert, where Abdullah and his men were camped.”

“Make it bloody,” a man from the audience said.

“King Farouk told his men to rest for the night. They’d launch their attack at dawn. This would be the king’s very first battle. That night, he sat alone by a fire, unable to sleep, a camel wool blanket draped over his shoulders. A desert wind blew sand against his sandaled feet. He looked up at the starlit sky, wishing he were back home in Baghdad, in his room in the palace overlooking the Tigris River where he worked on his calligraphy. Before inheriting the throne, he had spent years in mosques around the city painting scriptures from the Qur’an on their walls and ceilings. He was happiest when he

stood in the higher reaches of scaffolding, paintbrush in hand. For endless hours he'd paint, stroking his brush against the wall, shaping Arabic letters into abstract swirls and flourishes, making the words of God his own.

“Farouk had been so absorbed in his calligraphy that he spent little time with his wife and two young sons, though he loved them dearly. His father had wanted a heroic warrior for a son, not a pale-faced calligrapher who had never drawn blood.

“When Farouk got word that his father had been killed in battle, he shed few tears. But as his father's only son, he now had a kingdom to govern.

“With little to no time to work on his calligraphy, Farouk grew morose. At meetings with his advisors, he spoke little. His life had lost its meaning.

“And now he sat by a crackling fire on the eve of battle. Although he had received military training in his youth and was praised for his swordsmanship, he had never wanted to fight. It wasn't in his blood. Looking up at those stars, he wondered how one went from stroking a paintbrush to swinging a scimitar.”

The hakawati peered down at his storybook. He was in his sixties, his silver beard reaching down his neck. A breeze swung the lamp, and for a moment, his face alternated between light and shadow. The water in the hookah urns bubbled furiously. Smokey clouds levitated above the audience like mystical thoughts. Prayer beads ticked.

The hakawati looked up, scanning his eyes over us. “Farouk knew,” he said softly, “that if he didn't win the battle tomorrow, he'd lose Baghdad. His wife and sons would be killed. He couldn't risk that.”

“Now you're talking,” a man said.

“Dawn was breaking. Farouk put out his fire.” The hakawati thumped his rod.  
“Are you ready for battle?!” he asked us.

“Yes,” we cheered. An exhilarating rush made me eager to fight. Jidu must have experienced this same thrill before heading down to the Turkish checkpoint on the Beirut-Damascus Road. I was ready to behead Turks in a blaze of blood and glory.

“King Farouk mounted his white horse and told one of his men to sound the horn. He was armed with two scimitars, an axe across his back, a dagger, and his shield. He hadn’t slept in two days. His mouth was dry, his eyes red. He held tightly onto his reigns to control the trembling in his hands.

“In the distance, Abdullah the One-eyed had assembled his men for battle. During the night one of their scouts had spotted King Farouk’s army.

“The two armies faced each other in the desert. Heat waves trembled in the air.

“King Farouk unsheathed his scimitar.”

“He’s finally become a man!” an audience member said.

“‘Charge!’ King Farouk cried.

“The armies clashed in a haze of sand. Scimitars swung this way and that, metal against metal, sprays of blood arcing into the air. Burning boulders were catapulted in either direction, mowing down soldiers. The dreadful sounds of men and horses dying, blood gurgling, bones breaking....”

“More!” a man cried.

“The sky darkened with thousands of arrows, which pierced throats and eyes and arms, cut through cheeks, sunk into thighs. Daggers were thrown, spears hurled, maces swung.”

“More!” we cheered.

“Axes split skulls, clubs smashed faces, bludgeons splintered legs. Fingers gouged out eyes, punches broke jaws, elbows knocked back teeth, knees cracked ribs, kicks ruptured testicles.”

“More!”

“Heads chopped off, limbs severed, intestines spilled. Spines snapped, arms shattered, shoulders dislocated, ankles twisted.”

“More!”

“Warriors shat themselves, spat out loose teeth, swallowed blood. They vomited, choked on sand, bit on their tongues. They cried for their mothers and wives, their sons and daughters. And still they fought till the death!”

The hakawati whacked his rod against the floor, breaking it in half. We cheered as loud as we could.

“It was in this bloodbath,” the hakawati said, holding aloft the broken rod, “that King Farouk transformed into a slaughterer. He fought possessed, lost in the heat of battle, drenched in sweat and blood, hungry for more. His arm had been slashed, but he felt no pain.

“King Farouk was gutting an enemy soldier when he spotted Abdullah.

“‘Abdullah!’ King Farouk yelled.

“Abdullah turned around. He wore an eye-patch, his black hair flowing down to his shoulders. They faced each other, surrounded by corpses and dying men.

“‘Your father begged for his life before I beheaded him,’ Abdullah said.

“‘You’ll soon be begging for yours,’ King Farouk said.”

A roar erupted from the audience. I pumped my fist.

“It was no match,” the hakawati said. “Before Abdullah knew what had happened, King Farouk poked his eye out with his scimitar. The son of a bitch stumbled around like a drunk. King Farouk took his time with him, slicing off his limbs one by one.

“At the end of the battle, King Farouk and his men carried their wounded back to camp and returned home the following morning. King Farouk would fight in many more battles over the years, and was heralded as one of his people’s greatest warriors. But the next time King Farouk put his paintbrush to canvas, he made abstract drawings of men with their guts spilled, some without eyes or missing limbs. He was unable to paint again.

“Do we, my friends, have a dark beast buried within us? Do we really know who we are?” He wiped his mouth. “That is the end of my story.”

The men clapped and whistled. It was only when the hakawati stepped down from the platform that I returned to reality.

“I have to go home,” I said. I could picture Mama pacing the hallway.

“Relax,” Ali said. “We’ll leave soon.”

The guys drank jellab with pine nuts at the Antabli water-fountain. I was too anxious about Mama to drink or eat anything, and began to resent her for not allowing me to savor my time. We continued on to Place de l’Étoile, passing a giant clock tower that stood in the middle of the square, and walked up to the fisher’s market beneath the Grand Serail, the house of parliament. Ali bought rose petal ice cream from an ice cream parlor peculiarly situated amongst the iced fish.

The calls to prayer boomed through the night sky, punctuated by the tolling of church bells. We heard a faint chorus of men chanting from some far corner, similar to

the distant roar of a stadium. We couldn't make out the words but the closer the chanting became, the more I realized those chanting were angry. I exchanged glances with Ali. He spat on the ground, trying to hide his fear.

The chanting became deafening. A mass of men, all wearing kaffiehs and pumping their fists, emerged from the streets, radiating heat.

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!” they cried.

Ali threw his ice cream in the trash and repeated the chant, joined by Rashad and Ziad.

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!” I said. I could barely hear my own voice. I suddenly stopped chanting and looked up at the sky. A jet could incinerate us in seconds. I was desperate to leave, but the one way out of the souks from this area was through the sea of protestors. Once the last of them had marched on, a middle-aged man standing next to us walked into the street and spat in the direction of the protestors.

“Those sons of bitches are ruining our country,” he said. He was a stocky man with thinning hair. He had a bushy goatee.

Ali looked at him, pink ice cream smudged on his chin. “Don't call them that. They're our brothers.”

The man turned to Ali. “You're just a kid. The Palestinians are dividing our country. Soon we'll all be at war with each other, just like in '58.”

“We're all Arab.”

“I'd rather not be called that.”

“Then fuck you.”

The man's eyes lit up. “What'd you say, boy?”



“Let’s go,” I said. “Please, Ali.”

A small crowd had gathered around us. Ali gestured to step forward, but was held back by Rashad and Ziad. Ali made a half-hearted attempt to break free from them.

“Our country would be as great as France if we didn’t have hoodlums like you,” the man said.

Ali spat toward him. His glob fell well short. The man charged us, knocking me down with his shoulder. I landed on my ass. He clenched Ali’s neck, only to be pulled back by older men in the crowd. Meanwhile, Rashad and Ziad stood there motionless. I got up, catching my breath. Ali rubbed his neck, clearing his throat, his eyes filled with tears.

“I’ll get you next time, sisterfucker,” he yelled at the man as he was walking away.

The night only seemed to be getting more dangerous.

“See you later,” I told Ali, and ran out of the market and up to the street and hailed a taxi. Once I arrived back in Hamra, I finally felt calmer. But before I could even knock on the front door of our apartment, Mama opened it wide. She must have heard the sound of the elevator.

“You’re late!” she said. “I almost called the police. Do you enjoy worrying your mother?”

“I’m really sorry.” As angry as she was, her presence comforted me.

“You’re not allowed to be out at night again, not without me.”

“But I’m a grown up!”

“Don’t yell at me.”

“All the rest of my classmates hang out at night.”

“I don’t care what your classmates do,” Mama said.

“This is the first time I have friends,” I said, moping for affect.

Mama’s face softened. “I never had any friends when I was your age. I kept to myself, reading all those stories. I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere alone. One of my brothers had to accompany me...I want you to have many friends. But you can’t worry me.”

“I didn’t mean to.” I felt guilty for seeing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* without her. She had probably spent her day knitting, longing for Robert Redford and the buttery taste of movie popcorn.

“You missed dinner. I made your favorite dish: shishbarak. And I have a surprise for you.”

She left me in the kitchen and returned with a mustard yellow sweater crowded with talking pine trees and a tiger smoking a hookah. “It took me a while to make this one,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

“Try it on!”

“Let me eat the shishbarak first.”

“Just try it on. I want to see if it fits.”

I put on the sweater, feeling my throat constrict.

“Do you like it?” Mama asked.

“Thanks.”

Mama’s smile disappeared. “Is it the color? I can make you another one.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m really hungry.”

Mama served me a plate of shishbarak. I took off the sweater and placed it on the back of my chair. “Is Baba home?”

“He’s in the parlor with your Jidu.”

I was relieved. Baba obviously hadn’t told Mama about my visit to Mutanabi Street.

“Tell me a story,” I said.

As I ate the yogurt dumplings, Mama recited the tale about the man who woke up from a 100-year slumber in a cave to find his wife still alive. Her story felt more like a summary, devoid of action and blood, and the way she told it, without dramatic pauses or gestures, as if she were reading aloud an article from the newspaper—well, I lost interest.

I was preparing myself for bed when there was a knock on my door. Baba stepped in and closed the door behind him.

“About this afternoon,” he said. “Those women are special, and you have to treat them as such.”

“I was trying to impress my friends,” I admitted.

“The women are more important than your friends.”

“I don’t even know the women.”

“Someday you will.”

Before he left my room, I asked him not to mention my visit to Mama.

“It’s our secret,” he said.

\*

During recess, Ali came up with a plan to visit one of the brothels later that night. I was now part of his gang. I stood next to them with my back against the schoolyard wall, my hands dug in my pockets. We observed the yard like ringmasters. My classmates finally noticed me. I pretended not to give a damn about anything, which made them even more envious of me.

“I’ll borrow my brother’s ID,” Ali said.

On Saturday, we sat on the floor of Ali’s room, looking up at him on the bed, desperate to hear about his adventure. Ali lived in the poor and overpopulated suburb of Shiah. His family’s apartment was filled with old furniture and dusty drapes. I wore a wool pea coat over a T-shirt, having abandoned Mama’s sweaters, and my Converse high-tops.

Ali sat back against the headboard with his legs stretched before him, his ankles crossed.

“Tell us,” Rashad said.

Ali looked out the window and then turned to us.

“Did you have sex?” Ziad asked.

“Give me my pack of cigarettes and ashtray on the desk.”

Ziad obliged. Ali lit a cigarette.

“My cock still hurts from all the fucking,” he said, looking dreamily at his smoke rings.

“Wow,” Ziad said.

“Give us the details,” Rashad pleaded.

“I visited this place called Sandra’s Sweethearts. I walked in like I was entering my own house. No one asked for my ID. An elderly woman led me to a waiting room filled with other men and asked me which woman I wanted. I told her it didn’t matter. She said I could have Rokaya. I gave her five liras and lit a cigarette and waited. I later found out that Sandra’s Sweethearts is a second-class brothel, so the whores are cheaper.

“About an hour later, the elderly woman led me down the hall. I entered a red-lit room. A woman stood by the bed. She wore a skimpy black dress.

“‘You’ve got an hour,’ the elderly woman said, and closed the door behind her.

“I took off my clothes and sat naked on the bed. Rokoya unhooked her shoulder straps and raised her arms. The dress slipped down to her ankles.

“She was completely naked.”

Ali put out his cigarette and sighed.

“What does Rokaya look like?” Rashad asked.

“She’s got a cleft chin and nice long legs. I stuck my fingers inside her bush.”

“How did that feel?”

“It was hot and wet and soft all at the same time. She was moaning really hard. She began stroking my cock.

“‘You’re so big,’ she said.

“I have a huge cock, boys.”

“So does my Jidu,” I said. “It’s called the Beast from the Middle East.”

“That’s gross,” Ziad said. “How do you know about the size of your Jidu’s cock?”

“Enough about Omar’s Jidu’s cock,” Ali said. “Listen to this: Rokaya slipped a condom over me. I climbed on top of her and fucked her brains out. The bed kept on squeaking.”

“Then what happened?” Rashad asked.

“I came like a warrior.”

Rashad and Ziad continued to ask Ali questions about his night, while I sat in silence. Ali had no idea about the history of those women or the street, and he talked as if he had lived there his entire life. If anyone deserved to be intimate with a prostitute, it was me.

I got up and told the guys I’d see them later. They didn’t seem to care.

I took a bus downtown, thinking I’d see a film. At least that’s the excuse I gave myself. The closer I neared Mutanabi Street, the more reason I had to see it. I’d have a story to bring back to Ali and the gang.

I passed through Martyrs’ Square and the port and walked up to the Shooting Star. Three women had just left the store when I entered. Baba was sweeping the floor.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. He was wearing another striped scarf.

I didn’t know what to say.

“Hold the door open for me,” he said.

I held the door as he swept the dust into the street. He then washed his hands in the backroom and sat in his chair behind the register.

He repeated his question.

“I was bored.”

“So you come *here*? There are a lot of other things to do.”

A man came in and asked for a pack of Marlboros. Baba reached for the pack from the shelves behind him, recorded the sale in his ledger, and gave the customer his change.

“Your mother doesn’t want you here,” he said.

“But I do.”

“In that case, you can swipe down the glass counter. After that, clean the front door and windows. You’ll find all the things you need in the backroom.”

I sprayed the glass counter with chemicals and swiped it back and forth with an old, scrunched up newspaper.

“Swipe in circles,” Baba said. “And don’t leave any marks. I want it spotless.”

Meanwhile, customers came in and out, including a couple of boys who bought candy and Pepsis.

Once done with the counter, I filled a bucket with water, and following Baba’s instructions, poured in cleaning powder. I pulled the bucket outside.

“Use long strokes, bottom up,” Baba said.

I dunked the squeegee in the bucket and swiped down the glass. The strokes left my arms sore. I poured out the dirty water into the street and returned inside.

“Looks good,” Baba said. “I’ll make you a roast beef sandwich. After that, you can mop the backroom.”

I didn’t understand why Baba was punishing me. I felt like I was in a prison camp.

As I mopped the backroom floor, clearing away a horde of dead cockroaches, I came across a row of striped scarves hanging from hooks on the wall. They were made of

wool, and as I examined them closely, I saw that a purple fig oozing milky nectar was embroidered above the fringe of each one. A mouse scuttled behind a sack of flour.

“Baba, there’s a mouse!”

Baba came into the room and handed me the broom.

“Trap it and kill it.”

“Are you serious?”

“It’s part of the job,” he said.

I took the broom.

“Block its escape,” Baba said.

I placed my foot at the opening of the crack and peered over and saw the rodent nibbling at the corner of the sack. I raised the broom over the mouse and brought it down.

“Don’t move the broom,” Baba said. “Keep it in place until the mouse is dead.”

When I raised the broom, the mouse ran over my foot. Baba stomped on it, crushing it alive.

“It’s just a mouse,” he said. He handed me a dustpan and told me to clean up the mess.

I turned my head from the splattered mouse as I scooped it up.

Later in the afternoon, Baba told me it was time for inventory.

I stood on the ladder, and with a pencil and pad in one hand, took inventory of the canned foods.

“Having fun?” Baba asked me.

I pretended not to hear him. He tapped me on the small of my back.

“I’m busy,” I said.



“Turn around.”

I turned. He handed me a couple of liras.

“For your services,” he said.

Murron gets up from the bed and walks over to me. She holds the tail end of my striped scarf and finds the purple fig oozing nectar.

“Thought so,” she says.

“You have your *Braveheart* poster and I have this scarf.”

Murron looks at the poster. “I miss him. Saladin Jaber. He’s my William Wallace.”

“And you must have been his Murron MacClannough.”

“That was years ago.”

I check the time on my watch. It’s approaching ten p.m..

“I also worked at my father’s place,” Murron says, returning to bed. “At the ‘The Smoke ‘em Both Café,’ the smoke referring to a hookah to puff on and a rifle to shoot flying discs with. A guy would fling a disc in the air and the shooter would take aim. The outdoor café was perched on a hill in the woods above the main square. I helped Mama in the kitchen; we served light snacks like labneh sandwiches and fried halloum cheese. My father waited on the men and cheered them on as they fired their rifles, and my younger brothers kept the coals for the hookahs warm on the fire and collected the shells littered around the shooters. Every now and then a Hezbollah sniper appeared to show off his aim. Only instead of using a rifle he’d fire his Kalashnikov. He rarely ever missed. The younger men idolized him.”

“I’ve also got snipers in my story,” I say. “One was a teenager with a lethal shot.”

“Will you let me finish my story?”

“Please, continue.”

“Whenever the café was empty, my father let me take aim at the discs with our family rifle. My brothers would fling the discs in the direction of the trees and I’d shoot off rounds. The rifle was damn heavy to carry, and at first I kept getting pushed back every time I pulled the trigger. My shoulder got bruised. But with practice I started popping off those discs. My mother hated when I shot rounds because she said no man would be interested in a woman with a gun. My father said no man deserved me.”

Murron reaches for her beer from the floor and finishes it in one gulp. “He was clearly wrong.” I wait for her to continue her story, but she appears done.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I say, breaking the silence. What else is there to say to someone who has lost her entire family? How can words possibly console her?

“You must have spoken to Madame Hafiza.”

“I didn’t mean to pry. I wanted to know more about you.”

“Why? I’m just your pleasure for the night.”

“You’re much more than that.”

She shakes her head. “Go ahead,” she says. “Finish your story.”

“Murron, I’m really sorry.”

“I hate apologies. I’ve heard enough of them. The truth is that this country has fucked everyone over and always will. That bomb today killed innocent civilians and many more will die because the bombs will keep on coming. But you’re not here to listen to my story. You’re here to recite, so recite.”

I light a cigarette and take a sip from my drink. Murrone resumes cracking pumpkin seeds.

“I’ve lost my place,” I say.

“Your father just paid you for working at the Shooting Star.”

On Monday, Ali walked around school with a big grin on his face.

“I went back to Mutanabi Street,” I told him.

“Did you get laid?”

“No.”

“So what’s the point?”

“I saw some women. One winked at me.”

“You know what? I’m getting tired of you.”

“Me too,” Rashad and Ziad said.

“I’ll be quiet,” I said. I stood alongside them, our backs against the schoolyard wall, absorbing all the stares.

“I want to visit a first-class brothel,” Ali said. “I need ten liras, boys.”

I told Ali about the money I had made working for Baba.

“That’s a start,” he said. “Hand it over.”

I returned to the Shooting Star on Saturday morning. This time, I wore a black collared shirt and white slacks, and a pair of loafers with frills. I used Jidu’s wax to grease my hair and sprayed myself with his cologne.

When Mama saw me, she asked if I were attending a birthday party.

“I’m meeting my friends,” I said.

“Why are you dressed up?”

I shrugged.

“You look as handsome as Omar Sharif,” she said, and gave me a mischievous grin.

“What?”

“Are you meeting up with girls?”

“No.”

“Good. Because you’re still too young to be speaking with girls.”

Jidu sniffed me out. “Holy shit,” he said. “You smell exactly like me.”

At the store, Baba told me to use his cologne. “Bien-être is more refreshing,” he said. He combed his fingers through my hair. “You put too much wax. You don’t want to look sleazy. Next time, use my brilliantine. But I like your clothes.”

“I’m here to work.”

He taught me how to use the cheese and meat slicer, and the register.

“I remember this button,” I said, pressing No Sale.

For lunch, Baba made sandwiches and a kettle of tea. He pulled an extra chair from the backroom and set it next to his. We sat eating at the register. For dessert, I had a couple of chocolate bars.

“So you like this work?” Baba asked me.

“Sure.”

“Have you said anything to your mother?”

“No.”

I looked at his striped scarf loose around his neck.

“I only wear these at work,” he said, tugging at the ends of his scarf. “Nisreen made them. I’ll ask her to knit you one.”

Imagine if I wore one home. What would Mama say? How would she feel? Didn’t Baba understand this?

During a lull in the afternoon, Baba and I played backgammon. I was a lousy player, and was losing easily. The front door opened. I looked up and couldn’t believe my eyes. An enormous man stood at the entrance, dressed in a wool trench coat and snake leather boots, a striped scarf around his neck. He had broad shoulders and a belly, and long, black hair parted in the middle and combed down to his waist. His nose was crooked.

“Crazy Giant!” Baba said. “Meet my son, Omar.”

He looked down at me, offering his paw of a hand.

“Crazy Giant is a champion boxer,” Baba told me. “He’d knock out his opponents with one punch to the jaw. They were all frightened to death of him.”

Crazy Giant blushed. “I haven’t fought in years. And they were underground fights, nothing professional. I also lost my final match.”

“Crazy Giant is the bartender at Madame Bandar’s,” Baba explained.

“And the enforcer.”

“What can I get you?” Baba asked him.

“The girls want to make pasta.”

I retrieved two boxes of pasta and a jar of tomato sauce.

“I’ll need more than that,” Crazy Giant said. “I eat a lot.”

I rang him up and bagged the groceries.

“Thanks, Chief,” he said. “Hey, do you like Indians?”

I was confused.

“Native Americans?” Crazy Giant said.

“I don’t know much about them.”

“You’re looking at one. I used to be called Tarek Kobeissi, but I changed my name to sound more like Crazy Horse, a famous Native American chief.”

As he was walking out the door, Baba told him he’d pay Bandar a visit later in the day.

“I want to introduce Omar to her and the girls,” he said.

I looked at Baba with fear. I preferred to remain in the store, where I could interact with the women at a safe distance. Baba took out a miswak from his breast pocket and began cleaning his teeth. A young man came in and asked for a kilo of halloum cheese and sijouk. I weighed the cheese and sausages on the scale, wrapped them, and gave Baba the price.

With each prostitute who came into the store later that afternoon, all bundled up in long coats and scarves, I asked Baba for her story.

“She ran away from Baghdad when she was nineteen,” he said of one prostitute.

“She left her husband, whom she couldn’t stand. He beat her every night,” he said of another.

“She dropped out of school and had nowhere else to go.”

“That one doesn’t talk much. But I hear she used to help her brother herd goats in the hills of Kurdistan.”

“That one tried other work—she was a receptionist at a hotel—but realized she could make more money as a prostitute.”

“Bandar’s girls are different,” Baba said. “They’re singers, dancers, musicians, and actors. The stage is their true home.”

I told Baba I was going home.

“Not so quick,” he said. He pulled our coats from the backroom and told me to put mine on. “We have to pay a visit to some special ladies.”

He ushered me out the front door and locked it behind him.

“I have a stomachache,” I said.

Baba wasn’t fooled. “They’re harmless.”

I followed Baba down the street, feeling more anxious the closer we approached Bandar’s. An old, white-haired man answered the front door. His sunburned face was creased with wrinkles and speckled with liver spots. He wore a wool cardigan over a collared shirt and faded slacks, and leather shoes in need of a polish.

“Hassan, meet my son Omar,” Baba said.

Hassan was the doorman. He had grown up on the streets, Baba later said. He was good with his hands and built sets for Bandar’s plays. In fact, he was most at peace when building different worlds on stage.

Hassan turned on the light, and suddenly, the room turned ruby red. I stepped inside, crossing a threshold I’d never tire of. I walked around the windowless room, inhaling that musty smell of cigarettes and beer. I looked up at the red velvet curtains with gold fringe, and pressed my palms against the worn-down stage, the wood creaking. The thrill of past performances and the promise of future ones were in every creak. Six

framed portraits were hung on the wall. On the bottom slat of each frame was a bronze plaque with an engraved name: Grace, Chantal, Scheherazade, Jasmine, Rose, and Youla.

“Those aren’t their real names,” Baba said.

“Hello, Halloumi.”

We turned around. An imposing woman in a long, loose-fitting black dress stood before us.

“Bandar,” Baba said, and kissed her thrice. “This is my son.”

She shook my hand and kissed me as my mother did: firm, dry pecks on either cheek, only with Bandar’s kisses, I felt the prickle of her whiskers. She had a broad face with deep eye-sockets and silver-black hair pulled back into a chignon. A mole with wiry hairs hung from the edge of her chin. When she shook my hand, she squeezed it hard. A rosary made of black onyx was coiled around her other hand.

“Halloumi tells me you like films,” she said, threading the beads of her rosary—tick, tick, tick. I would never see her without it.

Bandar was once an actress in Cairo, I remembered, starring in films in which she played the role of the insufferable and domineering mother-in-law.

“I’d like to be a filmmaker,” I said, shyly.

“There isn’t a dirtier industry. I suggest you try something else.”

I didn’t dare protest, and followed her and Baba into the parlor, which was illuminated by dusty light coming in through long, vertical windows. Women sprang from the couches and crowded around me, fighting each other to be the first to kiss me and pinch my cheeks. I was pulled and turned in a whirlwind of black hair and pursed lips, in flashes of open wool sweaters and nightgowns, amid laughter and giggling. Was



this how they attacked their clients? Was I about to lose my virginity? I was too nervous to speak, and looked for Baba above the heads of the women. He was speaking to Bandar.

“He’s still got those curls!” one of Bandar’s girls said.

“And Halloumi’s big nose.”

“But he’s got sad eyes.”

“You’re too skinny!”

“Skinny but cute.”

“How’s school?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Is Halloumi working you too hard?”

I was embarrassed by all the attention and remained quiet. Nisreen, who I recognized, ran her fingers through my curls, messing my hairdo. She lowered my head and inhaled the waxy scent of my hair. I wondered if the other women might do something equally inexplicable to me.

I rose on my tiptoes for Crazy Giant to reach my cheeks and kiss me—as affectionate as he was, his smacking kisses left my skin a little raw. Finally, I sat down next to Baba on the couch, safe from any woman’s reach. The coffee table was covered in French fashion magazines, nail polish, cotton balls stained red, nail clippers, elastic hair bands, a pack of Marlboros and Zippo lighter, and an ashtray filled with crumbled butts. Pantyhose lay on the blue Persian carpet, which Baba told me was a fake. A poster of the Marlboro Man hung on the wall, his chiseled face cast in the shade of his cowboy hat, a

burning cigarette dangling from his lips. A big, wooden cross was nailed to the opposite wall.

Five of Bandar's girls were present, including Nisreen. Each one took their turn introducing themselves. Zeina looked like a twelve-year-old boy. She had short, dark hair brushed to the side, hazel-colored eyes, and a hipless body with a whisper for breasts. She was the only one wearing bellbottom jeans. I was comforted to see that she wore black Converse high-tops. At least we had that in common. Sunlight sparkled off the silver cross hanging over her sweater.

Farah was squat and round, her modest white nightgown stretched over a semi-circle of droopy breasts and a belly. She had a cute, chubby face. When she looked at me, I quickly turned my head.

Sitting next to Farah was Laila, who was tall and thin. The collar of her long-sleeve nightgown was buttoned. Concealed as she was in her nightgown, she appeared embarrassed of her body, which I found strange considering her profession. She had buckteeth, and bit down on her lower lip like an adolescent. A dog-eared book lay at her side.

Hind sat next to Nisreen on the couch by the gas heater. When I entered the room, she had stood up to greet me, but remained silent as the rest of the women barraged me with questions. Her black eyes darted all over the place, as if she was afraid of someone startling her. Her intensely dark features and dark skin gave the impression that she was a daughter of the desert, though she had never stepped foot on such harsh sands.

“Where's Diala?” Bandar asked Laila.

“Napping.”

“Didn’t you tell your sister Halloumi and his son were coming over?”

“Don’t bother to wake her,” Baba said. “She must be tired from her belly dancing.”

One more woman to fear, I thought.

“I’d rather she remain asleep,” Zeina, the boyish-looking one, said.

“I second that,” Farah said, her double chin quivering. “Diala’s a terror after naps.”

“Stop exaggerating,” Laila said.

“Laila’s Diala’s older sister,” Baba told me.

Bandar turned her attention to Farah. “Bring Omar and Halloumi some of the chocolate mousse you made.”

“Come and help me,” Farah told Zeina.

“You don’t need my help,” Zeina said, and looked at me. Her gaze burned right through me.

“You can make the tea,” Farah said.

Zeina rolled her eyes and followed Farah out of the room. A huge black spider climbed up to the wooden cross on the far wall. I gasped.

“Oh, we’ve seen worse,” Bandar said.

Crazy Giant stood up and plucked the spider from the wall, pinching one of its legs between his fingers, and went into the kitchen. There was a scream.

“You’re not funny, Crazy Giant!” Farah yelled.

Crazy Giant returned, grinning. “Don’t worry, Chief,” he told me. “Indians never kill spiders. I threw it over the wall in the garden.”

I wondered about what other kinds of insects and rodents lay beneath our couch. I stretched out my legs. Baba lit a cigarette and sat back, crossing his legs.

“What’s your favorite subject at school?” Laila asked me. Was this her way of seducing me?

“I don’t really have one,” I said.

“Omar gets excellent grades,” Baba said.

“But he wants to be a filmmaker,” Bandar said. “You know what I think about that.”

“When I was at school at the refugee camp, my favorite subject was Biology,” Laila said. “I was a very good student.”

“She was top of her class,” Nisreen said. She was knitting a scarf, a ball of purple yarn in her lap. The clicking of her needles relaxed me. I pictured Mama knitting at this very moment, sitting in the parlor while Jidu smoked his hookah in his leather armchair. I envisioned Mama and Nisreen sitting together on the same couch, their needles clicking, sharing each other’s yarn.

“At my school,” Laila said, “they awarded a novel to the top student in every grade at the end of the year. I have quite a few novels, though of course I’ve bought hundreds since then.” She picked up her book. “Ever read Naguib Mahfouz?” she asked me. I shook my head. “You should,” she said. “He’s not as didactic or preachy as other Arab writers. He’s more of a storyteller.”

I found Laila’s buckteeth increasingly charming.

“I don’t know what didactic means,” Crazy Giant said. “But that’s because I was horrible at school.”

“I was decent,” Nisreen said.

We all turned to Hind, the quiet one, to see if she’d respond. “I never finished school,” she said. “I like reading magazines.”

“You’re very smart,” Nisreen said, stroking Hind’s face. “Much smarter than me.”

Farah came in with the chocolate mousse, followed by Zeina with the tea. Nisreen helped with the serving. With my first bite of the mousse, which was extra chocolaty and topped with whipped cream, I began to feel that I was paying a social visit. But maybe this was all a ploy. Surely Baba would protect me if I needed his help. And yet, I had never seen him look so calm, not even at home. Was Bandar’s his true home? Because the mess on the coffee table and the Marlboro poster and the cross on the wall and the fake Persian carpet, and the dusty light filtering through the windows and the crawling insects, all seemed pleasantly familiar to him.

“How was the performance last night?” Baba asked Nisreen, resting his cigarette against the ashtray to sip his tea.

“The usual,” Nisreen said.

“She got Charbel for the first hour,” Zeina said.

“Sorry about that,” Baba said.

“It’s my job,” Nisreen said, and resumed her knitting.

“Let me tell you about Charbel,” Zeina told me. “He’s a nice guy, but as furry and big as a bear. He sheds hair when he’s having sex.”

“He prays after sex,” Farah said. “He gets down on his knees and prays to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. I once joined him in prayer, only I recited from the Qur’an.”

“He’s married with kids,” Laila said.

“Most of them are married,” Zeina said.

They wanted to have sex with me. Why else would they bring up the subject? Where would we do it? Upstairs in their rooms, I thought, enclosed in the pink curtains of their beds. Instead of humping Soula the Seal, I’d hump real flesh. I got a boner.

“Was it busy last night?” Baba asked.

“Not like old times,” Nisreen said.

I shifted in my seat, trying to hide my boner, when we heard someone coming down the stairs.

“Diala’s awake,” Laila said.

“God help us!” Farah said.

When she entered, the first thing I noticed was her frizzy, black hair that burst from her scalp like the fronds of a palm tree. Her hair had a life of its own, its countless ringlets springy to the touch. She was wearing an open grey sweater over a black nightgown that was cut above her knees, revealing a pair of muscular legs. She was short and curvaceous, with big eyes and juicy lips. A pair of keys hung from her necklace, settling above the crack of her breasts.

She kissed Baba hello and gave me her hand. I shook it.

“You’re supposed to kiss it, mon chérie!” she said, her voice raspy. “Un petit bisou.”

I had always associated the French speakers of Beirut with the upper class. By speaking French, these cosmopolitans seemed more European and cultivated, which made me embarrassed of my own poor French that I had learned at school, and acutely

aware of my working-class background. But Diala speaking French added to her mystique, and as I would soon discover, her French came in and out like faulty electricity, lighting up her Arabic.

As my lips pressed against her skin, I tasted cinnamon and a faint trace of Bengay. A white silver bracelet slipped down the edge of her palm. I could have stood there kissing her hand for an eternity.

She sat down next to Laila and handed her a small, tin canister. She reached for the pack of Marlboros and lit up, and blowing out smoke, slipped out of her slippers and propped her feet on her sister's lap. Her toenails were polished a deep red. Laila twisted off the lid of the canister, releasing a pungent odor of Bengay, and scooped up the waxy ointment with her fingers and began rubbing it over the soles of Diala's feet and ankles.

"Mon dieu, my knees are killing me!" Diala said.

"Don't be so dramatic," Zeina said. "You've been belly dancing for years."

My muse was a belly dancer. How I wished to see her on stage!

"That doesn't make my joints hurt less," Diala told Zeina. "And you didn't have eight clients last night, now did you? How many did you get? Two? Three?"

"Two," Zeina said, dejected.

"I don't blame the men."

"Be nice, Diala," Laila said, rubbing the Bengay over Diala's knees. Would Laila rub between her sister's legs? "And don't blow smoke into my face."

"The only reason Zeina gets clients is because they fantasize about screwing a child," Diala said.

“Go to hell!” Zeina said. “It doesn’t matter how many clients I get. Bandar hired me to sing and play the lute.” She turned to me, her face red. “I write my own songs.”

“If you don’t have anything nice to say,” Bandar told Diala, “keep your mouth shut.”

“Je suis très fatigued, Bandar. You work me too damn hard—I kill my body belly dancing and then I have to fuck.”

I bristled at the sound of a woman cursing. I turned to Baba, who had an amusing smile on his face. This was his world: women cursing, women fucking. My penis ached it was so hard. I was ready to go upstairs with Diala.

“You work as much as everyone else here,” Bandar said.

Diala took a drag on her cigarette. “Is there any chocolate mousse left?”

“It’s done,” Farah said.

“You can have the rest of mine,” I said, reddening.

“Merci, mon chéri, but I want you to enjoy that mousse for yourself.”

“I don’t mind giving it to you, Auntie.”

“Auntie?! I’m not *that* old. I’m only twenty-four.”

“You can call us by our first names,” Laila said.

“Our *real* names,” Zeina added.

“The men call me Madame,” Bandar said. “But you’re not a client. So call me Bandar.”

“Fucking clients,” Diala said. “I got stuck with Ibrahim’s garlic breath for the last hour. I keep telling him to lay off the garlic, but he says he can’t eat chicken without it.”



“At least he comes quickly,” Laila said. “I was lucky to have Monsieur Elias. He’s a real gentleman.”

“He speaks to me in French,” Zeina said, “but I never understand him. All I say is, ‘Bonjour, Monsieur,’ and ‘Merci, Monsieur.’”

“Monsieur Elias doesn’t like me because I’m Muslim,” Farah said. “That’s the problem with the Christians here—they all claim to be Phoenician. They’re Arab, damn it.”

“Laila and I are Muslim, and he just *loves* us,” Diala said. “Monsieur Elias says my French is impeccable. He thinks I can get by in Paris.”

“Monsieur Elias knows you’re not a believer,” Farah said. “He’s scared of pious Muslims like me.”

“What’s up your ass? A cock?”

“Diala, watch your mouth,” Laila said.

“She has a filthy tongue,” Farah told me.

I craved Diala’s tongue. Wanted it in my mouth with all its filth.

“At least I know how to use my tongue,” Diala said. “Men still complain about you biting them. You’re supposed to suck them!”

“May God punish you,” Farah said. “The men love me. Bahaa had me for two hours last night.”

“I once stuck my whole arm up his ass,” Diala said. “He cried for more, but shit, I was about to tickle his intestines.”

Jidu, I remembered, once enjoyed blowjobs from Ward the dwarf, who stuck her middle finger up his ass as she sucked him. Apparently the asshole was a channel worth exploring, running both ways.

“Bahaa asked me to shave his pubic hair and sprinkle it over his body,” Farah said. “I accidentally cut him with the razor.”

“Serves that sick bastard right.”

“Well,” Baba said, rising from his seat, “I have to return to the store.”

I didn’t want to leave so soon. For one, I was about to have sex. And two, I was beginning to acquire the language of this strange house, a language that would also allow me to better understand my father. Baba was right: These were special ladies, especially Diala, who was the fiercest woman I’d ever met. Before I left the store that day, I asked Baba about the keys Diala wore around her neck.

“Those are the keys to her family home in Jerusalem,” he said. “The Israelis kicked her family out in ’48; they now live in the Shatila refugee camp. Diala hopes to use those keys again. Until then, she refuses to take them off.”

“Did she learn French in the camp?”

“Bandar taught her the basics. Diala watches a lot of French films and reads French magazines.” Baba stroked his mustache. “There’s something else that I’d like to say,” he said, looking at me as if he were about to confess a terrible sin. “I’ve been on this street for years, and I still can’t say that I completely understand what Bandar’s girls, or any girl on this street, suffer every night; what they put their bodies and souls through. All I can do is listen to them and respect their pain.”

And yet somehow, Baba contributed to their pain.

“Why did Nisreen sniff my hair?” I asked.

“You reminded her of someone.”

“Who?”

“I’ll tell you some other day.”

I went to work at the Shooting Star as often as I could on Saturdays, dressed in my finest clothes. I applied Baba’s brilliantine to my hair and splashed myself with Bien-être. Mama became suspicious.

“Are you trying to be like your father?”

I put on a startled look. “God no,” I said.

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In January, the winter rains poured down from grey skies and cleansed the concrete buildings and the sparse trees and the parked cars. Rainwater coursed through the streets on its rush to the sea, whisking fallen leaves and debris and splashing pedestrians with its filth. Murky puddles formed at street corners and curbs. But the air was fresh. Lampposts glittered. Electric lines shimmered.

One rainy Saturday, I met up with Ali and the gang at the Rivoli. We sat in the back of the theatre. *Easy Rider* was playing.

“How much money have you all saved?” Ali asked.

“I’ve got three liras,” Rashad said.

“I’ve got a couple,” Ziad said.

“And you?” Ali asked me.

I had worked hard for my money. I didn’t want to give it all away so that Ali could sleep with another prostitute and boast about it while I remained a helpless virgin.

“I’ve got a few coins,” I said.

“That won’t do. You’re supposed to be saving.”

“We should drop him,” Ziad said.

I pulled out three liras from my wallet.

“When do you plan to go?” Ziad asked Ali.

“Tonight.”

As expected, Ali was all grins on Monday morning.

“She had a hairy-ass pussy,” he told us. “Dove my face into that mess and got hair stuck in my teeth.”

But what did a pussy look like?

That night, I visited Jidu’s room as he was preparing for bed.

“Did you come to tuck me in?” he asked.

I sat on his bed. He combed back his hair and slipped the nylons over his head.

“Why do you look so damn shy?” he said.

“Some guys at school were talking about a woman’s—a woman’s private part.”

“A woman’s vagina? Her pussy? Her cunt? Her bush? Her slit? Her—her oasis? Her wet lips? Her well? Her jellyfish?”

“Yes.”

“There’s no harm in saying it. Go ahead, say it aloud.”

“Jellyfish,” I whispered.

“So what’s your question?”

“What does it look like?”

“Shit.” He sat up in bed. “Go get me a pad and pencil.”

I retrieved the items from my room and handed them over. He flipped to a clean page and drew a big V on the paper, accompanied by squiggly lines for hair.

“That’s it,” he said. “Home to the Beast from the Middle East.”

As I was leaving the room, Jidu asked me where I’d been these past Saturdays.

I hesitated for a moment. “I’ve been helping Baba at the store.”

“You’re following in our footsteps.”

“Does Mama suspect anything?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

That Saturday afternoon, a big black woman in an orange turban and high heels entered the Shooting Star. She was sparkling in silver: triple hoop earrings, a majestic necklace studded with topaz over her plaid shawl, a dozen bangle bracelets on either wrist, and rings on all her fingers. It seemed as if she was wearing all her jewelry in fear someone would steal it from her bedroom. As she approached the register, her earrings and bangles tinkled like silvery wind chimes. Her lips were plump and shiny with gloss. It was rare to see black women in Beirut. The few blacks in the city were domestic workers from Sudan.

“Who’s the kid?” she asked Baba, picking out a box of Turkish Delights from the shelf.

“Omar, my son.”

She looked at me. “I’m Ayesha, Black Goddess of Mutanabi Street. I’m the only black on this street.”

“I see a beautiful woman,” Baba said.

“That’s because you’re not a racist, Halloumi. But the rest of your country is. It’s not easy living here when everyone calls me abdi. I’m not a slave.”

“You’re Mother of the Believers, as your namesake suggests.”

Ayesha smiled, revealing a row of gummy teeth. She picked out more groceries and placed them on the counter, her bangles sliding up and down her forearms. Baba rang up the items and I bagged.

“I can’t carry these on my own,” she said. “I’m tired. I had a long night.”

“Omar will help you out.”

I wasn’t sure if Baba understood the implication of his offer. I’d have to carry the bags inside her home.

“Go on,” Baba urged me.

I carried the bags and followed Ayesha out the door.

“My African Queen!” Elvis cried from his stall.

“Elvis, my love!”

We headed to the coffee stall. As soon as we placed the bags on the pavement, Elvis embraced Ayesha, rising on his tiptoes and burying his face in her breasts. She kissed his forehead. He stepped back on top his footstool and scooped coffee grounds from a can into a Turkish coffee pot, added some water and three spoons of sugar, and set it on the stove, bringing the coffee thrice to a boil, the brownish froth ballooning and threatening to spill. He poured the steaming, viscous liquid into two plastic cups. I wasn’t a coffee drinker, but the syrupy sweetness and taste of cardamom was delicious.

“I’ll visit you later tonight, ya habibti,” Elvis told Ayesha. “Wear the silk gown I bought you.”

“Elvis always brings me gifts,” Ayesha told me, glowing.

“I bought her all her silver,” Elvis said.

Ayesha opened the box of Turkish Delights and popped a powdery cube into his mouth.

“Open up,” she told me, and popped one into my mouth. She popped two into her own. Powdered sugar fell from her lips.

Ayesha licked her fingers and told me to follow her. We picked up the bags and continued down the street. She swayed her ass as she walked, her heels clicking on the asphalt.

“I work at Aunt Roula’s,” she said. “Roula’s been dead for years, but the girls say you can see her ghost. Some clients have seen her. But I don’t believe it. If you ask me, I think it’s bad for business to talk about her ghost. Who wants to be spooked when they’re having sex? You know what I mean?”

“Sure.” What else was I going to say?

“Is that your new boyfriend, ya abdi?” a prostitute said from the balcony of English Lucy, cupping a mug. She wore a pink frock coat. Her pearly-white hair was wild and wooly. She didn’t look English to me.

“It’s none of your business, you old hag,” Ayesha said.

“Are you Halloumi’s son, handsome?” the prostitute asked me.

I stopped, embarrassed. “Yes,” I said, barely audible. How could she still be prostituting at her age?

“Speak up, kid. I still need to wax my ears.”

“Yes,” I repeated, louder.

“When you turn eighteen, come upstairs to my room. Just ask for Elizabeth the Third. My snatch is full of honey.”

Years later, I would pay an unexpected visit to Elizabeth, and she’d give me something that I’d never forget. But at that moment, all I wanted was to give Ayesha the grocery bags and return to the store. She told me to ignore the catcalls, which made my cheeks burn. I felt as if I were naked, my every limb up for inspection. More women emerged on their balconies, complimenting me on my good looks as if I were Omar Sharif. On the top balcony of Marwa’s Muse, an elderly woman stood alone in a black turban and long-sleeve dress. She was ghastly pale.

“Don’t look at her,” Ayesha warned. “She’s the matron, and isn’t a kind person. Neither are her girls.”

A bag slipped from my fingers.

“Sorry!” I said.

“Calm down, Omar,” Ayesha said, helping me pick up the groceries.

“Don’t be so nervous, my son,” the elderly woman called down. “Your father wasn’t nervous when he had fun with my girls.”

“Ignore her,” Ayesha said.

I looked down at the ground and followed the sound of Ayesha’s high heels to her front door and into the kitchen. A bowl of fruits lay on a round table. I was about to leave when Ayesha said she’d make hot chocolate. She had a sweet tooth as bad as mine.

I sat down at the table. I didn’t want to leave so soon—the women on the balconies would be waiting for me like vultures.

Ayesha heated milk in a pot and melted a bar of chocolate on a saucepan.



“They’re still sleeping,” she said, meaning the girls in the house. I surveyed the kitchen and looked up at the ceiling. There was no ghost in sight.

Ayesha poured the melted chocolate into two mugs and added the milk. She sat across from me.

“Do you think I’m attractive?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Even though I’m black? Be honest.”

“Yes. I like your lips.”

She flashed her gummy teeth. “You’re sweet like your father. And Elvis.”

“Elvis is in love with you.”

“Elvis is a little crazy. I mean, just look at the size of his pompadour. He’s proposed to me over a dozen times, but I keep telling him we have no future together. Not because of my profession. Because of my skin. His family would never accept me. But mine would take him in.” Her family was back home in Khartoum, she said, a city still stuck in the last century. She had come to Beirut after her father died to help support the family. “When I write letters home,” she said, “I tell my mother I’m doing well, that I’m working as a housemaid for a cabinet minister’s wife and that on my days off I visit the souks downtown and walk along the Corniche. She thinks I’m very happy.”

“So you’re not happy?”

She sipped her hot chocolate. Her eyes widened. “Watch out! Aunt Roula’s ghost is behind you!”

I leapt from my chair, turning around to face the wall. There was nothing.

Ayesha roared with laughter. “I’m sorry, habibi. I was just having some fun. I do that all the time with the girls.”

On my way out, Ayesha told me to walk the street as if I owned it. “That way the girls will leave you alone.”

I ran back to the store as fast as I could, not once looking up.

One afternoon at the Shooting Star, Baba and I sat behind the register, looking down the aisle at the front door with nothing to do. It was grey and rainy outside. I was feeling sad for no particular reason—we both were, in fact—which I credited to the gloomy weather.

“My mother died on a rainy winter day,” Baba said. “Believe it or not, I was a lot like you when I was younger. I was a Mama’s boy.”

“Were you close to Jidu?” I asked.

“I was terrified of him. He’s now mellowed. But at the time he had a bad temper. Mother and I were careful not to disturb him, but anything minor could spark his rage. If one of us accidentally broke a plate on the floor or failed to hear his request for a cup of tea, or didn’t share his opinion on a given matter, he went berserk. His face would redden and he’d curl his hands into fists and yell.”

It was their fear of Jidu that brought Baba and Teta even closer together. It was true that Teta had been a taboo in her village, a woman of strong character. But her move to Beirut changed her. She wasn’t confident in the city. Jidu’s temper put out her flame and turned her into an obsequious wife.

Teta nurtured Baba into a softer man. If he ever got ill-tempered and yelled at her, she was quick to reprimand him.

“Don’t be like your father,” she warned. “Or else you’ll make your wife miserable.”

“I’ll be a great husband,” he assured her, and kissed her cheek, imprinting his lips over her shooting star of moles.

Jidu had been sleeping with the Mutanabi women, there was no question about that, because he gave Teta a sexually transmitted disease. One night, Jidu’s loud voice woke Baba from his sleep. He tiptoed to their bedroom door and overheard their conversation.

“You’ve given me something bad between my legs,” Teta said, her voice trembling. “I’m afraid this might be a disease.”

“You look well to me.”

“Where’ve you been all these nights?”

“It’s none of your damn business.”

Teta never questioned him again about his nighttime outings. Baba wasn’t sure if she ever sought treatment for her disease. If she had, she probably had gone to a nondescript clinic and given them a false name in the hope of preserving her honor. She didn’t consider leaving Jidu because divorce wasn’t an option. A divorced woman was a disgraced woman.

In the winter of 1939, Teta fell ill with tuberculosis. Jidu took her to the hospital and with Baba by his side, the two of them stayed up day and night by her bed. The doctor was unable to save her.

Baba was fifteen and had lost the most important person in his life. He barely ate or spoke and spent his days at home lying in bed, skipping school.

Jidu went on with his life as if nothing had happened. He worked his long hours and returned home. One evening, he stormed into Baba's room and told him to stop feeling sorry for himself. Baba turned in bed, giving his back to Jidu.

It was in this silence that Jidu came up with a plan that would forever change Baba, and ultimately, forever change me.

"Get up," he said. "I'm taking you somewhere special. But you first need a bath. You smell like my underwear in summer."

"That's the second time you've used that silly underwear joke," Murrone says, giggling. Suddenly, she looks a lot younger. I wish I could always make her laugh.

"Jokes get funnier the more you use them," I explain.

Baba was forced to wear a button-down shirt and pants. Jidu sprayed him with cologne.

They hopped on a trolley and stepped off in downtown. They passed the port and turned onto Mutanabi Street. The street was alive and streaming with men. Colorful light spilled from the billboards onto the pavement below. Powdered women stood on their balconies, whistling like demented birds.

"Hey, gorgeous," one cried out to Baba. "You look hot in those clothes. Come upstairs and let me undress you."

In a shadowed alley off the street men too poor to pay for sex gathered at the Wall of Masturbation. They masturbated and came against the wall as they listened to the prostitutes moaning above from their steamy rooms.

“I want to go home,” Baba said.

“Quiet now,” Jidu said.

As they walked down the street, the women called out Jidu’s name.

“Hi, girls,” he said. “I’ve brought my son.”

They peered down from their balconies.

“He’s got your nose.”

“Let me have his cherry.”

They arrived at Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love. Hassan, the doorman, sat in a chair on the pavement.

“You missed the show, Mahmoud,” he said.

“I’ve come on an urgent matter.”

Hassan opened the door and let in father and son.

A rush of heat hit Baba’s face. In the smoky, red-lit room men stood along the walls and by the bar or sat in the wooden chairs facing the stage. Baba’s eyes watered from all the smoke. He followed Jidu to the side of the bar where a large woman in a black dress stood with a clipboard pressed against her bosom, a rosary coiled around her hand. It was Bandar.

Jidu whispered a few words to her. Bandar said to wait.

Jidu and Baba sat at the bar. Jidu ordered two Almazas and handed a bottle to Baba.

“I don’t like beer.”

“Drink!”

Baba took a sip and squinted in disgust.

“Watch me.” Jidu tipped back the bottle and downed the beer in one sip.

Baba tipped back his bottle and finished half its contents.

“Finish it!” Jidu said.

On the second round, Baba gulped it down in one sip.

“Disgusting!” he said, a warm sensation creeping through his blood.

On the third round, he hardly tasted the alcohol. “I’m a man,” he cried, “A man.”

“That’s the spirit.”

An hour later, Baba stumbled out of the room and followed Bandar up a set of creaky wooden stairs to the second floor. Velvet curtains were strung on either side of the hallway, leading into rooms from which moans and cries and grunts, of men and women, comprised a soundtrack Baba had never heard before.

They stopped at the end of the hallway, at the last room on the left.

“You’ve got an hour,” Bandar said.

Baba stepped through the curtains and into a warm, red-lit room fragrant with gardenia. In the center lay a four-poster bed with pink curtains and fluffy pillows. At the side of the bed was a walnut dresser; half a dozen bottles of perfume and oil were lined against the mirror. Among these beauty products was a small, cedar wood box.

Nisreen, also known as Grace, stood by the French doors leading out onto the balcony. She wore a red chemise. Her eyes were lined with kohl and her cheeks

powdered red. Her breasts were glistening. She approached Baba and held his face in her hands. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she said, her breath minty.

Baba sobered. She held his moist hand and led him to the bed. They parted the curtains and sat on the edge.

"You're very handsome," she said.

Baba focused on his shoes.

"I've lost someone, too," she said.

"Your mother?"

"No. But someone just as important."

She held Baba's chin and turned his face toward her. The more he looked at her, the more he believed she resembled his mother.

"May I touch your hair?" he asked.

She folded her hair over one side. Baba scooped it up with one hand and combed the other through her raven locks, as if he were petting a cat. He lost himself in the rhythm of these movements. Suddenly, he dug his face in her hair and wept. She stretched him flat against the bed and lay next to him. He nuzzled his face against her bosom and fell asleep.

Baba paused his story to light a cigarette. I couldn't imagine him stroking anyone's hair except for Mama's. But I had never seen him stroking her hair.

On their way home from Bandar's, he continued, Jidu asked him if he'd enjoyed himself.

"Can we come back?" Baba asked.

"As much as you'd like."

The next night, Baba sat on the edge of the bed with Nisreen's hair in his hands.

"Did you know I come from the mountains?" she asked.

He shook his head. She led him onto the balcony, in the red light of the billboard.

Birdcages hung from the ceiling, filled with parakeets.

"I wake up in the morning to the sound of their chirping," Nisreen said. "It's a lovely sound that reminds me of my village, Ozlah. Back then, I'd wake up every morning to the sound of the birds in the pine trees. They sang right outside my window."

"Mama comes—came from the mountains."

"You were right the first time: Your Mama *comes* from the mountains."

"Mama's dead."

"There's no such thing as the dead. Did you forget your Druze beliefs? We don't die. We reincarnate. Your mother is now a baby. One day she'll find you, and she'll remember you."

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"I'm waiting for Milhem."

"Who is he?"

"Our time is almost up."

Baba paused again to look at me. "I'll tell you this part of the story only once."

"I'm listening."

Over the next several nights, Baba said, he listened to Nisreen's tale of illicit love. Milhem Salha lived in the same village as Nisreen, which rested on a mountaintop east of Beirut. One autumn afternoon at school, Nisreen was sitting alone on a bench during



recess. She had a bad cough, and wouldn't stop sneezing. She was blowing her nose when a boy approached her with a lemon in his hand.

“This is for you,” Milhem said. “Its juice is good for sore throats.”

He smiled, and then instinctively cupped his mouth. He had a gap between his front teeth. Boys teased him that they could ride a donkey through his gap.

He was the smallest boy in class. He had curly black hair, thick eyebrows, and skin a shade of chestnut brown. His eyes, round with long lashes, were emerald green. He wasn't your typical looking village boy, and many suspected he had gypsy blood. He came from a poor family.

His father, a milkman, was a drunk who spent his free time gambling. He stumbled in the night along the main road, awakening people with improvised songs about winged animals and three-eyed babies and clairvoyant spinsters. Milhem once found him in the morning passed out in the middle of the road, his limbs splayed, appearing as if he had fallen from the sky.

Milhem accompanied his father on his milk rounds on the weekends. They rode in a mule-drawn cart filled with leather sacks of milk, and from door to door, poured the milk into jugs. Milhem sang in his high-pitched voice to pass the time. In the words of Father Malouf, the village priest, his voice was a gift from God, even if he was a drunkard's son. On early Saturday or Sunday mornings, Nisreen awakened to Milhem's voice. She opened her window to hear him better. He was too frightened to wave at her: Nisreen's father would have wrung his neck.

“Later that day,” Nisreen told Baba, “I squeezed the lemon and drank its juice. I still had a cold and sore throat the next morning, but I told Milhem that his lemon had done wonders. He brought me a lemon from his garden every day for the next week.”

From that point on, Nisreen and Milhem spent their time together during morning and afternoon recess. Their friendship was looked down upon by the village, especially by Nisreen’s parents. Her father twisted her ear and said: “Do you want to shame your family? If people see you and him walking around Ozlah together, they’ll say you’re a whore and you won’t ever be able to get married. I’ll kill that boy if I ever see him talking to you. I’ll kill him with my bare hands.”

Days later, Nisreen fell ill. Her skin burned. She threw up everything she consumed. Despite the damp towels her mother covered her in, her temperature soared. She sweated through her sheets. Her heartbeat was irregular. None of the doctor’s medication worked on her.

During the night she mumbled incoherent words in her sleep. Her mother kept vigil at her bed, muttering her prayers in a daze of insomnia. Her father cracked his knuckles and paced the room.

At dawn there was a knock at the front door. Nisreen’s father was shocked to find Milhem standing outside. The boy had been warned.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Amou, but I wanted to give you this,” Milhem said, handing him a cloth purse of medicinal herbs. “My mother says it will cure Nisreen.”

Nisreen ate the herbs. The next morning, she was able to hold down her food, and the day after that, her fever dropped. On the third day she awoke to the angelic voice of a singer. She flung her blanket aside and stumbled to the window and opened it wide.

“I survived!” she said.

Nisreen’s astonishing recovery made her father think twice about Milhem. There was no doubt that Milhem had saved his daughter’s life. For this, he’d forever be indebted to him. He allowed them to resume their friendship, and explained to the village that he and his family were caring for Milhem as recompense for the slovenly boy’s one good deed.

Nisreen’s father, however, made it perfectly clear to Milhem that if he wanted to see Nisreen, it would be in his house and under strict supervision.

The years passed. Nisreen blossomed into a beautiful woman. Bachelors visited her house, accompanied by their overzealous mothers. So far, none of the bachelors had impressed Nisreen’s parents. Nisreen found them all repulsive.

“You’ll always have suitors,” Milhem told her. They were playing backgammon in the parlor. Milhem had grown few inches—he was shorter than Nisreen—and still looked like a boy. He had no facial hair, and his chest was as hairless as a newborn’s.

That summer, he joined a zeffe. As the lead singer, Milhem danced and waved a scimitar above his head in the center of a wide circle of his men. Throughout the village, their sonorous voices and the beating of their derbakes and the whistling of their reed flutes carried on the wind.

Milhem finally started to see villages in the greater area of Ozlah, and on one occasion, he visited Beirut. When he and his troupe had work in the distant villages, they traveled by truck. They crammed together in the bed of the truck with their instruments in hand and struck up tunes and sang over the din of the engine. Passing cars honked in approval.

Milhem's voice soon brought him fame in Mount Lebanon. Villagers sought him out to perform at their weddings. The trip to Beirut was a revelatory experience.

"It would forever change the course of my life," Nisreen told Baba.

A wealthy factory owner hired Milhem's troupe to perform at his son's wedding, which was to be held at an opulent hotel by the sea. The troupe hadn't seen the capital; they hardly knew what to expect. They drove down in the truck and had ample time before the wedding ceremony to tour the city. The suffocating humidity and the interminable traffic didn't deter Milhem like it did the others; neither did the pollution and ceaseless honking of cars and taxis. He walked through the shopping district of Hamra and visited the mosques and churches downtown. He would have continued touring the city neighborhoods until nightfall, but had to return to the hotel for the ceremony.

"My dream is to become a famous singer in Beirut," he told Nisreen the day after his trip to the capital. "I even saw foreigners! They had blond hair and blue eyes. And I walked along the sea, which you must see for yourself. The sun glinting off the calm waves, the fishermen, the seagulls, the Pigeon Rocks...."

Along with Milhem's newfound ambition, money channeled into his pockets. He was able to take care of his parents. He accompanied his father on his milk rounds when he didn't have a wedding performance. Their milk sales almost doubled. Now every villager wanted to buy milk from the greatest singer in all of Mount Lebanon. The women opened their windows long before he arrived, despite the morning chill. Potential brides whispered to each other that they wouldn't mind gliding their tongues between his gap.

At the time, a Lebanese-American businessman from Philadelphia had proposed to Nisreen. He had come to Lebanon to find himself a bride.

In the weeks that followed, villagers noticed a striking difference in Milhem's voice. Many women wept at dawn, and beseeched him from their open windows to refrain from singing such sorrowful tunes.

"You'll make us die of sadness," they cried.

One day, on the verge of dusk, Nisreen found Milhem in his sanctuary: in the shade of a weeping willow tree down in the valley. He was wearing a striped red scarf she had knitted for him. He sat on the ground, with his back against the tree trunk.

"You'll soon be in America," he told her.

"I don't want to get married."

"It's the best thing for you. You'll live a very comfortable life. And you'll finally be able to experience love."

"I then said the boldest statement of my life," Nisreen told Baba.

"I've already found love," she said.

Nisreen and Milhem kissed under the branches of the weeping willow with a desperation that made them courageous. Milhem kissed her eyes, her lips, her neck. She placed his hand over her pulsing heart. The sun started to set.

"My parents will get worried if I'm not back before dark," she said.

"Meet me here tomorrow. At noon."

At noon the next day, Nisreen and Milhem sat on a quilt in the shade of the weeping willow. Butterflies hovered over them. A lizard scuttled near their feet. Milhem

had brought a wicker basket filled with purple figs, which they gorged on, their fingers sticky with nectar.

“I have an idea,” Milhem said. “Let’s plant the fig peels around the tree. In years to come, if fig trees blossom, imagine what this place will look like.”

They planted the fig peels around the tree.

They returned to lying under the sloping branches and kissed, their jaws never tiring. Their clothes came undone, and they were suddenly naked. They were shocked that they had reached this unimaginable stage, and felt as if someone was guiding them along, some force of nature made from the trees and the earth, the wild flowers and shrubbery, the summer breeze and the sunshine breaking through the leaves. They heard the rush of the river coursing its way to the sea. They heard each other’s moans as they joined bodies, and Nisreen’s painful cries. She bled onto the quilt.

“We’ll be punished for this,” she said.

Days later, they were under the tree again, making love to the sounds of nature.

“What are we doing?” Nisreen asked Milhem. “We’re supposed to be married before we do this.”

They were terribly confused, and also mesmerized. Following their lovemaking they ate figs and planted the peels around the tree.

Milhem sang at the weddings and on his milk rounds with resonating power.

“No one sings like that unless he’s in love,” one woman said.

“Nisreen’s story has a tragic ending,” Baba told me, cutting to the climax.

Nisreen was pregnant with Milhem's child, and although she hid her pregnancy from her parents, they eventually found out. This was in winter, a few weeks before Nisreen was to be married to the businessman from Philadelphia.

Nisreen's father loaded his rifle and headed down to Milhem's house on his mule. Nisreen ran after him in the bitter cold. She sped through the pine forest, stepping over rocks and dry pinecones and parting through stalks of dead weeds. A branch scraped her face; her eyes stung.

The lamps in the house were lit. She found Milhem and his parents seated on the couch in the parlor, gazing up at her father, who had his rifle aimed at Milhem. Milhem was wearing his striped red scarf.

"Baba, please, let's go home," she said, out of breath.

"Not now, Nisreen. I have to take care of business."

He aimed his rifle at Milhem's chest.

"I love you, Nisreen," Milhem said.

"Those were his last words," Nisreen told Baba. "He said them in a hurry, but he meant them with all his heart."

"What happened next?" Baba asked.

Her father pulled the trigger. The shot was deafening. Sparks flew. The windows rattled. The smell of gunpowder filled the room. Blood was splattered over the couch and over Milhem's parents. Milhem had a massive hole in his chest.

That night, Nisreen left for Beirut. She couldn't remain in Ozlah; she wouldn't be accepted by the village or her family, not after her scandal. She'd make a life for herself and child in the city in which her lover had invested his dreams.

A friend of Milhem's, Imad, agreed to drive her down in his truck. Before leaving, Milhem's mother placed a folded handkerchief in Nisreen's palm.

On their way up and down the dark mountain roads to Beirut, Nisreen and Imad remained silent. Nisreen unfolded the handkerchief and found a lock of Milhem's hair, tied at one end with thread.

She wondered if Milhem had been reincarnated into a baby boy somewhere in the world. He might now be breastfeeding. Oh how she'd love to cradle him in her arms and sing him a lullaby. Or bathe him and kiss his tiny feet. If she couldn't be his lover anymore, she'd care for him like a son. As long as he returned to her.

Near the town of Aley, which had an aerial view of Beirut, Imad slowed down and pointed out the city to Nisreen. She saw a triangle of glittering lights outlined by the sea.

When they finally reached Beirut, Imad asked where she'd like to be dropped off.

"At the sea," she said.

It was at the sea where Bandar found her.

"I'm still waiting for Milhem's return," Nisreen said.

She retrieved the cedar wood box from her dresser and opened it. Inside was Milhem's lock of hair. She brushed it across her face.

"Have you been back to Ozlah?" Baba asked.

"I went up there a few years ago. I hiked down to the valley and walked under the weeping willow. Guess what I found? A forest of fig trees."

Baba visited Nisreen night after night. He watched her perform on stage, in one-act plays Bandar wrote herself. Although the matrons of Mutanabi Street thought Bandar



would fail miserably and welcomed such a downfall, Bandar's house surprisingly thrived—it was the only one that offered something more than sex. Perhaps the brothel wasn't as lucrative as Marica's, but it made enough money.

What the matrons didn't account for and underestimated was the clients' appreciation for drama, even in the midst of sex. With their enthusiasm for the performances, many men fell desperately in love with Bandar's girls, and had sex with a longing for their stage characters. When a man made love to Nisreen, he made love to Grace, who had been the poor lonely widow or the abandoned wife in one of Bandar's plays. Or in the case of *A Shattered Heart*, a love-struck teenager.

Bandar staged a new one-act play every month, and without fail, they were all steeped in melodrama. She derived much of the content for her plays from the stories of her girls. Since she first took to the pen, she was in search of a romantic death scene that would leave an indelible mark on the hearts of men and change them forevermore.

Baba sat in the front row and watched Nisreen under the lights. At times he thought it was his mother up there, and blinked twice to clear his vision.

Upstairs in her room, she continued to comfort him in bed. He stroked her hair and sometimes wept. One night, he kissed her.

"You're still too young," she said. "The law requires you to be at least eighteen."

He kissed her again, and this time their tongues locked. Someone screamed from down the hall.

"That must be Amani," Nisreen said. "She's a screamer."

He kissed her hard.

"Please," he begged. "Please."

Nisreen looked at the time on the clock on the dresser. “Take off your clothes.”

At times, Baba’s mind would be drifting fancifully to the upstairs room of Madame Bandar’s, in the red heat of a night which had him making love to Nisreen, when unexpectedly, like a shooting star across a night sky, he remembered his mother. The same was also true in the reverse. He’d be thinking of his mother, his heart as heavy as a stone, when he recalled Nisreen and became breathless with lust.

It dawned on Baba that Jidu had slept with many of the prostitutes. He had committed adultery.

He found the courage to ask Jidu why he hadn’t remained faithful to Teta.

“I *was* faithful,” Jidu said. “Whores don’t count. I was only in love with your mother, God rest her.”

In his first intimate revelation to Jidu, Baba said: “I’m in love.”

Jidu laughed. “I think it’s time you try out different whores.”

And that’s what Baba did. He still favored Nisreen above them all.

He grew fond of Abdel Wahab’s ballads—he sat by the radio and waited to hear the Egyptian’s singer’s heartbreaking voice—and began to sing them to Nisreen in the satiated laziness following their lovemaking. One night, while Nisreen was busy with a client, he stood on the pavement across from Bandar’s, looked up at her balcony, and sang an Abdel Wahab number:

*They warned me of your spell before I fell for you, they warned whoever resides  
bedside your heart will suffer....*

He sang until she stepped out onto her red-lit balcony to wave at him. He could finally breathe.

Baba pulled out another cigarette but didn't light up.

"What happened next?" I asked.

"I dropped out of high school to work at the Shooting Star."

We listened to the sound of the rain. Silvery rivulets sizzled down from the edge of the awning. I was trying to reconcile myself to a new father, one whose history was inextricable from Mutanabi Street. Had he told Mama his story? Why did he tell me his story? It couldn't have only been the gloomy weather that loosened his tongue.

I remembered Nisreen's pregnancy, and asked Baba about her child.

"She had a miscarriage," he said.

"Is she still waiting for Milhem?"

"She hasn't ever stopped waiting," he said, and looked out onto the rain. "She's been working at Bandar's for years now—she's her longest serving prostitute. The rest of the girls look up to her. Even her clients do. Some of them pay her only to listen to their problems. They pour out their souls to her."

A pick-up truck pulled up by the entrance.

"It's the juice man," Baba said.

The juice man came into the store, holding a piece of cardboard above his head to shelter him from the rain. He exchanged a few words with Baba and began hauling carts of juice inside. I put on my pea coat and told Baba I'd see him at home.

I opened my umbrella. The cool air was refreshing. Instead of walking up to the corner, I walked down the empty street. I imagined the street at night, sparkling with lights, raucous with men. I pictured Jidu and Baba walking under the balconies all those years ago, a widower leading the way for his motherless son.

Standing outside Madame Bandar's, I wondered if the girls were napping before a long night ahead of them. I was desperate to see Nisreen. If she was ever overcome with nostalgia, I was more than willing to offer her a whiff of my hair or allow her to comb her fingers through it. Anything to relieve her duress. I wondered if she'd transform my life as she had done Baba's. How, I knew not.

At home, I found Jidu asleep in his chair, his head slung back. The rain was pattering against the windowpanes. I hung my coat and pulled off my wet shoes and went to the kitchen to see what Mama had made for lunch. She was sitting at the table, eating fried cauliflower with bread and hummus. She breathed furiously as she ate, and made loud sucking noises. Food seemed to taste better on her palate. She had gained extra weight this winter and was on another cauliflower diet.

She hadn't yet noticed me. I stood at the entrance watching her eat. She was all alone, with nothing but the food to entertain her. I wanted to believe that it was my talent as an actor that had let me deceive her so easily, but I knew the truth: She trusted me.

A drop of oil dripped down her chin without her realizing it.

"Mama," I said.

She looked up. "Omar!"

I walked around the table and embraced her. She asked if I had enjoyed my time at the Beirut Center, the shopping mall, which is where I had told her I'd be with friends. All these Saturdays, she had remained at home. She didn't think it was proper for a lady to see a film alone.

Instead of answering her, I handed her a napkin and pointed to her chin.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me," she said.

\*

Despite my guilt—

“Wait a moment,” Murrone says, frowning. “Nisreen seems too good to be true.”

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

I’m approaching an incident in my story that nearly kept me away from Mutanabi Street for the rest of my life. Before I’m able to continue, there’s a knock at the door and Anastasia enters the room.

“Hi, Ammoura!” she says, using my nickname. “Madame Hafiza said you were reciting tonight.”

Anastasia is approaching thirty. Her body is shaped like a squash: a slim torso that widens into a chunky bulb. Her bangs are highlighted purple. She’s listened to my story numerous times, and although I once put her to sleep—she said she hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours—she favors me over her other clients. But that’s because I tip well and she doesn’t always have to sleep with me, not that I’m demanding in bed. She simply has to stay up and pretend to listen until I’m done with my story, and my heart feels lighter.

“Get out,” Murrone says, rising from the bed. “He’s my client.”

“Calm down, Blondie,” Anastasia says. “Where are you in the story, Ammoura?”

“I’m approaching the scene at Marwa’s Muse,” I say.

“Oh, poor thing! Those bitches were horrible to you. I hate that part where Hanah—or was it Hala?—grabs your—”

“Stop talking!” Murrone says. “You’re giving it away. Don’t you have work?”

“I’ve got an hour to spare.” Anastasia walks over to me. I stand up and exchange three pecks on either cheek. “My last client said more suicide bombings are inevitable.

The worst is yet to come. What if a jihadist blows himself up in my room as I undress him? I'm really scared, Ammoura."

"You're a coward," Murrone tells her.

"Oh look who's talking," Anastasia says. "You shit yourself every time Badr el Din visits. By the way, I heard he came asking for you tonight."

Murrone runs her fingers through her blonde locks, and then pulls back her hand as if she touched a burning stove.

"There's nothing to worry about," I tell her.

She walks to the window and looks out.

"Mind if I listen to your story before my next client turns up?" Anastasia asks me.

"I mind," Murrone says, moving a step closer to her. "Omar, please tell her to leave."

Touched by Murrone's possessiveness, I ask Anastasia to leave.

Anastasia rolls her eyes. "Blondie's too young to understand your story. I mean *really* understand it."

"Murrone's a great listener," I say. Much better than you, I want to add.

"For God's sake, don't call her by that ridiculous Irish name."

"It's Scottish, idiot," Murrone says.

"Whatever." Anastasia tugs at my scarf. "Want a quickie?"

Murrone charges Anastasia with her hands raised. I force myself between them and hold onto Murrone's wrists, shifting her away from Anastasia who laughs wickedly.

"Leave us alone," I tell Anastasia. "Now."

Anastasia slams the door behind her.

Murron is shivering with anger, her eyes shiny with tears. I walk her to the bed and cover her in the blanket. She's new at this profession, I remind myself. She hasn't hardened like others in the trade.

"Can I have a sip of your drink?" she asks.

I bring her my drink and she swings it back, the Pepsi dripping down her chin. I wipe the droplets with my thumb. Beads of sweat shimmer on her forehead. I stroke her arm. She tells me she despises the girls who work here.

"They're just jealous of you," I say.

"Madame Hafiza's the only reason I haven't left yet."

She takes my hand and places it in her lap, petting it softly. She turns toward me. Her tears are gone. "You're the first client who's ever told me stories."

Despite my guilt, I continued to visit Mutanabi Street. I worked hard at the Shooting Star, and was becoming known by the prostitutes and the deliverymen. The prostitutes called me Ammoura, and I called them by their real names. They lowered their baskets from their balconies and I filled them with groceries. I also helped carry their bags home. The catcalls had ceased.

One prostitute, Katie, insisted on feeding me before I left the brothel. She had a cleft chin. She made a labneh sandwich packed with tomatoes, mint leaves, and pitted olives. I asked for her nighttime name.

"Rokaya," she said.

"I think a friend of mine slept with you." I described Ali's features.

"Does he wear a shark tooth necklace?" she asked.

“That’s him.”

She burst into laughter. I wondered what was so funny.

“What did he say about me?”

I told her, embarrassed.

“So he thinks he’s some champ,” she said. “We never had sex. Every time he tried entering me, he went limp. He was scared shitless. At the end of the hour, he promised he wasn’t a homosexual. He was in tears. I actually felt sorry for him.”

I thanked Katie for the food and returned to the store, giddy with the knowledge that Ali wasn’t so much of a stallion after all.

One February afternoon, Crazy Giant paid a visit to the store. I had seen him often. Bandar sent him over to buy groceries for the house. Over the course of his visits, he recounted his days as a bare-knuckled boxer dispatching opponents in dimly lit garages and basements, surrounded by a circle of betting men. He had a vicious left hook. During the day, he worked at the family butchery, donning an apron stained with blood, the stench of flesh rising from his pores.

“My father used my prize money to cap his front teeth in gold—he wanted to cap all his dentures in gold,” Crazy Giant said. “I won thirty-three matches. All knockouts by way of my left hook...But then I got knocked out.”

“I can’t imagine anyone beating you,” I said.

“My mind was elsewhere. On Bandar, actually. She had approached me following my last victory to see if I’d consider bartending at her theatre house. She said I could be



Crazy Giant for the rest of my life, day and night. I'm not sure how she was even allowed to attend the fight. Only men turned up."

"I was thinking about leaving my family behind in Tyre," Crazy Giant continued, "when I stepped into the ring in the basement of a wool factory in a northern suburb of Beirut." Someone had black taped a lopsided circle on the concrete floor, inside of which the fighters battled until one knocked the other out. The floor was shiny with fresh blood. Crazy Giant was slated to fight Droopy Eye, the most feared fighter of the underground.

Crazy Giant was stretching his arms in the ring, waiting for his opponent to show up. He was bare-chested and wore jeans and leather boots. He thought he'd be happier at Bandar's. He'd never have to chop and dice raw meat or clean intestines or see the flash of his father's gold teeth.

"Focus, Tarek," his father said from the crowd. "This is the biggest fight of your life!"

Droopy Eye was a former heavyweight freestyle Olympic wrestler—he had placed sixth at the summer games in Mexico City. He had left his last opponent brain dead after putting him on the floor with a double-leg takedown and then elbowing his face to a pulp. Droopy Eye worked as a bodyguard for a Christian member of parliament. The minister often attended his fights and betted thousands of liras on him.

The men quieted down when Droopy Eye entered the ring, bare-chested. He had hulking shoulders and a wide chest. His arms were long and veiny, his hands reaching down to his knees, giving him the appearance of an oversized ape. A portrait of Jesus Christ was tattooed over his heart.

His face was shaped like a hexagon, his cauliflower ears curled inwards. He had a droopy eyelid and cropped black hair. He got down on one knee and crossed himself.

“Bless me Father, for I am about to sin,” he said.

“I was always anxious before fights,” Crazy Giant said, “but as soon as the bell rang, my nerves evaporated. That night was different.”

Crazy Giant shuffled his feet, moving right and left, trying to feel out Droopy Eye. He jabbed air. When he closed the distance, Droopy Eye faked a double-leg takedown and threw an uppercut, which caught Crazy Giant’s chin, making him stagger back. The crowd roared. Droopy Eye stepped forward. Crazy Giant threw a hook that missed wildly. Droopy Eye faked a jab and threw a hook of his own, narrowly missing. The crowd gasped.

Crazy Giant attempted a double-takedown, which Droopy Eye easily defended with a sprawl. Crazy Giant was still on his knees when Droopy Eye kicked him in the ribs. Crazy Giant grunted, and instantly felt a sharp pain. Every breath was accompanied by excruciating pain. Grasping his broken ribs, he got up and tried to swing with his free hand. Droopy Eye pulled back his head and circled to his right and left, light on his feet. He moved his head from side to side. He began to pick apart Crazy Giant with jabs. One jab snapped Crazy Giant’s nose to the side, sending an arc of blood in the air. Crazy Giant was forced to breathe from his mouth—big gasps of rancid air.

“Stop the fight!” he heard someone scream above the raucous. It was a female voice, and with a quick turn of his head, Crazy Giant glimpsed a woman in black, clutching a rosary. When he looked back at Droopy Eye, he saw the fighter lower his hips. He knew what was coming before it landed, and could do nothing to stop it: Droopy

Eye pounded his shoulder into his gut and followed through with a double-leg takedown, his arms wrapped around Crazy Giant's legs, both men airborne for a split second. Crazy Giant landed with a thud on the concrete floor with Droopy Eye on top of him. He lost his breath.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned," Droopy Eye whispered, and proceeded to hammer punch Crazy Giant's face until the poor Indian lost consciousness and men finally pulled Droopy Eye off.

Crazy Giant's face was a pink, swollen mess. The next day he headed up to Beirut and found Bandar's place, where he finally began to heal.

On that February afternoon, Crazy Giant told Baba that Bandar wanted him in the theatre.

"It's time," he said.

Time for what, I wondered?

Crazy Giant walked around the register and sat in Baba's chair.

"Put on your coat," Baba told me.

I followed him down the street.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It's Bandar's first dress rehearsal for her new play. Opening night is this Friday."

I wasn't sure what Baba knew about theatre. He hadn't acted before, or at least I didn't think he had. But recently, his stories about himself and the prostitutes made me think he was capable of anything.

Hassan, the doorman, let us in.

Diala, Laila, and Zeina were sitting in the front row.

“Dépêche-toi!” Diala told us, smoking a cigarette. An ashtray was propped on her knee. “The play is about to start.”

We sat down next to them. Behind the closed curtains, we heard Bandar giving her actresses last minute stage directions. I stole a quick glance at Diala, who was wearing the same grey sweater over a nightdress. She flicked a lock of hair from her eyes; in the process, her sleeve slipped down to her elbow, revealing her lovely forearm.

I asked Baba why neither Diala, Laila, nor Zeina were acting.

“We’re different kinds of performers, mon chéri,” Diala answered. “In case you haven’t noticed, I have the sexiest ass in the world. C’est magnifique! You should see the men’s reaction when I belly dance.”

I didn’t doubt her claim. I wanted to see her on stage this very moment, in a two-piece outfit. I wondered what she was like in bed. A tiger, I thought. Something untamable. I couldn’t imagine any man having the upper hand on her, this French-speaking dancer who had escaped the squalor of a refugee camp.

“Zeina opens up the show with a song,” Diala continued, “but her songs put the men to sleep.”

“I’ve driven men to tears with my songs,” Zeina said. She turned to me and promised that was true. “I don’t have to shake my ass to be noticed.”

“You don’t have an ass to shake.”

“Be polite,” Laila said, nudging her younger sister. “We have company.”

“Anyway,” Diala said, “after Zeina’s song, Laila comes on and plays the derbake, which brings the men back to life. And then I dance onto the stage. That’s when the party begins.”

“Don’t listen to everything she says,” Zeina told me.

“What’s that, child?” Diala asked her. “Did you say something?”

Zeina sat back and said: “At least I have a country.”

“You bitch!” Diala stood up and threw back her chair. Her ashtray and cigarette went flying across the room, emitting orange sparks. Laila restrained her.

“You know that’s a sensitive subject,” Diala yelled.

Bandar poked her head between the curtains. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s nothing,” Laila said, and sat between Diala and Zeina. Diala was now seated next to me, breathing out her fury, her eyes focused on the stage. I was about to tell her that I believed in the Palestinian cause, if only to comfort her, and that one day soon, she’d be able to turn the keys she wore around her neck into the front door of her family home in Jerusalem. She sensed my gaze and smiled. “I’d rather sit next to you, handsome,” she said. Did she really find me handsome? Was a puny teenager even worthy of her attention?

“Sorry about my outburst,” she said.

Putting on a serious face, I said: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

“Oui,” she said, pinching my cheek. “Vive la Palestine.”

Bandar thanked Baba and me for coming and returned backstage. A moment later, her voice rang through a PA system.

“It’s time for *The Second Marriage*.”

Baba whispered into my ear that a retired prostitute named Shams was the theatre’s PA announcer. She didn’t come until the evening.

The curtains opened to a deathbed scene, which immediately drew me in. Hind, the silent one with dark features, stood at one side of the bed. She was dressed like a man, in a button-down shirt and slacks. Her hair was in a ponytail; a mustache was painted on her face. Farah, the chubby prostitute, stood at the other side.

Nisreen lay on the bed, a blanket covering her legs. As I quickly put the pieces together, Nisreen was playing Farah's younger sister, and was married to Hind's character.

"Don't leave me," Hind wailed. "Oh God have mercy on us. Spare my beloved wife."

Nisreen was gasping for breath. Her hair was a mess, her face astonishingly pale. I could hardly believe that I was about to see someone die right before my eyes.

"Let me speak to my husband," she told Farah, every word a struggle.

Farah walked to the opposite side of the stage, the wood creaking beneath her feet, and began dusting a table. She was still able to eavesdrop on the conversation, which was obvious by the way she'd pause in her dusting to better hear Nisreen's words.

Hind kneeled, with Nisreen's hand in hers.

"I want you to find a woman who'll take care of you once I'm gone," Nisreen said.

"I can't!" Hind said, spittle spraying from her mouth. "You're the love of my life."

As they conversed, I sat at the edge of my chair, absorbing every word. Tears were streaming down Nisreen and Hind's faces. I wondered if Nisreen was weeping for her long lost love, Milhem, the gap-toothed singer. Baba's eyes were also misty. Maybe

he was thinking the same thoughts. I looked at Diala, who was splitting the ends of one of her curly locks. Was she not feeling the power of theatre?

Hind was breaking down, her shoulders shaking. I felt her pain as my own; it was me on that stage losing a loved one. As much as I enjoyed going to the movies, I had never experienced the degree of intimacy that I now felt. I could almost feel the hot spotlight on my skin.

“I love you,” Nisreen said, and closed her eyes. I gasped.

The play ended with Hind and Farah lying in bed together, newly married.

“Bravo!” Diala said. She whistled between her fingers. Her exuberant applause puzzled me. She hadn’t seemed too involved in the play. “Hind needs extra encouragement,” she told me.

Bandar stood with her actresses on stage.

“What do you think?” she asked Baba.

“The usual: dramatic, heartrending, and sad. I like how you began your play with the romantic death scene and built up to, to—um—it was lovely.”

“What about you?” she asked me.

They all looked at me, as if waiting for a sentence from a judge.

“I liked it,” I said. I was unable to articulate my excitement. I wanted to hug and kiss the actresses on stage and tell them how deeply moved I was by their performance.

“I’ve never seen women act as men before.”

“I take after Shakespeare,” Bandar said. “Only he had his men dress as women.”

Before leaving, Nisreen gave me a striped red scarf. “I made it just for you,” she said. I hugged her, smelling gardenia.

At the store, I asked Baba if we could attend opening night. He shook his head.

“You have to be at least eighteen to enter.”

“You visited the brothel when you were fifteen,” I protested, the scarf wrapped around my neck.

“That was under different circumstances. We don’t want to get Bandar in trouble with the police.”

I was left to imagine the theatre packed with men, hypnotized like I was by the performers of the night. I hung my scarf on a hook in the backroom before leaving for home.

\*

During recess one day, I sat on a bench next to Ali and the gang.

“Did you boys know that you can fuck a whore in the ass?” Ali said. “My brother said it’s a tighter fit than a pussy.”

“What if she shits?” Rashad asked.

“She can’t shit if I’m pumping her.”

“What if you get stuck?” Ziad asked.

“I don’t know about that.”

Ali told me to ask my father if he had ever fucked a whore in the ass.

“He hasn’t,” I said, irritated. “He’s married to my mother.”

“Does he fuck your mother in the ass?”

Rashad and Ziad laughed.

“I need some money,” Ali said. “How much have you saved, boys?”

Rashad and Ziad said they needed time to save more.



“What about you?” Ali asked me.

“I don’t have anything.”

“But you’ve been working at your father’s store. Pay up.”

My heart was pounding. “My money’s at home.”

“Then bring it. I need to fuck a whore.”

“They’re not whores,” I said.

“What?”

“Stop saying that word. They’re good people. And very talented.”

Ali laughed. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I think he’s a homo,” Rashad said.

“Maybe he wants to get fucked in the ass,” Ziad said.

“Are you a homosexual?” Ali asked me.

“No,” I said.

“Then pay up. I want to visit Rokaya again.”

“I spoke to Rokaya,” I said. My words, though shaky, spilled out. “She said you never had sex with her.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She said your penis went limp and that you cried. She laughed when she told me the story.”

“That’s a lie!”

Rashad and Ziad looked stupefied. “Is he telling the truth?” Rashad asked.

“Of course not!” Ali said.

Before I could defend myself, Ali punched me in the face. I saw nothing but black. When I came to, the supervisor was standing over me. I couldn't see out of my left eye; it was swollen shut.

"We're sending you home," the supervisor said.

Mama wrapped ice cubes in a cloth and pressed it against my eye. I sat back in one of the kitchen chairs.

"I don't want you ever getting near that boy again," she said.

"I won't. Rashad and Ziad don't like him either."

Although I was woozy, I had been conscious enough to realize I needed to keep Rashad and Ziad as friends in the eyes of Mama if I wanted to return to the Shooting Star on Saturdays without suspicion.

"Did you throw any punches?" Jidu asked me.

"Ali caught me by surprise."

"When someone hits you, you hit them back—harder."

"Ali's much bigger than me," I said.

"The Turk was twice my size. Remember what happened to him?"

"I remember, Jidu."

He held my shoulder and said: "Fighting is in our blood."

When Baba returned from work and noticed my eye, he became concerned. He asked for details. Since Mama was lingering around, I gave him a false version, saying that Ali tried to steal my pocket money. Later, when I found him alone in the kitchen drinking water from the jug, I gave him the true account.

Baba smiled. “So you were defending the girls.”

“I’ll lose an eye for them,” I said, in the voice of an intrepid soldier.

Baba kissed my brow. “I’m proud of you.”

He left the house after dinner. It was the first Friday of the month, which meant opening night of *The Second Marriage*. He returned around midnight, smelling of smoke and perfume. I tiptoed out of my room and whispered to him before he entered his bedroom.

“How was it?” I asked.

“They perform better when you’re in the audience.”

He was trying to appease me. I’d have to wait for Bandar’s next dress rehearsal to see the actresses on stage.

On Saturday, I brandished my black eye for all the women of Mutanabi Street.

“He called you a whore, which I couldn’t accept,” I told them.

“You fought for us?” Nisreen asked. She was accompanied by Hind, who stood silent.

“I’ll always fight for you,” I said.

Baba embellished the story, saying I was able to throw in a punch.

When Crazy Giant saw me, he lifted his huge palms in the air and told me to punch them. I swung back my fist for a windmill punch.

“Stop!” Crazy Giant said. “Don’t telegraph your punches. And never reach back like that. It leaves your face exposed.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon reciting my heroic tale to the women that came in, including Ayesha.

“I punched the racist bastard in the gut,” I said. “He fell to the ground.”

“Serves him right,” she said, and told me to open my mouth. She popped in a Turkish Delight.

\*

After my eye healed, a prostitute named Hala from Marwa’s Muse asked me to help carry her groceries home.

“Don’t linger at Marwa’s,” Baba told me. “I’m not fond of Marwa or her girls.”

I paid little mind to Baba’s warning. I was Prince of Mutanabi Street. There was nothing that could faze me. I followed Hala into Marwa’s and dropped off the groceries in the kitchen. I heard a lot of chatter in a nearby room.

“Ask them if they’re hungry,” she told me.

I traced the voices to the parlor, where the women were slouched on couches, eating roasted chestnuts, their legs covered with quilts. Fairuz was playing on the radio.

“Hala is wondering if you’re all hungry,” I said. They turned to me. Their collective stares made me nervous.

“How nice of you to visit,” Marwa said. “Look, he’s wearing a Nisreen scarf.”

She wore a black turban and a cloak-like dress. Freckles dotted her translucent skin. Blue veins pulsed at her temples. She cracked open a chestnut and asked if I’d like one.

“No thanks,” I said.

“You’re handsome,” Marwa said. “Isn’t he, girls?”

“He’s not ripe yet,” one said.

“Turn around.”

I turned.

“He’s got a nice ass.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Marwa asked.

“No.”

Marwa cracked another chestnut. “Have you ever kissed a girl?”

“No, Auntie.”

I didn’t like Marwa one bit.

“Would you like to kiss one of my girls?”

“That’s okay.”

“Why not? You don’t think they’re beautiful?”

“I think you’re all beautiful,” I said.

“Then who would you like to kiss?”

“He can kiss me,” Hala said, entering the room and taking a seat on an armrest.

She popped a chestnut in her mouth.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You’re being very rude,” Marwa said. A few of the prostitutes giggled.

I was too anxious to speak.

“Help him, Hala,” Marwa said.

Hala stood up, turned up my chin, and kissed my lips.

“Did you enjoy that?” Marwa asked.

I nodded.

“Do it again, Hala, only with more passion.”

I felt Hala's tongue inside my mouth. Her breath smelled like chestnuts. She pulled back, stretching a string of saliva hanging from our lips. I wiped my mouth.

"Look, he's hard," someone said.

"It's up all right."

"Let's see what you've got, naughty boy," Marwa said. "If you're at least as big as your father, I'll let you fuck one of my girls for free. It will be my gift to you."

"I have to go," I said. Hala held my hand, pulling me back.

"You're sweating," she said.

"You've made him hot," Marwa said. "Touch him, Hala."

The girls wouldn't stop giggling.

Hala massaged my crotch. "Do you like that?"

"Please, leave me alone."

"We'll let you go if you show us your cock," Marwa said.

"I don't want to."

"Be a man."

"Please, let me go."

Hala unbuckled my belt, undid my button, and pulled down the zipper. I had trouble breathing.

"Relax," she whispered. She slipped my pants and underwear to my ankles and held up my shirt. The girls broke into laughter. My penis had shrunk to nothing.

"You'll have to do better than that," Marwa said. "Stroke him, Hala."

Hala held my balls in her hand. It was the strangest feeling in the world to have someone other than myself touching my privates, as if they didn't belong to me anymore.

Hala rubbed the head of my penis between her thumb and forefinger; still, I couldn't get it up.

"I want to go," I stuttered.

"Suck him," Marwa said.

"Is that really necessary?" Hala said. "I'm on break."

"Just a little."

"No."

"Suck him, cunt! Or else I'll throw you out of the house."

Hala got down on her knees and took me into her mouth. Her teeth scraped against my penis. I was terrified she'd bite it off. My legs began shaking violently.

"Leave me alone," I screamed.

"She's pleasuring you," Marwa said.

"Leave me alone," I screamed again.

Hala leaned back. A pubic hair was stuck to her lower lip.

When I tried to run away I tripped over my pants and fell to the floor, which made the girls laugh louder. I pulled up my pants, and without bothering to buckle my belt, ran out into the cold and up the street. I found Baba in the backroom, sorting through boxes.

"Give me a hand," he said. The sound of his voice was a relief.

"Just a moment."

I went inside the bathroom and wept.

I was ashamed of myself; felt dirty, my soul soiled. No matter how many times I bathed and scrubbed my skin, I couldn't rid myself of feeling unclean. My pores emitted

filthy vapors. I had been too weak to defend myself, and it was entirely my fault: I lacked the courage of my Druze ancestors. I deserved what I got. From that point on, I'd never again eat chestnuts. Their roasted smell would forever remind me of my frailty and filth.

A week following my shameful encounter at Marwa's Muse, I spent the Saturday at home with Mama and Jidu. The Saturday after that, I asked Mama if she'd like to see a movie.

"I thought your friends were more important," she said.

"No one's more important than you."

I wore the mustard yellow sweater with the talking pine trees and tiger smoking a hookah.

"You look so handsome!" Mama said.

I tugged at the collar. "It's a nice sweater."

Baba came around my room one night to ask why I had been absent from the store.

"I got bored," I said.

"You seemed to be having a good time."

I shrugged.

"Everyone's been asking about you."

"I don't want to work at the store anymore."

Baba gave me a piercing look. "Does your mother have anything to do with this?"

"It's my choice," I said. "The store isn't for me. It never was. I'm sorry."



I saw the disappointment on his face. He had shared his life story with me, had introduced me to his intimate, alternate world, and I was rejecting it all. He closed my door without saying goodnight. I avoided Mutanabi Street for the next five years.

## The Loss of a Legend

I got my heart broken in the fall of '72 by a poet named Youmna Yassine. As I tried gathering the pieces of my heart, Jidu had a bad accident: He fell in the shower and broke his hip.

It all began at a movie theatre. I was in tenth grade, fond of plaid sweaters and bellbottom jeans, and still stuck on Converse high-tops in black.

I frequented the movie theatres in Hamra almost every weekend. Half the time I went with Mama, and the rest of the time alone. I kept my eyes open for classmates in order to avoid them. I was still embarrassed to be seen with Mama or by myself. But it was hard avoiding classmates. I had grown six feet tall. No matter how far I slunk back in my chair, they spotted me in the shadows.

What I had gained in height I lacked in size. Mama cooked most of her dishes with meat to fatten me up. Jidu said I looked like a starving African. I had a high-powered metabolism that burned food as fast as I consumed it.

I still dreamed of becoming a filmmaker. In fact, I was thinking of a potential script before the film was about to start one Saturday afternoon when a petite girl who looked around my age sat in the same seat a couple of rows in front of me. She, too, slunk back in her chair. At the closing credits, when I usually rushed out of the theatre before anyone saw me, I decided to linger for a moment to catch a better glimpse of the girl. Her head popped up like a jack in the box. We made eye-contact. She quickly strode up the

aisle and out the doors. She wore a white tank top and bellbottom jeans. Her black hair was in a French braid. A pair of purple-framed glasses consumed half her face.

I saw her again two weeks later. We were in a different theatre, seated at the end of a back row. At the closing credits, I waited for her to leave before I made my exit.

The third time I saw her, I followed her out. I acted like a spy, keeping a safe distance between us as we walked up Hamra Street. She suddenly made a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and stared directly at me. My first thought was my lousy spying, and the second, how cute she was. She smiled. My heart fluttered.

She continued up the street but then stopped at a juice stall, looking at the various fruits on display. She turned her head to make sure I was still following her. She walked up from Hamra Street and entered Sanayeh Garden. It was a dusty public garden shaded sparsely by willows and palm trees, in the center of which stood a water-fountain. Pigeons pecked at the shells of sunflower seeds strewn across the entrance. Children rode their bicycles and pushed each other on the swings. Women walked briskly in loops around the garden for exercise, the makeup melting on their faces. Old men sat in folding chairs in various corners playing cards and backgammon in the shade of willows.

I followed the girl to the water-fountain. She sat on a bench and pulled out a book from her purse and began reading. I sat on the bench next to hers. I read the cover of her book: *The Madman and Layla*. She looked up.

“Why did you follow me here?” she asked.

I hadn’t expected her to speak to me. “I didn’t follow you.”

“You’ve been following me for weeks. I see you in the movie theatres.”

“I like going to the movies.”

She moved to the far end of her bench. “You can sit here,” she said. “That way you don’t have to yell to be heard.”

I sat next to her. Across from us a circle of veiled women in long-sleeve dresses sat in the shade of the trees, their children running around. In those days before the Iranian Revolution in ’79, the veil was more like a kerchief. The women had southern accents, which I had been hearing more often on the streets of Beirut. These refugees had fled their village homes near the Israeli border to escape the daily airstrikes. Israeli fighter jets were in pursuit of Palestinian militias, pounding them wherever they hid in the woods and valleys and homes of the southerners. Years ago, on a school trip, we visited a Crusader castle in the southern port city, Tyre. But I hadn’t been back since then, as the south was considered dangerous territory, and seemed so far away. I figured the women under the trees were passing time as their husbands looked for work in the city.

My movie girl nudged her glasses up the bridge of her nose, providing me with an optimal view of her arm. It was hairier than mine. But she had the most delicate hand, with long slim fingers and perfectly trimmed nails. Every time her glasses slipped down her nose, I anticipated the flash of her palm.

“What school do you attend?” she asked.

I gave her its name.

“I go to IC,” she said.

The International College was one of the most prestigious schools in the country. I was suddenly embarrassed of my public school.

“So you like films,” she said.

“I want to make films one day,” I said, “and act in them.”

“Are you going to be the next Omar Sharif?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m going to be a poet.”

“What kind of poetry do you write?”

“I’m a romantic, much like the rest of the Arab poets. But I plan to put them to shame. People will soon be talking about the works of Youmna Yassine. What’s your name?”

“Omar Aladdine.”

I asked if she was enjoying her book. The women under the trees were eying us. One giggled. I was happy to be seen with a girl.

“It’s the best romantic poetry you’ll ever read,” Youmna said. “It’s all about Qays ibn al-Mulawwah ibn Muzahim. Or Qays for short. Do you know his story?”

I shook my head.

*The Madman and Layla*, she explained, was a love story based on the real life of Qays. Qays fell madly in love with a woman from his tribe named Layla. He recited romantic poems about her, immortalizing her in verses which his fellow Bedouins recorded. He chanted his poetry day and night, unable to sleep, tormented by love.

Qays proposed to Layla, Youmna said, but was rejected by her father, who disapproved of him. Layla was eventually wed to another man, leaving Qays devastated. He wandered into the harsh desert to recover from his heartbreak. His family waited for his return; they kept food for him out in the wild. But he never came back. Those who

saw Qays said he had gone mad. His beard was long and messy and his skin charred by the sun.

Qays was found dead in the desert at the foot of a gravestone. He had carved his final three verses on a rock.

Youmna removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Every time I read Qays’ story, I imagine him wandering in the desert, his heart broken. I wonder if love can turn one mad. What do you think?”

“Oh,” I said, “I’m not sure.”

“Don’t you want to fall madly in love?”

I thought of Lamyia the wet-nurse. “Yes, I do.”

“Me too. I think it would be good for my writing.”

I met Youmna at the movies the following Saturday. She insisted on seeing a romance. I bought tickets for *What’s Up, Doc*, starring Barbra Streisand and Ryan O’Neal. We shared a bag of popcorn, our buttery fingers brushing against each other, at one point clasping. We ate chocolate bars and sipped from the same Pepsi bottle, not once sinking down into our chairs.

We left the theatre aching for love. We sat on the same bench in Sanayeh Garden across from the women under the trees, who were drinking tea from a thermos.

Youmna opened *The Madman and Layla* to the first page.

“Read to me,” she said.

We spent that entire day reading aloud to each other, passing the book back and forth. After a poem that Youmna passionately read, the women under the trees clapped for her. Youmna bowed.

“I want my poetry to speak to the masses,” Youmna told me, “so that those women over there can understand me better and recite my verses by heart.”

“I’d love to read your work.”

“One day, my dear.”

I walked her home and asked when I could see her next.

“You can always see me,” she said, pointing at my heart. “I’m right there.”

At home, Mama asked why I looked so dreamy.

“I’m just happy,” I said. Once I turned eighteen, I planned to marry Youmna. She was definitely the one. And I knew she’d never shame me, not like that time at Marwa’s Muse. No, she’d be graceful.

“Happy about what?”

“Life.”

“Hm.”

I visited Jidu’s room that night and asked him to repeat the story of how he met Teta.

“I broke her brother’s shoulder in a wrestling match,” he said. “She came over and slapped me in the face. I told her to get me some water.

“‘I’m not your damn wife,’ she said.

“‘We’ll see about that.’

“She had a shooting star on her face,” Jidu said.

I was unable to sleep that night. Like Qays, I was tormented by love. I pulled out a notebook and began writing poetry, which I had never written before. The words came pouring out as I imagined myself in a desert, writing in the moonlight.

When I saw Youmna next in the garden, I told her she had inspired me to be a poet.

“I’ve brought some of my work,” I said, waving my notebook.

Her eyes widened. “So have I.”

She took out a leather-bound journal from her purse and flipped to a page.

“I wrote this poem last night,” she said. “It’s called ‘Sad Eyes.’”

She glanced at the women under the trees, and in a loud, slowly paced voice, she recited:

*The sadness of the world was in his eyes.*

*Every time I looked at him, I wept.*

*He told me not to cry, that he and melancholy were one.*

*I offered him a hand, but he said his burden was heavy.*

*I told him no burden was too heavy for love.*

The women under the trees clapped. “Bravo, habibti,” one said.

“Do you like it?” Youmna asked me.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “Do I really have the sadness of the world in my eyes?”

“Your eyes are heartbreaking,” she said. “Read me yours.”

I opened my notebook and adopted the same nuanced voice of her recital, belting out my verse:

*Under the bright blue sky*

*I wondered if I’d ever fly.*

*I promised my girl I’d take her to the moon,*

*Where we’d be alone soon.*



*I gave her a rose,  
She said I had a big nose.  
We saw a movie,  
And later, had a fruit smoothie.  
We walked to the sea  
And drank some warm tea.  
She had to go home  
And left me all alone.*

The women under the trees laughed out loud. “I liked the line about the big nose,” one said.

I waited nervously for Youmna’s verdict.

“You don’t have to rhyme,” she said. “The content is more important.”

“Did you like the content?”

“It’s amateurish.”

“Let me read you another poem,” I said. “That wasn’t my best one.”

“Listen to mine first.”

I listened to Youmna’s poetry with the realization that I’d never match her talent, or come close. When she was finally done, she said she had to go home.

“Don’t forget your promise,” she said.

“What promise?”

“You promised to take me to the moon.”

“I think we’re in love,” Youmna said. “I can’t stop writing poetry about you. I’ve never been so productive. I’m finally experiencing what the poets have been writing about for centuries. Do you feel it, too?”

“Yes!”

“You don’t have to yell.”

“Sorry. But yes, I feel the same way.”

“Before I met you, I felt so alone. No one understands me at school.”

“I don’t have any friends,” I admitted. The women under the trees were cracking pumpkin seeds as they played cards.

“I wish you could kiss me.”

It was now or never. Before I lost my courage, I reached over, close enough to smell the orange soda on her breath, and was about to kiss her when a blast erupted in the sky. We dove to the ground, covering our heads. Women and children were screaming. I looked up and spotted parallel streaks of white smoke stretching across the sky. My heart was pounding so furiously I thought I was about to collapse at any moment.

“Are you okay?” I asked Youmna, hoping she couldn’t hear the fear in my voice.

“We could have died!” she said.

“It was just a sonic boom,” I said. Surely the Israelis didn’t plan on bombing Beirut. If they did, a full-scale war would break out. Lebanon had no air force or anti-aircraft defense. We were at the mercy of the soaring jets. “There’s absolutely nothing to worry about.”

I helped her up to the bench. The women under the trees were gathering their belongings. Others were rushing to the exit.

“I can’t write love poems in a state like this,” she said.

I became anxious at having lost the opportunity to kiss her. I couldn’t let that jet steal my thunder.

Youmna got up to leave. I pulled on her wrist and sat her back down. With our lives at risk, I kissed her, tasting orange soda. Her lips were soft and wet.

“My God!” she said.

I was about to apologize, for although I was burning with fear and desire, I hadn’t anticipated my lunging kiss. The kiss was borne on an impulse I had no control over, pursing my lips and thrusting me forward. I had even closed my eyes without remembering closing them, and I wondered if a kiss had a life of its own, a mouthy spirit that acted independently of the kiss giver and only showed itself when it recognized its counterpart on the lips of another.

“We’re supposed to be married first,” Youmna said. “It’s not proper otherwise.”

“Then marry me. I love you!”

Youmna turned to her right and left. The women under the trees were gone. “Kiss me again. Quick.”

I kissed her, poking my tongue inside a gushing well, opening and closing my jaw, the mouthy spirits multiplying in orangey bliss. Youmna pulled back, wiping her face.

“Where the hell did you learn how to do that?” she said.

I smiled. We were more than alive.

“You’re my Qays,” she said, blushing.

“And you’re my Layla.”

We didn't have the chance to be Qays and Layla for long. A distant cousin of Youmna's joined our Saturday gatherings at the garden. His name was Wassim. He had transferred to Youmna's school from the mountains. He was in eleventh grade, and like Youmna, was obsessed with poetry and believed he was Lebanon's next Kahlil Gibran.

Wassim was short and slim, and wore black-framed glasses. He had a bushy mustache drooping over his upper lip, which he had grown to look more like Gibran.

"My best subject is Arabic," he said. "I won first prize in the student poetry competition for three consecutive years."

"What kind of poetry do you write?" Youmna asked.

"I'm a romantic."

"Me too!"

"And me," I said, sheepishly.

"Would you like to hear one of my poems?" Wassim asked Youmna.

"Please," Youmna said.

Wassim stood up from the bench, and with one hand raised in the air and his eyes closed, he said, "This poem is called, 'The Day the Mist Cleared and I Found Love and Realized I'd Never Be the Same Again':

*I was lost in the interminable mist of my existence until I found you,*

*in the light of a midday sun.*

*Like the pouring rains of winter, tears of joy fall just as rapidly down my face,*

*and when I taste the saltiness of my insurmountable mirth,*

*I crave for more.*

*My loneliness has become a pain of the past,*

*my sadness drowned in the overflowing river of your affection.*

*We will fly among the birds in the eternal sky,  
far from the mundane and close to the guiding stars.*

*If you ever miss your home,  
I will take you back, and if you ask me if I miss mine,  
I will tell you this: "I was homeless until I found you."*

He opened his eyes.

"Allah! Allah!" the women under the trees said, clapping for him. He nodded, giving them a look that said he was accustomed to such praise.

"That was lovely," Youmna said.

"This next one is called 'The Day I Knew I was in Love with a Woman who Didn't Love Me but I Loved her Nonetheless in Bitter Torment.'"

Wassim accompanied us on our walks up and down Hamra Street. As we walked in and out of clothing stores and browsed bookshops, drank mango juice at a fruit stall, ate ice cream and hamburgers at Wimpy's, and sneered at the intellectuals sipping espresso at Café Paris and the Horseshoe, Wassim always had his eyes on Youmna.

"I want you to discover Beirut through my eyes," Youmna told him. As my heart was about to break, she turned to me. "That goes for you, too."

We walked down the Corniche and ate grilled corn by the sea, watching the waves crash into the Pigeon Rocks. We sneaked into the wooded grounds of the American University and explored the souks downtown, where we listened to a hakawati, and watched a film at the Rivoli. The streets were busier and more packed than I could recall. Brand-new hotels and residential buildings swallowed up what little space was left

in the city. Trees were sparse, the sound of birds chirping a rarity. We spotted plenty of foreigners and heard all kinds of languages: English, French, German, Spanish. Beirut was now being called the Paris of the Middle East. But one afternoon, when we headed to the southern tip of the city and accidentally found ourselves in the Shatila refugee camp, which was home to thousands of Palestinians, Beirut didn't seem like Paris to me. The area was overflowing with leaning buildings that in some cases blocked out the sun, leaving the streets in musty shadow. Trash was piled high on the pavement, picked at by wild dogs. The air smelled of sewage.

"I want to go back to Hamra," Youmna said, covering her nose and mouth.

We were lost and frightened. A veiled woman saw our confusion and said her son would lead us out. Her son had a wispy mustache and wore a kafieh around his neck. He rode his bicycle in front of us, winding his way between narrow alleyways and along streets filled with potholes, and at one point, past a flea market. At the entrance to the camp, he told us that one day soon he and his mother would return to their homeland.

"The revolution is coming," he said.

We just wanted to leave.

In Sanayeh garden, Wassim and Youmna recited their poetry to each other as I sat silent, filled with jealousy. I was desperate to kiss Youmna again.

"You're better than Gibran," Youmna told him.

"And you're better than the poetry in *The Madman and Layla*," he said.

She nudged up her glasses. "Do you have a special Layla?" she asked him.

"I'm looking at her," he said.

I pretended to have missed his comment. I had an intense desire to punch him in the face, throw him a hook that would land him on his ass. If only an Israeli jet would incinerate him.

“The titles of your poems are too long,” I told him.

“Excuse me?” he said.

“You should edit your titles.”

“Youmna told me your poetry stinks.”

I looked at Youmna. “Is he telling the truth?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry, but you’re no poet.”

“I thought—um.”

“I have a new poem for you,” Wassim told Youmna. “It’s called, ‘The Day Two Spectacled Poets Fell in Love and Left a Poor Amateur in their Wake.’ I just composed it in my head.”

“You’re a natural,” Youmna said.

“Let’s go.”

Youmna told me she’d see me later.

“Do you want to see a movie next week?” I said.

She sighed. “We’re over, Omar.”

“What do you mean?” I was dumbfounded, too shocked to register the reality of the moment. It suddenly became very difficult to breathe.

“She’s dumping you,” Wassim said.

“I thought—I thought we were in love.”

“Our love has come to an end like a setting sun,” she said.

“Nice line,” Wassim said.

“But I still love you,” I said.

“I can’t return that love. So long.” She followed Wassim out of the garden.

I sat on the bench, not feeling a part of myself, as if my soul had slipped out of my body to watch me sitting there alone.

“You look so sad,” one of the women under the trees told me.

I avoided the garden, the movie theatres, and other spots Youmna and I had frequented. Any reminder of her stung my heart. One time I saw her entering the bookshop on Hamra Street. A gut-wrenching pain shot through my body. I gasped for breath. Passersby walked around me, some turning their heads to see what my problem was.

I lost my appetite and secluded myself in my room, listening to sad songs on the radio. I found solace in Abdel Wahab.

“Why are you irritated all the time?” Mama asked me.

“I’m not,” I snapped.

I felt like the biggest failure in the world. I doubted whether I had any talent as a screenwriter. Maybe all my scripts were as bad as my poetry. I also doubted if I’d ever be a movie star. Only talented and good-looking actors made it on the big screen.

One night, I sat outside on the balcony, thinking of Youmna. The orange tips of cigarettes glowed like fireflies from the balconies. Perhaps my fellow insomniacs were also suffering from heartbreak.



I heard the front door open. It was Baba coming home late. I remained still, hoping he wouldn't notice me. But he walked out onto the balcony to smoke a cigarette. I knew where he had been. Mama did, too, though I never raised the subject with her.

“What are you doing up?” Baba asked, lighting his cigarette.

“I can't sleep.”

“Is something bothering you?”

“No.”

He set his forearms against the balustrade and looked out at the city. There was nothing for us to talk about. Ever since I had given up on the store, we had become distant. At times he looked at me with disappointment, as though I had failed him. He never referred to Mutanabi Street or to the prostitutes, which I was grateful for. He occasionally asked me about school or if I needed money. Other than that, we went our separate ways.

“Are you sure nothing's bothering you?” he said.

“I'm great.”

“You don't sound great.”

I shrugged.

“Did some girl upset you?” He tipped the ash from his cigarette and looked at me, reading my soul. “Don't get too down. You'll experience a series of heartbreaks until you meet the right woman. It's part of growing up.”

I was on the verge of mentioning Youmna, and revealing how confused I was about her. I thought she loved me. She had written poems for me. Why, then, had she left

me for someone else? What did that say about me? I missed the flash of her palms and the orangey taste of her mouth.

“I’ve been listening to a lot of Abdel Wahab,” I said.

“Like father like son,” Baba said. He began to hum an Abdel Wahab ballad, his soft voice a balm to my open wound. I hummed along like that time I sat on his shoulders as a six-year-old on Mutanabi Street. He had sung to Nisreen, who emerged on her balcony in a white dress. Perhaps she had broken his heart, and he only had the sad songs of Abdel Wahab to express his pain. Would I end up like Baba? A ballad singer who was perpetually heartbroken?

Baba flicked his cigarette onto the street. “Good night, son.”

\*

After school one day, as I sat at my desk laboring through Advanced Algebra and feeling miserable, I heard a wail from somewhere inside the house. I leaped from my chair and bumped into Mama in the hallway.

“It’s your Jidu,” she said.

We traced the wailing to the bathroom.

“Jidu, what’s wrong?” I said.

“I fell,” he screamed.

“We’re coming in,” Mama said.

Jidu was sprawled on the slippery floor, as naked as the day he was born.

“My hip,” he cried. “I broke my hip.”

“We need to get you to the hospital,” Mama urgently said. “I’ll call Halim.”

I rested Jidu's wet head on my lap and dried him off with a towel as he moaned in pain, his skin covered in goose bumps. As worried as I was for him, I couldn't help looking at his penis.

The Beast from the Middle East was nothing but a brown slug hanging from a grey bush. He was in pain, I told myself. I half expected the beast to rise to glory to prove to the world that it hadn't been slayed. Instead it recoiled to oblivion. I covered his privates with the towel.

Mama and I helped Jidu stand on his good leg and fit him in his robe. Baba arrived.

"You're going to be fine, father," he said, taking hold of Jidu. We led him step by step, his arms resting on our shoulders, into the elevator and down to the car.

The doctor chose not to operate on Jidu, considering his age. He gave him medicine for the pain and instructed Jidu to sleep on his back or on his good side, and to restrict his movements. He'd have to use a wheelchair for the next few months.

Jidu lay on his bed. "I don't understand how I slipped."

"It happens," Mama said.

Jidu looked at me with self-pity. "I want your children to know me as the warrior I've always been, not the cripple I've become."

I stood there motionless. I couldn't bear seeing him in pain. When Mama brought a bowl of chicken soup on a tray, Baba and I propped him up on his pillows.

"I'll feed you," Mama said.

“I’m not a damn baby,” Jidu yelled, and broke down into sobs, whimpering like a schoolboy.

I never thought I’d see this sight. I stroked his face. “You’re a warrior,” I said. “A legend.”

During the day, Jidu lay on the couch in the parlor. When he had to use the bathroom, we helped him up and sat him in the wheelchair.

Bathing him wasn’t easy. We sat him down on a stool placed in the middle of the bathtub. He scrubbed his hair and torso on his own, and Mama and I washed his back, legs, and feet. When it came to his privates, Mama left the bathroom. I helped him stand up as he cleaned himself between his legs.

The muscular body that village women had once peeked at from the corners of their eyes as Jidu poured water over himself had wasted away. His pectoral muscles had dissolved into swollen sacks of withered skin. He had a pasty belly and scrawny legs.

I expected to see slashes across his body, pink markings of his heroism. But his wrinkled skin was unscathed. I looked closely beneath the white fur of his chest. Nothing. His back and legs were unblemished. I didn’t have the heart to ask him about his lack of scars.

At night I heard Jidu grunting from his room. Once, when I stood outside his door, I heard him moaning ever so softly. Immersed in these moans was the name of Nadia, his shooting star.

Jidu had no appetite, and lost significant weight. His face sagged, his mouth drooped. He didn’t bother to shave and looked scraggly. He bathed himself less and less,

and started to smell. But he still wore his nylons. His thick, silver hair was held back without a strand falling loose.

He listened to the radio and watched TV with little interest. The news was dominated by the trouble in southern Lebanon. The country was split between those who supported the Palestinian cause, mainly Muslims, and those who opposed it, the Christians. The Druze leader and politician, Kamal Jumblatt, was a staunch advocate of the Palestinians. Jidu supported Jumblatt, and compared him with his own hero, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had died two years earlier in 1970. But now, Jidu had no interest in the political situation. He showed enthusiasm only when narrating stories.

“I was the most famous warrior in all of Mount Lebanon,” he told Mama and me. “One morning, I led a band of villagers down to an Ottoman checkpoint and—”

“And you fought the hulky Turk,” I said.

“I beheaded the Turk!”

“Jidu, I know the story.” Mama poked me in the shoulder.

“As I was saying,” Jidu said, and continued.

\*

In the middle of winter Jidu was able to walk on his own, but he felt pain in all areas of his body. He complained of arthritis and of losing his memory and eyesight. One day he sat outside on the balcony and caught a cold. He coughed and coughed. He developed a fever and shivered at night. We took him to the hospital for treatment. The doctor diagnosed him with pneumonia.

“It’s serious,” the doctor said.

“How serious?” Baba asked.

“Your father’s old. I’m not sure he’ll survive this.”

Jidu had survived much worse. Pneumonia was nothing compared to the battles he had fought in.

Mama, Baba, and I sat until the late evening by Jidu’s hospital bed. Baba remained overnight, sleeping in a chair. After school I met my parents at the hospital and spent interminable hours in the room, waiting for Jidu to recover.

Jidu mumbled incoherent words. More often than not, he was asleep.

One day I found my parents outside the hospital doors.

“Why aren’t you in the room?” I asked.

Baba placed his hand on my shoulder. “Your Jidu passed away earlier this morning.”

“Really?” I said. That’s all I could say, as casual as could be. I removed my satchel from my shoulder and looked to and fro. I felt lightheaded.

Mama embraced me. I lost myself in her arms.

## Intermission

The rain has finally ceased. Wind whistles through the branches of the magnolia tree. A pyramid of sodden shells lies on a tissue on Murrone's dresser. We sit on the edge of the bed.

"Oh, Gaddafi, give me more!" Anastasia yells from down the hall.

"Gaddafi?" I ask.

"It's Ibrahim," Murrone says. "He likes to pretend he's an Arab dictator in bed. The last time I had him he was Saddam Hussein. Said he'd gas me if I didn't go down on him. I went with it. Begged him for my life. He got off on it like you get off on telling me your life story. God rest your Jidu, the dirty bastard. But that Youmna girl was a bitch!"

"We were young. Broken hearts are common."

"I know all about it, Ammoura. The man I mentioned earlier?"

I nod.

"I was in love with him...I need another beer. Let me refill your glass."

Murrone puts on a coat, slips into heels, and takes my empty glass and leaves the room. I open the window, the wind wet and cold on my face. The street is empty. It's past midnight, but that usually doesn't mean anything in Beirut. The city thrives at night, its bars and nightclubs pulsing until the early hours, when the wired partygoers head to Zaatar Wa Zeit or some other café to eat warm mankoushis and meat and cheese pies and wash it all down with mint tea. Beirut has been called the party capital of the world, which seems inconceivable considering the political crisis. Clichés abound about our culture: To be Lebanese, one must have the resolve to withstand the violent vicissitudes

of politics; to be Lebanese, one has to understand that there is no time to reflect on history because history is always in the making; to be Lebanese, one must rise from the ashes like the Phoenix and embrace the preciousness of life amid so much chaos and instability and lack of twenty-four hour electricity. War is inevitable, political assassinations as certain as dawn. If today might be your last, you might as well make the best of it.

Ah Beirut, the metropolis of juxtapositions, made up of state of the art high-rises and million-dollar apartment buildings overlooking the sea and bullet-riddled buildings still standing along the borderline between east and west Beirut, a former front line during the civil war; five-star restaurants, international boutiques, and exclusive clubs, and also the shanty Palestinian refugee camps. A city whose summer heat and traffic and pollution are countered by the deep blue and soothing calm of the Mediterranean and the lush mountains looming in the distance. A city where women dress in revealing tank tops and tight jeans and others in long-sleeve blouses and dresses, not a strand of hair strewn loose from their veils. Posters of politicians, alive and dead, are plastered over city walls, car windows, and the metal grilles of shops, and banners suspended over streets show larger-than-life portraits of these men.

I prefer the Beirut of my time, when Mutanabi Street still existed. Today few people know about Mutanabi Street, certainly not the youth. If I mention it, people associate it with another Mutanabi Street located in Baghdad. That street was once known for its booksellers' market, which was destroyed by suicide bombers.

Murron returns and hands me a rum and Pepsi and a bar of Cadbury Flake. "I'm not sure if you even like Flake."



“I like all chocolate,” I say. “Thank you.” I tear open the yellow wrapper and offer her some. She shakes her head, says she prefers salty foods. I bite into the crumbly bar, flakes dissolving in my mouth.

Murron takes one of my cigarettes and lights up, blowing out smoke through the window as she sips her beer.

“Madame Hafiza and Malik are watching the news downstairs,” she says. “Apparently the army is setting up checkpoints all over Beirut. I hope they stop Badr el Din and figure out who the hell he really is.”

Checkpoints are not uncommon. The army often stops men with big beards. That’s why Ayda insists that Nadim keep his facial hair neatly trimmed.

“If I had another citizenship I’d leave this country for good,” Murron says.

I’ve heard that line a thousand times.

Murron smokes her cigarette down to the filter and flicks the butt into the courtyard. She closes the window, pulls up a chair next to mine, and says that when she was sixteen she was in love with Saladin Jaber, who ran a small DVD store in the main square. It was his cousin’s store, but he managed it by himself, selling pirated DVDS of films from all around the world, though most were Hollywood pictures.

“I fell in love with film before I fell in love with Saladin,” Murron tells me. Since his DVDs were cheap, she bought them by the handful. They came in flimsy plastic sleeves and were often defective or poor quality. Nonetheless, she’d stay up throughout the night watching one film after the other with her younger brothers, cracking pumpkin seeds and drinking her father’s nonalcoholic beer that tasted like apple cider. Her brothers loved action films. She preferred historical epics.

Saladin was eighteen, and looked nothing like the men in the village. He was painfully skinny, and had a slightly hunched back. His limbs were long and wiry; villagers compared him to an insect. He had copper-colored hair and bluish-grey eyes, and was as pale as goat milk. His parents had named him after the great Kurdish warrior famous for fighting off the Crusaders. Unfortunately, Saladin looked more like his namesake's adversary, Richard the Lionheart. He wore a black leather jacket with silver buckles. He loved the jacket—it became his second skin—and thought it made him look “Hollywood.”

“You must understand something, Ammoura,” Murrone says. “Saladin wasn't your typical Shiite man from the south. My village was filled with Hezbollah soldiers. You could always spot them by their buzz cuts and beards and the way they walked with their chests puffed out. For one, Saladin had a sunken chest. But two, he couldn't care less for Hezbollah or Allah or martyrdom. All he cared about was film. He thought he'd make a great film critic. When he advertised DVDs to me, his eyes would brighten and he'd go on and on about the plot. He'd even act out scenes for me.

“I don't want to give away the ending,” he once told me, “but in a critical scene in *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson is on the execution block. His wrists and ankles are tied down. A masked executioner has carved up his torso with medieval hooks and curved knives. In his palm he clenches a piece of embroidered cloth his dead wife gave him. There's a dirty peasant crowd watching, hungry for blood. The King of England is lying on his deathbed up in the castle, coughing up phlegm. His beautiful daughter-in-law, a French princess played by Sophie Marceau, stands by the window, her heart in pieces over what's about

to happen to the Scottish warrior, her secret lover. Sir William Wallace has only one thing left to say before he gets the axe; it's the last word of his life. Guess what he says?

“‘I love you!’

“‘That’s three words. But no. He says, ‘Freeeeedom!!!’”

“‘Freedom from what?’

“‘The English occupation.’”

“‘Fucking Brits.’

“Saladin stepped back, horrified.

“‘I’ve never heard a veiled woman swear before,’ he said. ‘Where’d you learn how to speak like that?’

“‘I waved my hand to encompass his cramped store. ‘R-Rated films are the best.’

“‘He grinned. ‘Fucking Brits.’”

It wasn't long before Saladin began to visit Murrone at the Smoke 'em Both Café. He'd sit alone at a plastic table smoking a hookah and drinking tea. He didn't care to shoot the flying discs; he despised the deafening crack of the rifles and couldn't relate to the shooters, who cheered every time a disc was hit. But one afternoon, as Murrone was serving him a plate of fried halloumi cheese with tomatoes and olives, he repeated Sir William Wallace's wedding vows from *Braveheart*: “I will love thee and no other for the rest of my life.”

She placed the plate on his table, her hand trembling, and whispered: “And I thee, and no other, for the rest of my life.”

Reenacting scenes from *Braveheart* became a favorite pastime of theirs, she says. Saladin would also ride by her house on his scooter. In the early hours of the night she

snuck out and climbed behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist and they were gone, up the winding road and into the arid hills. She loosened her veil, freeing her black hair in the rush of wind. Saladin parked his scooter in a grove of olive trees where in the distance beyond the farming plains, lights flickered on Israeli mountaintops. They sat under the silver trees, and as jackals howled in the valley, they had their first kiss.

“When you were describing your kiss with Youmna,” Murrone tells me, “I was reminded of my kisses with Saladin.”

As she kissed Saladin, she says, she realized she was French kissing, and was baffled at how automatic it was, how seemingly natural. Her eyes were closed, and she also didn't remember closing them. She opened them and saw Saladin with his eyes closed, lost in the rapture of a kiss. He looked so handsome. She didn't want to close her eyes, for the kiss was too wondrous not to savor it with open eyes, but their kissing called for it, demanded it, as if to tell them that a kiss was only possible when they were momentarily cut off from the world, that nothing mattered except for the kiss and the synchrony of their lips, tongues, and jaws, the exchange of their breath and saliva in sweet darkness. A kiss was deservedly selfish in that way.

From that point on, Murrone developed a taste for romantic dramas.

Murrone and Saladin got engaged and planned to marry when Murrone turned eighteen. But a summer war ruined their plans.

As Hezbollah and Israel battled in the fields and bombed each other, Murrone and her family remained at home, their windows covered with sandbags. Since the electricity was cut, they lit kerosene lamps and sat together in the living room, praying and biting on

their nails. Whenever the sonic booms of Israeli jets tore through the sky, they feared their time had come. Her youngest brother once wet himself.

They all found comfort in Saladin, who came over every day with a charged laptop on which he played a DVD. They sat together in a tight semi-circle, Murrone and her two brothers and parents and Saladin, the laptop propped on a coffee table like a deity, coloring their faces in bluish light.

“One night, as my family was sleeping,” Murrone says, “I tiptoed out of the house. Saladin came by on his scooter and drove us to our spot in the olive grove. We hadn’t kissed in days, and so we were greedy with our tongues. I let him feel my breasts. But when we returned home....”

She stands up from the chair and looks out the window. In the reflection of the beaded panes, I see her face nearly crumble.

“The house was in flames,” she says. “At least they died instantly. No suffering. It’s better that way, you know?”

“God rest them,” I say. I ask about Saladin.

“I broke things off,” she says. “Every time I saw his face or smelled the leather of his jacket, I lost it. I didn’t blame him for anything. I blamed myself. I shouldn’t have left the house.”

“But then you wouldn’t be here.”

“I wouldn’t be a whore, now would I?”

“Don’t use that word, Murrone.”

“I meant prostitute,” she says. “Or is sex worker better?”

I don't respond. I wonder what she was like before she lost her family in the bombing, about to get married and filled with romantic notions.

She comes over to my chair, leans in, and massages my crotch, her fingers grazing my testicles.

I hold her hand, my heart racing.

"Don't you want to fuck me?" she says, and slips off her coat. It falls to the floor. I caress her breasts, feeling the silk of her camisole, rubbing my thumb over her plump mole. I pull her in, pressing my face between her breasts, smelling her perfume. She strokes the back of my head. I look up. Her eyes are tired.

If I sleep with her I'll just become another one of her clients, and as soon as I leave, she'll wash my scent from her skin. She'll wash me away from her thoughts. I haven't felt this way in years, not since I was eighteen. She won't understand this unless she hears the rest of my story. But I want to leave my story for another night. It will give me something to look forward to, to live for.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," I say.

She picks up her coat from the floor and hangs it in the closet, slips off her heels, and returns to bed, covering herself with the wool blanket. I put on my coat and wrap my scarf around my neck. I leave a hundred-dollar bill for a tip on her dresser. I approach the bed, kneeling to kiss her cheek. She pulls back.

My hand is on the doorknob when she calls out my name. I turn around.

"Be careful walking home," she says. "Badr el Din might be out there."

All is silent at home. I shower and change into cotton pajamas. Ayda is asleep. I lie on my side of the bed, my hands behind my head. Bluish moonlight pours in from the rain-spattered window. I can still feel Murrón's mole on my fingertips and the softness of her breasts. As I was leaving the Candlelight, I told Madame Hafiza I'd like Murrón for tomorrow. She said Murrón was booked for the early evening, but that I could have her later in the night.

"I'd like her for the entire night," I said. "I'll pay as much as you want."

"I can't keep canceling Murrón's other appointments," she said. "You'll have to wait."

I wonder if Murrón has told her stories to any of her clients. Do they also know about Saladin Jaber? About the Smoke 'em Both café? About her love for film?

I wake up later than usual and dress for work. As I knot my tie in front of the dresser mirror, I imagine that Murrón is still fast asleep. She probably won't wake up until noon or later. I should buy her DVDs. Historical epics filled with romance.

In the kitchen, Ayda is seated at the table drinking a cup of Nescafé as she reads from her laptop. Mama is in the parlor watching a morning news program. My daughter Loulwa is at IC, where she's a sophomore, and Nadim is down at AUB.

"Good morning," I say.

Ayda looks up from her laptop. She stares at me for a moment, and then returns to her work. I make myself a cup of Nescafé, adding powdered milk and sugar, and join her at the table.

She types and then sits back in her chair, her chin in her hand. She wears a cardigan over a blouse and loose jeans.

I'm proud of Ayda. She's completing a Master's Degree in Education at the Lebanese University, and in the fall will begin her PhD. I offered to pay her tuition so that she could attend the American University, which is more prestigious, but she said she preferred to pursue her degree through public education. When it comes to her own endeavors, she rejects my help.

I have a feeling that a few years from now, once our children are done with university, Ayda will leave me. By then she'll have her PhD and no reason to stay. I can't blame her for that.

We've been married for over twenty years. We married in the late '80s when I was sunk in the deepest of depressions.

"Marriage is the cure for you," Mama had told me. "You're thirty-two. It's time."

Mama began making calls to the mothers of bachelorettes, setting up appointments. She implored me not to mention anything about the Shooting Star or Mutanabi Street in our conversations with these women.

"I can't describe my life without mentioning Mutanabi Street," I said.

Mama clenched her jaw. "Keep your mouth shut."

In the evenings, when I returned home from work, I often found Mama speaking to a mother and her daughter in the parlor.

"Omar, come and meet our lovely guests," she'd say.

Invariably, the potential bride was Druze.

On a few other occasions, Mama dragged me to the homes of the bachelorettes for tea. I was never responsive with the young women or their mothers. I remained silent, as if I were too shy to speak.



“No mother will wed her daughter to a mute,” Mama told me. “You have to be confident in yourself. You’re an AUB graduate; a successful banker; and you own land in Kornayel.”

One Sunday morning, I drove Mama up to Kornayel to visit her family. After having breakfast with my grandparents and a late lunch with my uncles, Mama said she had one final visit to make.

I met Ayda on that visit, which was Mama’s intention. Ayda was a sweet, fairly attractive young woman who had recently finished her university studies. When she pulled up her sleeves to serve the tea, I glimpsed her thick forearms and stubby hands. But as soon as she said she enjoyed watching films, I became more interested in her. I appreciated her effort to converse with me, even though she was shy.

Ayda had worn a brown dress with puffy sleeves and big buttons. It was a ridiculously outdated dress that one only found in the village souks. She had spent her entire life in Kornayel, and apparently knew about the world through the films she had seen. She had never walked along the sea. I soon discovered that she had been desperate to leave home. Marriage was the only way of gaining independence from her family, who watched over her every move. She craved privacy, which I gave her.

Mama and I paid a few more visits to Ayda’s. Mama insisted I ask for her hand.

“I don’t want to marry,” I said.

“You *have* to. It’s only right. Everyone in Kornayel knows that you’ve been speaking with Ayda. If you don’t marry her, you’ll shame her and her family.”

Ayda and I celebrated our wedding at a fancy hotel in Broumana, a mountaintop village overlooking the sea.

“How’s your dissertation coming along?” I ask her.

She sips her coffee.

“I can read it over if you’d like,” I say.

“Stop it,” she says.

“I was only trying to help.”

“You don’t get it,” she says. “You never have. You only look back at the past.

The past is dead.”

“I love you all,” I say.

“Save that love for your friends, those whores.” She tells me that I like the idea of family but I don’t know how to be in one. “Don’t you realize what you’ve put us through with your filthy habits?”

“I’m sorry, Ayda. I don’t mean any harm.” I fear that my words ring false or sound ridiculous, but I speak from the heart.

“Please, I need to work,” Ayda says.

Mama comes into the kitchen. “How’s the writing, ya Doctora?” she asks Ayda.

Ayda smiles. “I’m not a doctor, Auntie. Not until I have my PhD.”

Mama doesn’t bother to greet me. I’m not offended. It’s part of her routine. She wears rimless glasses and a sweater over slim, black pants. She teaches Arabic part-time at a language center. She also practices yoga three times a week at a downtown studio.

“On the news they’re saying to expect more bombs,” Mama says. “We’re going to be dragged into the civil war in Syria. As if this country hasn’t suffered enough.”

“Then let’s all move to Europe,” Ayda says. “Maybe Paris.”

“You can teach at the Sorbonne!”

“I like this plan. C’est bon, n’est-ce pas?”

The plan surely doesn’t include me. I’m a bad husband and father, a bad son.

I rinse my mug in the sink.

Mama asks Ayda what she’d like for dinner.

“You cooked last night,” Ayda says. “Don’t trouble yourself again.”

“You’ve been saying that for as long as I’ve known you, habibti. When will you understand that it’s my pleasure.”

I stand at the entrance of the kitchen. “Goodbye,” I say.

They both ignore me.

My workday can’t pass any slower. I’m the branch manager of Bank Byblos in Hamra. I’m still surprised at my success, considering I never did well in business at AUB. But it’s not through my banking acumen that I’ve reached my current status. It’s simply a product of time.

I drink tea with honey to soothe my throat, and keep looking at my watch, longing to return to Murrone. I answer emails, take an international conference call, meet two prominent clients, and with Antoine by my side, interview another candidate for the position of assistant chief financier.

I leave in the early evening, holding my umbrella. Light rain falls like glitter. An army truck is parked on the main avenue. The soldiers sit in the back under a green canvas, their M-16s in hand. Few people are walking the streets. Their faces are stern, even frightened. Any car driving along might be booby-trapped.

I stop at a DVD store and buy several films. As I'm leaving, I see a man in a black trench coat standing at the corner, staring at me. It's him.

"Hey!" I say.

He turns away and walks up the street.

I cross the street, but by the time I'm at the corner, Badr el Din is gone.

I eat a quick dinner at a crepes stall, and when the time comes, return to the Candlelight. Malik makes my drink and I walk upstairs to Murrone's room. I knock on her door. No answer. I knock again, and again. The door is cracked open. Red light spills out.

"Good evening," I say.

Mascara is streaked down her face.

I step back. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe tonight's not a good night. I'm sorry, Omar."

Omar, not Ammoura. Has she changed this quickly overnight?

"I brought you a gift," I say, holding up the plastic bag of DVDs.

"Many do," she says.

She knows how to break my heart.

"Please, let me in. I'll just sit in the chair."

She opens the door. She wears a black chemise. The room smells like men's cologne. I place my glass on the windowsill and lay the gift on the floor, propped against the chair leg. I hang up my coat and sit down.

Murrone stands by the window, looking out.

"He's not out there," I say.

She doesn't respond.

"Why don't you put on a sweater? You'll get cold."

"I'm old enough to do as I please."

I take a sip of my drink, trying to lessen the hurt spreading through me. I hate the smell in the air. Whatever's bothering her, she still hasn't acquired the skill of masking her emotions like more seasoned prostitutes.

"We don't have to do anything," I say.

She stares at me. "You're a married man like the rest of them."

"I'm different, Murrone."

"The last man I had, do you know what he did to me?" She curls her hands into fists. I stand up, wanting to take her into my arms. "No! Sit, please sit." I sit back down. "I'm just, I don't know, I can't take this for much longer." She smells her arms. "My God, I still smell like him. I need to clean up."

She leaves me for a while, and returns with the mascara washed off her face. She sprays herself with perfume.

"So what did you bring me?" she says.

I give her the bag. She opens it, her eyes widening. She flips through the DVDs. "Oh I've seen *Gladiator* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, but not *Rob Roy* or *A New World*." She looks at me. "Thank you. Come, let me show you something."

I follow her to the closet. She opens the double doors and points at two big cardboard boxes stuffed with DVDs. I'm impressed.

"They're all counterfeit," she says.

Other than her clothes, her DVDs seem to be her only possessions.

She reaches for the back of her head, wincing.

“Let me see,” I say.

“No, please.”

“You can trust me.”

She turns around. I rest my hands on her shoulders and look down at her head.

She tells me that she used to have thick, glossy hair before she started working here. I find a small bald spot.

“He yanked out my hair as he was taking me from behind,” she says, her shoulders trembling. “He kept on pumping me until he was done, ignoring my screams.” She turns into me. “Do you know what he said after he came? This married man who drives a fancy car and thinks he owns half of Beirut? He said that he loved me.”

I sit back down in my chair and sip my drink. I’m the biggest fool in the world. How could I be so naïve?

“What about your story?” Murrone says. “We left off with the death of your grandfather.”

I remain quiet.

“Aren’t you blue? Isn’t that why you tell your story?”

She feels nothing for me. Or is this part of her act?

“Do you really want me to continue?” I ask.

She nods. I go back in time to the summer of 1974.

## Act Two

## A Destined Heir

At eighteen I had a springy afro that swayed easily in the direction of the wind. My sideburns were long and thick. I even had a mustache, a real mustache, not grandmother whiskers. It was bushy like Jidu's, and in remembrance of him, I curled the edges into half-moons.

I wore tight shirts and bellbottom jeans. I had no interest in the politics of being a hippie, or in politics in general. The Vietnam War and concepts such as love and peace meant nothing to me. I was only interested in the hippie look, much like the rest of my classmates.

Mama was repulsed by my fro, and said I had been corrupted by the West.

"It's from all the films you see," she said, giving me a stern look. "They have sex and do drugs in the West. Is that what you intend to do?"

I reminded her that *she* was the one who had taken me to see *Doctor Zhivago*.

One day, Mama entered my room while I was finishing up my homework and said she needed to talk. She was clenching her jaw, a recent tic. Her health wasn't in the best condition. She was taking pills for high blood pressure and cholesterol.

"I don't want you fooling around with women," she said.

I returned to my homework. This wasn't a conversation I was having.

"Listen to me," she said. "In the fall you'll be at university. I've heard people are different there, too liberal, even radical. Remember what happened in spring?"



I remembered the story. It had been all over the news. In protest of a ten percent increase in tuition for the following academic year, students at AUB went on strike. They occupied buildings and stood guard at all university gates, and stood from balconies pumping their fists and screaming: “Viva la revolucion!” The administration had been forced to suspend the semester. Eventually, heavily armed security forces stormed the campus and overtook the occupied buildings; the protestors were handcuffed and thrown into the backs of trucks, where they were kept overnight in prison. A hundred and three student activists were expelled.

“Who knows what the women are like,” Mama continued. “They may be—they may be loose.”

It was true that sex had been on my mind. I was now old enough to have legal sex with a prostitute. Many of the guys in my class had been taken by their fathers to Mutanabi Street on their eighteenth birthdays for a red-lit coronation of adulthood. I wondered if any had visited Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love. But I had no interest in sleeping with a prostitute, not after what had happened to me at Marwa’s Muse. She’d only remind me of my shame.

\*

I was admitted to the business school at the American University. I wanted to major in film, but film wasn’t offered as a major. Besides, Mama never would have let me pursue such a degree. She wanted me to be a businessman, an engineer, or a doctor.

I chose business because I couldn’t imagine building things or repairing human bodies. Baba said business wasn’t a bad option.

“Especially if you’d like to run the family business someday,” he said.

I was surprised by his comment. It was rare that he referred to the Shooting Star. Truth was, I planned to move to Cairo to pursue a career in film as soon as I graduated from AUB.

I was grateful to Baba: He was going to pay my tuition. He sold his only piece of land in Ras-el-Metn, which he'd inherited from Jidu, to finance my education. This money should have gone for his retirement. I'd have to repay him somehow. I'd graduate with distinction, make plenty of money off my films, and support him and Mama. But I knew there was a shortcut to all of this, and it was simple: take over the family business.

I took the short cut. On a temporary basis, that is. It wasn't of my own volition that I returned to the Shooting Star. It was fate.

Shortly after my graduation from high school, Baba fell ill. At first he began to eat less and less at dinner, until he had no appetite at all. He came home from work exhausted and slept until the morning. He had a slight fever and sometimes vomited. Mama suggested he see a doctor, but he said he probably had the flu and would be over it soon. She made him chicken and rice soup and had him drink tea with honey. But one morning he was too weak to get out of bed. His face was yellow, which I attributed to the sunshine pouring through the window. I closed the blinds. His face remained yellow. I peered in closer: the whites of his eyes were yellow. I examined the rest of his body. His arms were yellow, his abdomen was yellow, even his feet were yellow.

We took him to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with Hepatitis A. His yellowness was jaundice.

"The only treatment for Hepatitis A is plenty of rest," the doctor said.

"How much rest?" Baba asked, too weak to sit up in the hospital bed.

“It varies from patient to patient. Could be anywhere from three to six months.”

At home, we walked Baba to the couch in the parlor. I placed a cushion against the armrest for his head and helped him stretch out his legs.

“I’m an invalid,” he said, nearly crying. I turned to Mama, hoping she’d console him.

“I’ll make you something to eat,” she said, and left the room.

I knelt to the floor, and for the first time in my life, stroked Baba’s face. I was sadly reminded of the time Jidu broke his hip. Like his father, Baba had become dependent on us.

Once Baba fell asleep, Mama said she knew who had infected Baba.

“Those women carry diseases,” she said.

I was suddenly worried for her. I remembered the story of how Jidu had infected Teta with a sexually transmitted disease. I looked into Mama’s eyes and examined her skin. She was still white.

Baba scratched his skin incessantly. He scratched his arms raw.

“You’ll peel off your skin,” Mama said, applying cream onto his arms.

“My back,” he said. “Please, scratch my back.”

We turned him over to his side. Mama applied the cream.

“My legs,” Baba said. This time, I applied the cream.

One afternoon, as Baba slept, the phone rang in the foyer.

“Who’s speaking?” Mama asked.

She hung up and returned to the parlor, clenching her jaw.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Wrong number.”

That night, the phone rang again. I ran to the phone before Mama had the chance to answer it.

“Yes, this is Omar,” I said. “Oh, hello, Nisreen...I know. He’s ill...Yes, it’s serious, but he’ll get better. The doctor said he needs plenty of bed rest....”

Mama charged up to the phone, snatched it from my hand, and hung up.

“Calm down,” I said.

“Don’t tell me to calm down! Look at what those dirty women did to your father. Now do you understand why I’m so worried about you?”

Mama was beginning to annoy me. I hadn’t left the house for the past couple of days and was feeling restless. I picked up my keys and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’m going out to see a film. Is that *okay*?”

I stepped into the elevator.

“Wait,” she said. “Do you want shishbarak for dinner?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

One morning, I sat in Jidu’s leather armchair, reading over my script, a horror flick inspired by *The Exorcist*. Mama had gone out to do some grocery shopping.

“I can’t go on like this,” Baba said from the couch. “I need to return to the store.”

I looked up from my script. “You’re too weak to stand up.”

“I can’t leave the store closed indefinitely. I’ll lose business.”

I knew how to console him. “Nisreen asked about you.”

“When?” he said, pulling himself up on the couch to see me better.

“She called a few days ago. Actually, they’ve been calling every day, but Mama hangs up on them.”

“That’s not a surprise. Nisreen must be worried about me. Help me up.”

He held onto my arm as he shuffled to the foyer. He picked up the phone and dialed a number by heart. “Bandar, it’s me....”

At one point in the conversation, he gave directions to our house. When he was done, he asked to go to his bedroom. He collapsed on the bed.

In the late afternoon, we received the most unlikely of visitors: Crazy Giant.

“Chief!” he said. “You’ve grown an afro!”

He embraced me, lifting me off my feet and sucking me into his belly, and gave me three smacking kisses on my cheeks. He had a double chin and his black hair was still long, reaching down to his waist. He wore a sleeveless T-shirt and bellbottom jeans, his snake leather boots scuffed at the tips. His massive biceps were tanned. When Mama saw him, she gasped.

“Hello, Madame,” he said. “I’m a friend of Halim’s.”

Halim, I thought, not Halloumi. Crazy Giant was being careful with his words.

We all went into the bedroom. Baba was still asleep. I nudged him awake. He opened his eyes and smiled.

“Thanks for coming,” he said.

“Anything for you,” Crazy Giant said.

Mama and I gave them their privacy.

“I wonder who he is,” she said. “He looks very strange.”

I didn't give her details. She'd only get upset. She returned to the bedroom and offered Crazy Giant a glass of lemonade mixed with orange-blossom water and a plate of apricots and cherries.

“He needs meat,” Baba said, rejuvenated. “Fry him some steaks.”

I was somewhat dampened by Baba's improved mood. Neither my or Mama's company was enough to invigorate him.

Mama fried steaks, working up a sweat in the steamy kitchen. Crazy Giant joined Mama and me at the dinner table.

“Looks great,” he said, licking his lips. He inhaled several slices of steak as though fearing they'd disappear, chewing down on the fatty edges, his chin slick with meat juice. Recognizing that his appetite had only been whetted, Mama brought out leftover lentils and rice, which he gobbled up. His shirt stuck to his chest in sweat. A mosquito feasted on his bicep.

“I can fry you some eggs, too,” she said.

Crazy Giant smiled.

She fried a dozen eggs, which, with no embarrassment, he ate with bread. When he finally sat back and rested his hands over his belly, Mama sighed with relief. She wiped her brow and asked him where he worked. I was worried about his response. Once Mama knew the truth, she'd change her attitude toward him.

“I work at a bar in downtown,” he said. “That's how I know Halim.”

“Where in downtown?”

“Far from Halim's store.”

Baba must have given him instructions for conversing with Mama.

Later, while Mama was bathing, Baba told me he gave Crazy Giant the keys to the store. Crazy Giant and Bandar's girls had volunteered to look after the Shooting Star until he got better.

"I should be back in a few weeks," he said. "I plan to prove the doctor wrong."

I wondered why he was confiding in me.

\*

Baba still felt weak after a month. He was increasingly frustrated at his inability to perform daily functions on his own. Mama helped him with every task, from providing him a hand as he walked up and down the hallway to bathing him at night.

"Aren't you tired?" I once asked her. I myself was tired. I had to get up during the night to help Baba to the bathroom or fetch him a glass of water, or apply cream to his skin when it itched.

"It's my duty to look after your father," Mama told me. "He's my husband until death."

One day, while Mama was out visiting Lamya the wet-nurse, Baba posed a proposition to me. We were seated in the parlor, me in Jidu's chair and he on the couch. The windows and sliding glass door to the balcony were open, but not a single breeze blew through. The summer heat hung in the room like a burden, buzzing with mosquitoes.

"It may be a while before I'm able to return to work," he said. "It's not fair to Crazy Giant or Bandar's girls to have them run the store when they're already busy. Sometimes they don't get off work until four or five o'clock in the morning."

Crazy Giant had been visiting us regularly. He'd hand Baba an envelope containing the earnings and stay over for lunch.

In the sweltering parlor, Baba continued: "If I could afford to hire a temporary replacement, I would. We're barely breaking even, and I need to pay the bills, including the one for the hospital."

Baba paused to catch his breath. I knew exactly where this dreadful conversation was headed. I slapped a mosquito on my sticky forearm.

"You have all this free time on your hands," Baba continued. "Since you plan on majoring in business, wouldn't you like to gain some firsthand experience in running a business?"

"Not necessarily," I said. I wished Baba would just fall back asleep.

"I was wondering if you'd do me a favor," he said, and breathed deeply. "How about running the Shooting Star this summer?"

He had posed his request as if it were as innocuous as asking me to buy him a Pepsi from the neighborhood grocery store. He knew of my aversion to the Shooting Star. But most startlingly, he knew of the complications it would cause with Mama, between them both and between us, mother and son. She'd have a fit, which wasn't good for her health. And still, despite this, he asked me.

"I'll guide you through it and teach you all I know," he said. "I'll even have Crazy Giant help you out for the first couple of days."

"What about Mama?" I said.

"I'll speak to her. What about you?"



I wasn't sure if I could face the prostitutes. The pleading look on Baba's yellowish face was insufferable. He was more weak and vulnerable than I had ever seen him.

I was suffocating from the heat and the stench of illness.

"I'll do it," I said.

I stepped out onto the balcony and inhaled hot air, which only made me feel worse.

As soon as Mama returned, I went out to see *Enter the Dragon* for the fourth time. The iciness of the theatre was a welcome distraction, as was Bruce Lee kicking ass. On my way out, reality hit me with the heat. I regretted accepting Baba's proposition.

I became more relaxed when I thought of Mama: She'd never allow me to carry through with the plan. Her resolve would be too strong for Baba to break. He'd have to find an alternative.

At home, I found Mama and Baba seated quietly in the parlor.

"We were waiting for you," Baba said.

I sat down.

"I've explained things to your mother," Baba continued. "She understands our dire situation."

Mama's jaw was clenched.

"You'll work at the store under the condition that you return home before dark," Baba said. "You're not to venture down the street or into any of the houses. Is that understood?"

“Yes.”

Mama’s resolve, I sadly discerned, had been broken. I wondered if she had even put up a fight. But Mama never fought or argued with Baba. She obeyed him.

Baba continued: “You’re not to speak to any of the women, unless it involves a transaction; and even then, you’re to refrain from opening conversation. Once school starts, you’ll give up your duties, even if I’m not fit to return to work. At that point, I’ll have to figure something else out.”

Once Baba fell asleep, Mama ushered me into the kitchen.

“Don’t think I’m happy about this,” she said, pacing the room.

“Neither am I.”

“Then why did you agree to work?”

“I couldn’t reject him. Just look at him.”

“You have to be stronger, Omar!”

“But he’s sick!”

“There must be an alternative,” she said. “I can knit, but I don’t think that would bring in much money. Lamyia already services the neighborhood in that area. I’d have to work from home, so that I could look after your Baba. Maybe I can be an Arabic tutor. I’ve always loved Arabic literature.”

There were no alternatives. My parents didn’t dare touch my tuition money.

“I’ll support the family,” I said.

\*

I awoke early on my first day of work. Mama fried eggs for breakfast and prepared me sandwiches for lunch. I was too anxious to eat.

I dressed in a collared shirt and slacks and patent leather shoes. As Baba insisted, I splashed my face with Bien-être. He had given me numerous instructions the night before for running the store, which I wrote down on a pad. Crazy Giant would assist me for the first few days.

Before I left, Mama reminded me of the rules of engagement.

I drove Baba's Beetle to Mutanabi Street. Sunshine gilded the iron balustrades and reflected off the burning hoods of parked cars. All was calm and silent, the heat bearable at this hour. Crazy Giant was drinking coffee at Elvis' stall.

"Is that Halloumi's son?" Elvis asked Crazy Giant, standing on his footstool. "I recognize the big nose."

"It's me," I said, and knelt down to kiss him.

"My God, Omar! That's one impressive afro. The girls will like it."

I figured Elvis dyed his hair black because his pompadour didn't have a single grey hair. His face was beginning to sag with age. His suspenders held up khaki bellbottoms.

Crazy Giant yawned, his eyes swollen with sleepiness. "I need a second cup. I barely slept last night."

Elvis made us both a cup of Turkish coffee, bringing it thrice to a boil. The thick, sugary sludge mixed with cardamom shot right through my blood.

"Welcome home, my son," Elvis told me.

Crazy Giant and I headed over to the Shooting Star. He handed me the keys. I pulled up the grille and unlocked the front door. He then gave me a cloth purse filled with

the weekend earnings. I counted the amount and recorded it in the accounts book and placed it in the till. We sat behind the register.

“I had a rough night,” Crazy Giant said. “There’s this client named Jawad—he’s a nice guy, but a pain in the ass when drunk. He works at the port. When he’s not drunk, he tells me many interesting stories.”

Jawad, Crazy Giant said, was working the forklift one night when he saw young men whom he didn’t recognize unloading crates from a Soviet freighter and stacking them onto the beds of trucks. A man in a polyester suit supervised them, smoking a cigar. When the man noticed Jawad, he walked up to him and told him to get back to work. His Arabic had a Spanish lilt to it. He wore cowboy boots with spurs.

“You’re not my manager,” Jawad said.

The man pulled out a revolver from his holster and cocked back the hammer. Jawad returned to work.

“What was inside the crates?” I asked.

“Probably Kalashnikovs and Katyusha rockets.”

The men were Christian, Crazy Giant said, in all likelihood members of the political party, Kataib.

These kinds of stories revealed a side of Beirut that frightened me. In our neighborhood, whether at the stationary store, the butcher’s, the baker’s, the grocer’s, or at the French patisserie, rumors spread of kidnappings, murders, and car bombings that weren’t always reported on the news. It was assumed that those targeted either supported the Palestinian cause or opposed it. But it was so easy to ignore these rumors as I walked the streets and admired the endless cafés, movie theatres, and clothing stores, the glitzy

hotels and beach resorts, and as I took note of all the European tourists and the Beirutis who strolled down the avenues without a care in the world, the men decked out in buttoned-down shirts and bellbottoms and the women now sporting tight miniskirts that set my heart aflame.

“Jawad caused a lot of trouble last night, more than usual,” Crazy Giant continued. “He was upstairs with Farah—do you remember Farah?”

“Um, is she the small one?”

“That’s Zeina. Farah is the fat one. Jawad prefers his women chunky. He also likes it rough, a bit too rough. He started choking her, so Farah poked him in the eye. He let go of her and she ran down the stairs, naked, and told Bandar and me what happened. I left the bar and went up to Farah’s room and found Jawad pulling on his jeans. He was blinking wildly. He promised he wasn’t trying to hurt her. I pulled on his wrist and dragged him out of the theatre. Good thing he wasn’t in a fighting mood. Or else—”

“Or else you would have knocked him out with your left hook,” I said, remembering his boxing history.

“That’s right, Chief.” Crazy Giant patted the register. “Let me teach you how to use this thing.”

By noon, Mama had already called three times.

“Did anyone harass you?” she asked on the first call.

“No. Everything’s fine.”

“Please don’t upset me,” she said on the second call.

The third time, I told her she had to trust me and stop calling. After I hung up, I realized I was hungry. So was Crazy Giant. We ate chocolate bars. I offered him sandwiches.

“That won’t be enough. I’ll get us food from home.”

Crazy Giant returned with Bandar and her girls. They swarmed around me.

“Look at your afro!” Farah said. She placed a pot of green peas with minced meat and rice on the counter next to the register.

“Nice mustache.”

“He’s so tall.”

“His eyes are still sad.”

“I hear you’re attending AUB in the fall.”

“Mon chéri, why did you ignore us for all these years?” It was Diala, the Palestinian belly dancer with the raspy voice. She hadn’t aged, or maybe I was too awestruck to see any change for the worse. Her big, black eyes were lined with kohl. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse and miniskirt. A white silver bracelet hung across the edge of her palm.

“I was busy,” I said. I looked down, fearing I’d lose my calm if I continued to stare at her.

“How’s your father?” Nisreen asked. The roots of her dyed hair were grey. Her wrinkles were more pronounced. “We’re all so worried about him.”

“He’s still weak,” I said. “But he’s on his way to recovery.”

“If there’s anything you need,” Bandar said, “you know where to find us.”

Her silver-black hair was in a chignon. Despite the heat, she wore a long-sleeve black dress. Her furry upper lip glimmered in sweat. I stared at the prickly mole on the edge of her chin, a blemish eager to leap off her face.

“Make sure Crazy Giant doesn’t eat the whole pot of food,” Farah said.

I thought of asking her if she was feeling better from last night, but refrained from commenting.

Later that afternoon, several more prostitutes from other brothels came in to ask about Baba. They filled the store with the smell of perfume and strutted about in high heels.

“I guess we’ll be seeing more of you,” Yasmina from the House of Blondes said. “If I need anything from the store, I’ll lower my basket and call out your name.”

“Sure.”

“I like your afro. If you want me to dye it blond, just come over.”

Ayesha, the Black Goddess of Mutanabi Street, came in to buy Turkish Delights and a Pepsi, preceded by the tinkling sound of her silver jewelry. I opened bottles for her and me and Crazy Giant. She wore a purple turban and matching sleeveless dress and leather sandals, her arms ringing with bangles. As we sipped on our icy sodas, she said one of the girls at Aunt Roula’s left in the middle of the night after claiming to have seen Aunt Roula’s ghost as she was giving a client a blowjob.

“Jamila was down on her knees and bobbing her head,” Ayesha said, “the client’s feet spread apart, when she says Aunt Roula slid between the client’s legs on her back and cried, ‘Sucky Sucky!’ Jamila screamed and ran out of the brothel. The client thought

something was wrong with his cock. I had to come in and tell him his cock was beautiful and that I'd finish him off. He said he didn't take head from blacks."

"Next time I see the client I'll scalp him for you," Crazy Giant said.

I asked Ayesha what Aunt Roula's ghost looked like.

"Jamila said Aunt Roula was in her bridal gown and that her face was wrinkled and her eyes as yellow as the sun. They say Aunt Roula was married for thirty-six hours. Her poor husband was killed while crossing a street—hit by a trolley, back when trolleys were still used in the city. He had gone out to buy croissants for breakfast. Aunt Roula was still petrified over having lost her virginity when someone knocked on her door to give her the news. She never married again...But I don't believe in ghosts."

I was surprised at how comfortable I felt interacting with the prostitutes. As the day progressed, few customers came in. I sold a pack of cigarettes to one man and a kilo of almonds to another.

"Some days are slower than others," Crazy Giant explained.

During a lull in the afternoon, I asked Crazy Giant about Marwa's Muse, feeling a pull at my stomach.

"It closed down. Wasn't making enough money. Madame Marwa and all her girls moved up north. Who knows, they might start another red-light district in Jounieh."

I finally felt relieved.

Crazy Giant became dour. "I hope the same doesn't happen to our home. Bandar tells us not to worry, but all the brothels are losing money."

Toward the end of the day, Zeina, the small, boyish-looking one with short hair combed to the side, came in. She wore a T-shirt and bellbottom jeans over Converse



high-tops. If she didn't live on Mutanabi Street, I thought, it would be virtually impossible to tell that she was a prostitute. She was sucking on her finger.

"How's work?" she asked.

"Not bad," Crazy Giant said.

"I wasn't asking *you*."

"I'm enjoying it," I said. "I like your shoes. I've got the same pair."

She smiled. "We've got good taste."

"Did you bite off your nail again?" Crazy Giant asked Zeina.

"Mmhm," she said. Although she was in her early twenties, she looked much younger than me. I felt more mature in her presence.

I found a Band-Aid in the drawer, opened it, and wrapped it around her finger. A spot of blood stained the center padding. Most of her fingernails had been chewed down.

"Kiss it for me," she said.

I kissed her bandaged finger.

"I've been biting my nails since I was a little girl," she told me. "Even bite my toenails. I'm very flexible." She stepped back from the register, rolling up her sleeves.

"Wait till you see this," Crazy Giant told me.

Zeina interlaced her fingers and extended her arms, forming a loop, and stretched it behind her head, her shoulders rotating like oiled knobs. She then pulled on her left wrist and draped her arm around her neck, tilted her head, and cupped her chin with her palm. She did the same with her other arm, and just when I thought she was about to dislocate her shoulder and I became almost too afraid to watch, she put on a show: she folded her arms behind her head in the shape of triangles, her fingers touching the

opposite shoulder; she crossed her arms behind her back, her hands creeping from opposite ends to clamp down on her ribs—it seemed as if she was armless, and that a pair of decapitated hands was crawling up and down her torso. She turned around, giving Crazy Giant and me her back, and braided her arms down her spine, resting her palms on her waist. She continued to twist and bend her arms around her body in improbable circus contortions, at one point sitting on the floor and turning her arms into a hula-hoop through which she stepped. I realized her limbs were made of rubber.

“My father, God rest him,” she said, shaking out her arms, “would smack my hand when he caught me biting on a nail. He said if my mother were still alive, she would have rubbed my nails with hot peppers.”

Zeina looked at the products on the shelves.

“You know,” she said, “I was much younger than you when I first started working. I must have been eleven or twelve.”

“Where’d you work?”

“In the city. I sang for money. And I also put on my arm show.”

“Zeina begins our shows with a song,” Crazy Giant explained.

“I’ve been singing since I can remember. My father taught me how to sing and play the lute. We sang and played together, a two-person band. The only family I had was my father. We lived in a run-down apartment not too far from here. Baba worked odd jobs, one of which was striking up tunes on his lute. We sang in all kinds of places: cafés, cheap restaurants, sometimes on the street. Baba sang about his dead wife, the mother I got to know through his lyrics. He gave me her cross, which I wear.” Zeina pulled out her silver cross and kissed it. “Baba died from a broken heart—at least that’s what I believe.

After his death I had to fend for myself. It was hard paying the rent. Lucky for me, I was discovered by Bandar. I auditioned at the theatre and was offered a place to live.”

“I still play on my father’s lute,” Zeina continued. “One time I’ll sing for you.”

“She’ll break your heart,” Crazy Giant said.

I was starving by the time I got home. I devoured stuffed eggplant as Mama sat at the table next to me and asked me, apprehensive, how my day had been.

“It was fine,” I said, downplaying my time. “Boring, actually.”

“Did any of those women try to touch you?”

“Nope.”

I was eager to speak with Baba, but he was asleep. When he woke up, he asked me about my day. Mama looked up from her knitting.

“I can’t wait till summer is over,” I said.

“That’s not a surprise,” he said, and didn’t press me further. We had communicated in a secret language that came naturally to us, one that was imperceptible to Mama. When she finally left the room, I told him the truth.

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I became adept at running the Shooting Star. I no longer needed Crazy Giant by my side, though he visited me often to chat. I discovered that I was quite attentive to details. I referred religiously to the book of inventory to check the expiration of products. The cans had to be aligned in proper columns. If there was a smudge on the storefront window or a spot of dust on the glass counter, I was quick to clean it. I made sure the backroom was spotless, and in the process, killed countless cockroaches and a mouse.

Hanging from a row of hooks were all the striped scarves with the embroidered purple fig above the fringe that Nisreen had knit for Baba. One of the scarves was mine.

I felt as if the store were my child. I had to nurture it every day, keep it clean and tidy. But not all days were fulfilling. At times I had nothing to do. I sat behind the register, sweating, and daydreamed about films. I got into the habit of doing the crossword puzzles in the local newspapers to pass the time.

Now, it was impossible to overlook the news. I read the headlines, and even a few of the articles, in the papers before I did the crossword puzzles. The headlines were invariably about the trouble in the south. Villages were being pounded by Israeli air and land strikes. Debates ensued about whether the government should send the army to the south to defend its people, thereby risking a confrontation with Israel, or crush the Palestinian militias in the country, who continually launched attacks into Israel. The latter option risked a confrontation between Muslims and Christians, quite possibly a civil war.

Katie, the prostitute with the cleft chin whom Ali Zaidan had once claimed he'd fucked, told me that one of her favorite clients, Roberto Rizk, a Christian member of parliament, had been kidnapped. His body was later found dumped on the Beirut-Damascus Road with a bullet in the back of his head.

My worries of impending doom were quelled whenever customers didn't mention politics. Their mere presence raised my spirits. I was friendly with all the prostitutes, and they treated me with kindness and respect. When I heard Yasmina call out "Ammoura," from her balcony, I darted outside and retrieved her list from the basket. I often found cookies or a slice of cake inside.

Crazy Giant and Zeina visited me almost every day. The three of us drank plenty of Elvis' coffee, which he delivered to the store on a tray propped on his palm—by now I had become addicted to the sugary sludge. Every now and then I fastened Band-Aids around Zeina's fingers and kissed them for her.

"My sweetheart, my sweetheart, my sweetheart," she sang to me, mimicking an Umm Kalthoum ballad. "I wish all the men were as sweet as you and as eager to listen."

Nisreen came in to ask about Baba. She also ran her fingers through my afro.

"Milhem was embarrassed of his smile," Nisreen said. "He had a big gap between his front teeth."

"And emerald green eyes," I said.

"How'd you know?"

"Baba told me your story."

"He's coming back," she said. "One of these days he'll turn up at the front door and ask for me."

Even if Milhem had been reincarnated and found Nisreen, I doubted he'd accept her for what she had become. He was now twenty-eight, she said. His birthday was on December 22nd, the day he was murdered and born again.

Nisreen was often accompanied by Hind, the quietest and most guarded of Bandar's girls. She remained reticent as she bought her groceries.

Zeina told me that although Hind was sparse with her words, on stage she transformed into someone else. "She's a talented actress," she said.

"I remember seeing her perform," I said.

“Hind grew up in an orphanage,” Zeina explained. “But she wasn’t an orphan. Her mother dropped her off at the orphanage when she decided to remarry. Poor Hind was only fourteen. When she turned eighteen, she was forced to leave. She found work at a salon just up the street from here. She started as an apprentice. Lene, the owner, let her spend the nights on a mat on the floor. Eventually, she discovered us. She liked Nisreen and wanted to live with her.”

Zeina popped a hard candy into her mouth and sucked on it. “Hind has replaced her mother with Nisreen. That’s why you always see them together.” She moved the candy to the other side of her mouth. “Hind has panic attacks. She starts pulling on her hair and screams for her mother. We have to hold her down. It’s a sad sight. Thankfully, she’s never had a panic attack while in bed with a client.”

When Diala and her sister, Laila, visited the store, I stumbled over my words. Diala’s presence turned my sentences into mumbled gibberish.

“Do you have une petite amie?” Diala said. When she saw the confusion on my face, she asked if I had a girlfriend.

“No.”

“You won’t if you always act so damn shy.”

“Be nice,” Laila said.

“I’m trying to help him out. C’est necessaire, non?”

“Maybe he doesn’t need your help.”

Diala placed a tube of lotion and a box of sanitary pads on the counter. I rung her up and placed the contents in a paper bag.

“If you ever want to lose your virginity, you have to be more confident,” she said.

How did she know I was a virgin? Was it that obvious?

“Just be yourself,” Laila said.

“What a cliché,” Diala said.

Laila noticed my copy of a Naguib Mahfouz novel on the counter. I had started it this morning.

“I enjoyed that one,” she said.

I remembered that she was an avid reader. “Mahfouz can be funny when he wants to.”

My words flowed freely with Laila, who looked plainer standing next to her sister, the tips of her buckteeth grazing her lower lip. She asked if I was excited about AUB.

“I’d rather move to Cairo and make films.”

“You’re being rash. I wish I could attend university. Diala and I never had the chance.”

“What would you do with a college education, anyway?” Diala asked her sister. “It’s about as useless as the hairspray you use.”

“I wouldn’t be what I am today.”

“Merde! You can blame what we are today on the Israelis. If they hadn’t kicked us out, we’d still be in Palestine.” Diala took the bag from the counter. “Don’t forget what I said,” she told me.

I wanted Diala to stay and tell me her story so that I could understand her better. Maybe then I’d become more comfortable around her.

Farah often brought me lunch. She arrived with rosy cheeks and complaining about the heat. Stripes of sweat ran across her dress in places where the cloth had folded under her rolls of fat. Her sunburned arms resembled big chunks of tender lamb.

“You didn’t have to,” I said every time.

“I’ll die of guilt if I don’t feed you,” she’d wail. “You need some fat on you. If only you could take some of mine.”

Farah, I learned, was the main cook of Bandar’s house. Though the girls took turns cooking, it was Farah who supervised them. Crazy Giant and Zeina told me that when Farah stepped foot in the kitchen, she transformed into a culinary dictator.

Her dishes were deliciously fatty. She complained to me as I wolfed down the food. She said Bandar was taking advantage of her, that she should be paid more, that the girls annoyed her and were selfish, that she needed a break. If she wasn’t complaining, she recounted her depressing life. I always knew her story was coming because she’d take a moment of silence to put on a sad face.

“I was born and raised in Sidon,” she once said. “I wore the veil and long-sleeve dresses, and loved listening to the calls to prayer. When I was young, I used to think the sky was singing in many voices that rose to God. I sang along with them, though my voice was out of tune.

“When I turned seventeen, my parents forced me to marry my first cousin, Rami. He lived on a farm on the outskirts of Sidon. He rode a donkey around the village, and used it to plow the fields. The donkey’s name was Ali Baba. Rami fed it steaks and brushed its raggedy mane every morning. He had long conversations with it, in which he



revealed his soul. The two were inseparable. Villagers found it difficult to differentiate their smells; they both smelled of shit.

“The rumor was that Rami loved Ali Baba in an intimate way. I told my parents that I hated Rami and didn’t want to live in the village. But I had no choice in the matter.

“Rami couldn’t hold a conversation, except to talk about Ali Baba. He did, however, love my cooking. At night, he threw his saddle on my back and entered me from behind.

“Rami was out of the house for most of the day. That gave me more time alone. I was bored and lonely. There was nothing for me to do. I began to eat a lot. I gorged on chocolates and fried foods. I ate greasy shawarma sandwiches from a stand in the souk. I cried while I ate, swallowing my tears with the food.

“Rami wanted children to help him work the farm. We tried having children for two years, but I was unable to get pregnant, which angered Rami.

“‘I’m going out with Ali Baba, and won’t be back until morning,’ he said.

“He returned a week later. He had found himself another wife, and said she’d live in the house with us. Her name was Nour, a blacksmith’s daughter.

“I overheard Rami and Nour make love at night. He threw the saddle on her back, which she enjoyed. She treated him like a king, combing his hair, cutting his nails, cooking for him, washing for him.

“Rami rarely spoke to me.

“‘Why don’t you divorce me and let me return home?’ I once told him. ‘I have nothing to offer you.’

“‘Nour is pregnant. When she gives birth, you can help raise my child.’

“That was the last thing I wanted to hear. I begged him for a divorce; he refused. I decided to take matters into my own hands and make him divorce me.

“One day, I walked to the mosque when few were around and climbed up to the minaret. I turned on the amplifier and sang the call to prayer, the same call I had once mistaken for the sky’s voice. My voice wafted over the town. Within minutes the muezzin climbed up the stairs and turned off the amplifier and began screaming at me.

“‘You sacrilegious bitch,’ he said.

“The villagers said I had gone mad. Rami wasn’t bothered. But his family was; they forced him to divorce me.

“‘I’ll miss you,’ Rami said. ‘And so will Ali Baba.’

“I returned home a disgraced woman.

“‘Now people will spread nasty rumors about us,’ Mama said. ‘Look how fat and crazy you’ve become.’

“I was miserable at home. I joined a band of female cleaners who went up to Beirut by bus six days a week to clean the brothels of Mutanabi Street. My assignment was Bandar’s. Back then, Bandar had more money to hire cleaners.

“The cleaners and I covered our heads with veils and wore midnight black abayas.

“‘May God protect us,’ we uttered, before stepping foot in the brothel.

“I mopped down the bar and theatre room and dusted the chairs. When no one was looking, I climbed onto the stage and behind closed curtains, danced, swishing my dress this way and that.

“On the bus ride back home, the women spoke of the dirty underwear they found on the floors, the packs of opened condoms, the wretched stench of sex in the rooms, and above all, the unspeakable manners of the whores.

“‘The whore with the frizzy hair is a devil,’ one said.

“I, however, couldn’t stop thinking about the theatre.

“One day, I was dancing on the stage when the spotlights were suddenly turned on. I froze.

“‘Go on,’ Bandar told me.

“‘I’m not a dancer.’

“‘Let me see you without your veil.’

“I loosened my veil and slipped it over my shoulders. My hair fell down.

“‘You have a pretty face,’ Bandar said.

“‘I’m fat.’

“‘That’s not necessarily a disadvantage.’

“As the weeks passed, Bandar had me try out different stage roles behind the closed curtains. Surprisingly, I could act. Bandar had recently lost one of her most profitable prostitutes to another brothel. She needed a replacement soon.

“I told Bandar I wanted to act.

“‘That’s not all we do here,’ she said.

“‘I’m willing to give it a try.’”

Once Farah was done telling me her story, she patted her belly, having had her narrative fill.

Something very surprising occurred during this month. I arrived home from work one day to hear my parents laughing. They were seated together on the couch in the parlor. The TV and radio were turned off.

“How was work?” Baba asked me.

“Okay.”

“I made you koosa for dinner. I’ll prepare it for you,” Mama said.

“Stay here,” I said. “I’ll heat the food myself.”

I didn’t want anything to disrupt their laughter. I wondered, with a sudden injection of giddy relief, if my parents weren’t as unhappy together as I had thought they were. Maybe I had failed to notice their intimacy. Mama may have taken pleasure in serving Baba.

Baba whispered in Mama’s ear. She giggled, more reserved now that I was present. I went inside the kitchen and heated the stuffed squash. I heard them laugh again, louder this time. I returned quickly with my plate, fearing their happiness would prove as transient as the yellowness of Baba’s skin.

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One day, I received a call from the dairyman that he was running late and would deliver the cheese later in the afternoon. Around closing time, after I had counted the till, mopped the floor, and swept the pavement, I became anxious. He hadn’t yet arrived, and if I was late returning home, Mama would worry. She called the store.

“Why are you still there?” she asked. I sensed the urgency in her voice. “It’s getting late.”

“I’m waiting for the dairyman. He’s coming any minute now.”

When the dairyman arrived, he blamed his delay on an unavoidable visit he had to make to the hospital. His mother-in-law was suffering from gastric complications. He described in detail her inability to shit.

Mama called again. Discreetly, I told her I was on my way.

When the dairyman finally left, it was dusk. I switched off the lights, locked the front door, and pulled down the grille. When I turned to the street, I was startled by what I saw: Mutanabi Street had metamorphosed into the red-light district it had been for decades, shedding its daylight skin to reveal its throbbing heart. The neon lights sparkled, a chain of beacons directing the way for lustful men. Lamplights illuminated prostitutes standing on their balconies in low-cut dresses. Two men were smoking beneath the balcony of French Antoinette, apparently indifferent to the catcalls and whistling raining down on them from above.

I walked down the street. A sea breeze scented with perfume sent my afro adrift.

“Hi, Ammoura,” the blondes cried. They wore miniskirts.

I waved hello.

“Have you come to visit us?” one said from the Magic Castle. She stood with her chest out, in a silver sequin dress, glimmering like a wet fish in the sun.

“I’m afraid not.”

From the balcony of English Lucy, a prostitute with wooly, pearl-white hair threw sugared almonds at me.

“Catch them, damn it!” she said. It was Elizabeth the III, whom a few months from now, I’d get to know more intimately.

I caught one and ate it.

“If you like sweets,” she said, “my snatch is overflowing with honey. Come upstairs and lick it up for me.”

“Maybe later,” I said.

At Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love, the glare from the billboard cast Nisreen’s second-floor balcony in red. I thought Bandar had the most distinguished looking billboard; the cursive English brought to mind a Shakespearean establishment. No one was standing on the balconies woven with flowery vines. I assumed they were preparing for the show. The green French doors were all closed, but on the other side of the whitewashed walls were rooms filled with four-poster beds, including Diala’s, and a stage on which Zeina sang her songs and the girls acted in Bandar’s plays.

Hassan, the old doorman, was seated on his stool outside the front door.

“It’s still early,” he told me. “The show doesn’t start until eight.”

“What’s playing tonight?”

“*Kamila’s Heartbreak.*”

“Is it good?”

“They’re all the same.”

I wished him a good evening and made my way to my car. As expected, Mama was angry and worried when I arrived home.

One afternoon, Crazy Giant and Zeina mentioned that Friday was opening night for Bandar’s new play *Rania Ranteez: A Village Tale*. It starred all the girls.

“Sounds exciting,” I said.

“Hardly,” Zeina said, biting on her pinky nail.

“It’s a heartbreaking play,” Crazy Giant said. “I like it a lot.”

“Pretending to sound positive doesn’t work with me,” Zeina told Crazy Giant.

“You’re no actor.”

“You can’t give up,” Crazy Giant said. “I never gave up in my fights.”

“What are you giving up on?” I asked Zeina.

“They’re all giving up,” Crazy Giant said, shaking his head.

“Giving up on what?” I asked them.

“On performing,” Crazy Giant said. “They’re not putting in any effort.”

“There’s no reason to,” Zeina said. “The theatre’s always empty; some nights Bandar cancels our shows.”

Crazy Giant’s face brightened with an idea. “Why don’t you attend opening night?” he asked me. “It might raise the girls’ spirits. Your father always attends our opening nights. You can replace him.”

I imagined a packed house, and, with great excitement, Diala belly dancing in a skimpy outfit under the spotlights. Who wouldn’t want to see that? But there was a problem: Mama. I explained my dilemma to Crazy Giant.

“Just tell her you’re going out with friends,” he said.

“Or to a film,” Zeina said. “If you come, I’ll sing just for you.”

“I’d have to lie to Mama,” I said, dejected. I told Zeina and Crazy Giant that I had to think it over.

Days later, Diala came in wearing a yellow summer dress with white polka dots. Her breasts were practically popping out of her dress. The peculiar smell of cinnamon and Bengay inundated the store and made me dizzy with longing.

“Crazy Giant said he invited you to our opening night,” she said.

“That’s right,” I stuttered.

“It’s not worth coming,” she said. “Except if you want to see me dance. The rest of the girls have lost their magic—that’s if they had any magic to speak of—but not me. I’m keeping the theatre alive.”

She flicked her hair from side to side, and in the process, flashed the edges of her palms.

“I’d love to see you dance,” I said, breathless.

“I’m sure you would, mon petit bonhomme.”

If I didn’t see Diala dance soon, there was the chance that I never would. Who knew how long the theatre would survive?

“I’ll see you Friday,” I said.

When I arrived home, I was shocked to find Mama in a red dress, which was uncomfortably tight on her—her fat was itching to break loose. Her hair was straightened. She wore makeup, and even smelled of a sweet flowery fragrance.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

“Nowhere. Your father insisted that I buy myself a dress and visit the salon, even though we should be saving money.”

She sucked in her belly.

“Doesn’t your mother look beautiful?” Baba asked me.

“She looks like a Beiruti woman.”



“I was hoping to look more like Julie Christie in *Doctor Zhivago*,” Mama said, and laughed.

Over dinner, Mama didn’t question me when I told her I’d be coming home late on Friday.

“I’m going out with the guys,” I said. The guys constituted Ramzy, a high-school acquaintance who I called up when I didn’t want to go to birthday parties alone.

“Please be careful,” she said. She looked at Baba, grinning.

That Friday, I was completing a crossword puzzle at the register, eagerly awaiting the evening, when a burgundy Mercedes-Benz Sedan pulled up in front of the store. A huge man emerged from the driver’s seat and two men in polyester suits got out from the back and stood on the pavement and lit cigarettes. A fourth man stepped out of the passenger seat, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, and entered the store with the Neanderthal. With each step, I heard the jingle of his spurs, which were attached to cowboy boots. He wore a brown polyester suit with a gold cross over his wide-collared shirt. He reached for a cigar from his coat pocket and placed it in his mouth without lighting up. He had a receding hairline, his black hair long and curly in the back. He was slim and clean-shaven.

“I like the name of the store,” he said. “What’s the history?”

His Arabic was accented.

“It was named in honor of my grandmother,” I said, and swallowed. I didn’t realize how dry my mouth had become. The Neanderthal was inspecting the rack of candy. His suit must have been tailor made to accommodate his broad shoulders and

muscles. He barely had a neck and his arms were long and monkey-like. His buzz cut was spotted with grey hair.

“Was your grandmother fond of shooting stars?” the man asked.

“She had three moles on her cheek in the shape of a shooting star.”

He smiled, placing his hands on the counter. His nails were manicured. He wore a gold ring on his pinky finger. “My wife will like that story. She has a mole on her upper lip just like Marline Monroe. It drives me crazy. What’s your name, my son?”

“Omar.”

“Omar what?”

“Omar Aladdine.”

“A Druze name.”

I nodded.

“That’s not a problem,” he said. “Don’t look so afraid.”

I cleared my throat.

“My name is Elias Sleiman,” he said, offering his hand, “but people call me El Señor.” He wiped his hand on his pants. “Your palm is clammy.”

“It’s hot,” I said.

“As hot as the Caribbean. I grew up in Caracas, so I know what I’m talking about. How old are you, Omar?”

“Eighteen.”

“That’s young to be running a store, no?”

“I’m filling in for my father. He’s sick.”

“I used to work at my father’s Lebanese restaurant in Caracas. Mother cooked in the kitchen and Baba managed the place. I waited tables. It was hard work and I hated it. I never got along with my father. He was always so bossy.”

The Neanderthal pulled several Pepsis from the fridge and placed them on the counter, and it was then that I noticed his droopy eyelid. His ears were curled, chewed down knobs of cartilage. His knuckles were like rocks, and I wondered how many men he had knocked out, maybe even killed. Now was the time I needed Crazy Giant more than ever.

The Neanderthal threw down a lira. I broke the bill and gave him change.

“Do you have a bottle opener?” he asked. His voice was surprisingly soft and gentle.

I grabbed it from the shelf under the register and opened the bottles for him. He handed one to El Señor and went outside and handed the other bottles to the men waiting in the shade of the awning and returned. He gulped down his Pepsi in one sip and placed the empty bottle on the counter and thanked me.

El Señor asked for a straw. “Has there been any trouble on the street?”

“Trouble?” I asked.

He sipped his Pepsi and sighed. “That tastes very good. Thank you, Omar. I was wondering if you’ve seen any Palestinian fighters around. I know there are Palestinian whores on this street, so I figured their men might visit every now and then.”

I became worried for Diala and Laila. Were some of their clients Palestinian fighters? Did they understand the risk they were taking?

“I haven’t seen any,” I said.

“That’s good. Because Palestinian fighters are ruthless. A month ago they kidnapped one of our minister’s daughters as she was walking to the university—Celina was only nineteen; studying chemistry at l’Université Saint-Joseph. They raped her and then chopped off her breasts; her hip was dislocated. We found her naked in a gutter by the Beirut River. Rats were nibbling at her flesh. That’s the kind of men they are. They’re not after the liberation of Palestine. They want Lebanon for themselves, and to get that, they’re willing to rape and torture our women.”

I understood El Señor meant Christian women. He lit his cigar.

“If you spot a stranger on the street, or someone up to no good,” he continued, “I want you to tell me. I’m looking after this neighborhood now. I’ll protect you and your father from the hoodlums.”

But there weren’t any hoodlums on the street. And besides, the police station was a few blocks away.

“Tell your father I stopped by,” El Señor said.

I nodded.

He walked out with the Neanderthal, his spurs ringing, leaving behind a wispy trail of smoke. The men in polyester suits got back in the Mercedes and they were off. I sat in my chair, trying to catch my breath. My hands were shaking. Elvis stormed in.

“Who were those men?” he yelled.

“I think they’re members of the Kataib.”

“The Kataib?! Shit, Ammoura. They’ll only cause trouble. It’s bad for business.”

“What should we do?”

“I don’t know. For fuck’s sake, this is the red-light district!”

I decided to close the store before dusk and walked down Mutanabi Street. I waved hello to the women standing on their balconies and returned their air kisses, and also caught the sugared almonds Elizabeth III threw down at me. Hassan got up from his stool as soon as he saw me and opened the door. “They’ve been expecting you,” he said.

I stepped into the red-lit theatre room, crossing the same threshold that Jidu and Baba had for years. This was the first time that I entered Bandar’s alone, and although I didn’t know it then, I was about to embark on the most scintillating and harrowing period of my life.

“Chief!” Crazy Giant hollered from behind the bar. His appearance was breathtaking. He wore an Indian headdress with pigeon feathers, a beaded vest over his bare chest, tan leather pants with fringes, and when I peered over the bar to take a closer look, moccasins. His plump face was coated in war paint: two black stripes on either side trailed down from his hairline and tapered to his jaw.

“This is the first time you see me in costume,” he said. “Bandar says I’m probably a walking stereotype, but she thinks it goes well with the theatre.”

The room was empty. Abdel Halim Hafiz’s romantic voice rung from a transistor radio placed on a shelf between bottles of liquor. Crazy Giant said I looked spooked out.

“Don’t tell me you saw Auntie Roula’s ghost,” he said. “Or are you frightened of a live Indian?”

I told him about El Señor’s visit to the store, including the muscle man with a droopy eyelid and cauliflower ears.

He poured himself a shot of vodka and knocked it back. “Droopy Eye is in town,” he said, gritting his teeth. He poured a second shot. “That means only one thing.”

“What?”

“A rematch,” he said, trying to quell his apprehension with more vodka.

Two men entered the theatre room, greeting Crazy Giant and me, and sat on the far side of the bar. Crazy Giant took their orders and got them their drinks.

“Let’s talk about this later,” he told me. “You need a drink.”

He poured me a glass of rum and Pepsi and wiped the countertop with a rag. I sipped the drink and squinted, the rum burning through me. It was a good burn, one that alleviated my nerves.

“You must be a novice drinker,” the man nearest me said. He was short and pudgy, with a bulldog face. A white cardboard box lay on an empty stool next to him.

“I don’t really drink,” I said.

“Are you Muslim? Don’t let religion get in the way of your having fun. I’m Muslim and I love to drink. So does my friend here.”

His friend, who sat on his left, was big and hairy. Drops of beer hung from his fluffy, black beard. “I like beer,” he said, and burped.

“Ammoura,” Crazy Giant said, “is Halloumi’s son.”

“You’re kidding!” the pudgy man said. He looked at me closely. “You definitely inherited Halloumi’s nose. My name is Bahaa. This here is Charbel.”

He sipped from his glass and said he’d treat me to a girl tonight. “Let me suggest some of them to you,” he said. He grabbed his drink and told me to follow him across the room. Portraits of the girls were hung on the wall, with their corresponding names engraved on the frames. Nisreen was Grace; Farah was Chantal; Zeina was Scheherazade; Diala was Jasmine; Laila was Rose; and Hind was Youla.

“I’ve slept with them all, so I know what I’m talking about,” Bahaa said. “But it all depends on what kind of girl suits your fancy. I prefer them fat, like Chantal. Charbel prefers them old, like Grace. Most men prefer Jasmine; she’s a fiery woman.”

I grew hard at the thought of sleeping with Diala.

“Once the show is over, tell me which one you want and I’ll tell Bandar,” he said.

“I’m only here to see the show.”

Bahaa was perplexed. “Ah,” he said. “Now I understand. You must be a virgin.”

I crimsoned. My virginity was like a pimple everyone spotted.

We returned to the bar. Bahaa caught me eying the white box.

“It’s for Chantal,” Bahaa said. “Inside are chocolate éclairs, which I made myself. I’m a pastry chef. Chantal loves éclairs. She gobbles them down right after we have sex.”

Charbel held up a small, plastic bag. “Birdseed for Grace’s parakeets.”

I was embarrassed I had come empty-handed.

An hour later, more men arrived at the theatre. They took their seats at the bar and in the chairs facing the stage. Scattered here and there were old men, which reminded me of Jidu. Why hadn’t he ever visited Mutanabi Street in the latter years of his life? He certainly looked stronger than any of the elderly present, before he had fallen ill with pneumonia.

It started getting hot and smoky, even though Hassan had cracked open the front door. A drop of sweat slid down my back.

Bahaa began speaking about his affection for Farah (aka Chantal), and how he enjoyed the tight thrust of her hand up his ass. Sweat stains had spread beneath his armpits. His bulldog face was oily.

“She knows my ass as well as I do,” he said.

“She probably knows it better,” Charbel said, and slapped the back of his neck.

“Damn mosquitoes.”

“What’s great about these girls,” Bahaa said, “is that they lack any pretense. As long as you have money, you’ll be served. You don’t have to be some wealthy arrogant prick with a fancy car to get pussy. That’s what I hate about this country. People look down on you if you’re not a ‘somebody.’ I have a great heart, but women don’t care for that. They only see a pastry chef. But with Farah, she sees my true self. She even said I was handsome. No one’s told me that before. I—I’ve actually proposed to her; promised I’d take care of her for the rest of our lives and that she’d never have to work again. She can’t be happy here. But she rejected me.”

“It took a while for my wife to accept me,” Charbel said. “She didn’t like that I was a truck driver. But she came around.”

“And now you’re at Madame Bandar’s,” Bahaa said.

Charbel sipped his beer. “Don’t make me feel guilty.”

“You know what Charbel does after he’s done fucking?” Bahaa told me. “He gets down on his knees and prays to Jesus Christ.”

I became exhausted listening to Bahaa. When Crazy Giant had a moment, I asked him if I could say hello to the girls.

“By now they must be in the dressing room,” he said. “Go through the curtains there and walk down the hallway. It’s the last room on the right.”

The hallway and the adjoining rooms were curtained off from the clients. An overpowering scent of perfume and hairspray emanated from the open door of the



dressing room. I found the girls in costume seated before mirrors outlined with lightbulbs. There was a counter for each one lined with cosmetics, combs and brushes, perfume and oils, and hairdryers and spray-bottles. Bandar walked among the girls, serving as the makeup artist.

“Hello,” I said, standing at the door.

They all turned to me.

“Ammoura!” Zeina cried.

“Wait for us in the parlor,” Bandar told me. “We’ll be right there.”

A poster of the *The Way We Were* hung in the parlor. Robert Redford looked handsomely contemplative, his sandy blond hair brushed to the side. He was embracing Barbra Streisand with one arm, his other hand curled into a fist and propped against his waist. Streisand rested her face against his chest, her arms looped around his torso and her hands clasping on his far shoulder. Mama was desperate to see this film, and said she was waiting for Baba’s health to improve so that they could go down to the Rivoli and see it together.

The same wooden cross hung on the opposite wall. There were empty coffee cups on the table and a crusted bowl of hummus. A vase of wilted roses stood in the center. The fake blue Persian carpet was worn and dusty. I sneezed, and saw a mouse poke its head from under a couch. The paint on the walls was peeling, revealing patches of grey concrete.

When the girls entered, they began to warm up for the show. I nearly died of lust when I saw Diala in a two-piece, gold-colored sequined outfit. The keys to her family house in Jerusalem hung between her breasts, attached to a silver chain. She had a small,

charming potbelly; a love trail trickled down from her bellybutton. She wore gold-looped earrings and a column of gold-colored bangles on either wrist and an ankle bracelet with the charm of a heart.

Laila drummed on her derbake, her buckteeth clamped down on her lower lip. Zeina sang scales as she sat tuning her lute inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Nisreen and Farah practiced their lines. Hind stood in a corner.

“Ammoura,” Zeina said, gesturing for me to come closer. “I’ve decided to sing one of my own songs tonight. Just for you.”

“I look forward to it.”

Zeina wore a sleeveless blouse over velvet bellbottoms. With makeup on, she looked like an adolescent dressing up as an adult. I turned my head toward Diala—she was stretching her calves.

“Do I look pretty?” Zeina asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“You’re not even looking at me.”

I turned to her. She was sucking on a finger. “You look great!”

“Thanks, kid,” she said, and spat out a nail.

Bandar entered the parlor and said it was time. She offered me the best seat in the house, which was backstage.

“You’ll get a behind-the-scenes look at the theatre,” she said. “I’ll sit you right next to Shams. She’s in charge of the lights and curtains. She’s also the PA announcer and the prompter, though she’s too lazy to prompt.”

I followed her backstage. I could hear the loud voices of men out in the audience. Shams sat at a table at the periphery of the stage. The controls for the lighting and a microphone were propped on the table, alongside a musty ashtray and a glass of whiskey. The ashtray was filled with cigarette stubs, their filters smeared with red lipstick.

Bandar introduced me and then left.

“Are you a hippie?” Shams asked me. “Because if you are, you’re going to annoy the fuck out of me.”

“No, Auntie. I just like afros.”

“First off, don’t call me Auntie. Secondly, your afro looks like a damn nest. Do you have birds roosting in there?”

Remaining quiet seemed the wisest thing to do.

She lit a cigarette. “Want one?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“You’re missing out.” She sipped from her whiskey and looked me up and down. “Damn you’re tall. That afro makes you even taller.”

She spoke in a husky voice so deep and resounding that I feared a dark spirit was lodged in the depths of her soul. I also wondered about her age. She looked eighty or older. A rooster’s wattle hung from her chin.

Later, Zeina told me Shams was in fact in her sixties. The ravages of prostitution had erased her youth and left a withered woman unrecognizable even to herself. Shams was a relic of the brothel’s past. A retired prostitute, she had entered the red-light district as a sixteen-year-old God-fearing virgin. She matured in the brothel under Omayma’s supervision, Bandar’s predecessor. She had been Omayma’s most loyal and hard-working

prostitute, and out of respect for her deceased mentor, Bandar kept her on as stage manager. She only came in the evenings and left when the show was over. She lived alone with her cat in a run-down flat near the Palestinian camps.

Zeina confessed to me that they were terrified of evolving into Shams. They lathered their faces and arms with fragrant lotions and oils to preserve the softness of their skin. When they looked at Shams, they wondered if it was in their power to stop the train of their years from heading into such decrepitude, if they could hop off at an earlier stop without incurring the scars of their profession.

A beam of red light filtered through a hole in the curtains. I peeked through it, brushing my face against its soft fabric odorous with decades of smoke. The room was a quarter filled. A film of cloudy smoke hung in the air.

“It’s empty, I know,” Shams said.

“But it’s opening night,” I said, and turned toward her.

“Doesn’t matter. The theatre’s dying. This whole shitty district is dying.”

Just as I was immersing myself into this new world, it was falling apart right before my eyes.

“The men have grown tired of the theatre, at least this one,” Shams said. “Bandar has lost her touch. The girls are uninspired. For all of them, performing has become as boring and routine as having sex. It’s not easy to stand before an empty house.”

She stood up from the table and walked to the side of the curtains and looked out.

“Well, all the regulars are out there.”

I joined her for a better view. “I met those two men,” I said, pointing out Bahaa and Charbel.

“Ah, Bahaa the Ass Man and Charbel the Sinner.”

Shams proceeded to point out other clients and told me their stories. Samer Saab, who stood at the bar in florescent yellow bellbottoms, worked as a clerk in the Department of Transportation. He was of average height. Patches of hair were scattered across his scalp, as though the process of balding had gone haywire. He was known in the district for the unparalleled size of his penis.

Samer was dehumanized and disrespected and mistreated by his superiors at work. He was sacrificing forty hours of his life every week to filing papers, copying notes, and answering calls. He was unmarried, in his late thirties, and still lived with his parents in a cramped apartment that stunk of garlic. In the late evenings, long after his parents had gone to bed, he sprayed himself with cologne, combed his patches of hair, and drove to Mutanabi Street, where he was King. He had a gift from the heavens.

Shams also pointed out a miniscule man in a three-piece suit seated upright in his chair, smoking a cigarette from an ivory holder. His dark hair was parted down the middle. He was Ralph Najjar, his Christian family name evoking the trade of carpentry. He wrote obituaries for a local paper, which was popular due in large part to his section. The editor never tampered with his pieces, in fear Ralph would object to his edits and seek employment elsewhere. His obituaries were written with flowery romanticism devoid of factual accuracy. He used the few details of the deceased and transformed them into legendary lovers. Quite often, the family of the deceased didn't recognize the description of their loved one. Ralph was despised by the journalists at the paper; they accused him of being a fiction writer.

His greatest fantasy was to die in the throes of lovemaking. He disliked communicating with the other clients because it distracted him from his mental preparations for the possibility of death in bed.

At exactly eight o'clock, Shams said it was time. We returned to our chairs. Zeina stood next to us with her lute slung across her back.

"Good luck," I whispered. I felt a rush of adrenalin, as if I were about to take the stage.

"It's bad luck to wish me luck. Here we say: 'Break a heart.'"

"Break a heart!" I said.

"Thanks, kid."

In the darkness, Shams' husky voice resounded from the amp: "Welcome, gentlemen, to Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love."

The men cheered.

"From the heart of Beirut, from the famed Mutanabi Street, we bring you music and dance, and theatre that will move your heart and water your eyes," Shams announced. "Please welcome Scheherazade to the stage!"

Shams stood up and opened the curtains.

Zeina sat in a chair under a bright spotlight. A constellation of dust particles hovered over her. The men whistled and cheered her on. At the sound of her first melancholy notes, they cried, "Allah, Allah."

In her alto voice, she sang about a girl who lived alone with her father down by a river. Every day the father spoke to his daughter about his wife, her mother, who had drowned in the very same river.

*And one day, oh one very sad day, the father saw his wife's ghost and dove into the river and swam to her. He was swallowed by the current, down the current he went. His blue body was later found on the muddy banks of a nearby town, oh on the muddy banks of a nearby town.*

Zeina sang with her eyes closed, her voice ringing through the speakers and through me. Was she imagining what she sang about? I looked out onto the audience. The front row appeared indifferent. Did they not know good music when they heard it?

*The poor girl was left all alone, and lived many years alone, oh how alone she felt, how alone. But one day a man appeared on a raft and she asked him where he was headed. To the sea, my beautiful lady, to the sea. And from there? she asked. That's for you to decide, my beautiful lady, that's for you to decide. She dove into the river and swam to the raft.*

At the conclusion of Zeina's song, the men applauded halfheartedly, which surprised me. She had sung wonderfully.

"The men prefer her covers," Shams told me. "Her own songs stink."

Zeina continued to play her lute as Shams slowly closed the curtains. When she reopened them moments later, Zeina was joined by Laila, who sat in another chair and was drumming furiously on her derbake, biting down on her lower lip. The spotlights were all on.

"Please welcome Rose to the stage," Shams said.

The men hooted. Laila wore a turquoise dress slit open at her thigh.

Zeina played an upbeat tune to match Laila's drumming. The men rose from their chairs and clapped.

“Laila used to be a better drummer,” Shams told me. “She’d drum so fast you’d think her fingers were about to catch fire.”

Diala appeared backstage in her glittering outfit. She took Shams’ glass of whiskey and downed it in one gulp.

“That’s my girl,” Shams said.

“Break a heart,” I said.

“I’m about to smash their hearts,” Diala said, and belly danced onto the stage.

“Welcome Jasmine to the stage!” Shams said.

The men went wild.

Her bangles tinkled and slipped down her forearms as she stretched a red shawl above her head. She danced with an intoxicating sensuality, her potbelly vibrating with every move, her keys clanging. As Shams explained to me amid the clamor, Diala didn’t shake her breasts like the cheap dancers in the cabarets around town. She was a true dancer, one who emulated the dance steps of her hero, Tahia Carioca. Tahia was a famous belly dancer in Cairo who had appeared in dancing acts in dozens of Egyptian films, most of which Diala had watched and studied while growing up in the Shatila camp. She wanted to be Beirut’s Tahia, an enchantress whose body movements were enough to kill a man.

She danced to the edge of the stage, shaking her hips. Her breasts jiggled and bounced and her hair expanded. She spun and turned her arms in the air as Zeina and Laila played to the fervor of her movements. She sprayed the men with her sweat, which I yearned to lick off her phosphorescent body.

“You should have seen Diala in her prime,” Shams said.



I thought Diala couldn't dance any better, and expressed as much.

"You can't see straight," she said. "This whole damn show is a novelty to you."

At the finale, Diala synchronized her hip-shaking to the beating of her sister's drum. Every tap received a shake of the hips. Men threw liras at her.

Shams closed the curtains.

"There will be a brief intermission," she told the crowd. "Go on and get yourself a drink."

Zeina, Laila, and Diala rushed off the stage. They had to change costumes for the play.

"Do me a favor and collect the money from the stage," Shams said, lighting a cigarette. She said she'd be back. She needed to refill her glass.

I picked up the liras from the stage, the wood creaking beneath my feet, and sat back down at the table. My heart was still pounding. I wiped the sweat from my face and contemplated taking up Bahaa on his invitation.

"I'll have Jasmine, please," I'd tell Bandar, as if I were ordering tea at a café. But I hadn't the slightest clue of what to do in bed, and worried I'd be unable to perform. How would Diala react if I went limp? Would she tell the others or spread word down the street that I was damaged? I reminded myself that my ignorance of sex was not uncommon among men my age. After all, men my age visited brothels to learn from the prostitutes *how* to have sex. Once Baba's health improved, I reasoned, I could ask him to accompany me to my first lay. He wouldn't have a problem with that, considering he slept with Nisreen when he was only fifteen. But what about Mama? She'd be devastated if I ever slept with a prostitute. It would kill her.

And how could I possibly sleep with my newfound friends? If I did, they'd think I'd only been after their bodies. And if I went to another brothel, I risked being shamed again.

I blamed Baba for placing me in this situation. I didn't blame him for his illness; he had no control over that. I blamed him for attempting to inculcate in me his love of the prostitutes, which had started when he first walked me down Mutanabi Street on that summer afternoon when I was six.

By the time Shams returned, I had settled down.

The actresses appeared backstage.

"My mustache is falling off!" Diala said, having changed into a long-sleeve shirt and pants. She wore a wide-brimmed hat. Even as a man she looked sexy.

"This dress is too tight on me," Farah said.

Hind was holding Nisreen's hand. "I forgot my lines," she said.

"They'll come to you," Nisreen reassured her, wearing a silver wig. "They always do."

"You're stepping on my foot, Laila," Zeina cried. She wore a black wig and a blue dress, which looked odd on her. Femininity didn't suit her.

"Fix your wig," Shams told her. "It's lopsided."

I doubted the actresses could pull off the play. They seemed too disorganized. But they ended up proving me wrong.

In the final scene, Nisreen lay on the stage floor with her arm extended to the lights. Mascara ran down her face.

“Even in the throes of death, lying on that mountaintop and looking out to sea,” Shams said, “Rania still believed her sweetheart would return after years of waiting for him.”

Her sweetheart was a Venetian merchant played by Diala.

“Come back to me, my love,” Nisreen said, spraying spit. “Come back.”

She died. The lights faded.

“I’m no director,” Shams told me, as we watched the girls take their bows to the mild applause of the men, “but shit, I can tell the difference between inspired acting and uninspired acting. They used to be more spontaneous, more instinctual. They took risks. Now, they act as well as I can, and I can’t act for shit. Are you crying?”

“No,” I said, wiping my eyes. “It’s the smoke in the room.”

I felt sorry for poor Rania Ranteez, and for the girls and their own losses.

Nisreen’s dramatic stage death made me yearn for a similar death, one infused with great emotion. There was something to be said about the way Bandar trained her actors. She wanted their every gesture and facial expression to be heightened, even over exaggerated, much like the actors from the era of silent film. Although I had spent years watching Hollywood flicks in which such emotion was tempered, I found that I didn’t mind Bandar’s girls’ outpouring of feeling because the feeling became a character in itself.

When the curtains closed, I followed the girls into the parlor, my shirt stuck to my back in sweat. They stood silent, appearing dazed. There were no congratulations.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Zeina. I was still exhilarated.

“The night’s young.”

Bandar came into the room and handed Nisreen a sheaf of papers and left without a word. Nisreen distributed the papers among the girls.

“Director’s notes,” Zeina told me, crumpling her paper. “As if we have the time to read them. Or even care to read them.”

“Now’s where the real work begins,” Farah said.

“We’ll manage like we always do,” Nisreen said. She noticed the look of concern on my face and told me they’d be just fine. “Dawn is but a few hours away.”

They thanked me for coming and filed out of the room like a column of chained prisoners. I followed them to the creaky wooden staircase and watched them walk up to their bedrooms. At the second-floor landing, Zeina turned around and waved at me. I waved back, wishing she’d come back down. But she disappeared down the hall.

I returned to the theatre room. Men crowded around Bandar like hounds over a piece of meat. She had a clipboard pressed to her bosom.

“Give me Jasmine at ten!” one man said.

“I want Jasmine at ten,” another said.

“We’ll draw lots,” Bandar said.

Most of the requests were for Diala.

I had no reason to remain in the theatre, and took my leave.

“Come back soon,” the doorman said on my way out.

I walked up Mutanabi Street still under the influence of the theatre. The dusty glare of the spotlights, the creak of the stage floor, the swish of the velvet curtains with gold fringe, the smell of cigarette smoke and sweat, the consuming heat, the plucking of Zeina’s strings, Laila’s drumming, Diala’s belly dancing, Nisreen’s tears and the crystal

spray of her saliva, Shams' voice over, all of it swirled around in my mind. I had never been a part of a theatre family, and this feeling of kinship remained with me as I walked under the balconies lit with the neon lights of billboards, the prostitutes calling out my name, Elizabeth the III throwing sugared almonds at me while promising me a lick of her honey if only I'd walk up the stairs and request her for an hour, five liras for her love because she was second-class; Ayesha and Elvis waving at me from the top balcony of Auntie Roula's, the African Queen in a bathrobe, Elvis in his undershirt and trousers, his suspenders hanging in loops from his waist; Katie with the cleft chin lowering a basket to a man in a three-piece suit looking up at her, holding a wreath of gardenias; the blondes in miniskirts singing their off-key anthem; a young man with slick black hair blowing into his cupped palm and smelling his breath before entering Marica's. It was only after I left Mutanabi Street and walked among the crowds at Martyrs' Square and was bombarded by the honking of cars and taxis that I felt I was back in Beirut, that where I was before was its own world, composed of its own sounds and smells, alive with the magnetic energy of its performers who only came out in the red of night, even if their love was for sale and they longed for dawn.

I returned to the theatre the following night with a bouquet of roses and a box of Belgian chocolates for the girls. I had spent the entire day distracted at the Shooting Star. In my daydreams, Diala and I were alone in the theatre house, she belly dancing naked for me as I sat in a chair facing the stage. She danced in the red haze of a spotlight, shaking her glistening breasts.

I wondered if she had a hairy vagina, and recalled the V with the squiggly lines that Jidu had once drawn for me. I got an erection. Whenever customers came in, I tried to push it down, and if that didn't work, I loosened my shirt and let it trail over my belt. Finally, I stepped into the bathroom and jerked off.

"You must be really horny," Shams told me when I appeared backstage before the start of the show.

"I enjoy the theatre," I said.

I saw the shows as often as I could. Diala's dancing act never failed to excite me. I grew more in love with her every time I saw her dance in various outfits. And yet I still knew little about her, only that her family had been forced out of Jerusalem in 1948 in what was known as the Nakba, and that she had grown up with Laila in the Shatila camp. Did she really hope to return to her homeland? Was that her driving force and why she danced with such fury? I had seen the squalor she had lived in. She may be a prostitute, but at least she had escaped from that hellhole. And why did she insist on speaking French?

As for the play, which the actresses referred to as *Ranteez*, truncating the title, I had memorized lines from several scenes, which I recited in my room. I focused on sad thoughts, such as Jidu lying naked on the bathroom floor with a broken hip or him dying in the hospital, and as soon my eyes filled with tears, I acted out the scene. It was the closest I'd ever come to being an actor.

I saw *Ranteez* at least seven or eight times. Toward the end of the play's running, I found out from Zeina that Bandar wasn't staging a new play for the following month.

"She plans to put on an old one," Zeina told me.

“The men won’t like that.”

“Bandar’s been staging old plays for years. She’s written so many that she sets them into a rotation. She does this whenever her writing isn’t going well, and right now, it’s stalled. She’s hit a wall. She’s been in a foul mood, and yells at us for nothing.”

I attended opening night of Bandar’s play *A Forsaken Heart*, and found it just as powerful as *Ranteez*.

From the edge of her bed, Murrone tells me to stop for a moment. “That part in your story just now, where you’re acting out scenes from the play at home and getting all teary eyed; I understand that feeling. I felt it when Saladin and I acted out scenes from movies. There was one movie called *Kingdom of Heaven* that came out before the 2006 war. We saw it at least half-a-dozen times. Have you seen it?”

I shake my head. I’m happy to see that she’s become talkative again.

“The movie’s set between the Second and Third Crusades. It’s about a blacksmith from a small village in France who leaves his life behind to join his long lost father across the sea to Jerusalem, where the father owns land. Balian, the blacksmith, has nothing to lose. His young wife has committed suicide following the death of their child. He’s filled with grief. Things don’t get any better when the village priest tells Balian that he ordered the beheading of his wife before her burial, and that she’s now a headless soul burning in hell. Balian sticks a sword into the priest’s gut and throws him into his blacksmith’s fire pit. So now Balian is a murderer and a widower, and he’s lost his faith. His father comes to save him right in time. The father is a noble lord named Godfrey.

“Saladin really loved this movie because it featured his namesake: the great Kurdish warrior who fought off the Crusaders. King Saladin is played by this wonderful Syrian actor named Ghassan Massoud, who’s got a narrow face and striking, sharp features. At the end of the film Balian, who has proven to be a fine warrior, tries to defend Jerusalem from King Saladin and his massive army. There’s little hope for Balian, as he’s trying to lead men untrained for battle. And the walls of the city can only hold for so long. His death seems certain. But after days of battle, King Saladin and Balian decide to talk things over. It was this very scene that Saladin, my Saladin, acted out. Do you want me to perform it now?”

“Please,” I tell her.

Murrone stands up from the bed, closes her eyes, rolls her head, and takes a deep breath.

“Let me set up the scene first,” she says. “So, like I said, Balian is exhausted from battle. His face is covered in blood and his arm is wounded. He leaves the walls of Jerusalem and meets King Saladin out in the desert, under a canopy held up by four of the King’s soldiers. I always played the role of Balian, and Saladin played the King. They exchange a few words, and then—please don’t judge my acting, Ammoura.”

“I promise I won’t judge.” I’m truly excited to see her act. “Break a heart.”

“Thanks. I’ll start with King Saladin.” Murrone looks straight at me, narrowing her eyes and pursing her lips. “I will give every Christian soul safe conduct to Christian lands.” She has adopted a deep, dramatic voice, enunciating every word. “Every soul: the women, the children, the old, and all your knights and soldiers and queen. No one will be harmed. I swear to God.”



Murron clears her throat and puts on a quizzical expression, becoming Balian.  
“The Christians butchered every Muslim within the walls when they took this city.”

Murron returns to Saladin’s penetrating gaze, pointing a finger in the air: “I am not those men. I am Saladin. Saladin.”

When she doesn’t continue, I ask about Balian’s next move.

“He surrenders Jerusalem and returns peacefully to his village in France. I loved playing his part. I tried to see the world through his eyes. He was a broken man who questioned his beliefs about God and religion. And yet as broken as he was, his heart was still open to love—he falls in love with the Queen of Jerusalem.” She sits back down on the bed. I applaud. She bows her head.

“Bandar would have hired you in a heartbeat,” I tell her. “That was very good. And you played the roles of two men!”

“Now,” she says, smiling, “you can finish up this part in your story.”

It takes me a moment to compose myself, to become the young man I once was, before I continue the story I’ve been telling for years.

All too quickly, my time at the Shooting Star had come to an end. I spent an interminable weekday at the university running from building to building registering for courses and paying my fees.

“I’m proud of you,” Mama told me. Her hair was curly again. But she now applied makeup to her face every morning, which I couldn’t get used to. I often spotted lipstick on her front teeth.

“For what?” I asked with irritation.

“For remaining pure.”

“*Pure?* What does that mean?”

“I think you know. Now you can concentrate on your studies.”

I felt empty, as if I had lost someone dear to me. I also began to resent Mama.

Before the start of classes, there had been an armed clash involving the Kataib up in the mountains where my parents were from. A gun battle erupted between Kataib members and supporters of Kamal Jumblatt, the Druze leader. The Kataib members were celebrating the opening of a new chapter in a village when the fighting broke out. The battle left three dead, two injured.

“Jumblatt better protect our villages,” Mama said.

“No one fucks with the Druzes,” I imagined Jidu saying.

I was grateful the fighting had taken place far away from Mutanabi Street. I only hoped it wouldn’t spread, and tried hard not to think about this too much because it made me sick with anxiety.

On my last weekend before the start of classes, I bid farewell to my customers.

Bandar and her girls came into the store to wish me good luck.

“Please don’t forget us,” Zeina said.

How could I ever forget them? I had had the best summer of my life.

“He’ll be back,” Diala said. “He’ll miss us too much.”

“If anyone upsets you on campus,” Crazy Giant told me, shadow boxing, “just tell me. I’ll knock them out.”

He had begun hitting the punching bag and lifting weights in his room in preparation for a rematch with Droopy Eye. As big as Crazy Giant was, I was scared for him. Droopy Eye had nearly killed him in their first fight.

As for Baba, he planned to work half-days at the Shooting Star until he was fully recovered. When I had told him about El Señor's visit, he said that El Señor was nothing but a cheap thug who was only trying to intimidate them.

"Mutanabi Street is harmless," he said.

His words relieved me. All the trouble reported on the news and all the rumors I overheard in the streets about kidnappings and murders would soon fade. Beirut was on the world map, and it was here to stay. We'd become even more glamorous than Paris.

In a matter of months Baba would be proven wrong, and there would be nothing that he or I or anyone else on Mutanabi Street could do to stop the violence.

## The Possessed

If only the summer had been longer. I could have learned as much about business by working at the Shooting Star than by listening to the droning lectures of Professor Dajani, who taught Accounting, and lectured in an affected British accent. I had never been too good with numbers and didn't see myself improving.

I rarely participated in my classes. The other students came from the top high schools in Lebanon and the Middle East. I came from a measly public school—I was the only student from my graduating class to attend AUB—and had little money. The students' fathers were successful businessmen, lawyers, doctors, engineers, bankers, ministers, diplomats. Mine owned a small grocery store in the red-light district. I kept this secret, fearing I'd only distance myself further from the students. For those who asked, I said Baba worked in the import-export business.

As soon as I stepped through Main Gate on Bliss Street and walked down the steps facing College Hall, Beirut magically disappeared. The wooded campus overlooked the Mediterranean. Red-tile buildings dotted the grounds. A walkway shaded by pines led to a green oval lawn surrounded by palm trees on one side and buildings on the other. Fruit trees colored the terraced garden facing the football pitch, known as the green field. Massive Banyan trees provided ample shade.

Despite the lush refuge of the campus, I sensed the tension among the student body. Students were wary of starting any trouble with the administration after the fiasco of the previous spring. They were also wary of one another: Christians of Muslims,

Muslims of Christians. Students supported conflicting political parties and boldly identified themselves as capitalists or communists, or quite often, as socialists. Many supported the Palestinian cause and wore their kaffieh with pride. And there were some like myself, who just wanted to fit in.

In a matter of a week, I managed to find my own group. There were four of us: Waleed, Khaled, Roy, and me. We gravitated toward one another for one very obvious reason. Among the incoming students, we had the most impressive afros. Students referred to us as the Fro Club.

I was the tallest among my friends, but Waleed had the biggest afro, which looked more like a black planet. He hadn't cut it in two years to gain extra inches of desired height. A mousey young man, he was in the engineering school and planned to one day build an auditorium in the shape of an afro.

Khaled was pre-med, and swore that he wouldn't cut his afro until medical school. His curls were compact like a black man's. He wore aviator shades day or night, in the sunshine or in the rain.

Roy's afro was rusty red. His skin was covered in freckles. In church on Sundays, he told us, he spent his time scoping out the young women in the pews, and watched their tongues poke from their mouths for the Communion. When a woman in long braids once noticed him watching her, she licked the Communion off the priest's fingers.

Waleed, Khaled, and Roy wore imported button-down shirts with big, pointy collars and Levis bellbottoms. I wore a denim jacket I had bought on sale and counterfeit Levis jeans. Khaled was dropped off at the Main Gate in a BMW by the family chauffeur.

They talked about skiing in Faraya in winter, the chalets their parents rented in the mountains in summer, and their family trips to Paris and Switzerland. I remained silent during these conversations. The Fro Club never asked me where my family vacationed, in winter or in summer. They assumed I stayed where I was, in Beirut, which was the truth. They could tell I came from a lower-class family.

Between classes, we hung out on the steps of the cafeteria, admiring the women walking by. Most wore tight bellbottom jeans and had let their hair grow long.

“She just winked at me,” Khaled said, eyeing a student walking past us with a textbook pressed against her breasts.

“She was probably admiring my red curls,” Roy said. He hissed at a cat, an ugly mixed breed which had curled up against his leg.

“Man, look at her ass,” Khaled said, eyeing her behind his aviator shades. I thought of Diala’s ass, which shook with unparalleled force when she belly danced.

Beautiful women roamed the campus. I didn’t think they’d care to talk to me, a shopkeeper’s son. The one woman who caught my attention was Natalie Malouf, an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department. She was in her mid thirties, and wore v-cut dresses that tantalizingly revealed the parting of her breasts.

“She’s old, man,” Khaled said.

“Maybe Omar likes them old,” Roy said, pulling out a cigarette from his fiery afro.

Maybe I did like them old. Diala was certainly older than me. I had had a long infatuation with Lamyia the wet-nurse, who was much older than me. Had she initiated my attraction to older women? But how to explain Youmna Yassine?

“How far have you gone with a girl?” Khaled asked me.

“I’ve kissed a girl.”

I didn’t consider the blowjob at Marwa’s Muse a sexual encounter. It was a nightmare.

“Man, you’ve got no experience. I’ve fondled boobs and ass. Once—you all better keep this a secret—once I fingered my maid.”

“That’s gross!” Waleed said. “Your maid?!”

“Shh. She’s a young Egyptian who’s kind of cute.”

“I’ve gotten a hand job,” Roy said, “and it wasn’t from my maid. She’s my sister’s friend. She was sleeping over at our place one night when I bumped into her in the hallway. She was on her way to the bathroom. I followed her inside and we started making out. I pulled out my cock and she began stroking it. I came all over her hand.”

After classes, we hung out on Bliss Street. At the top of the street by the Medical Gate was a movie theatre called the Orly. Down the street were clothing stores and restaurants, a secondhand bookstore, a barbershop, and an ice cream parlor. Our favorite haunt was Universal Snack, a popular diner at the corner of Jean D’Arc and Bliss Street.

I could afford Universal once or twice a week. On other days, I told my friends I was headed to Jafet Library to catch up on my studies.

“You’re always studying,” Khaled said. “Take a break.”

“I have to maintain a high average,” I explained. As soon as my friends walked out of Main Gate, I reached inside my satchel for the sandwich Mama had made me and ate it on a bench facing the sea. The bites were hard to swallow, but I downed them

nonetheless, hoping that one day soon, as a rich filmmaker, I'd afford to eat out every day of the week.

At home, Mama bombarded me with questions about AUB. She was ecstatic about my university career, and boasted to the neighbors whom she bumped into in the stairwell or in the neighborhood grocery store or at the butcher's, that her son was an AUB student.

She perused the university handbook.

"This Latin-American literature course looks so interesting," she told me. She read aloud the titles of the required reading. "*One Hundred Years of Solitude*. What a title!"

On a Saturday, I showed her around campus. She gripped my arm in excitement.

"The main graduation ceremony is held on the green field," I said, pointing to the football pitch.

"I can't wait to see you down there in a cap and gown. I'll be the proud mother of an AUB graduate."

Mama was overjoyed when I took her to Jafet Library. As we walked among the stacks, she inhaled the dusty smell of old books and ran her fingertips along their spines.

We sat at a table in the reading room, sunshine pouring through the arched windows. A student sat at the far end, buried in a textbook, twirling a pen between his fingers.

"I can check out books for you," I whispered.



“I’d love that!” Mama covered her mouth. “Let’s see if they have *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.”

We found the novel, which Mama pressed to her chest like a lost child.

That evening, as Baba and I watched TV, Mama read the book. She had only stopped reading to make dinner. Finally, when Baba turned off the TV and we both got up to prepare for bed, Mama remained curled up on the couch.

“I’m going to keep reading,” she said.

At breakfast, as Baba and I sipped Nescafé at the kitchen table, Mama said she had stayed up the entire night reading and drinking coffee. She finished the book at dawn.

“I’ve never read anything like it before,” she said, her eyes red but magnetic. “It doesn’t compare to *The Arabian Nights* or *Tales from Mount Lebanon*. In those books, the magic is only magic. But in García Márquez’s book, the magic is part of everyday life; no one pays attention to it. It’s similar to our belief in reincarnation. And the way García Márquez describes falling in love; it’s breathtaking!”

Baba and I exchanged glances. He gave me a look that thanked me for making Mama happy.

I checked out more books for Mama, including works by Borges, Cortázar, and Vargas Llosa. She devoured them, though her favorite remained García Márquez.

When Mama was preoccupied with cooking, I asked Baba about my friends on Mutanabi Street. His health was steadily improving.

I was worried about the theatre’s survival. I kept meaning to visit the girls but I just couldn’t find the time, overwhelmed with university life.

Baba said Bandar was still struggling with writer's block, and as a consequence, was ill-tempered. The district continued to lose money. The matrons could do little to prevent or at least slow down the inevitable.

I was disheartened. "Isn't there something that we can do?"

"We're helpless, Omar. Our store won't survive for much longer. It's a good thing you're at AUB. You have a bright future ahead of you."

But I was his heir to the Shooting Star. Assuming the store did close down, did Baba consider his own future? Our family's future? How would he be able to support Mama?

One evening, as I struggled through an accounting assignment, Baba said Bandar's mood was only worsening.

"She claims to have lost her creativity," he said. "She thinks her life is nearing its end. Writing is what gives her meaning, and without it, she can't go on. It doesn't matter," Baba said, in a defeated tone that was beginning to irritate me. "The whole street is going down the drain."

Dismissing his defeatism, I asked what Bandar's girls thought of this.

"The girls are frustrated. They say Bandar has become unbearable. Diala's threatening to leave, and if she does, Laila will join her. Diala's made these threats before, but now it's serious. She's been asking other girls on the street about their future plans. Without Diala, the theatre can't possibly survive."

Now *I* felt defeated. If Diala left, I wasn't sure I'd ever see her again. I wasn't prepared to let her go, not just yet.

On a Friday after classes, I took a taxi to Mutanabi Street. I hadn't been to the district for nearly a month. On the weekends, I usually met up with the Fro Club. Khaled would pick us up in the evenings in his BMW to cruise the streets. Invariably, he parked on Bliss Street. We bought sodas and stood against the car, checking out the women. I felt confident standing against the BMW: People assumed I had money.

When we got bored, we cruised down the Corniche. We were always on the lookout for lovers, who sat on the metal railings or walked along the promenade holding hands. We stood against the railings ourselves, smoking cigarettes (I had become a social smoker), and looked out at the sea. The dark waters were dotted with the swaying lanterns of fishermen's boats. In the distance, the mountains sparkled with yellow lights. The sound of crashing waves competed with the music blaring from the radios of parked cars. Among the fishermen with their lines cast out at sea, families were gathered, sitting in wide circles in chairs they brought from home. They smoked from their hookahs and cracked pumpkin seeds between their teeth and chatted endlessly while their children ran around. We watched the planes flying over the sea and descending for landing.

We also hung out at Khaled's apartment in the exclusive sector of Verdun, a four-bedroom spectacle tiled with marble and furnished with Italian couches and chairs, Persian rugs, and crystal chandeliers. His family had their own cook, a chauffeur, and the Egyptian maid, Sabah. Sabah was a bony young woman with jet black hair and dark brown skin. Although she wasn't very attractive, we—Waleed, Roy, and I—lusted after her. We thought a sexual creature lurked behind her unassuming character. If she had spread her legs for Khaled, we wondered if she'd do the same for us.

"She's got a spicy scent," Khaled said. "I sniffed it on my fingers."

That Friday, a crisp autumn day, I had a cup of Turkish coffee at Elvis' stall before stopping by the Shooting Star. Elvis kept tugging at the back of his pompadour.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He stepped down from his footstool and told me to come around his stall. He opened the bottom metal cabinet drawer and told me to peek inside. A Kalashnikov lay among cans of coffee and a plastic jug of water.

“What do you need a gun for?!” I said.

“If the government can’t protect us, we have to defend ourselves. The police force is a farce. Jawad, who works the forklift at the port? He came by and sold Kalashnikovs from the back of his pick-up truck. He taught me how to use it and clean its parts.” He turned his head to either side, and began to whisper. “The gangster who visited your store, El Señor?”

“What about him?” I said, turning around to make sure he wasn’t standing behind me. “Did he come by here again?”

“Once. I made him and his henchmen coffee. He asked me if I had any news to share. I said I didn’t know anything. He gave me a big tip; said I’d get a bigger tip the next time I gave him news about the Palestinian militia. He’s hunting down a Palestinian fighter known around Beirut as Don Juan. He said Don Juan is a psychopath—cuts out the tongues of his enemies while they’re still alive and watches them choke on their own blood. He wears a necklace strung with shriveled, black tongues.” Elvis rubbed his face. “I’ve been hearing terrible things about El Señor, from Jawad and others. They say he cracks skulls with his steel-toe boots. Kicks and stomps people to death. A week ago, his minions kidnapped a Palestinian commando as he was sipping his morning cup of coffee

at Café Paris on Hamra Street. A Volkswagen van pulled up at the curb and masked men got out and dragged the commando from his table while all the patrons sat back in shock. They took him to a parking lot somewhere nearby—after all, we’re on the Christian side of the city—and chained the commando’s wrists to the back of a car and his ankles to the back of another.” Elvis shook his head. “The drivers revved their engines and hit the gas. The Palestinian’s limbs were ripped apart from his body. They dumped his corpse and body parts on the Beirut-Damascus Road.”

I was too ill to finish my coffee.

At the Shooting Star, Baba asked if I had come to visit him or the girls.

“Both,” I said.

“But you prefer the girls. I know it.”

“Did you buy a Kalashnikov from Jawad?”

“You must have spoken to Elvis. The gun’s in the backroom.”

I walked into the backroom and saw the automatic rifle propped against the wall beneath the striped scarves. The gun appeared harmless among those hanging scarves, as if it only shot spools of yarn.

“It’s just a security measure,” Baba said.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“You should focus on your studies. Don’t worry about us.”

“Us? I’m one of *us*.”

Baba kissed my cheek. “Let me teach you how to use it.”

Baba showed me how to pull and release the charging handle and pointed out the safety. I removed the clip, blew on it, and stuck it back in. The feel of the cold barrel and

the wood of the butt, the spring of the trigger and the metallic smell of the instrument, empowered me, for I had the resource now to fight any man of any size. Soon most Beirutis would learn how to operate the Kalashnikov. They'd keep the gun stored in the back of their closet behind hanging clothes, fully loaded.

I ate a chocolate bar and headed over to Bandar's. Hassan let me in. In the sun-lit parlor, Zeina sat at the coffee table playing a game of solitaire. Laila was reading *Madame Bovary* and Farah was peeling potatoes. Abdel Wahab was singing about the brokenhearted on the transistor radio. When they saw me, they stood up and kissed my cheeks.

"It's about time you visited," Zeina said. "Nice shoes." She was wearing the same pair, though her feet were much smaller.

I slipped off my satchel and sat down in a chair. The wood creaked.

"How's school?" Laila asked.

"Okay."

"Okay? That's it? It must be better than that. Come on, tell me more."

I described my courses.

"Is the library nice?"

I nodded. "I can take you sometime." Like Mama, I could also check out books for her and show her the stacks and reading rooms.

Laila closed her book. "That's all right. If I ever visited the campus, I'd only see what I've been missing out on."

I wondered what the rest of Bandar's girls were missing out on, if they also had unfulfilled dreams like Mama.

Farah asked me where I ate on campus.

“There’s a cafeteria,” I said. “We also eat at a diner on Bliss Street.”

“Who’s the ‘we’?” Zeina asked.

“My friends.”

“Are they your best friends?”

“They’re just friends,” I said. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Diala’s napping upstairs,” Laila said. “Nisreen and Hind went out to buy something. Crazy Giant is working out in his room.”

“Did Jawad sell you guns?” I asked.

“It’s behind the bar,” Zeina said. “If someone tries to kidnap me, will you protect me, Ammoura?”

“I’ll shoot the kidnapper dead.”

“You’re a sweetheart.”

“Baba told me Bandar isn’t doing well,” I said.

“We can’t move an inch without her yelling at us,” Farah said, peeling a potato.

I looked at Laila. “Is it true you and Diala are thinking of leaving?”

“Maybe.”

“You both are selfish,” Zeina said. “How could you leave us behind?”

“There’s nothing left for us here,” Laila said. “For any of us. Diala mentioned leaving for Cyprus. It would be a fresh start. We could work at a music club or a restaurant. Who knows?”

“There’s still hope,” I said.

“Hope for what?” Laila asked me. “The city’s becoming more dangerous.”

I had no answer.

“You’re lucky you’re at AUB,” she said. “That’s what I call hope. For us, we can only hope to survive from day to day.”

“I’ve lost some weight,” Farah said. “Bandar has been buying less meat.”

“Don’t exaggerate, Farah,” Laila said. “You’re still the same size.”

“Bahaa said my ass looks smaller.”

“Is there hope for Bandar?” I asked.

“She’s run out of ideas for her plays,” Zeina said. “She’s dried up.”

“We’re all dried up,” Farah said. “We’ve been whoring for far too long.”

“You can go upstairs and talk to Bandar,” Zeina suggested. “It might improve her mood.”

I followed Zeina up the squeaky wooden staircase to the third floor, where Hassan, Crazy Giant, and Bandar made their living quarters. I heard Crazy Giant grunting from a room down the hall. Zeina and I went in. The room was massive. Bandar had broken down the wall between two rooms and converted them into one, to accommodate Crazy Giant. One half of the room served as Crazy Giant’s workout space. A wall was covered in floor-to-ceiling mirrors, before which stood rows of dumbbells, a bench press, an incline and decline, a latpull, and stacks of twenty-kilo weights. A punching bag hung from the ceiling.

Crazy Giant stood shirtless before the walled mirror, curling dumbbells, his belly glistening.

“Chief!” he cried. He set the dumbbells on the floor and gave me one of his crushing bear hugs. His sweat smeared my shirt.



“Is anyone bugging you at AUB?” he asked me.

“All is well.”

He picked up his dumbbells and resumed his workout.

“I need to get back into shape for the rematch,” he told me. His face and torso were bright red. “I’ve gotten too fat and slow. My Indians would be disappointed in me.”

I saw Zeina looking at me in the mirror. “Bandar’s room is across the hall,” she said.

I was nervous to speak with Bandar, but I had to give it a try. I walked across the hall and knocked on her door. No one answered.

“Knock again,” Zeina whispered from the entrance of Crazy Giant’s room.

I knocked twice.

“Leave me alone,” Bandar yelled from inside.

I turned to leave. “Tell her it’s you,” Zeina said.

“It’s me, Bandar. Omar.”

“What do you want?”

“I wanted to say hello.”

“Hello.”

“Tell her you want to see her,” Zeina said.

“I’d like to see you.”

“There’s nothing to see.”

“Tell her you miss her,” Zeina told me.

“I miss you.”

“There’s nothing to miss,” Bandar said.

“Tell her you only want to say a few words to her,” Zeina said.

“I can hear you whispering, Zeina,” Bandar said.

“Shit,” Zeina said.

Bandar opened the door. “Come in,” she told me, and closed the door behind me.

Bookshelves lined the walls, packed with stacks of papers. A typewriter lay on a desk next to an open Bible. She directed me to a two-seater sofa. She pulled up her desk chair and sat down in front of me. Light streamed in from the open French doors.

Bandar’s face sagged like melted wax. Her whiskers and the hairs on her mole seemed to have grown.

“Why’d you come? You should be studying.”

“It’s a Friday. I’m done with classes for the week.”

“Don’t you have friends to hang out with?”

“I have friends here, too.”

“We’re not your friends. We’re whores.”

“You’re performers,” I wanted to say. A silence ensued, in which the light spread over Bandar’s face, making her appear paler than she already was.

“What can I do for you?” she finally said.

“Baba said you haven’t been writing.”

“Why should that concern you? You don’t live here.”

I squirmed in the sofa. This conversation was going nowhere.

“I’ve lost it all,” Bandar said. She waved her hand at the bookcases. “Those are all the plays I’ve written, starting from the first one I wrote in nineteen forty-five, the year I took over the brothel. I’ll never forget that one. It’s called *Runaway*, about a young

woman who runs away from home. It's similar to my own story. But instead of running away to Cairo, the heroine runs away with her lover, a vagabond named Ali Ali—I was fond of his double name. Unfortunately, on the way to Ali Ali's village, which is far away, the woman catches a cold, which develops into pneumonia. She dies before reaching Ali Ali's village. It's a sad ending—all my plays have sad endings. The men loved it.

“At the time, I had a girl named Raghida star as the heroine of *Runaway*. She was a good actress. But she wasn't as good as Nisreen, who came a year later. Nisreen was a natural on stage. She had an innocence that made her all the more attractive to the men. It was with Nisreen that I came closest to achieving the ultimate romantic death scene. I thought I could do that, write something that moving.

“I had Nisreen tell me her story numerous times so that I could turn it into a play. I wanted to know every single detail about the night her father killed her lover, and also about her past. These details would make my play more authentic, which I titled *In the Shade of the Willow*. It's one of my favorite titles.

“Nisreen played herself. She did a marvelous job. She always broke down at the death scene. She fell to her knees and pleaded for her father—played by one of my girls—not to pull the trigger. It was impossible to tell if Nisreen was acting or not.

“I was on fire back then. The stories were pouring out of me. It was just a matter of putting them down on the page. In the first five or six years of my running this place, I wrote a play per month. But now,” she said, “I don't have anything more to say. I don't feel sorry for myself, and I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me. I've had a good run. I'm not a failure. I'm just retiring.”

“What will happen to the theatre?”

“I’ll continue to rotate my old plays. If the men don’t enjoy recycled work, they can go someplace else.”

Bandar thumbed the beads of her rosary. I stood up from the sofa.

“Good luck at school,” she said on my way out.

Zeina was waiting for me in the hallway. “How’d it go?”

“Not too good.”

“Thanks for trying.”

On our way down the stairs, I stopped on the second-floor landing and peeked down the hallway. I wondered if Diala was still sleeping. I could hear someone snoring.

“Let me show you something,” Zeina said.

She took me to the first room on the right, where floor-to-ceiling mirrors covered an entire wall. Zeina opened the doors of a closet, releasing an overpowering smell of mothballs. I ran my fingers along the hems of costumes, feeling different fabrics and sequins graze my skin. A wicker basket filled with props stood in the corner of the room. I dug my hand inside and shuffled through a toy pistol, a wand, a silver-colored cane, a pair of artificial eye-glasses, a fake beard, a rubber nose with an elastic string, and a bowler hat. I pulled out a plastic mask of a cat’s face, slipped it on, and looked at the mirrors. I couldn’t help myself from meowing.

“It must be fun to act,” I said, with some regret. I’d never be the next Omar Sharif.

“Sometimes. Want to see my room?”

“Sure.” I removed the mask and followed her out.

Zeina's room was decorated with posters of Arab singers: Fairuz, Sabah, Umm Kalthoum, Abdel Halim, and Abdel Wahab. She also had a portrait of Elvis Presley, whom she thought was the handsomest man in the world.

"You think Elvis would find me attractive?" she asked, looking up at his portrait. I thought of the Elvis down on the street.

"Of course."

"He'd mistake me for a boy."

"You don't look like a boy to me."

"But Samah, one of my few regulars, fantasizes that I'm a boy. I do my arm tricks for him, which really turns him on. It's rare that I turn on men, so it makes me feel special when I do." Her eyes widened. "Want to see my arm tricks again?"

"That's okay."

She looked down at her high-tops. She wore a plaid sweater over jeans.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She started biting her nails. I gently pulled her hand from her mouth. "You'll make yourself bleed."

She swallowed. "You have soft hands."

I blushed. The small crescent of a nail was stuck to her lower lip, but I didn't dare brush it off. I looked at her four-poster bed, the curtains hanging like sheaths of skin. How did Zeina spend her time between clients? Did she sleep? Read magazines? Play on her lute? Did she fantasize about living a different life? She could have left Bandar's anytime she wanted. But she chose to stay, and I was grateful for her company.

An old rug with brown stains covered the floor.

“My father once told me I’m built like my mother, God rest her,” Zeina said. “I wonder if Mama also wished she had curves. My body is ugly, isn’t it?”

“It’s lovely!”

She shook her head.

“I mean it, Zeina.”

“Hush.”

For Zeina to attract men, I realized, she went out of her way to stand out, primarily with her short hair and insistence on wearing pants. Knowing she couldn’t compete with Diala or the tantalizing sexuality of Beirut women, she assumed a different persona that would hopefully catch someone’s eye. Wearing a dress or miniskirt would only remind them of how unfeminine she was. I was then suddenly aware of how unmanly I was—I had no muscles to speak of. My limbs were long and wiry, my chest flat, almost sunken, my shoulders droopy. Why would any Beirut woman desire me? Before I felt worse about Zeina or myself, I asked to see the other rooms.

Zeina led me to Diala’s sister’s room. Laila had a bookcase packed with spine-cracked novels. Other than that, the room was bare. But like Zeina’s room, there was the same four-poster bed with curtains.

Farah, Zeina told me, had wanted to cover her walls with religious paraphernalia, but Bandar objected.

“We don’t want religion turning off the men,” Bandar had said.

Instead, Farah had hung a framed sura from the Qur’an and an evil eye to ward off danger.

“I didn’t think Farah was that religious,” I said, reading the sura.

“She isn’t. But she likes to think she is.”

Silk underwear the size of a pillowcase lay on the floor. The trash bin was full of crumpled tissues and torn packs of condoms.

In Nisreen’s room, I spotted the cedar wood box on her dresser.

“You know what’s inside that box?” Zeina asked.

“Milhem’s lock of hair.”

I walked out onto the balcony and looked at the colorful parakeets.

“Nisreen should release them,” Zeina said. “I don’t like seeing caged animals.”

Hind’s room was across from Nisreen’s. She had the barest room. There were no pictures or posters hung on the walls. However, on a night table next to her bed was a framed black-and-white photograph of her and her mother, Ghiwa. In the picture, Ghiwa was bathing her in a galvanized tin bucket in the courtyard. Hind must have been two or three. Only her wet head and naked torso showed. The rest of her body was concealed by the bucket. Ghiwa stood to the side of the bucket and was reaching over Hind and scrubbing her hair. Her own hair had fallen over to a side and was grazing the top of Hind’s head.

On our way out of Hind’s room, I noticed that Diala’s snoring had ceased. We heard her shuffle about in her room.

“Let’s go before she sees us,” Zeina said, taking my hand. I resisted. “Come on,” she said.

“Who’s out there?” Diala said, in a sleepy scratchy voice.

“It’s me, Omar,” I said.

Zeina let go of my hand. “You shouldn’t have answered.”

Diala emerged from the velvet curtains in a black chemise. One side of her frizzy hair was flat. The other side stuck out. She wasn't wearing a bra, which was obvious by the way her breasts hung down. One of her shoulder straps was unhooked.

"Mon chéri! I knew you'd come back," she said, and kissed my cheek. Her breath was sour. "Do you have une petite amie?"

"Not yet."

"Damn it. When are you going to grow up and be a man?"

"He is a man," Zeina said. "Come on," she told me. "Let's go downstairs."

"What makes you think he wants to go downstairs with you?" Diala asked her.

"Because he's my friend—my *best* friend."

Diala rolled her eyes. "I need to pee."

I was tempted to fall down to my knees and beg her not to leave for Cyprus.

I stayed in that night. I sat at my desk reading over my script *The Possessed*, which I had written over summer. It was inspired by *The Exorcist*. If Bandar had run out of ideas for her plays, I'd provide her with new ones. If she liked my script, maybe she'd adapt it for the stage. And if the play was well-received and more clients turned up and Bandar's mood improved, maybe Diala wouldn't think of leaving.

My plot was loyal to *The Exorcist*, except that I set the play in Beirut and made the heroine a famous singer.



I paid a visit to Bandar's in the early afternoon. On Mutanabi Street, a ragged old man pushing a wooden cart filled with almonds and walnuts and pistachios was yelling up to the balconies that he had nuts for sale.

"Come and get your big, hard nuts," he said. "I dare you to fit more than two in your mouth."

"You can shove those nuts up your ass," a prostitute from the House of Blondes said, eating grapes on her balcony. Her platinum blonde hair stuck out in twisted wires. She appeared to have just woken up.

"If you're trying to look like Marline Monroe, it's not working," the old man said. "You look like her stepsister."

The blonde threw a grape at him and missed. Ayesha was hanging laundry on her balcony of Aunt Roula's.

"Want some tasty nuts, ya abdi?" the man said, looking up at her.

"Your nuts are shriveled up like raisins," Ayesha said, clipping stockings to the line.

"You're lucky I don't go up there and whip you with my belt. You don't speak to a white man like that. May God scorch your tongue, cut it out, and feed it to the rats."

"If you come upstairs I'll hang you naked from my balcony with your shriveled balls stuffed in your mouth."

"God will surely punish you now! You're going straight to hell, ya abdi, where you'll roast on a pit and turn blacker than you are now and when I die and go up to heaven, I'll piss down on you as you continue to burn eternally!"

“I bet you can’t even get it up,” Elizabeth the III told the old man. She sat on her balcony with her feet propped up against the railings, painting her toenails, a cigarette dangling from her lips, her pearl-white hair parted down the middle. In the sunlight, and without makeup, she looked like a young grandmother.

“No man can get it up for an ugly hag like you,” the old man replied. “Even if you fucked for charity, men would go limp at the sight of you.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I bet the only thing you’ve ever fucked is a goat.”

“God forbid!” the man said. “Bestiality is a sin! May God strike you dead with lightning and turn you into ash.”

“Let me dye your pubes blond, old man,” the blonde said. “Maybe then your goat will actually suck it for you.”

“You sick, sick woman. May God bring down that brothel and crush you and all the blonde whores inside and when I die and go to heaven, I’ll piss on your rotten corpses.”

“Old man,” Elizabeth said. “Look over here.”

The man turned. Elizabeth pulled up her dress and mooned her flat, dimpled ass.

“Dear God!” he said, clutching at his heart. “May God sew your asshole shut so that you never shit again and die from constipation, and when I die and go to heaven, I’ll shit over your bloated soul rotting in hell.”

The girls laughed hysterically. I laughed, too. The man spotted me by Danya’s Delights. “May God turn your afro into a burning bush, you shit-eating hippie!”

“May God be merciful and grant you your first lay before dying a sorry virgin,” I said, perhaps thinking more of myself.

“I’m married, you skunk-ass hippie.”

“Then what are you doing on this street?” I asked.

“Selling my damn nuts, boy. Maybe you’d like some nuts. Maybe that’s the kind of man you are.”

“Leave him alone,” Ayesha warned.

Elizabeth turned inside her room. She came back out with a Kalashnikov and fired a round in the air. We all ducked.

“Be careful with that thing,” Ayesha cried, “or you’ll end up killing us all.”

With a cigarette burning from the corner of her mouth, Elizabeth aimed her gun at the old man. “Say one more word and I’ll blast your cock to hell.”

The old man gripped the handles of his cart and quickly made his way out of Mutanabi Street. Nuts spilled, leaving a trail in his wake. We never saw him again.

“Good morning, ladies,” I said.

“No one fucks with us, Ammoura,” Elizabeth said, flicking her cigarette over the balcony. I preferred this Elizabeth to the one who threw sugared almonds.

“I like your jeans jacket,” Ayesha told me.

“Thanks,” I said, turning up my collar.

Crazy Giant and the girls sat in the “garden” out back. It was a walled courtyard. A wicker table and chairs were placed in the shade of an umbrella. Pots of basil and parsley and mint leaves lined the wall.

Bandar was missing. The rest acknowledged me with tired smiles. An empty pot of kishk lay on the table, along with empty bowls crusted with porridge.

“Morning, Chief,” Crazy Giant said with a yawn.

Zeina told me to pull up a chair next to hers.

The girls had dark circles under their eyes, which made them look older. Even Zeina looked older—more like a young man than a young boy. The wrinkles on Nisreen’s face stood out. I grimaced at the possibility of a wattle hanging from Diala’s chin.

Once Farah served the coffee, the girls’ mood improved.

“What’s that in your hand?” Diala asked me. “Did you come over to do your homework? God knows I hate schoolwork; isn’t that right, Laila?”

“You were never a good student,” Laila said. “But I give you credit for learning French.”

“Merci, ma sœur. I’ve had a few teacher-clients. One instructor offered to tutor me in math for free. I told him math had no purpose in my life except for counting tips.”

“I once had a history teacher,” Nisreen said. “He had me call him ‘Justinian’ in bed.”

“I once had a physics teacher,” Hind said. She didn’t elaborate further.

“I got Bahaa the Ass Man for three hours last night,” Farah said. “My hand still smells of his ass.”

“Well I got Ralph,” Zeina said.

“Who’s Ralph again?” I asked Zeina.

“He writes romantic obituaries.”

“So what did you bring?” Diala asked me.

“A screenplay. I wrote it myself.”

“What’s it about?”

“A young girl who becomes possessed by an evil spirit.”

“Sounds scary. Why’d you bring the script with you?”

I didn’t know what to say. Telling them that I was here to save them and the theatre sounded too presumptuous.

“Did you want Bandar to read your script?” Zeina said.

“Yes,” I admitted. “I thought if she read it, and liked it, she’d adapt it for the stage.”

“But it’s a horror film,” Diala said. “Bandar doesn’t do horrors. She does romance.”

“At this point, she doesn’t do anything,” Nisreen said.

“It doesn’t hurt to try,” Zeina said.

Zeina explained to Bandar that I had written a script which I wanted her to read.

Bandar looked at me. “How long have you been working on this script?”

“A few months,” I said.

“Have you revised it?”

“At least three or four times.”

“Come back to me after your twentieth revision.”

The demoralized look on my face must have stirred Bandar to compassion.

“How long is it?” she asked.

“About fifty pages.”

“Screenplays are at least a hundred pages long,” she said. “You must be missing something.”

“That’s why he wants you to read it,” Zeina said. “So you can help him out.”

Bandar pointed to her desk. “Leave it there.”

I placed my screenplay between the typewriter and Bible.

“Give me an hour,” she said.

An hour later, I sat at her desk. My script was in the same place I had left it. I didn’t want to hear her verdict. What if she didn’t like my writing?

“How long have you been writing screenplays?” she asked.

“Years.”

“It doesn’t look like it. Your format is wrong. It’s very unprofessional, not that I expect something professional from an eighteen-year-old.”

She picked up the script and ruffled the pages.

“*The Possessed*,” she said, shaking her head. “What inspired you to write this?”

“A film called *The Exorcist*.”

“Hm. Let me ask you another question. What do you know about love?”

I wasn’t sure what Bandar’s question had to do with my screenplay. I told her I was once in love with a girl named Youmna Yassine when I was sixteen.

“How long did you two see each other?”

“A month.”

“Only a month? Did she leave you?”

“She left me for her cousin.”

“Interesting. So she broke your heart?”

“Yes. It was a tough time.”

“You felt that the whole world had come crashing down and that you’d never fall in love again. You probably had trouble sleeping and were terribly lonely.”

“Yes.”

“Do you still remember those feelings?”

“I can’t ever forget them.”

“They’re that strong?”

“Yes.”

“After reading your script, it sure doesn’t seem like you’ve ever experienced love or heartbreak.”

“Oh,” I said, not completely understanding her.

“Where’s the passion?!” she said, pounding the desk. “There’s not an ounce of love in this script. Instead, you have a silly girl screaming her head off the entire time. I couldn’t relate to her or to any of your characters. They’re all loveless.”

I wanted to leave.

“Listen,” Bandar said, “if you can’t write about love, you have no future as a screenwriter. You have to trust in your feelings. Relive that month you spent with Youmna. Remember how she broke your heart. She left you for her cousin, for God’s sake!

“There’s a secret door to our innermost memories that all writers and actors—serious writers and actors—aren’t afraid to open when the time calls for it. They relive those memories, which can all be found behind that door, and translate their feelings onto the page or stage. They become soul doctors. Their patients: the audience.

“When the men relate to my characters and are deeply moved, I’ve treated them. But to become a soul doctor, you’ve first got to open that secret door. *You* didn’t even place your hand on the doorknob. Open the door! Tear it down!”

Tick, tick, tick went the beads of her rosary, infuriating me. My years of screenwriting had been a waste of time.

She returned my script. I thanked her and left the room.

“Did she like it?” Zeina asked me in the hallway.

“I have to go,” I said, making my way down the stairs.

“Hang on a second!”

I stopped midway.

“Don’t let her upset you,” Zeina said.

“She thinks my work is lousy.”

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

“I’m a failure,” I said, and nearly wept.

Zeina walked down to a step above me and embraced me. She was all bones. “If anyone’s a failure, it’s us.”

“You’re an amazing singer.”

“I’m an average singer who also happens to be an average whore.”

On my way out, she told me to leave my script with her. She’d give it a read.

One evening, Baba said the girls wanted to see me. It concerned my script.



After my last class the next day, I took a taxi to Mutanabi Street. Farah was stretched out on a couch in the parlor, her stubby feet propped up on the armrest. Her eyes were half-open.

“Sit with me,” she said.

I sat in a chair next to her. A scratchy noise came from under the couch. I mentioned this to Farah.

“I’m too tired to set up another mouse trap,” she said. “I work harder than anyone else in this house. Not only do I have to fuck and act, but I cook, too. If any of the girls were half-decent cooks, maybe then I’d let them help me in the kitchen. But they can’t cook for shit and get in my way.” She yawned. “I sometimes wonder if I made the right decision—you know, about working here. I’d be less exhausted if I had never left home.”

“But you were unhappy at home,” I said.

“That’s what I keep telling myself. My parents treated me like shit. I was divorced, barren, and fat. None of these things mattered here, at Bandar’s. And the men love me, at least Bahaa the Ass Man does. I know he’s got a thing for his ass, but he’s a good man.”

“He loves you,” I said.

“I know. Poor thing. But I’m not interested in marriage. I want to run my own business like the Madams on this street. I’ve been thinking about opening my own restaurant. I’ll call it Farah’s and serve traditional home cooking. As soon as I save enough money, I’ll leave this place. I don’t want to end up like Shams. She lives in a dump. Before I forget,” she said, yawning, “Nisreen is waiting for you upstairs.”

And with that, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

I walked upstairs to the second floor and lingered outside the velvet curtains of Diala's room, inhaling the wafting vapors of Bengay. I overheard her speaking with Laila.

"Stay on that spot, Sister," she said. "Yes, there—it feels great."

"Give me your other foot," Laila said.

"What's Farah cooking?"

"Kibbe."

"Damn it. I'll be burping kibbe all night."

"I was thinking we should visit Mama and Baba. It's been months."

"You know I hate going back to the camp. Baba will tell us the same sad stories."

This was the opportunity I'd been waiting for. I burst through the curtains like an impresario and said I had visited the Shatila camp when I was sixteen.

"You must have suffered a lot," I said, looking at Diala.

She sat against the headboard with her feet in Laila's lap, her muscular legs waxy with Bengay. She pulled in her feet and stretched the hem of her chemise over her knees.

"First of all, don't eavesdrop on us," she said. "Second, you have no idea what it's like to be a refugee."

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"Who the hell do you think you are?!"

"Easy, Diala," Laila said. "He's just a kid."

"He's not *that* young. He should be smarter than that."

"I am smart," I said, my voice breaking. Why was she being so cruel to me when I was only trying to reach out to her? Surely she knew how much I pined for her.

“I’m not talking about book smart,” Diala said. “I’m talking about life smart. You’ve got to work on that. Anyway, I need to nap, or else I’ll be grumpy all night.”

I left her room without another word, holding in my tears, and rushed to Zeina’s room and peeked inside. She was sound asleep, curled up beneath the covers. I was tempted to wake her, knowing she wouldn’t mind, and telling her that she was my best friend, the best I’d ever had. But instead I crossed the hallway to Nisreen’s room and parted the curtains.

Nisreen sat before her dresser. Hind stood behind her, combing her hair.

“Is this a good time?” I asked.

“It couldn’t be better,” Nisreen said. “Sit down on the bed.”

Her motherly tone put me at ease. If only Diala was just as nice. Or was it because she had an attitude that I found Diala more alluring? I sat on the edge of the bed. Baba had sat on this same bed as a scared fifteen-year-old. He had made love to Nisreen on it, along with thousands of others. There were tears in the curtains.

“We read your script,” Nisreen said, looking at her reflection in the mirror, “and thought it very interesting.”

“That means you didn’t like it.”

“I did. We all did.”

“Bandar didn’t like it.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case. But listen: We think this script could work on the stage.”

“Really?!”

“We,” Nisreen said, “minus Bandar, argued about the best way to revise your work, which wasn’t very productive. We had different takes on the story. Finally, the girls decided that I should rewrite the script, since I’ve been in nearly all of Bandar’s plays and understand best how they work. We—you and I—have to adjust your script to Bandar’s preferences, which means developing one very important element: romance.”

“But I’ve written a horror story.”

“No matter. We’ll have the priest and singer fall in love with each other.”

“It will be a Romantic-Horror,” I said, excited. “Such a genre doesn’t even exist. There are Romantic-Comedies, but not Romantic-Horrors.”

“All that matters is that we move the men, and I think we can.”

“I’ve never written a play before. I don’t know how they work.”

“I’ll help you.”

“When do we start?”

“As soon as we can.”

Over the rest of the week, I went to Bandar’s whenever I had a long break between classes, and after classes, too. I avoided speaking to Diala, as much as I longed for her. On Saturday, Nisreen and I worked for hours in her room until we came close to finishing the One-Act Play, entitled, *The Possessed*. We had kept the play a secret from Bandar. The plan was to write the play and have the girls rehearse it before it was performed for Bandar. In the state she was in, it was best to present Bandar with the final product.

From Nisreen, I learned how setting and parenthetical asides and stage directions and lighting and dialogue all worked together to set a mood on stage. Or how a

character's pause or prolonged silence could be more powerful than words. My dialogue became less encumbered and more real.

During that week, Zeina routinely came into the room to see if she could be of any use.

“Can I write a scene?” she asked

“Two writers are more than enough,” Nisreen said.

Zeina looked at me. “Want to go out for ice cream?”

“I have to go home soon,” I said. “Mama will get worried if I'm late.”

Another time, Zeina complained to Nisreen that she wasn't sharing me. I had never perceived myself as something to be shared, and was flattered.

That Saturday, Nisreen and I sat on her bed, with our backs against the headboard. I had the script in hand. Hind sat by our feet, watching us in silence, ever ready to make us a snack or a cup of tea with pine nuts and two teaspoons of sugar, just the way Nisreen drank it. Her presence was barely felt, except when she sneezed.

“This play is vintage Bandar,” Nisreen said. “But it's also fresh. The men will think Bandar has reinvented herself.”

“And it has a romantic death scene,” I said. “Bandar told me the closest she ever got to achieving the ultimate romantic death scene was with you—the play about you and Milhem.”

Nisreen turned to the balcony. From our vantage point, we could see the balcony of A Thousand and One Nights across the street. A topless prostitute was walking around her room in red stockings while smoking a cigarette. She was of mammoth proportions.

When Nisreen didn't respond, I thought I had said something to upset her. Hind maneuvered up the bed and held her hand.

"Don't be sad," she said. "I'll make you some tea to feel better. Or I can buy you creampuffs from the patisserie. You love creampuffs."

Nisreen patted Hind's hand, telling her to stay put. "I relived my past on the stage," Nisreen told me. "I relived that terrible day my father murdered Milhem. I lost control over myself, and cried in front of all those men. That's the last thing I wanted; to show my pain to clients.

"But I'm very thankful for Bandar. She saved me—she saved us all. Not only did she give us a home, but she gave us the theatre. This bed is another stage; these pink curtains are stage curtains. I perform as Grace. Bandar named me Grace. She said my calm nature suited the name. But the rest of the girls here named themselves."

"I named myself Youla," Hind said.

"Tell Omar about Youla," Nisreen said.

"Youla was an orphan like me. She was a very pretty girl, and also very loud. She kept us up at night with her chatter. I always wanted to be like her—loved by everyone."

"Diala and Laila named themselves after flowers—Jasmine and Rose," Nisreen said. My heart stung at the sound of Diala's name. "Zeina chose Scheherazade because she liked to narrate stories in her songs. As for Farah, she named herself Chantal because she wanted a Christian name. She was frightened that God would punish her for prostituting herself. She said she was a devout Muslim. I told her she could still be a devout Muslim while living under Bandar's roof. She could pray five times a day. She said she didn't pray that often, and had cheated during the fast of Ramadan by eating

chocolates before sunset. Despite this, she believed in God and feared His wrath. I told her when she was in bed with clients, she could pretend to be someone else. God would know her as Farah, not as the prostitute. So she pretended to be a Christian in bed.”

Hind laughed.

“Hind still finds this funny,” Nisreen said, revealing her dimples with a smile. She pointed at the cedar wood box on her dresser, which Hind got up to retrieve. She handed the box to Nisreen.

“Milhem is twenty-eight,” Nisreen said. “The same number of years I’ve been here.”

She opened the box and removed a balled-up piece of cloth tied at the top with string. She untied the string and extended the cloth toward me, as if she were offering me the Holy Grail. In its center lay a lock of curly black hair, bound at one end with a rubber band. She held the curl between her thumb and index finger and brushed it across her face, keeping her eyes closed.

“I can see him,” she said, smiling. “He’s singing to me. He has the sweetest voice. Can you hear him?”

“He sings like an angel,” Hind said.

I remained silent.

By the time I left Bandar’s, the sun had already set and a chill was in the air. I was walking up a dark side street on my way to Martyrs’ Square, energized by hours of writing, when a Volkswagen van without rear windows turned into the street, illuminating me in its headlights. I squinted. The van was driving at an unusually slow pace, as if the driver was looking for someone. I remembered the story Elvis had told me

about the Volkswagen van pulling up at Café Paris and masked gunmen jumping out and kidnapping the Palestinian commando, and later, chaining his limbs to the backs of cars and ripping them apart. In my terror, I wasn't sure if I should quickly return to Bandar's or continue my walk up the street, minding my own business. Before I could even decide, standing there on the sidewalk, the van stopped right in front of me, the engine still running. The driver rolled down his window. He wore a black knit hat, and had patchy facial hair. A young man sat in the passenger seat, smoking a cigarette. Both men wore camouflage jackets. I could hear other voices in the back of the van. The smell of tobacco and body odor wafted from the driver's window.

“What's your name?” he asked.

I noticed a cross dangling from his rearview mirror. If he asked for my ID, he'd find out that I was Druze.

“I'm just walking home,” I said, thinking now was the time to run.

“Your name.”

“Michel,” I said, thinking of a Christian name. “Michel Malouf.”

The driver nodded. “Be careful, brother,” he told me. “The Muslims are creeping up on us.”

He drove down the street. As soon as the van turned the corner, I ran to Martyrs' Square. Within seconds I was surrounded by throngs of people, the avenues filled with cars and buses, all the buildings lit up, the shops open, the palm fronds swaying in the wind. The marquees of the Rivoli and the Roxi showcased their latest movies. And yet I could have been kidnapped just a few blocks away, my limbless corpse dumped on the Beirut-Damascus Road.



I kept my encounter with the Volkswagen van a secret from my parents. If I said something, they'd have restricted my movements after dark. I was unable to sleep that night. Although I tried to focus on the play Nisreen and I were writing, and the chance of staging it, I continued to feel the beams of the van lighting up my face.

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I avoided walking up that side street, and at night, kept my eye open for Volkswagen vans. Once Nisreen and I finalized the script, I typed it up in Jafet Library. Nisreen handed the typed manuscript to a client named Fakhir, who worked at a printing press and made copies of the play.

"I'll take care of the rest," Nisreen told me.

A week later, I attended the girls' first dress rehearsal. I sat in the audience with Bandar and Crazy Giant. Hassan sat backstage. He was in charge of the curtains.

During the entire play, I kept turning to Bandar to see her reaction. She remained impassive, thumbing her rosary. It was impossible to gauge her feelings, even during the exorcism scene or the one in which Father Tabet and Boushra, the singer, come close to kissing each other.

I was smiling throughout the play. My characters were alive, and I loved them like a proud father. All those hours writing the lousy film script and then adapting it to a play with Nisreen had transformed into life on stage. I could hardly believe that someone else could give voice to my typed words.

Following the play, the actresses stood together downstage. We all looked at Bandar, awaiting her response.

She stood up from her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “I thought you overdid it, Nisreen,” she said. “You were screaming the entire time.”

“My character is very anxious,” Nisreen said. “Her daughter is possessed.”

“You were one-dimensional. And you, Farah, weren’t obnoxious enough as the detective. At times you seemed indifferent.”

“I thought—” Farah said.

“Laila, how many times do I have to tell you not to turn your back to the audience?”

“I’m not an actor, Bandar.”

“You don’t have to be an actor to get that right. As for you, Hind, not once did you change your sober expression. If you’re in love with the singer, you have to show more emotion.”

Hind nodded.

“You, Zeina, weren’t scary enough. Remember, you’re *possessed*. You’ve lost control over your body. And you, Diala, can’t act to save your life. Make us believe that you’re a nanny.”

“I’m a dancer, Bandar, and that’s what you hired me for,” Diala indignantly said.

Bandar glared at me. “Did you write this?”

“Me and Nisreen,” I said. Here comes the axe, I thought.

“I see that you revised it,” she said, “added some romance.”

“We thought the play would work better as a Romantic-Horror.” I looked to the girls for support.

“It’s not bad.”

“Oh, thank God!” Farah said.

“Will you let us stage the play?” Nisreen asked Bandar. “Of course you’d get all the credit.”

“It needs revision,” Bandar said. “But if we work hard on it, perhaps we can open it to the men this coming Friday. We’ll start announcing it to our clients.”

We all cheered. Crazy Giant lifted me up from my chair and swung me around.

“I love you!” he cried. “I love you so much.”

As I was getting ready to leave, Diala asked me if I’d like to go for a walk.

“Sure,” I said, surprised at her invitation.

“I’ll join you,” Zeina said.

“No,” Diala said. “It’s only me and the kid.”

Zeina bit on her nail, ripping it out. “Ay!” she said, blood pouring down her finger. “See what you made me do?” she yelled at me.

She darted out of the theatre room and up the wooden stairs. I was about to chase after her when Diala held my wrist.

“Give me fifteen minutes,” she said. “I’ll go change.”

I slipped into my denim jacket and waited for Diala in the parlor. I knew Zeina was brewing in her room, but now wasn’t the time to comfort her. A half hour later, Diala returned smelling like cinnamon, her cheeks powdered pink. She wore a wool cardigan over a white blouse and black miniskirt, her legs in stockings, and red high heels. My God, I was about to walk the streets of Beirut with Diala! Men would look at me with envy.

The late afternoon sun shone down on us as we walked up Mutanabi Street, a sea breeze billowing the laundry strung across the balconies of the brothels. A white chemise was blown off its line and twisted and turned in the air like a dervish, until it fluttered down onto the windshield of a parked car. At Elvis' stall, he knelt from his footstool as Ayesha popped Turkish Delights into his mouth, her silver bangles tinkling. When he spotted us, his mouth covered in powdered sugar, he asked where we were headed.

"Don't be so nose-y," Diala said.

"I wouldn't be a Beirut if I weren't nose-y," he said. He opened his mouth and Ayesha popped in another Turkish Delight.

"You look really nice," Ayesha told Diala.

"Merci, ma chérie," Diala said.

We walked up to the top of the street and turned into Martyrs' Square, where Diala hailed a taxi. We got off in Achrafieh, the most posh neighborhood in East Beirut. Like Mutanabi Street, the narrow streets were lined with old French Colonial style buildings, flowery vines trailing down from the balustrades. A lot of the store awnings had French names: Marcel's, a bookstore; Magalie's, a clothes boutique; Jacque's, a family restaurant. As we walked down the pavement, entering Sassine Square, Diala's high heels clicking against the asphalt, men turned their heads.

We entered a patisserie called Amélie's. It had round marble-top tables, wicker chairs, and a tiled floor, and smelled deliciously of cake. We sat at a corner table in the back. A waiter in a tweed vest and creased pants placed two menus on our table.

"Bonjour Madame Diala," he said. "Ca va?"

"Bonjour Bernard," she said. "Oui, bein. Et tu?"

“Bien, bien. Alors, est-ce votre frère?” he asked, looking at me. His oily black hair was slicked back. He had a dot of fuzz beneath his lower lip.

“Non, non. Mon amie.”

“Petit ami?”

“Bernard! Je connais son pere.”

“Ah, je comprends. Vous êtes très belle, Madame Diala. Votre parfum est incroyable!”

“Merci, Bernard. Tu est très jolie.”

“Que voulez-vous boire? Une café?”

“Une café crème pour moi.” Diala looked at me. “Would you like a cappuccino?”

“Oui,” I said. “Oui.”

“Bon,” Bernard said, and left. Did he know that I could barely speak French? I noticed that the other customers in the patisserie were speaking French. It felt like we were in Paris, despite how Arab everyone looked. I didn’t belong here.

We opened our menus, which were in French. At least I recognized the names of desserts.

“Their baba au rhum is delicious,” Diala said.

When Bernard came back with our cappuccinos, Diala ordered a baba au rhum and I ordered a chocolate éclair.

“Très bien,” Bernard said.

I handed him our menus.

“Merci, monsieur,” he said

Monsieur. In this part of town, I was a monsieur. I took a sip of my cappuccino, which was strong and frothy. Diala sipped hers and sighed. “Mm, c’est bon. They have the best coffee in Achrafieh.”

“How often do you come here?”

“At least two or three times a month. I come alone. One time I brought Laila, but she couldn’t stand it. Called it too Frenchy.”

That’s exactly how I felt—the place was too Frenchy to my liking—but I was grateful to be here with Diala. If anything, she was my link to the Beirut I knew.

She took another sip of her cappuccino, delicately wiped the edges of her mouth with a napkin, making sure not to smudge her lipstick, and accused me of giving her the cold shoulder.

I felt my heart drop. I’d never want to upset Diala, and said as much.

“Just because you visited the Shatila camp doesn’t mean you understand it,” she said. “You have no idea what it’s like to grow up there. Actually, with the PLO in town, the camp is doing much better. There are more jobs for people, and Arafat is feeding the camp with fresh water and reliable electricity. But damn, it’s still a refugee camp. And when Laila and I lived there, it was in the shits.”

Bernard came with a tray propped on his open palm. He set the dessert on the table and looked at Diala with longing. I didn’t like that look, nor that I couldn’t speak French as well as him. But I had a play I had written that was about to be staged, something he couldn’t boast of.

“Je peux vous obtenir quelque chose d’autre?” he said.

“Would you like anything else?” Diala asked me.

“I’m fine.”

“No, mon chéri,” Diala told Bernard. “Merci.”

Diala took a bite of the baba au rhum. “Mm,” she moaned. “Just delicious.” She forked another bite and told me to open my mouth. The baba au rhum was soft and sweet. I forked a bite of my éclair for her. She placed her hand on mine and leaned in.

“Magnifique!” she said.

“Oui,” I said. “Magnifique.”

“You never learned French at school?”

“I did, but I never liked my French teacher.”

“Bandar’s a very good French teacher. She helped me with the basics, and then I took care of the rest. Sometimes I make mistakes, but who cares? I feel like a real Beirut woman when I speak French, that I’m high class.” She took another bite of her baba au rhum and finished her cappuccino. A couple of middle-aged men were having a heated discussion across from us. At a window table, a mother and her young daughter were sharing a slice of cake. “You should see when I speak French in the camp,” Diala continued. “Well, the few times I go back to visit my parents. No one understands me, and they think that I think that I’m too good for them. I love it.”

She polished off her dessert, placed her fork on her plate, and pulled out a cigarette and lit up. Unlike the casual way she smoked at Bandar’s, here she looked more bourgeoisie, one arm bent across her breasts, the other propped on top at a ninety-degree angle with the cigarette clamped between her index and middle fingers, her hand bent back. When she exhaled, she tilted up her chin and let out a thin trail of smoke.

“May I have one?” I asked, having finished my éclair. She shoved her pack of Marlboros and Zippo lighter across the table. I lit up.

“No one in the camp knows what Laila and I do,” Diala said. “Not even our parents. We told them we’re receptionists at a hotel. If our parents ever found out, they’d disown us.” She flicked the ash from her cigarette. “I can’t stand going back.”

I remembered what she had said—what I had overheard outside her bedroom—about growing tired of her father’s sad stories. I asked her what kind of stories he told.

“About life before the Nakba, before we became refugees,” she said. She called out to Bernard for another round of cappuccinos. We’d end up having three cups of cappuccinos each and a second round of dessert that late afternoon at the patisserie. We stayed until the early evening, which left little time for Diala to eat dinner and prepare for her long night. For as we smoked her entire pack of cigarettes and drank coffee and ate dessert, our blood pumping with caffeine and sugar and nicotine, Diala told me her story.

She was three years old when her family was forced out of Jerusalem by Jewish gangs, and like thousands of other Palestinians, made the long, dusty trek up north to Beirut. “I don’t remember a single thing about that time,” Diala said. “I only know Palestine through the stories my father told me. His favorite phrase was ‘lest we forget.’ Forgetting our past was a crime, he said, because if we forgot, our enemy won. We had to remember to exist.”

As she and Laila grew up in a cramped apartment in a corner of the camp that got little to no sunlight, her street lined with tilting buildings, Diala said, her father Nawaf spoke about the clock store he ran in Jerusalem, not too far from the Dome of the Mosque. He sold and repaired hand watches, pocket watches, mantel clocks, lantern



clocks, and cuckoo clocks. He serviced Muslims, Christians, and Jews, never making a distinction between the three.

“If Baba wasn’t talking about his clock store, he loved talking about our family home.” Diala looked around the tables to make sure no one was watching us, and furtively, pulled out her keys from underneath her blouse and kissed them. She didn’t want anyone to know that she was Palestinian, for the keys would have given her away. “Baba also wears a pair. He says when he walks and hears the clicking of his keys, he’s reminded of the tick-tock hum of his clock store.”

Nawaf had inherited his parents’ limestone house, which sat atop a hill covered in olive trees. In the terraced garden out back he grew tomatoes, cucumbers, and wild thyme, and tended to the lemon trees. The lemons grew as big as grapefruit.

He also told his daughters about the café he used to visit to listen to a famous local lute player; his favorite sweets shop; his favorite cousin Rasha, who made the most delicious kanafi; his favorite billiards hall; his favorite hakawati; his favorite this, his favorite that.

It was through her father’s stories, Diala explained, that she formed a notion of home. A home built from memories. She imagined herself fixing clocks in her father’s old store, or watering the lemon trees and eating Rasha’s kanafi lathered in syrup. As a child, she often wept when she listened to her father’s stories because he told them with a deep sadness. A short man with wide hips, his hair a frizzy mess, he lived in a state of constant melancholia. You could see it in his misty eyes and hear it in his soft voice. During the day he ran a small stall in the market where he fixed broken watches and clocks, and at night, he told his stories.

“One day we’ll return and life will be as it once was,” he told his daughters. For Diala, Jerusalem seemed like a place where dreams came true, where the air was fresh and the water clean, where she could have her own room and maybe fall in love. The city became holy to her in how different it was from life in the camp.

The only time Nawaf broke a smile was when Diala turned up the volume on a secondhand transistor radio and danced in the middle of the parlor, which also served as their sleeping quarters. She’d shake her hips while Laila drummed on the back of a cooking pot.

But as Diala matured, she grew tired of her father’s stories. “Baba loved playing the role of victim,” she told me as we ate crème brûlée, golden sunrays slanting through the glass windows. “Our return to Palestine seemed like a pipe dream. That’s when Laila and I started to look for work outside the camp, which led nowhere because work visas for refugees were hard to come by. That’s until we came across Bandar.

“I rather be a prostitute than a sorry-ass victim,” Diala said, lighting another cigarette. She looked across the room in silence. Most of the tables were now filled. Bernard could see that we were deep in conversation, and left us alone. Diala sipped her cappuccino, and with the smell of tobacco and coffee on her breath, the same smell on mine, she said that despite carrying herself like a Beirutite and speaking French, what she feared most was not that people would see through her façade and discover that she was a prostitute, but that she was a refugee. “A refugee has no real home, Ammoura,” she said. “As much as I like Beirut, I know that I’m an outsider. But even if I were able to return to Jerusalem, I’m not sure if I’d fit in over there. I’m not sure I fit in anywhere.”

I sat on the edge of my chair, yearning to reach for Diala's hands. How to explain to her that I, too, felt like an outsider, had been an outsider for my entire life. I always had difficulty making friends, and the friends I did make, I never really connected to. Perhaps my shyness and self-doubts made me uneasy around others. Whatever the case may be, I had always felt alone. But to articulate these thoughts to Diala was to assume that my experience of dislocation and alienation was in some way similar to hers. I hadn't been forced out of my homeland, and thus I feared my attempt for connection over our shared feelings would be too presumptuous. Instead, I pulled another cigarette from Diala's pack, falling ever more in love with her.

As dusk settled, I walked Diala back to Bandar's. At the door, where Hassan sat on his stool, she told me to never pity myself.

"However much shit drops on you," she told me, "don't feel sorry for yourself."

"Merci, Madame Dalia. For everything."

"Au revoir, mon chéri." She kissed my cheek, making my face burn, and stepped inside the theatre house.

"I hope I don't sound like a victim," I tell Murrone.

"You're just telling a story," Murrone says, her arms wrapped around her bent knees. "Your past is so alive. I can see you reliving it as you describe it."

"I'm most alive when I'm in my past."

"Yes, I can see that. But, forget it."

"No, tell me."

“Well, I couldn’t bear to tell my story over and over again for years to come. I mean, I can share my past with you and bring my family back to life and relive those special moments with Saladin. But I’d be afraid to drown in my memories.”

“Look at me,” I say. “I’m still breathing.”

“Hm. Anyway, I have a pressing question for you. If you knew I didn’t originally come from the south, would you think I was a Beirut? Do I have the accent down?”

“You’re Beirut through and through,” I say. But she’s still an outsider, and the same is true for me. At the bank I keep to myself. I have no close friends, only acquaintances. I’m sure people think I’m either the quiet type or just dull, or worse, arrogant. The truth is that I yearn for meaningful connections, the kind of connections I made with my loved ones on Mutanabi Street. But I’ve never been able to make those connections again, and all these years later, I wonder if I held so strongly to that world on Mutanabi Street because I knew it was about to disappear.

“Ammoura?” Murrone says, startling me. “You were lost there for a moment.”

“Sorry.”

“Your play was about to be staged, no?”

I nod.

“Continues, monsieur.”

“You speak French?”

“It’s about as bad as yours.”

I began promoting *The Possessed* to as many people as I knew. I understood the risk I was taking by mentioning the play to the Fro Club. I'd be compelled to reveal the truth of my background. And worse, I had lied to them.

At Universal, we sat in a booth. I had been too anxious to eat my messy hamburger packed with fries and coleslaw, the Lebanese version of a hamburger.

"What's up your ass?" Khaled asked me, looking up from his hamburger. I saw my worried reflection in his shades.

"You've got ketchup in your fro," Roy told Waleed. He took a sip of his Pepsi and burped.

"That's disgusting," a young woman at the counter said, turning around to face us. She was cute. "We're trying to eat."

Roy apologized. "Can I make it up to you?"

"Bug off," she said.

"Are you leaving your fries?" Waleed asked me.

"Take them," I said, shoving my plate toward him. As small as Waleed was, he had quite an appetite.

"Did some girl get you down?" Khaled asked me.

"I say you hit on that cute girl at the counter," Waleed told me, finishing up my fries.

"She's too young for Omar," Roy said. "But man is she cute."

"I have to tell you guys something," I said. "My father owns a grocery store called the Shooting Star on Mutanabi Street."

Khaled pulled up his shades. "Isn't that in the red-light district?"

I nodded. "My father is friendly with many girls on that street. And so am I."

"You?!" Khaled said.

"Have you fucked any of them?" Roy asked me. His question stung me.

"No. They're my friends."

"This is so cool," Waleed said.

"Why did you keep this a secret from us?" Khaled asked.

"I was embarrassed," I admitted. "Forgive me."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. I want to know more."

I told them more, starting with Jidu opening the store in the '20s and ending with me writing *The Possessed* with Nisreen.

"This Friday is opening night at Bandar's," I said. "Can you make it?"

"Hell yeah!" Khaled said. "We can break our virginity with the whores."

I grimaced at the sound of "whores." I didn't want the Fro Club touching Bandar's girls, especially not Diala. In fact I didn't want any man touching the girls, and right there, at the diner, I suddenly relived the shame I experienced at Marwa's Muse. I had hated my body then; it had been on display, and was the only thing that defined me. And now here I was, promoting the bodies of Bandar's girls, stripping them of their characters, throwing out their souls. All for what? So that men would attend a play I had written. So that the theatre, the most intoxicating place I knew, would survive for yet another day.

As it turned out, my desire to see the theatre thrive outweighed my concern for Bandar's girls, because aside from the Fro Club, I had someone in mind who no doubt would attend opening night and bring others along.

Ali Zaidan worked at his father's car-repair shop in Shiah. I had been to the suburb before, that time I visited Ali's apartment to listen to him lie about fucking Rokoya. I took a bus to Shiah, and after asking people for directions, eventually found the shop nestled between two apartment buildings. Ali was changing the tire of a Datsun pick-up truck out on the street. The truck was propped on a crank.

Ali wore a greasy T-shirt and pants stained with blotches of oil. When he stood up and wiped his hands on his pants, I noticed his belly. An older man walked out of the shop and asked him if he was nearly done.

"Almost," Ali said.

"I need you to replace the taillight on the Toyota," the man said.

He must have been Ali's father. They looked alike: stocky men with hairy beards and bellies. I was taken aback by Ali's transformation, the same Ali whom, long ago, my classmates and I had once looked up to.

When Ali finally saw me, he asked what I was doing here. His teeth were stained black.

"How's life?" I asked.

"You're looking at it."

He spat phlegm onto the street and reached for his cigarettes in his back pocket.

"Can I have one?" I asked.

He lit my cigarette. "What did you come here for?"

"I'd like to invite you to a play opening this Friday night."

"Plays are for faggots."

He took a long drag on his cigarette, squinting his eyes.

“This isn’t your typical play,” I said. “It’s being staged at Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love, which is on Mutanabi Street. I’ve co-written the play.”

“Mr. Big Shot is going places,” he said.

“You can invite as many people as you’d like.”

“What makes you think I want to go? I get enough pussy as it is.”

He hadn’t changed. “It’s a good play,” I said. “A horror.”

“What time’s it on?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Fuck that,” he said, and flicked his cigarette into the middle of the street.

After coming home from AUB one day, I found Mama knitting in the parlor. An open book lay facedown on a side table. I sat down in Jidu’s chair.

“When are you going to cut your hair?” Mama asked, looking up.

“Soon,” I lied. I wondered how long I could hide my involvement at Bandar’s from her. It was difficult to look into her eyes. I nearly asked her to tell me a story, thinking it would alleviate my pressing guilt. But I hadn’t listened to her stories in years, and it had been a while since we saw a movie together. Who was she knitting for?

Neither Baba nor I wore her sweaters.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

“*Epitaph for a Small Winner*. It’s by a Brazilian named Machado de Assis. The narrator writes his memoir from the dead. It’s an original concept.” She glanced at the book on the table, as if to reassure it she’d pick it up in a moment. “I was going through



the handbook again, and I think the next reading list I'd like to tackle is for a course called the Picaresque Novel. *Don Quixote* is being taught. I've always wanted to read it."

"I'll check it out for you," I said. "Soon you'll be more knowledgeable than a lit major."

"I miss the classroom. I was the student everyone hated because my arm always shot up when the teacher asked questions. If I ever went back to school, I wonder if the students your age would find me annoying."

Mama returned to her knitting. The sound of her clicking needles reminded me of the ticking of Bandar's rosary.

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I had trouble sleeping the week of opening night. I was both excited and worried about the play. Would the men enjoy it or think it was crap? The play had to move them, or else it would be a failure.

On Thursday I passed by Bandar's to relieve my stress. The girls told me not to worry so much.

"The men will need new pairs of underwear," Diala said. "I'm looking forward to scaring the shit out of them."

I longed for Diala to speak French so that I could return to that afternoon we spent at Amélie's. I hoped she'd invite me out again, for the patisserie to become our favorite haunt. At Bandar's we were always surrounded by others.

"We've added a special effect to the play," Zeina said. "Bandar's trying something she's never done before. You've inspired her to this."

"What is it?"

“In your screenplay, you have a scene where the possessed daughter’s bed levitates in the air. Bandar plans to have me levitate—when I’m possessed.”

“On the stage?!”

“Yup.”

“How’s that possible?”

“It’s quite simple. She’s gone out to buy a pulley and harness. We’re going to practice using it as soon as she returns.”

“Won’t the rope show on stage?”

“Yeah, but who cares? The men will love it!”

Zeina said she had been spending hours every day in character.

“I’ve been more Mirna and less Zeina,” she said. “It’s good practice.”

“She’s been terrorizing us,” Farah complained. “We’ll all be watching TV when suddenly, she’ll start insulting us. Yesterday, I was about to take a bath when I found her naked in the tub, with her eyes closed. There was no water in the tub, which I thought was strange. I figured she fell asleep—don’t ask me why she chose to nap in the tub. Anyway, when I nudged her shoulder, she grabbed my wrist and screamed. I nearly died of a heart attack!”

Nisreen said she hadn’t been as excited to act in a long time.

“This is a new role for me,” she explained. “The mother of a possessed daughter.”

I headed over to Mutanabi Street following my last class on Friday. Elvis made me a cup of coffee and said he’d see me later that night. I dropped in on Baba.

“Are you coming to the play?” I asked.

“Of course. It’s your big night. But I’ll leave as soon as the show’s over—I’m still not one hundred percent.”

I was thankful he’d be there. I needed his support.

At Bandar’s, the girls and Crazy Giant were lounging in the parlor. They seemed relaxed, which calmed me. I slipped off my satchel, removed my denim jacket, and sat next to Zeina, who had made room for me on the couch.

“You ready?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Scare them good,” Diala told Zeina. “It all depends on you.”

“Talk about pressure,” Zeina said.

“We’ve got nothing to lose,” Nisreen said.

After dinner, the girls went upstairs to prepare themselves for the show. I sat at the bar. Crazy Giant was dressed in his Indian costume, his face painted half white and half blue. He poured two shots of vodka.

“Let’s drink like Indians!” he said, and threw down his shot.

I drank mine and coughed.

Crazy Giant refilled our glasses and downed his drink. I closed my eyes and downed mine. A tingling sensation crept through me.

“Chief,” Crazy Giant said, “if you write another play, do you mind including an Indian? I’ve never seen a play about Indians. In all the Westerns I’ve seen, the Indians are always the bad guys. I’d like to see them as the good guys for once.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “That’s if Bandar stages another of my plays.”

“If tonight goes well, she will.”

An hour later, the regulars turned up.

Bahaa the Ass Man and Charbel the Sinner sat at their regular spots at the bar.

“Good to see you again,” Bahaa told me. He asked if I knew anything about tonight’s play.

“It’s a Romantic-Horror,” I explained.

“What the fuck is that?”

“It’s a cross-genre play.”

“And what the fuck is that?”

“It’s a romance *and* a horror.”

“Has Bandar gone mad?”

“I like scary films,” Charbel said. “*The Birds*,” he continued, shaking his head. “Now I’m scared half to death of crows.”

Samer Saab, King of the Street, entered through the front door. He wore tight, fluorescent yellow bellbottoms that accentuated his bulging package, a package that threatened to tear apart the polyester of his pants. His patches of hair had been oiled and combed, and looked ridiculous. He sat at the bar and ordered a scotch on the rocks.

“Are you new here?” he asked me.

“Not exactly,” I said.

He sized me up. “Do you know who I am?”

“I’ve heard about you.”

“What have you heard?”

“Um, I’ve heard that you’re big.”

He stood up and faced me, thrusting out his hips. “I’m enormous.”

“Get over yourself,” Bahaa told Samer.

“He’s just bitter,” Samer told me. “He’s got a small pecker. Sometime I’ll show you my pecker and you can judge for yourself.”

“I believe you,” I said, looking at his swollen crotch.

Ralph Najjar, the romantic obituary writer, appeared. His dark hair was greased and parted down the middle. A cigarette in an ivory holder was clamped between his lips. He ordered a glass of red wine and sat alone. I knew he didn’t want to be disturbed. He was envisioning his death in the arms of a prostitute.

More men entered, including Elvis. As one was ordering his drink at the bar, I got a whiff of his body odor. He had messy black hair and wore flip-flops. Another man had a purple stain on his face, consuming most of the white of his natural skin. I felt sorry for him. There was no way of hiding his marking. But he didn’t seem to mind, the way he sat back against the bar and sipped his drink.

The Fro Club came in a half-hour before the start of the show. They wore slim leather jackets over wide-collared shirts and platform shoes. Roy bought them drinks and the three took their seats in the front row.

“The bartender is weird as shit,” Roy said.

“Aren’t you going to sit with us?” Khaled asked me.

“I’ll be backstage.”

When I saw Baba, I introduced him to my friends.

Bandar walked around the theatre room, greeting men. Once Shams arrived, Crazy Giant poured her a glass of straight whiskey.

It was approaching eight o'clock when I went backstage. Shams sat at the table with the controls, smoking a cigarette. A copy of *The Possessed* was placed next to her ashtray.

"That's some scary shit," she said, pointing at the script with her cigarette. "I read it last night. You have a wild imagination, kid. I'm impressed."

"I only hope the men like it."

"Fuck the men. They don't know what's good for them."

She stood up and peeked behind the curtains at the audience. I joined her.

"Shit!" she said. "There are some hippies in the front row."

"They're my friends," I said. "But don't worry. They're not real hippies."

"Good. Look at Ralph Najjar," she said. "He's got his eyes closed. Most of the grandfathers are here. Your father's looking good."

The front door opened, and in walked Ali Zaidan with his friends. I knew he'd come. I doubted if women found him attractive anymore.

At eight, Shams turned on the microphone and welcomed the men.

"From the heart of Beirut," Shams said in her husky voice, "from the famed Mutanabi Street, we bring you music and dance, and theatre that will move your heart and water your eyes. Without further ado, please welcome Scheherazade to the stage!"

Shams opened the curtains to Zeina playing a cover of a Fairuz song on her lute.

"Allah, Allah," the men cried.

Once Laila joined Zeina on the stage, the energy of the audience picked up. The Fro Club was clapping along to Laila's drumbeat.

"I haven't seen Zeina and Laila perform this well in years," Shams said.

Diala appeared backstage in a two-piece, red sequined outfit, with a white shawl in her hand. My heart throbbed. I gave her Shams' glass of whiskey, which she downed in one gulp.

"Break a heart," I told her.

I stood up from the table and watched her dance from my spot backstage. The men were completely transfixed by her, as though she were a messiah sent down from God. She may not have been able to cure lepers or part the Red Sea, but she had the same power to enchant men.

The Fro Club, along with most of the men, was on their feet and cheering her on. Their unwavering attention made me anxious. I knew they were all longing for the same thing as me, and could easily get it, but none of them knew Diala as well as I did, that we were both outsiders. She danced to the edge of the stage to the rhythm of Laila's drumbeats, stretching the shawl above her head. Her bangles slipped down her forearms. Her keys swung. The men threw liras at her.

"She's dancing great," Shams said. I turned away, the sight of Diala half-naked and gleaming with sweat too painful to bear.

Once Diala's act was over, Shams announced an intermission and headed to the bar. I collected the liras from the stage and went to the dressing room. Diala sat in a chair in front of her counter, drinking a glass of water. Beads of sweat shone on her heaving breasts. I placed the money on the counter.

"Merci, mon chéri," she said.

Nisreen, Hind, and Farah were in their costumes. Laila and Zeina were changing into theirs.

“Excuse me,” I said, preparing to leave the room.

“Stay,” Zeina said. She was in her bra and panties. Her skin was taut against her ribs and shapeless hips.

Laila’s body was just as slim as Zeina’s, but her curves were noticeable.

I looked at Diala, hoping she’d undress before me.

“I saw some afros out there,” she said.

“Those are my friends from university.”

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, flashing the edge of her palm. She slipped off her bangles and unhooked her top. Her breasts fell down, bouncing momentarily. Her nipples were big and hard. She stood up from her chair, unzipped her skirt, and pulled it down to her ankles. She stepped one foot out of the skirt and with the other foot, which the skirt was hooked on, kicked it up and caught the skirt in midair. She threw it onto the counter, next to her top. She opened a drawer and took out a fresh pair of underwear.

“Oh my God,” I thought.

She slipped out of her underwear. In that heart-throbbing moment of time between the changing of her underwear I glimpsed her jellyfish—a blur of pinkish black. I was too embarrassed to keep my eyes trained on her, and looked away. When I looked again, she was fastening on a bra. She saw me in the reflection of the mirror staring at her, my mouth half-open.

“Merde! You’ve got the pathetic look of a virgin,” she said. “Hand me my costume.”



Her nanny's costume was a short, black dress with an accompanying white apron, which was hung on a knob on the wall. I handed her the dress and watched her put it on.

"Zip my back," she said.

I zipped the back of her dress, my trembling hands brushing against her voluminous hair.

"It's time," Bandar said from the entrance of the room.

I returned to my seat next to Shams. As nervous and excited as I was for the start of the play, I was reeling for Diala. I wanted to make love to her on the stage floor.

"Time to scare these fuckers," Shams said, and announced Bandar's new work.

The exorcism scene turned out to be the highlight of the play. The priests, played by Laila and Hind, entered Zeina's room. Zeina's wrists and ankles were bound with long straps of Velcro to either corner of a stretcher. Fastened into the harness, she sat up in her bed, seething, pulling her tied limbs this way and that. She had raccoon eyes; her face was pale white. Before taking the stage, she had drunk avocado juice, keeping a mouthful between her cheeks.

When Laila peered over Zeina, Zeina spat the juice into her face.

"That's disgusting," a man cried.

Laila wiped green slime from her face. She retrieved a bottle of holy water from her cassock and sprinkled it over Zeina. Zeina shook violently.

"You cocksucker," she yelled.

"Read the passage," Laila urged Hind.

Hind opened the Bible, and as Zeina continued to spew crude insults at the priests, she read: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He—”

“Burn, motherfuckers!” Zeina said.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You—”

“Shove it up your ass and die!”

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Nisreen and I had extracted this popular passage from Bandar’s Bible. Although I had seen *The Exorcist* a few times, I couldn’t recall the passage that Father Karras, played by Jason Miller, recites.

“You’re a failure,” Zeina told Hind. “You’re a faithless priest who—ahh!” Laila doused her with more holy water.

Zeina shook her limbs; the Velcro straps came undone. Miraculously, she levitated in the air, her limbs splayed. Diala stood backstage, pulling on the rope.

“Mother of God!” someone in the front row said. All the men were on their feet. What was most miraculous to me was that somehow, the drama that Nisreen and I had devised had drawn these men to a simultaneous action, as if they had been hypnotized. They were responding to my artwork, albeit stolen artwork. Like Diala, I also had the power to enchant men.

As Zeina hung in the air, the priests looked up at her, and in unison, hollered: “The power of Christ compels you!”

Shams switched on and off the stage lights and complemented Zeina's beastly cries by emitting strange, groaning noises into the microphone.

"The power of Christ compels you!" the priests repeated continuously.

"The power of Christ compels you!" the men joined in. "The power of Christ compels you!"

Zeina descended. She lay unconscious on the bed.

"They exorcised her!" a man cheered.

At curtain call, the girls received an uproar of applause. "Bravo! Bravo!" the men cried. I had never felt so high in my life, or so worthy of myself, and didn't want this moment to ever end. As the girls bowed to the audience, I clapped them on. And then the girls turned to me and clapped. I bowed.

"Good job, kid," Shams told me. I was now an artist with a credit to his name.

I quickly followed the girls into the parlor.

"You all were amazing!" I said.

"You're the amazing one," Zeina said, and held my hands. One after the other, the girls kissed and congratulated me.

"Bravo, Monsieur Omar," Diala told me. I inhaled her wild aroma of sweat and cinnamon as we embraced, her keys pressing against my chest.

"I'm going to cook you a feast," Farah said, as I wrapped my arms around her wide frame.

"Nice work, girls," Bandar said, standing at the entrance. She handed Nisreen her director's notes and returned to the theatre room.

The girls' jubilation subsided, as did mine. The time had come. I watched them walk up the stairs. At the top of the second-floor landing Zeina turned around. We exchanged waves. I went to the theatre room, where the men had surrounded Bandar.

"I'm proud of you, son," Baba said. He sat at the bar, finishing an Almaza. "That was one hell of a play."

"Thanks, Baba."

I saw the Fro Club waving at me.

"Need a ride home?" Baba asked me.

"I'll stick around for a bit."

"Scary shit," Ali Zaidan told me.

"Thanks for coming."

"I came to fuck," he said.

I walked over to the Fro Club.

"That was insane," Khaled said.

"The possessed daughter scared me bad," Waleed.

"Some of the whores are hot," Roy said. "Especially the belly dancer. I love this place!"

I didn't bother correcting Roy's use of the word "whores."

"Want to get something to eat?" I asked them.

"Eat? Are you serious?" Khaled said. "We plan to break our virginity tonight."

"I've got my eyes on the belly dancer," Roy said.

"Me, too," Waleed added.

I felt an ache in my chest.

“Why don’t you join us?” Khaled asked.

“I can’t. They’re my friends.”

“The whores?”

“Yes. I’m going home.” I retrieved my satchel from the parlor and put on my jacket.

“Leaving already, Chief?” Crazy Giant asked me from the bar.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I told him.

I said goodbye to Hassan and made my way up the street. I passed through the glow of the brothels’ billboards without looking up at the balconies.

“Where are you going, Ammoura?” Elizabeth called out. As expected, a sugared almond landed a step in front of me.

I turned up my collar and continued on. It was a chilly night.

A sadness had come over me. The girls would spend the rest of the night fucking on their four-poster beds. They’d fuck their regulars, Ali Zaidan with his rotten teeth, the elderly men, the man with the body odor, and the man with the purple birthmark. They’d fuck my friends, the Fro Club, too, and later wake up in the afternoon exhausted, their bodies broken, their vaginas sore. Maybe their souls were broken. I wished I hadn’t brought them more work, even though they needed the work to survive. I felt sheepish, because unlike them, I could leave Mutanabi Street on a whim, where the glow of light was only yellow.

I was nearing Marica’s when I spotted a shadowy figure standing alone in an alley. He was looking up at a red-lit window of a second-floor room of Danya’s Delights as he jerked off. His free hand was splayed against the wall. A prostitute’s impassioned

moans drifted below to the street. The moans intensified, as did the man's jerking motion. I had come across the Wall of Masturbation. The louder she moaned, the harder he jerked. He noticed me watching him.

"Get lost, sisterfucker," he said.

I walked on. At home, I sat on the toilet seat and masturbated to Diala.

In the morning, I still felt melancholy. How many men had Diala slept with? But this was part of her job, I reminded myself. She didn't love them. At breakfast, I ate little. Baba had already left for work. Mama's sour mood didn't make me feel any better.

"Guess where your father went out last night?" she said.

"I don't know, Mama."

"He visited the whores," she said. "I thought he was over them. I spent all these months caring for him, and instead of thanking me, he goes out and sleeps with those dirty women!"

I wasn't in the mood for any tirades. "Please, Mama," I said. "I don't want to hear this."

"You have to," she said. "I'm a foolish woman, Omar. Do you know why? Because I thought your father could change. He's the same man he's always been: a whoring man. I would never have married him if I knew he worked in the red-light district."

"You've told me this before."

"I'll tell it to you again. Your father has let us down."

"He hasn't let *me* down. He's paying my tuition."

“That’s his duty.”

“Why don’t you just divorce him?” I said, irritated.

“Divorce him?! And then what would I do? Go back to Kornayel a disgraced woman? Is that what you want for your mother?”

When I didn’t respond, she continued: “If I divorced your father I’d shame you, too. It would hurt your chances of getting married to a respectable woman. No woman wants to marry a man from a broken family. It doesn’t look good.”

“Who cares?”

“I care. I care about you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I’m your mother! It’s my duty to protect you.”

“I’m a man, Mama.”

“You’re my son,” she said with conviction.

I burst into tears, weeping for Mama and for Bandar’s girls, for my aching heart.

“Oh dear,” Mama said, reaching for my hands.

“I’ve disappointed you,” I told her.

“You’ve never disappointed me. May God always protect and guide you. I pray every day for your blessings.”

“I went to Mutanabi Street last night,” I said. “I swear I didn’t sleep with any of the prostitutes. They’re just my friends, nothing more. Don’t blame Baba. Blame me.”

Mama sat there without any kind of reaction.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

She cleared her throat. I expected an outburst, and braced myself for one, but

none came. Clenching her jaw, she stood up from her chair and slid it against the table, the legs dragging on the kitchen tiles. She gripped the back of the chair. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Mama, please sit down.”

She went to her room and locked the door behind her.



## English Lucy

I remained seated for hours by Mama's door, pounding on it every now and then. Mama didn't make a single sound. Her stubborn silence had left me exhausted. When Baba came home and found me on the floor outside his bedroom with my back against the door, he understood.

"She's angry with me," he said.

"Me too," I said. "I told her about last night."

He knocked on the door. "Salma, it's me." There was no response from the other side.

Baba fried eggs for dinner. We sat in the parlor, hoping Mama would emerge from the bedroom, at least to eat something.

Baba slept on the couch. I lay restless in bed.

The next morning, Baba and I found the frying pan we had used for the eggs washed. Mama was out of the house. It was Sunday.

In the evening, Mama was still absent, and we began to worry. We went over to Lamya's to see if she was there, or if Lamya knew her whereabouts.

Lamya's hair was graying and her hips were wider. I assumed she had retired long ago from her job as wet-nurse. Her husband, an obese man, lay on the couch, wheezing.

"I haven't seen her," Lamya said.

We returned home. Later, when we heard the sound of the key turning in the lock of the front door, we hurried to the foyer.

“Where’ve you been, Salma?” Baba asked. “We were worried about you.”

Mama walked down the hall to her room.

Mama developed a routine in her silent treatment. She made us dinner but remained in her bedroom during the meal. In the evenings, Baba and I sat alone in the parlor. I wished Mama would just unleash her fury on us. I preferred a violent outburst to silence, which only increased the tension at home.

Over the weekend, Mama disappeared from morning till dusk. I thought of following her, but Baba said it would only make matters worse.

I began a campaign to win her back. Whenever I heard her leave her room, I attempted conversation. Mama ignored me. Once, when I found her drinking tea at the kitchen table, I walked around her chair and embraced her. She shrugged me off. I understood she needed her space to come to terms with my involvement at Bandar’s, but I was too anxious to grant her that. I needed her to talk to me. Now.

I checked out *Don Quixote* from the library and left it on the side table in the parlor, Mama’s reading corner. The novel remained closed, the Sorrowful Knight and Sancho Panza reigned in.

I knew what I had to do. I went to the local barber, where as I sat in a chair before the mirror, I witnessed with horror my identity be shredded with each snip of the scissors. The barber relished the moment, the way he grabbed fistfuls of my curls to shear them at the roots. Clumps of my black hair littered the floor.

“You’ll look like a real man once I’m done,” the barber said. “The way the men grow out their hair these days,” he said, looking at me in the mirror, “you’d think they’d prefer to be women.”

I wished he’d let me grieve in silence.

I’d be the odd man out in the Fro Club. The girls at Bandar’s, and all the rest of them on Mutanabi Street, would shake their heads in remorse. Nisreen would be disappointed.

My afro was gone.

I returned home and stood in front of Mama, who sat in a chair knitting. Her eyes widened when she saw me. “It’s about time,” she said, and resumed knitting. The clicking of her needles punctuated my anxiety. But at least she had spoken.

“I did it for you,” I said.

She grunted. “I mean nothing to you.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I don’t understand how you could deceive me,” she said, looking up at me. She spoke softly, in a wounded voice. “I won’t ever be able to trust you again.”

I avoided looking into her eyes.

\*

I spent a lot of time at home to prove to Mama that she was still the most important person in my life. But my presence did little to alleviate her disappointment in me, and so I hung out with the Fro Club or at Bandar’s.

The Fro Club had become frequent visitors to Bandar’s. They invited their cousins along, too, and a handful of AUB students with whom they were friendly.

“I want to fuck Jasmine in the ass,” Waleed said.

“I already did that,” Khaled said. “It was tight, really tight.”

I couldn't recognize Diala in their details. She had become animalistic. I recalled a horror film about a man who transformed into a werewolf when the moon was full. Diala transformed every night, regardless of the shape of the moon, and this was what baffled me most. How could a woman as formidable as her, who had the courage to leave the refugee camp in search of a better future, refusing to be a victim of circumstance, become so submissive? Again, I understood this was her profession—I wasn't naïve about that—but still, I couldn't fathom Diala in a vulnerable position, offering her body to horny eighteen-year-olds who didn't care to hear her story.

One afternoon at Universal, Roy said, “I wish Jasmine would swallow.”

“She just spits it out into a tissue,” Khaled said.

“Tell your friend to swallow,” Waleed told me.

I sipped my Pepsi, refusing to comment. Waleed nudged me. “Tell her to swallow, man.”

“Tell her yourself,” I said.

“Someone's got an attitude,” Roy said. “You shouldn't have cut your afro.”

“Has she ever sucked you?” Khaled asked me.

“I've got class,” I said, making my way out of the booth.

“Tell me one thing,” Roy said. “What's Jasmine's real name?”

“It's none of your business,” I said, and left the diner.

Thankfully, Diala didn't mention her experiences with the Fro Club, except to say she liked my hippie friends because they tipped well. She encouraged me to invite more AUB students. Since opening night, Bandar's had been busier—once it was half-full.

“We're on the rise,” Zeina said. She ran her palm over my cropped hair. “I miss your fro. But you still look incredibly handsome.”

Maybe now Diala would remove Cyprus from her thoughts.

The other prostitutes and matrons on Mutanabi Street had become envious of Bandar's success. Zeina told me that the girls on the street now picked on her.

“Where's your Mama, little boy,' one bitch told me,” Zeina said.

“One whore called me a 'cow,'” Farah said.

“Someone called me a 'mute,'” Hind said.

“Fuck them!” Diala said. “We're going to put them all out of work.”

“That's if we continue to prosper,” Nisreen said.

“That depends on Bandar's plays.”

Everyone turned to me.

“Do you have any more stories?” Diala asked me.

“Plenty more,” I said. Anything for her.

Bandar said she was willing to listen to my ideas.

“I want us to work together,” she said. “That's the only way you can learn from me. I'll pay you commission—does five percent sound good to you?”

I hadn't expected this. Being paid for something that I loved doing seemed wrong.

“I'm willing to work for free,” I said.

“You're not charity. I'll pay you five percent.”

As simple as that, Bandar had shown me respect as a writer. Upstairs in her room, we brainstormed ideas for a new play. I remembered Crazy Giant's plea to include an Indian. Bandar called him in.

"I want an Indian love story," she told the former boxer. "Got one?"

Crazy Giant sat down in a chair. "It's a heartbreaking story," he said, and told the tale of White Lance and Red Willow Woman, two eternal lovers who waited for twenty-five years to live together. They had been forced to marry other partners, only to reconnect years later, near the end of their lives. One winter, they set up camp near the Great Muddy River. White Lance hunted elk and Red Willow Woman took care of their home. But one day, White Lance returned home from a hunt to find Red Willow Woman and her horse missing. He set out into the woods, following a set of hoof prints in the snow.

When White Lance spotted Red Willow Woman on the banks of the river, he howled. Crows flocked from the trees. She lay on the snow, in a pool of blood. A bear stood above her, growling. The bear turned to White Lance and roared. In blind fury, White Lance took out his spear and charged the bear, thrusting his weapon into its chest. The bear clawed at his body. White Lance pierced the bear repeatedly with his spear as he felt his own body be thrashed apart. The bear swiped at his face and slashed his throat open. Gurgling blood, White Lance struck the bear's heart. Man and beast fell to the ground. On his last breath, White Lance crawled to Red Willow Woman.

Two years later, hunters found White Lance and Red Willow Woman's remains. The lovers were still locked in an embrace. The bear's corpse was nearby, with the

arrowhead of the spear between its ribs. The hunters also found two cottonwood saplings growing side by side down by the river.

As the years passed, people went down to the Great Muddy River to the spot where White Lance and Red Willow Woman had died in each other's arms. The two cottonwood saplings had grown into trees whose branches sprawled out in twisting angles, as if the trees were trying to connect themselves together to live their life as one.

"I hate that bear," Crazy Giant said. "I would have boxed it to death."

Crazy Giant's story had all the makings of a Bandar play.

"Hm," Bandar said.

We waited anxiously for her response. Her rosary ticked.

She grinned. "We'll put on a play the men haven't ever seen before."

"Like *The Possessed*?" I asked.

"It's going to be better than *The Possessed*."

I was hurt by her comment. "How so?"

"There's a more convincing love story and romantic death scene," Bandar said.

Crazy Giant was ecstatic. "Will we be able to recreate an Indian village on stage?"

"We'll do that and more. I'll have the seamstress make us some Indian costumes."

In his excitement, Crazy Giant sprung from his chair and embraced Bandar.

"You're crushing my ribs," she cried. She instructed him to sit down and then considered casting. "We'll have Hind play White Lance and Nisreen her lover, Red Willow Woman."

"What about the bear?" Crazy Giant said.

Bandar looked at him, grinning. His excitement turned to horror.

“No way,” he said.

“You’d have an unbelievable presence on stage,” Bandar said.

“I already told you: I hate that bear.”

“You’re only acting.”

“The bear killed my Indians!”

“Crazy Giant,” Bandar said, “you’ve never even met an Indian. For all we know you might be misrepresenting them. You’ll be *pretending* to kill Nisreen who’s *pretending* to be Red Willow Woman.”

“What do you think, Chief?” Crazy Giant asked me.

“You’re as big as a bear,” I said.

That day, I sat at Bandar’s typewriter. Bandar walked around the room, reciting passages of dialogue, which I typed and read back to her. We soon had an opening scene.

“Read it aloud,” she said.

I pulled the sheet from the reel and read.

“White Lance’s last line is flat,” she said.

“I don’t think we need it.”

Bandar thought for a moment. “You have a point.”

I was surprised at how well we worked together. Bandar would begin a scene and I’d end it, or vice-versa. Whenever either of us got stuck, the other intervened. Every scene was a build up to the potential of an ultimate romantic death scene. That was our driving force, and I realized I had to cater to it. The metallic ringing of the keys, the



words appearing magically on the page, the sounding of the bell and my pressing the carriage return lever, all contributed to world building. I was my own maker.

\*

In November, a few days before opening night of *The Cottonwoods*, I visited Bandar's after classes. Hassan was mopping the theatre room. Crazy Giant sat in the parlor, flipping through the pages of a big, hard-back book of Native American portraits.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked.

"At the clinic," Crazy Giant said.

"Is anything wrong?"

"It's their weekly check-up. The doctor examines them for sexually transmitted diseases."

I sat down. "Have any of the girls ever been infected?"

"Nisreen and Farah had the clap. Bandar took them to a special clinic for treatment."

Bandar had paid a lot of money for their treatment, Crazy Giant explained. By law, the doctor of the special clinic had to report cases of STDs to the Ministry of Health. Free blowjobs with a finger stuck up his ass kept him quiet.

Crazy Giant said Bandar was more frightened of the girls contracting something incurable like herpes, which was fatal for business. The girls used a technique to check their clients for venereal diseases. They held the men's cocks at the base between their thumb and forefinger, and squeezing it, slid upward to the head. If milky gunk oozed out, the man had the clap.

"Then what happens?"

“Bandar returns the money to the client and tells him he can’t be serviced—unless he wants a hand job.”

I took out my accounting textbook from my satchel and began reading a chapter. I hated the material, and closed the book and went home.

\*

All the regulars attended opening night—Bahaa the Ass Man, Charbel the Sinner, Ralph Najjar, and Samer Saab—as well as Elvis, Baba, the elderly men, Ali Zaidan and his friends, the Fro Club and their cousins and AUB acquaintances, and some newcomers. Before the show, I sipped on a rum and Pepsi at the bar. Baba was having an Almaza. He introduced me to Jawad.

Jawad had long, greasy hair slicked back and curled at the ends. He wore a cheap, collared shirt and bellbottom slacks, and synthetic leather boots. He smelled of the sea.

“Need guns?” he asked me. “I’ve got Klashins and M-16s at home. And grenades.”

“No thanks.”

“I also have landmines. And a crossbow.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to use any weapons,” Baba said.

“I hear the Kataib is planning on opening up an airport in Jounieh,” Jawad said. “It will make it easier for them to smuggle in weapons from Europe. Hell, they might even be dealing with the Israelis. Both want Arafat dead.”

Baba asked Crazy Giant for a shot of vodka. I asked for one, too. The last thing we wanted to discuss was politics or conspiracy theories, especially at Bandar’s. Such talk made the prospect of civil war seem inevitable.

Crazy Giant poured four shots. “To my Indians!” he said.

“To Indians!” we said, clinking our glasses.

“You’re going to be great tonight,” I told Crazy Giant.

“I’m a little nervous,” he said. “But it’s a good nervous, like I was before fights.”

“Be ferocious.”

Crazy Giant growled. His back was turned to the front door when El Señor walked in with his entourage of men in polyester suits. Droopy Eye entered last.

“Shit,” Jawad said, hiding his face.

Baba turned to the entrance. He put a hand on mine.

“Crazy Giant!” I said.

Crazy Giant looked over at me and saw the newcomers. He dropped his dishrag on the floor.

“What the fuck are they doing here?” Jawad whispered.

Crazy Giant stood still, his gaze trained on Droopy Eye. He reached under the bar and pulled out the Kalashnikov. El Señor was speaking to Hassan.

“You can’t enter if you’re armed,” Hassan said.

“We’re here to see the play,” El Señor said, dressed in a tan, three-piece suit. “No need to start a commotion.”

“It’s a rule,” Hassan said. “No guns allowed.”

“This is my street, old man. I make the rules.”

Hassan gripped El Señor’s wrist. El Señor looked down at his wrist and struck Hassan across the face. Hassan crumbled to the floor, cupping his bloody mouth.

“Touch him again and I’ll blow your head off,” Crazy Giant said, aiming his gun at El Señor. El Señor’s men pulled out revolvers.

“Easy, boys,” El Señor said.

The theatre room turned deadly silent. The clients stood back against the walls, frightened and curious. Shams poked her head from the curtains. Bandar rushed in.

“What the hell’s going on?” she said. She saw Hassan’s bloody face and screamed his name. She helped him stand up from the floor and guided him to a barstool.

“I’m fine, my dear,” he said.

Bandar grabbed a dishrag and pressed it against his face. She then turned to El Señor, her broad shoulders rising and falling with each fuming breath.

“We’re here to see the play,” he said.

“You can see the play after you leave your guns with my doorman. He’ll return them on your way out.”

El Señor scanned his eyes across the room, looking for someone. “As you please,” he said. He extended his hand to Hassan. Hassan brushed it away and left the room and came back with a cloth sack in which he collected the guns and then went outside, keeping the front door cracked open. Crazy Giant lowered his Kalashnikov and left it propped against a cabinet.

“Next round is on me,” El Señor told the clients. “Order whatever you’d like.”

The clients looked at each other, cautious.

“Please, men. Drink up,” El Señor said. “There’s nothing to fear. We’re all here to have a good time.”

The clients approached the bar as if it were haunted. Bandar helped Crazy Giant make the drinks. Meanwhile, Jawad slipped out, saying he couldn't risk being in the same room as El Señor. When Droopy Eye came up to the bar and ordered an Almaza, Crazy Giant opened the bottle with an icy stare.

"I like your costume," Droopy Eye said. I was barely able to hear him his voice was so soft. "Are you still boxing?"

Crazy Giant remained silent. I had never seen him appear so hostile.

Droopy Eye left a tip and sat next to El Señor in the wooden chairs. Two of El Señor's men stood next to the framed portraits of the girls hanging on the wall.

Crazy Giant left the money on the bar.

"Just focus on the bear," I told him. "Don't worry about anything else."

"But what if there's a rematch tonight? I'm not ready to fight yet."

"There's no rematch, Crazy Giant. You're performing tonight."

Crazy Giant didn't look convinced.

"Let's have another shot," I said.

Crazy Giant poured more vodka.

"To bears!" I said.

We clinked glasses and drank.

"I'm going to be the scariest bear you've ever seen."

I went backstage and sat down next to Shams.

"That was close!" she said. "I nearly shat my dress."

I wanted to forget about what had happened and for the show to start. I took a sip of Shams' whiskey.

“Finish it, my son.”

I drank it down, squinting hard.

“That’s how we drink,” Shams said, and turned on the PA. Zeina came around with her lute, wearing velvet bellbottoms. She said she had a surprise for me.

“Break a heart,” I said.

Under the spotlights, with her eyes closed, Zeina sang a song she had composed herself:

“Ya Beirut,” she sang, drawing out long, melancholy chords, “ya Beirut.”

“Allah, Allah,” the men responded.

*In Beirut I met a young man in a denim jacket*

*his hair all black and puffy*

*his lips as sweet as chocolate*

*his eyes as sad as my own.*

“What the hell?” Shams said. “She’s singing about you.”

“It’s about someone else,” I said, wishing Zeina had just sung a cover.

*Ya Beirut, Ya Beirut*

*In Beirut I met a young writer*

*his satchel filled with plays he wrote himself,*

*plays about love and heartbreak and the dream of the sea.*

“Allah!” the men cheered.

“She’s singing from her heart,” Shams said. “By the way, you look much better without your afro.”

Youmna Yassine had once written a poem about me. But to be serenaded before a theatre full of men was embarrassing.

*Ya Beirut, Ya Beirut*

*At sunset we stood against the railings at the Corniche*

*watching the fishermen's boats pass us by*

*the seagulls squawking,*

*our hearts throbbing, the wind carrying his scent of*

*Bien-être.*

*Ya Beirut, Ya Beirut,*

*would I ever see this man again?*

When Zeina finally left the stage, following Laila with her derbake, she asked me if I had enjoyed her song.

"It was nice," I said.

"Just 'nice'?"

"What the fuck do you want him to say?" Shams said. "You practically proposed to him."

"You've inspired me," Zeina told me, ignoring Shams. Before I could respond, she left me backstage, as if she anticipated a rejection and was too afraid to hear it.

During intermission, as Crazy Giant changed into his bear costume (which included a costly but vicious bear head, its jaws open), I peeked out at the audience from behind the curtains. El Señor sat puffing on a cigar, adding to the smoky haze hovering above the men. Droopy Eye had taken off his jacket and opened the buttons of his collared shirt, exposing the right side of Jesus Christ's portrait tattooed on his chest.

Bandar stood behind the bar, talking to Baba. The Fro Club was sipping Almazas, kneeling forward on their chairs while continually glancing back at El Señor. It seemed that everyone was eying El Señor. I feared the girls would have to service El Señor and his men, spread their legs for thugs who had tortured and torn off the limbs of others. But before any of that happened, there was a play to be performed.

Although the men were moved by the love story between White Lance and Red Willow Woman, Bandar and I failed to achieve the ultimate romantic death scene. The reason was simple: Crazy Giant's portrayal of a bear had been devastating. He terrified the audience, which left little room for romance. As Shams impersonated the roar of a bear—her husky voice was perfect for the sound effect—Crazy Giant not only fought Hind as White Lance, but also leapt out into the audience. The Fro Club screamed, dropping their beers. Crazy Giant went around the room, swinging his clawed paws, clearing men out of his way, knocking back chairs.

"I'm just here for sex," one man said, cowering.

The panting bear approached Droopy Eye, who stood up, his fists curled. Men formed a circle around the giants.

"Now's not the time," El Señor told Droopy Eye.

The bear brought his paws up to his face, ready to box and claw. I couldn't let this fight happen. Shams kept roaring, her face beet red, spittle exploding from her mouth—method acting at its most frightening. I snatched the microphone from her hands. In the sudden silence, the bear snapped out of his trance and lowered his hands. He climbed up onto the stage and commenced his fatal battle with White Lance.



El Señor and his men left after the actors took their bows. We were safe, at least for now.

The girls went upstairs and Crazy Giant changed out of his bear costume and returned to the bar. I lingered in the parlor. I was hesitant to return to the theatre room. I wasn't in the mood for the Fro Club. All they'd talk about was fucking Diala. And I didn't want to return home, where Mama would make me feel lousy. I walked up the creaky wooden staircase to the second floor. A discordant chorus of moans broke free from the velvet curtains.

"Stick it in deeper," I heard Bahaa the Ass Man cry out to Farah.

At the curtains of Diala's room, I heard a sucking sound. I poked my head inside, and in the red light, saw Diala down on her knees on the floor with her face buried in Samer Saab's crotch. He stood naked by a gas heater, looking down at her. His yellow bellbottoms were slung on the back of the dresser chair. A poster of Diala's idol Tahia Carioca belly dancing on stage hung on a wall.

My view was of Diala's back. She was in a black chemise and bobbing her head. Her hands were clamped on Samer's ass. Samer was combing his fingers through her hair. I hardened, imagining Diala's face buried in my crotch, sucking on my cock. I nearly came in my pants. All I had to do was pay her. Ten liras for her first-class love.

Diala pulled back her head, unleashing Samer's penis from her mouth. His penis was thick and long and hard, and glistened with Diala's saliva. He parted the curtains of the bed and lay on his back. Diala slipped out of her chemise and threw her garment on the dresser, but still wore her silver necklace with the keys. She joined Samer and reached for something beneath the pillow and tore it open. She slipped a condom over

him. The rubber covered half his penis. She swung her leg over his hips and slid him inside of her and began moving her hips. The bed squeaked, the curtains swayed. Samer squeezed her bobbing breasts and asked her who was “King of the Street.” Suddenly, he buried his face in her breasts and cried for God. His body shuddered. Diala slid him out, climbed off of him, and put on a bathrobe.

Samer waited until his penis had retracted before he slipped off his condom. Diala placed the condom in a tissue and threw it into a trash bin. Samer rose from the bed and started to dress. Not a word was exchanged, and neither noticed me peeking at them, sick with longing. Once Samer was dressed, he reached for his wallet, took out a bill, and placed it on the dresser table.

“Sweet dreams, Jasmine,” he said.

I ran down the hallway and down the stairs.

About fifteen minutes later, I saw Khaled walk up the stairs. I waited a bit before I returned to Diala’s room and saw Khaled mounting her from behind, his shades still on. I wanted to pull him off of her and pummel him, break those shades to pieces and knock his teeth out. No one deserved Diala more than me.

I walked down the stairs and out the front door.

“Bandar’s whores have the clap!” a prostitute from A Thousand and One Nights warned me from her balcony. It was the same boar of a woman who lived directly across from Nisreen’s room. “Come upstairs,” she said. “I’m as tight as a nun.”

A couple of sugared almonds fell on the pavement. I looked up at Elizabeth the  
III.

“My honey is gushing,” she said in her pink frock coat. She never tired of her lines.

I picked up the almonds and ate them and continued on. When I reached the Wall of Masturbation, which was empty, I stepped into the shadows and stood under the red-lit window of a second-floor room of Danya’s Delights. A prostitute was crying for more.

“Come hard!” she wailed. “Pump me with all your cum.”

Breathless with lust, and oddly feeling an intense hatred for Mama, I ran back to English Lucy and pounded on the front door. A man in his thirties answered, asking me what I wanted.

“Elizabeth the Third,” I said.

He told me to take a seat in the parlor. I sat among middle-aged men smoking cigarettes and discussing a recent car bomb in Achrafieh that had killed a Kataib parliament member. Madame Lucy came up to me, her grey hair pulled back in a halo braid. Her face had the texture of mud scorched by the sun and broken into fragments and deep grooves. From this eroded mosaic protruded a big, knobby nose.

“Aren’t you Halloumi’s son?” she asked me.

“Yes. My name is Omar.”

“I thought Halloumi prefers Bandar’s. He never visits us.”

“I visit you.”

“Do you have five liras?”

I checked my wallet. I had two.

“You can pay the rest later,” Madame Lucy said. “Elizabeth is on the third floor. First room on the left. You’ve got an hour.”

I walked up the dark stairs, my mouth parched.

“It’s about time you came,” Elizabeth said, standing at the entrance of her room in her pink coat, her hands on her hips, her pumps a shiny black. She kissed me thrice on the cheeks, smearing my face with the scent of burning pinewood. “I’ve been waiting all these years for you.”

She held my hand and pulled me inside her red-lit room. There was a double-mattress, a night table, a gas heater, and a dresser. A glass bowl of sugared almonds lay on the dresser, reflected in the mirror. A poster of a scenic mountainside with a river coursing through a wooded valley hung on the wall.

“That’s in Switzerland,” Elizabeth said. “I plan to retire in Zurich. Maybe Geneva. Still debating.”

She asked if I wanted a drink.

“Please,” I said.

She opened her closet and poured two glasses of whiskey from a bottle of Johnnie Walker. I gulped mine down and coughed.

“Sip it, Ammoura. Enjoy the taste.” She poured me more and I sipped. We sat on the bed. “You’re a virgin?”

I nodded. Her cheeks were powdered purple, nearly consumed by her pearl-white hair.

“No offense, but it will probably be quick,” she said. “At least I’ll get to teach you.”

I sipped my whiskey. “I’ll taste your honey.”

“That’s right. As much as you want.”

I was wondering what had happened to Elizabeth from the balcony. This Elizabeth was subdued. She smiled, and her front dentures plopped off her gums. She cupped her mouth. "Shit," she said, turning her head away from me. I heard a wet, crunching sound as she adjusted her dentures.

"Take off your clothes," she said.

I removed all my clothes except for my underwear. She hung her coat in the closet. In her white chemise she looked starved: her arms were long and thin; her ribs protruded from the fabric. Her legs resembled brittle sticks with knobs for knees. She didn't appear to have breasts.

"Stand up," she said.

I stood up. She knelt to the floor and pulled down my underwear. She folded my clothes and placed them on the dresser chair and told me to lie on the bed. She slipped out of her chemise. Her breasts hung down her ribs like smoked meat. Her pubic hair was dusty grey.

I lay with my arms glued to my sides and my legs closed. Suddenly, Elizabeth's cold hand was on my crotch, caressing me. I came in violent spurts.

She pulled a tissue from the box on the dresser and wiped off the cum on her hand and on my stomach.

"I didn't mean to do that," I said.

"We have plenty of time," she said, handing me my glass of whiskey.

We lay together in silence.

"Have you ever been to Switzerland?" I asked, staring at her poster.

“Never. But if people say Lebanon is the Switzerland of the Middle East, I rather see the real one.”

“What would you do over there?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet. Anything will be better than staying here. I’m too old for this shit.” She looked at me, stroking my bristly hair. The purple blush had worn off her face, revealing creases across her brow and at the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were milky grey. “Thanks for coming.”

She groped my balls, grazing her middle finger over my asshole. I became hard. She licked her fingers, lathering them in thick goo, and stuck them inside her.

“Follow my lead,” she said. “And relax.”

“Okay,” I gasped.

She climbed over my hips and in one swift movement guided me inside of her. Before I had the chance to register this movement, or the fact that I was in her, and the sensation of being in her, she started moving her hips, in and out, in and out, her smoked breasts slapping against her ribs. I held her waist, her skin cold and flaky, and it was then that I realized I had been waiting for this moment and had pondered it for so long, that when it had finally come, it was anti-climactic. I appeared to be doing what I was doing: pumping an old lady. But so many monumental moments in our lives, or at least moments we’d like to perceive as monumental, fail to live up to our expectations. They disappoint us.

“Come inside me,” Elizabeth said. “Inside the honey.”

I arched my back and came into her. She looked down at me, her frosty locks suspended over my body like the branches of a willow tree, and said I had done well,

really well. Her dentures fell out, and before she could catch them, they landed on my chest with a wet thud.

“Please come back,” she told me on my way out. I grabbed a handful of sugared almonds from the glass bowl and stuffed them in my mouth. “I’ll take you to Switzerland if you do,” she said.

I turned up the collar of my denim jacket and walked up Mutanabi Street with my chin held high, smelling of pinewood, Elizabeth’s saliva having dried on my chest. But I had just become a client. Nothing set me apart from the regulars, including Baba.

## Intermission

“I can’t believe you lost your virginity to that old wretch,” Murrone says. “You’re a sick bastard, Ammoura.”

I put out my cigarette. “It gets worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me continue.”

“Before you do, let’s eat something quick. I’m starving.”

We put on our coats and I follow her down the stairs. Anastasia is talking to Malik at the bar, sipping on a clear drink filled with ice. She wears a thick sweater over her nightgown. Malik yawns, the toothpick falling from his mouth.

“Are you done with your story?” Anastasia asks me.

“He just slept with Elizabeth the Third,” Murrone says.

“Ah. I wonder if that poor woman ever made it to Paris.”

“It was Switzerland,” Murrone corrects her. “She wanted to immigrate to Geneva or Zurich.”

“Last time Ammoura told me Paris, Blondie.”

Murrone looks at me. “Was it Switzerland or Paris?”

“Tonight it was Switzerland.”

“You can’t change things up like that, Ammoura.”

I can see that she’s disappointed. It’s a small detail, I tell her, nothing to get upset about.

“He can do whatever he wants,” Anastasia says. “It’s *his* story.”



“Has Badr el Din come by,” Murrone asks Malik.

“No,” he says.

“You’ve got a stalker, Blondie,” Anastasia says.

“That man is more than a stalker,” Malik says. “But we won’t let him harm you, don’t you worry,” he tells Murrone.

Murrone tugs at my coat. I follow her across the bar and down the hall to the kitchen. I sit at the table as she brings out a plastic container of labneh, a tomato, and cucumbers from the fridge. She cuts up the tomato on a plate and salts the juicy chunks, and also sets the table with a bowl of olives and a loaf of pita bread. She pours olive oil in the center of the creamy labneh. We each take a loaf and begin tearing pieces off and folding them into the shape of a cone to scoop up the labneh, quickly bringing the laden morsel to our open mouths, lest we spill olive oil down our chins or on the table. We pop olives like candy and spit out the pews onto side plates and pick the tomato slices with our fingers and crunch on the cucumbers. We eat with ravenous pleasure.

Madame Hafiza walks in, buried beneath her fur coat, blowing into her cupped hands. “I made lasagna earlier today,” she says. “Would you like some, Ammoura?”

“I’m full. Thank you.”

“Do you want me to heat you some, Murrone?”

“I’m also full, Auntie.”

“Then I’ll leave you two alone. Good night.”

Murrone clears the table and puts a kettle of Turkish coffee on the stove. She makes it the way I like it: thrice boiled, flavored with cardamom, and extra sugary. We sip the steaming coffee in small cups at the table.

“Want to hear a story?” she asks.

“Sure.”

“It’s more like a confession. I broke my virginity with an old man.”

“And you’ve been mocking me this entire time.”

“It was for work, Ammoura. Before coming here, I used to work at Tico Tico.”

Tico Tico is also in Hamra, across the street from Café Younes. I almost tell Murrone that I’ve seen her at the Concord movie theatre, eating a big box of popcorn all alone. But for some reason, perhaps because I don’t want to make her self-conscious about her solitude, I keep that to myself.

“His name was Adel,” Murrone continues. “He could see that I was terrified, and told me not to worry. He promised to be gentle. His wife had died from cancer years earlier. She was a blonde from Germany. They met at the University of Hamburg, where he was studying for a PhD in political science. She was studying pharmacology. I guess Adel liked me because I reminded him of his wife—at least in hair color. He kept to his promise about being gentle with me. But I remained lifeless in bed. It took him a while to get inside of me, and once he did, he began grunting hard. I stared at the bedside table, trying to hide my pain. And then it was over. He came, pulled out, removed his condom, and threw it into the bin. He got dressed, gave me a tip, and said he’d see me again. And he did, and I got better with experience. He never cared to ask me questions, not that I would have shared anything with him. But I realized I could do this for a living, at least for now. I mean, what else would I do? Mop floors? Clean dishes? I’m not good for anything.”

“You’re a fine actress.”

“Please, Ammoura, this isn’t the time for encouragement.”

She gets up from the table and pours us a second cup of coffee and sits back down. Outside we hear scooters ripping down the street, their shrill honking piercing the night. Murrone closes her eyes, and I don’t have to ask her what she’s thinking about, or whom she longs for. I see him, too. Saladin the film connoisseur. They’re riding his scooter, Saladin in his leather jacket with his reddish hair rippling in the wind. She sits behind him, her arms wrapped around his waist. They ride through the arid hills of the south, the lights of Israel flickering in the far distance. They ride and ride, their gas limitless, Murrone and Sir William Wallace, Balian and King Saladin.

The sound of the scooters is gone as quickly as it comes, and Murrone opens her eyes. I’m filled with sorrow, hers and mine. I long for the red light.

We return upstairs.

## Miracles on Mutanabi Street

My night at English Lucy became the news on Mutanabi Street. The next evening, as Baba and I ate dinner at the kitchen table, he said girls from A Thousand and One Nights and Cathy the Cypriot told him they saw me entering English Lucy. Even Madame Lucy herself paid him a visit at the store to ask if his son had had a good time with her eldest girl.

“Did you really sleep with Elizabeth?” Baba asked.

“Shh,” I said, worried that Mama would overhear us. She was in her room, giving us the silent treatment. She had left a pot of fasoulieh on the stove.

“Did you?” Baba asked.

I scooped up a bite of fava beans and meat and swallowed hard. “Is there a problem?”

“Everyone’s talking about it. Why Elizabeth?”

“I don’t know, Baba. It just happened.”

“Did you use a condom?”

“Shh, Baba. Mama will hear us.”

Baba put down his utensils. “Did you use protection?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. Because Madame Lucy’s girls aren’t clean.”

I was too anxious to finish my dish. Was my penis damaged for life?

After dinner Baba made mint tea. I stirred three teaspoons of sugar into my glass.

“It’s your life,” Baba told me, locking eyes with me across the table. “But whatever you do, protect your heart.”

The next day was Sunday, and Mama was gone. She disappeared on Sundays and only returned in the early evening, leaving Baba home all day. He listened to the radio and smoked his cigarettes on the balcony.

“Your mother hates me,” Baba said at breakfast. “Whenever I look into her eyes, all I see is hatred.”

“What can we do to make her feel better?”

“Nothing. No one’s more stubborn than your mother.”

I drove Baba’s Beetle down to Mutanabi Street later that afternoon, parking in front of the store.

“Ammoura!” Elvis said, calling me over. He hopped down from his footstool. “Kneel, young man. I want to kiss your fresh nonvirgin cheeks.”

“Shouldn’t you be off on Sunday?” I asked.

“Kneel!”

I knelt and he kissed me.

“I’m already home, Ammoura,” he said. “What else would I do if I wasn’t here? Stare at the walls in my apartment? Pick my ass? Cut my toenails?”

He made me a cup of Turkish coffee.

“Now be careful, Ammoura. Don’t go falling in love with Grandmother Elizabeth. She’s on her death bed.” He broke into laughter. I remained quiet. “Sorry,” he said. “Bad joke. I’m glad you didn’t sleep with my African Queen.”

“Maybe I will,” I said.

His smile vanished from his face.

“Bad joke,” I said, and walked down the street. As I approached English Lucy I felt faint, as if I were passing the door of a lover who had spurned me. I lingered below Elizabeth’s empty balcony, which was flooded with sunshine, a pigeon perched on the railing, and sniffed the air for pinewood, hoping she’d step out and tell me to come on up because she wanted to start where we had left off the night before, she riding on top, her face outlined by her willow locks.

I still owed her three liras. I knocked on the front door. Madame Lucy answered.

“Elizabeth is napping,” she said.

I gave her the money and continued on.

At Bandar’s the girls sat on the floor in the parlor with their backs resting against the couches, their bare legs stretched out on the blue carpet. I could hear Bandar frying something in the kitchen.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Nonvirgin!” Diala said. Her nightgown was hitched up to her waist, allowing me to feast on her legs. I regretted not breaking my virginity with her, and hoped she didn’t mind, that it had been in the heat of the moment.

“But with Elizabeth?” Farah said. “Really?”

“He’s free to choose whom he wants,” Nisreen said.

“I hope you used protection,” Laila said.

I nodded.

Zeina refused to acknowledge my presence.

“I liked your song the other night,” I told her.

She folded her arms across her chest.

“Don’t bother with her,” Diala said. “She’s been like that since you popped Elizabeth Taylor.”

“It’s Elizabeth the Third,” Laila said.

“Either way, the woman is nearly as old as Shams. What were you thinking, Ammoura?”

“I wasn’t,” I said. I wished she were as angry with me as Zeina. Her indifference pained me. What did I have to do to gain her interest?

I sat on the floor next to Zeina.

Bandar came into the parlor holding a frying pan. “Be careful, it’s still hot,” she said, and went around offering caramel globs of wax. When she got to me, she pinched my cheek. She returned to the kitchen, and by the smell of fried onions wafting into the room, began cooking lunch.

The girls stretched the wax over their legs and ripped it off their skin.

“Merde!” Diala said.

“Don’t forget to wax your beard,” Farah told her, chuckling.

“Hahaha,” Diala said. “Palestinian beauties don’t have facial hair, you cow. Unlike Lebanese women.”

“I should wax your tongue,” Farah said, “and teach you how to speak like a God-fearing woman.”

“I bet you wish you could wax off all your layers.”

“My layers keep me extra warm in winter.”

Hind farted. “Excuse me,” she said, and continued to wax above her ankles.

“Mon dieu, it smells like death, Hind,” Diala said. “Make sure it wasn’t a wet one.”

Hind looked at me. “Do you mind lighting a match?”

I picked up the matches on the table and lit one.

“Hind’s farts can kill an army,” Diala said. “We’ve finally found our secret weapon against the Israelis.”

I cracked up, and quickly covered my mouth, lest I embarrass Hind.

“I’ve now heard that joke a thousand times,” Farah said.

“It’s your fault, Farah,” Diala said, eyeing me mischievously. “Your cooking gives Hind gas.”

“Let’s stop talking about Hind’s gas,” Nisreen said. “It’s only natural to fart.”

“The smell is gone now,” Hind said. “Thanks, Ammoura.”

“Sure,” I said.

Zeina was overaggressive with her waxing. Her thigh had turned bright pink.

“Be careful,” I told her.

She was crying silently.

“Zeina,” I said, reaching for her hand.

“Don’t touch me!” she said, and threw the wax on the floor and stormed out of the room.

I got up to run after her.

“Sit down, Ammoura,” Nisreen said.

“I think I’ve hurt Zeina.”

“You haven’t hurt anyone, habibi.”



I picked up Zeina's wax flecked with black hairs and stretched it.

"Wax that sad look off your face," Diala said.

Hind farted again.

"Time to light a forest!" Diala said.

This time we all laughed, and I felt less anxious about Zeina.

After lunch I went upstairs to Crazy Giant's room. He hadn't come down to eat.

He sat on a bench facing the mirror, his head lowered. He made room for me on the bench.

"I've been trying to visualize my fight with Droopy Eye," he said.

"You nearly mauled him the other night."

"I need to stop his double-leg takedown. If I don't, he'll get on top of me and pummel me to death."

"You're Crazy Giant!" I said, incredulous. "A fearless boxer."

"But he beat me, and he's a former Olympic wrestler."

"You were distracted the first time you fought."

"I'm rusty," Crazy Giant said, hanging his head. "I haven't even been able to spar. All I do is punch that bag."

"You've got a nasty left hook," I reminded him.

"All it takes is one punch to the bastard's chin. Just one."

"You'll knock his ass out."

Crazy Giant leaned against me, resting his head on my shoulder. I stroked his hair.

"This feels good," he said.

“One punch,” I said.

“A left hook to his chin and lights out.” He turned and looked me strait in the eyes. “Chief, is it true about Elizabeth?”

“Yes,” I said. “But she’s not as old as everyone makes her out to be.”

“Good thing you got the first one over with. My first lay was horrible. It gets better with time, Chief.”

“I didn’t use protection,” I admitted.

“Oh,” he said. “If your penis starts acting funny, just let me know.”

“You think I have a disease?”

“Not sure, Chief. But if you do, I’ll take care of you. A left hook to the STD!”

“We’ll knock it out cold.”

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During the running of *The Cottonwoods*, Bandar and I brainstormed ideas for our next play. The icy rains of winter slashed the balconies and French doors. Thunder broke, rattling the windows. The weather suited our flair for the dramatic. I asked Bandar if she’d be interested in staging a thriller.

“I’m open to all suggestions,” she said, a shawl draped over her shoulders. I wore a striped scarf coiled around my neck.

I shared some ideas, which she responded to by nodding, and sometimes saying, “interesting.” She wrote down notes on a pad. One day, we clicked. We envisioned the play in its entirety.

*Kidnapped Love* concerned a young mother whose daughter is kidnapped. I got the idea from *Hickey & Boggs*, which had come out a couple of years earlier and was about two seasoned private eyes hired to find a missing girl.

During one of our brainstorming sessions, Bandar said she intended to stage a special performance for Christmas and New Year's. In the past she had staged her regular shows on either night, but now she was inspired to try something different.

"I want to stage the nativity scene for Christmas," she said. "When I was a girl, I especially loved the season for the nativity scene. At service, before joining my parents in the pews, I stood in the entrance and stared endlessly at the manger, imagining holding Baby Jesus in my arms. I wished that Mary and Jesus, and the shepherds and animals, would come to life. Now, I can finally bring them to life on the stage. Maybe I can even show Jesus performing miracles on the townsfolk of Nazareth."

When I told the girls about the Christmas play, they giggled. Laila flashed her buckteeth.

"Bandar's losing her mind," Zeina said, biting on her nail. As if nothing had happened, she began to speak to me again. I wasn't required to do any explaining, which relieved me.

"Won't it be sacrilegious?" Farah asked. "Staging the nativity scene—Zeina, quit biting your nail, it's disgusting—"

"Mind your own business, Farah. I never comment on your weight."

"Staging the nativity scene inside a brothel," Farah continued, "doesn't sound like a good idea. God will punish us."

“Forget God,” Diala said. “Bandar’s punishing *us*. We’ll have to rehearse for this Christmas play.”

“We’ll also have to rehearse for *Kidnapped Love*,” Laila said.

“But imagine bringing Jesus back to life,” Nisreen said.

Zeina spat out a nail and said: “Jesus has already been resurrected, Nisreen. Long time ago.”

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As for the Fro Club, I had distanced myself from them following an argument we had at Universal. We were all eating our burgers when Roy said that Zeina couldn’t fuck to save her life.

“I bet you she’s better than the fat ass,” Waleed said.

“The one with the darting eyes freaks me out,” Khaled said.

“The older one isn’t bad,” Roy said. “She knows what she’s doing.”

“Change the subject,” I snapped.

“Why?” Roy asked.

“Omar’s just frustrated,” Waleed said. “He’s still a virgin.”

“I’m actually not,” I said.

“You’re lying.”

I slid out of the booth and grabbed my coat and scarf.

“You’re jealous of us,” Khaled said. “We get to fuck whomever we want.”

“We have money,” Roy said.

“Our fathers don’t work in grocery stores,” Waleed said.

“I write plays for Bandar’s,” I said. “You know what that means?”

I still had my theatre family. On a Saturday night at Bandar's following *The Cottonwoods*, I sat with Baba at the bar. He looked sad and tired. I suggested we go home.

"Not yet, son."

A half hour later, Bandar came over to the bar and whispered something into his ear. He finished his beer and removed a folded handkerchief from his coat pocket and picked out a mint leaf. Sucking on the leaf, he left me at the bar and walked through the curtains leading to the creaky wooden stairs.

I left Bandar's and ran down the street and hailed a taxi.

At home, Mama lay on her bed, facing the window. I knelt to the floor and rested the side of my face against hers.

"You smell like your father," she said, and turned the other way.

I spent the rest of the evening in the parlor, sitting in Jidu's armchair, trying to do schoolwork without much success. When Baba came home I joined him for a smoke on the balcony. He smelled of gardenia, which only made me feel sadder for Mama.

"Where does Mama go on Sundays?" I asked.

Baba took a long drag on his cigarette. "Long walks, I suppose."

"Do you love her, Baba?"

"Of course I do, Omar. Why are you asking?"

"Because you smell like Nisreen."

"That's another matter. Your mother is part of one world—this one here—and Nisreen is part of another—the one that you and I know."

"It's like you have wives in two different places."

“No, it’s not like that at all.”

“Which one can’t you live without?”

“That’s a silly question.”

Baba left me on the balcony to bathe. The bathroom was still steamy when I entered. I recalled the time I pretended to be a private detective and conducted an investigation of Baba’s nighttime habits. It seemed like nothing had changed since then, except that now I had become a culprit.

I peed fire, and cried out. I squeezed on the head of my penis and sat down on the toilet seat, cringing, urine dribbling over my fingers. The burning intensified. I let go of my head to release the remaining urine, which spurted out in searing droplets.

There was a knock on the door.

“I’m okay, Baba,” I yelped.

“It’s your mother.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m constipated.”

I heard her flip-flops slap the floor over to the kitchen. I stood up and looked into the toilet bowl. My urine was yellow. I inspected my penis for any warts or rashes, but all looked fine.

I came out of the bathroom to find Mama with a glass of prune juice extended before her.

“This should relax your bowels,” she said.

Now I only peed fire. I knew my burning pee was related to Elizabeth the III. But that didn’t stop fire-breathing jinns from flying up and down my urethra, howling with

wicked laughter as they scorched me, turning my penis into a blazing ember. If this condition was permanent, I preferred death.

I needed a cure quick, and there was only one person I could go to.

“My penis is on fire,” I told Crazy Giant during one of his workout sessions.

“How bad is it?” he asked, panting. The punching bag swung back and forth, the chains squeaking.

I grabbed my crotch. “I can’t stand to pee anymore.”

Crazy Giant nodded. “We’ll take you down to the clinic. I’ll need Bandar’s help since she knows the doctor.”

“But if she knows I might have—”

“Chief,” Crazy Giant said. “It’s Bandar. She knows everything.”

On a lazy afternoon while the girls were napping, I rode a taxi with Bandar and Crazy Giant to the clinic, which was in Hazmieh. I had pleaded with Bandar before leaving to keep this visit secret from Baba.

“It’s between us,” Bandar said. “I need you healthy to write plays.”

The clinic was on the third floor of an old apartment building overlooking the sea. In the waiting room, I sat between Bandar and Crazy Giant. Bandar was thumbing her rosary.

“You think I’ll be all right?” I said.

“Dr. Ghantous is the best,” Bandar said. “For STDs, that is. And no bribes will be necessary this time.”

“I don’t have the money to pay him.”

“I’m paying.”

“You can take it out of my commission.”

“That’s not necessary. I want you to focus hard on the next play. We’ve got to keep thinking ahead.”

“Is an ultimate romantic death scene even possible?”

“I’m not sure anymore. I’ve been trying for over thirty years and have failed to achieve one. But that doesn’t mean we should quit on it.”

“I don’t mind being a bear again,” Crazy Giant said. “As long as I don’t have to keep on killing Indians.”

The nurse called me in.

Dr. Ghantous, a bald-headed man with hairy knuckles, asked if my penis had a leak. I sat perched on the edge of the examining table, he on a stool with wheels.

I shook my head. “Just the burning sensation.”

“Drop your underwear,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“I need to examine your package.”

I pictured Hala from Marwa’s Muse down on her knees with my cock in her mouth, all the girls in the room pointing at me and giggling, the reek of roasted chestnuts in the air.

“Strip, son,” Dr. Ghantous said, slipping on a pair of latex gloves.

I slid off the examining table and pulled down my pants and underwear. My penis had shrunk. I felt cold and hot at the same time.

Dr. Ghantous rolled over to me on his low and creaking stool. “Don’t expect a hand job.”



I fake laughed and looked to the side. I wondered how many prostitutes had given Dr. Ghantous blowjobs with their fingers stuck up his ass in this very room to keep him from sending reports to the Ministry of Health.

He flipped my penis around and felt my testicles.

“It’s probably the clap,” he said. “If you get any sores on your little Antar, come back.” He removed his gloves and prescribed antibiotics. “Tell the girls Doctor Nasty Love says hello.”

Bandar bought me the prescription at a nearby pharmacy.

“You’ll be better right in time for Christmas,” she said.

\*

The Christmas season descended upon Mutanabi Street in a deluge of celebration. Red and white lights were strung across the street, from balcony to balcony. Christmas trees and candles lit up windows. Red ribbons hung from the lampposts. Portraits of Virgin Mary were pasted over walls and the metal grilles of shops.

Bandar had strewn her balconies with lights and planted a Christmas tree in a corner of the theatre room. The girls decorated it with ornaments and wrapped several empty boxes and placed them under the tree. Crazy Giant nailed a wreath above the bar.

Nisreen recalled the Christmases in Ozlah, when the Christian townsfolk decorated their houses with lights and adorned pine trees with ornaments and sang carols as they walked the roads or sat around their crackling stoves. Nisreen and Milhem would join them inside for a warm cup of tea and notice with envy all the wrapped presents under the tree. They also visited Father Malouf at his rectory, where Milhem sang songs and Father Malouf sat back in his rocking chair and smiled.

As Christmas Day approached and I began to pee with ease, the girls became increasingly frustrated. They were tired of rehearsing for *Kidnapped Love* and *The Nativity*, the Christmas play, and during rehearsals, many of which I sat for, confused their lines or forgot them.

“What’s your problem?” Bandar roared to her actresses on stage. They were rehearsing for *The Nativity*. “Embody the words on the script—make them your own! Show some passion, damn it.”

“We’re exhausted, Bandar,” Diala said.

“If we let up now, we’ll lose our momentum.”

“I’m hungry,” Farah whined.

“I’m sleepy,” Zeina said.

“Stop complaining,” Bandar said. “Let’s rehearse Scene Two.”

“I think we need some time off,” Nisreen said.

Hearing this from Nisreen, Bandar relented. “Let’s make a deal,” she said. “If we finish this scene, I’ll take you all out for dinner tomorrow night in the souks.”

“What about the show?” Diala asked.

“I’ll give you the night off. Consider it your Christmas gift.”

The girls cheered.

The following evening, we all walked together to the souks. The girls were bundled up in frock coats, scarves, and gloves, and had put on gowns and makeup and sprayed themselves with perfume. Well, except for Zeina, who wore pants. I wore my only blazer over a vest and button-down shirt, bellbottom slacks, and black-and-white

patent leather shoes. As we walked down the street, the prostitutes on their balconies asked where we were headed.

“To dinner,” Diala said, “and you’re not invited.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ve already eaten,” a prostitute said from French Antoinette.

“I’m so excited,” Zeina said, walking alongside me. “We don’t get this opportunity too often.”

“Ammoura, my love!” Elizabeth called out, throwing sugared almonds at me. I stopped to look up at her. She opened her pink coat, under which she only wore a chemise, and jiggled her smoked breasts.

“Ignore her,” Zeina said.

“I miss you,” Elizabeth said. “I really do. I bought two tickets to Zurich!”

I wanted to blame her for giving me the clap, but seeing her up there plastered in makeup, I worried that her dentures would fall out, horrifying the girls. And then they’d begin to squirm, making Elizabeth feel self-conscious. She didn’t deserve unnecessary attention.

I walked on. Almonds continued to rain down over me.

A gigantic Christmas tree with red and blue ornaments and white lights sparkled in the middle of Martyrs’ Square. Boys and girls ran around it and lovers had their pictures taken with the tree in the background. Christmas lights were strung from the balconies of buildings and wreaths covered the doors of various shops. The crowds were dense and loud, invigorated by the festive atmosphere.

We entered the souks and followed Bandar to Ajami, one of the finest restaurants in the city. It was early evening, so the restaurant was half empty. A waiter led us to a corner table and gave us our menus. When Nisreen looked at the prices, she asked Bandar if they could afford it.

“Don’t worry about the money,” Bandar said. “Order whatever you want.”

As we were perusing our menus, Crazy Giant began to drool.

“I could eat everything,” he said.

“I can cook all these dishes,” Farah said.

“I want the lamb chops,” Diala said.

“I hear their shish taouk is delicious,” Laila said.

I noticed the waiter whispering to a young man in a suit, presumably the manager. The manager nodded his head and came over to our table.

“Bonsoir, madmes et monsieurs,” he said. “I’m terribly sorry, but this table is reserved.”

He had thick, glossy lips shaped like a fish’s mouth.

“It’s your waiter’s mistake,” Bandar said.

“I apologize on his behalf.”

“Pardonnez-moi, monsieur,” Diala said, “mais je refuse pour aller a une autre table.”

The manager licked his lips. “Je suis désolé. All the tables are reserved.”

“Listen,” Bandar said. “We came here to have a nice dinner, and we expect to be served. This isn’t the first time I come here.”

“I apologize, but all the tables are taken.”

“Most of the tables are empty.”

“They’re still reserved.”

“Are you asking us to leave?”

“Yes,” the manager said. “I apologize.”

“C’est ridicule!” Diala said, pounding her fist on the table. The few customers in the restaurant turned to look at us.

“Calm down, Diala,” Laila said.

Bandar looked sternly at the manager. “I want to speak to your superior.”

“I am the superior.”

“Let me talk to the owner, then.”

“The owner isn’t here. I apologize, but you need a reservation.”

“Let’s leave,” Nisreen told Bandar.

Zeina closed her menu and placed it on the table. “I wish we never came here.”

“What’s your name?” Bandar asked the manager.

“Raad.”

“My dear Raad, you and I both know that most customers won’t show up until ten. It’s seven.”

He licked his lips. “I apologize.”

“They apparently don’t want our business,” Bandar told us. I looked at Zeina, and then at Hind, sitting across from me. Their eyes were lowered. I closed my menu and looked down at it. I felt embarrassed for the girls, and for myself.

We stood up from the table and put on our coats. Before leaving, Diala walked up to the manager, and in Arabic, she said: “You and society can go to hell. We’re better off without you, fish face!”

The manager turned red.

Out on the street, we broke into laughter. Thank God for Diala. There was no one she couldn’t stand up to.

We were accommodated at the next restaurant, after Bandar slipped the manager some cash. We gorged on a mezza of humus, baba ganoush, fried sardines, and liver; fatty sausages, cubes of raw meat and fat, and kibbe; tabouli, grape leaves, and garlic-flavored labneh; and for the main course, grilled chicken and meat and spicy, deep-fried fish. We sprayed the fish with half-cut lemons and were careful not to swallow the bones. The waiter served us warm loaves of puffy pita bread throughout the meal. Diala and Crazy Giant washed down the food with glasses of arak. For dessert, we ate fruits and kanafi, and recovered from a pressing drowsiness with Arabic coffee flavored with cardamom.

Once Bandar paid the bill, she took out money from her purse and gave us each ten liras to buy ourselves a gift. I was embarrassed to take the money, but when Bandar gave me a look that said, “Take the money now,” I thanked her and placed the bill in my pocket.

“Let’s go shopping!” Diala said.

We strolled through the souks and walked in and out of stores. I spotted a silver locket in a storefront display and thought Diala might like it. I had to use my own money in addition to what Bandar had given me to buy the locket, leaving me short on change.

I found Diala standing alone in an aisle at a clothing store and gave her the gift.

“What’s this?” she asked.

I was too self-conscious to explain myself.

She opened the jewelry box and took out the locket.

“It’s nice,” she said, and pulled down on my collar and gave me a big kiss on the lips, poking in her tongue. Her breath tasted of garlic, which I didn’t mind. “That’s my Christmas present to you.”

I was giddy with love. “It’s the best present of all!”

“Merde,” Diala said. “You’ve got to get over me, Ammoura. You deserve a lot better.”

“I’d be lucky to have you,” I said.

“Poor thing, you’re as lost as your father. Mutanabi Street has corrupted you. You should stay outside of the red-light district, or else you’ll never find true love.”

When I tried to answer her, she put her finger on my lips. “Get over us before it’s too late.”

That was impossible, and not only because of her and my friends on Mutanabi Street. How could I possibly abandon the theatre? Especially now, when I had become a playwright.

“Can we go back to Amélie’s?” I asked her, hating how desperate I sounded. “Just you and me.”

“Let’s find the others,” she said.

We joined the rest of the girls at a square to listen to a hakawati, who sat perched on a wooden platform. I couldn’t follow his narrative, overcome with anguish. I became

restless standing there in the crowd, able to smell Diala's perfume but unable to have her. Zeina handed me a gift wrapped in brown paper. It was a leather-bound journal. I felt guilty for not buying her a gift or even thinking about it. I hoped Diala would keep the locket a secret.

"Do you like it?" Zeina asked.

"I love it."

\*

*The Nativity* opened on Christmas Eve for a two-night showing. In the final scene, Bandar opted to portray Jesus as a boy, thinking it was more original. As Jesus, Zeina walked around the stage in a beige tunic and leather sandals performing miracles on the townsfolk. She was approached by Diala, who was blind. She touched Diala's eyes. Diala faced the crowd, blinking furiously.

"I can see!" she said. "I can see the light!"

"I want to see your tits," a man said.

Hind approached Zeina in a hooded tunic. She wore a mask of a disfigured face made out of papier-mâché. The men were horrified.

"Save the leper, Jesus," one said.

Hind turned to Zeina, with her back to the audience. Zeina placed her palms on her face. When Hind turned to the audience, her mask was gone.

"Hurray for Jesus!" a man said, pumping his fist.

Zeina revived Farah from the dead and cured Nisreen of heartbreak.

The curtains were about to close when a man ran to the stage.

"Save me, Jesus, I'm craazy!"



“Sit down!” Bandar said, parting through the crowd. Before she was able to reach the stage, Zeina touched the top of the man’s head.

“You are now healed,” she said.

“Jesus,” a man said, standing up, “I have cancer.”

Zeina touched the top of his head and said, “You are now healed.”

The men cheered.

“I suffer from an addiction to sex,” one man said, “so don’t lay a finger on me.”

The men laughed.

“I’m dying of love,” Bahaa said. “Love for Chantal.”

Zeina touched his heart.

“I’ve got a drinking problem,” another man said.

“I’ve got webbed feet.”

“Remove this damned birthmark from my face.”

“I can’t shit to save my life.”

At midnight, I wished Bandar a Merry Christmas.

## The Rematch

I had plenty of free time before my classes resumed in early January. I spent it at Bandar's. Morning at Bandar's meant the early afternoon. I turned up after the girls had had their breakfast. I once sat in the kitchen to watch Hind cut the girls' hair. Hind had covered the tiles with old newspapers, and with the patience of a seasoned hairdresser, cut the girls' hair according to hairstyles they'd seen in magazines or in soap operas. I asked Hind if she had ever visited her old salon, where she had worked before coming here.

"Never," she said. She was trimming Diala's curls. "But I've seen Lene, the owner, on the streets. She once called out my name; I pretended not to hear her."

"Lene was a bitch," Diala said. "She kept you locked up in that salon."

"It's better than what I went through," Farah said, who was washing vegetables in the sink. "I was forced to live with my donkey-loving cousin for two years in the village."

"At least you had food on your table," Zeina said, sitting on the counter. "There were nights Baba and I went to sleep on empty stomachs."

"Nothing is worse than being kicked out of your own country," Diala said.

"Those—"

"Fucking Israelis!" we said in unison.

At other times I loafed around in the parlor, watching TV with the girls and Crazy Giant or playing cards or backgammon. More often than not, I listened in on the girls'

conversation. They talked and laughed and argued as they cut and filed and painted their nails or combed their hair, or sat on the carpet and waxed their legs and upper lips.

One day, Hassan came into the parlor and said I had a visitor.

“*Me?*” I said.

“She’s waiting at the front door.”

“Who is it?” Zeina said.

“Elizabeth the Third,” Hassan said.

“Tell her to go away!” Zeina said. “We don’t want her here.”

“You’ve got a stalker, Ammoura,” Diala said.

“She’s an old hag,” Zeina said.

“I’ll be back,” I told the girls, and followed Hassan out front.

Elizabeth stood on the pavement, smoking in the sunshine. She was in her pink frock coat and long black boots. She wore no makeup; grooves sliced down her face.

“There’s a little ice cream parlor up the street,” she said. “My treat.”

“I’m busy.”

“It won’t take long.”

“I already ate. I’m stuffed.”

“I’m not trying to get you to sleep with me,” she said. She dropped her cigarette on the asphalt and grinded it out with her boot. “I’m leaving tonight. For good. Madame Lucy has decided to shut down the house. Please, it’s only ice cream. You won’t see me again.”

I wore my wool coat and followed her down Mutanabi Street and up an alley that winded toward Gemmayzeh Street. The ice cream parlor had a striped awning, and was

situated between a tailor's shop and a bookstore. We sat at a round table by the storefront window overlooking the pavement.

A waiter came over with menus.

"I'll have the usual," Elizabeth said.

I ordered strawberry and lemon. As soon as the ice cream came in glass bowls, Elizabeth's eyes lit up. She dug her spoon into a generous scoop of pistachio ice cream topped with creamy ashta and ate a mouthful. She cringed.

"Brain freeze," she said, cupping her mouth. "I do it every time."

I took a small bite, still uncertain about Elizabeth's intentions.

"I hope I didn't scare you in bed," she said.

I ate more ice cream.

"My teeth," she said. "I can't help it. I lost them when I was young. Ammoura? Please, look up."

I looked up at her withered face.

"How's the ice cream?" she asked.

"Good."

"Do you want to taste mine?"

I shook my head.

"You're so shy," she said.

"You gave me the clap."

She rested her spoon against her bowl. "I didn't know I was infected. I'm sorry."

"It hurt to pee."

"I never intended to hurt you."

“You should have told me to use a condom.”

“You’re a virgin, so I knew you’d be clean. And it’s not like I can have kids at my age. Did Bandar take you to Dr. Ghantous?”

I nodded.

“Now you’re only going to remember me for giving you the clap. That’s my legacy, if I had a legacy to begin with.”

She finished her ice cream with hardly a breath, tears filling her eyes.

“You’re going to give yourself another brain freeze,” I said.

She coughed into a napkin and ordered a second bowl.

“Please don’t remember me for the clap,” she said. “The truth is I haven’t had a man in years. You were the first to request me since I don’t know when. Madame Lucy keeps me on because I’m her cousin. But that doesn’t matter now. The house is closed. Mutanabi Street is dying, Ammoura.”

“It’s not,” I said, insistent. “Bandar’s been busy.”

“It won’t last for much longer. All the houses are losing money. And it’s getting dangerous around here. The other day a thug in cowboy boots visited our place looking for Palestinian fighters.”

“El Señor,” I said.

“Yup. He had a herculean man with him. They’re looking for a commando named Don Juan. El Señor said Don Juan cuts out the tongues of mothers and children. God only knows what they’ll do to him if they catch him.”

I concentrated on finishing my ice cream. Elizabeth worked on her second bowl.

“Let’s not talk about that anymore,” she said. “I want to appreciate this time with you.”

“Why me?”

“Because I have no one else, my dear.”

“Are you leaving for Switzerland?”

“I thought we’re already in Switzerland,” she said. “The Switzerland of the Middle East!”

Years later, I regretted not asking for her story, or what she intended to do for the rest of her life. I knew nothing about her, not even her real name.

\*

The closing of English Lucy would soon have a ripple effect on the other brothels on Mutanabi Street. But before that time came, days before New Year’s, I sat backstage with Shams. On stage, Hind, playing the role of the dashing detective in *Kidnapped Love*, was promising Nisreen that he’d find her daughter.

“I pray that she’s still alive,” Nisreen said. “Beirut isn’t the Paris of the Middle East anymore. It’s changing for the worse.”

As if on cue, El Señor entered the theatre room with his men.

“Fuck, he’s back,” Shams said.

Nisreen spotted El Señor and paused. Hassan stumbled into the room, blood pouring from his nose and down his chin. Crazy Giant went to reach for the Kalashnikov when Droopy Eye pulled out his revolver and pointed it at his head.

“Come around the bar, Indian,” Droopy Eye said. His soft voice was audible only because the room had gone silent.

“No weapons!” Bandar said. She hurried over to Hassan, guiding him for a second time into a barstool. “What did you do to him?!”

“We’re looking for Don Juan,” El Señor said. “Has anyone seen him around? He’s got big blue eyes.”

“He’s not here,” Bandar said.

“What if you’re hiding him upstairs?”

“I’ve never seen the man. What have you done to my doorman?”

“He’ll be all right,” El Señor said, lighting his cigar.

“Come around so that I can see you,” Droopy Eye told Crazy Giant. “Keep your hands up.”

Crazy Giant raised his hands and walked around the bar. He was bare-chested, and wore a headdress and his leather pants with fringes and moccasins. Droopy Eye grabbed the Kalashnikov from behind the bar and handed it to one of El Señor’s henchman.

“Go ahead, boys,” El Señor said. His henchmen walked past Bandar to search the house for Don Juan.

“He’s not here,” Bandar repeated, and looked at Hassan, who had pressed a dishrag against his nose.

“How do I know you’re not working for Yasser Arafat?” El Señor said. “You’ve got Palestinian whores living with you.” He scanned the room, the cigar burning in his mouth. “I apologize for the interruption, gentlemen. Next round is on me.”

The men were quiet. Nisreen and Hind stood next to Shams and I backstage, leaving the stage empty. Diala, Laila, and Zeina joined us, crouched around the table.

“You should work for us,” El Señor told Crazy Giant. “We like madmen.”

“I don’t work for thugs,” Crazy Giant said.

“I’m a married man with two beautiful children.”

“That doesn’t stop you from being a thug.”

“Droopy Eye tells me he knocked you out,” El Señor said. “Broke your nose.”

“That was years ago. I’m a different fighter now.”

“Droopy Eye would still knock you out.”

Crazy Giant looked at Droopy Eye, who had lowered his gun. Crazy Giant lowered his hands. “Droopy Eye got lucky in our first fight.”

“I took you down and beat you up,” Droopy Eye said. “That was all skill.” His nonchalance was terrifying. If he appeared this frightening calm, I couldn’t imagine what he was like angry.

“We’re a theatre house,” Bandar said. “If you’re looking for trouble, find it elsewhere.”

El Señor approached Bandar, his spurs ringing. She was about an inch taller than him. He flicked the tip of his cigar. Clumps of ash fell to the floor.

“Forgive me, Madame,” he said, “but you run a brothel.”

“We have a stage.”

“A stage for whores.”

“Get out of here.” She was clenching her rosary.

“I’ll leave once my men are done with their search. Until then, why don’t you serve your clientele and us some drinks? Crazy Giant, I’d like a whiskey on the rocks.”

“Fuck you,” Crazy Giant said.



“No need for vulgarities,” El Señor said.

“I’ll call the police,” Bandar said.

“I am the police, Madame.”

“We’re here to have a good time,” Bahaa said from the audience, his voice trembling. “No one means any harm.”

“Neither do I,” El Señor said. “I’m trying to protect you all. Don Juan is a dangerous man.”

“I told you: He hasn’t been here,” Bandar said.

“We’ll soon find out. Crazy Giant, a whiskey on the rocks, please.”

“I don’t think so,” Crazy Giant said.

“I asked you politely.”

“Don’t make him ask again,” Droopy Eye said.

“I’ll make the drink,” Bandar said, and was walking around to the bar when El Señor pulled on her wrist.

“Let go of her!” Crazy Giant said. He leapt forward and brushed off El Señor’s hand, pushing him back. A shot rang off. Everyone ducked, except for Droopy Eye, who had shot a round into the ceiling.

“Touch El Señor again and I’ll put a bullet in your head,” Droopy Eye told Crazy Giant.

El Señor dusted off his coat and then ran his hand through his back curls. “Make my drink,” he told Crazy Giant.

“I’m not making you a drink,” Crazy Giant said.

“Here, have my whiskey,” Shams said, walking onto the stage, her glass extended.

El Señor laughed. “You work here? At your age?”

“You’ve got a problem with me?”

“None, Madame, none at all.”

The two men returned to the theatre room.

“Nothing, ya istaz,” one told El Señor.

“All right. Looks like we’re done here. But I’m still waiting on my drink.”

“Leave,” Crazy Giant said. “Before I scalp you.”

El Señor puffed on his cigar. “You’re asking for a fight.”

“I’ll fight him,” Droopy Eye said.

“You already did, and broke his nose. Look, the Indian’s nose is still crooked.”

“I’ll punch it back in the other direction.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Crazy Giant said. “This time, I’ll knock *you* out.”

“Sounds like we need a rematch,” El Señor said.

“Give me the time and place and I’ll be there,” Droopy Eye said.

“Now,” Crazy Giant said. “Here.”

“Fighting’s not allowed!” Bandar said. “This is a theatre house.”

El Señor looked around the room. “Do you all want to see a fight?” he asked the men. None answered. “Come on! I say we see a fight.”

“They can fight on the stage,” one of El Señor’s henchmen said.

“That’s a brilliant suggestion, Michel. And we’ll take bets. How about that?”

“We’re all for Crazy Giant,” Bahaa said.

“He’s the greatest fighter that ever lived,” Charbel said.

“He’s a true Indian warrior,” Samer said.

“I’ll write Droopy Eye’s obituary,” Ralph said.

“You can shove your bets up your ass, cowboy,” Shams said.

“I hate fucking cowboys,” Crazy Giant said.

El Señor turned to Droopy Eye. “He’s all yours. Do as you please.”

Droopy Eye slipped out of his coat and gun strap holster and began to unbutton his shirt. Crazy Giant removed his headdress and placed it on the bar. I left backstage and ran down the hall.

“Crazy Giant,” I said, “don’t fight him. I’m begging you.”

“It’s time, Chief,” he said, stretching his arms.

“Bandar,” I said, “stop this from happening.”

“There’s nothing I can do, Ammoura,” she said. Resignation and Bandar didn’t mix, but here she was, powerless in her own house. She brought her palms together and kissed the cross on her rosary. “May God grant us victory.”

Droopy Eye had stripped down to his waist. He was in brown slacks and patent leather shoes. His chest was massive, thick, pulsing veins coiled around his arms. Jesus in black ink throbbed over his heart.

The men were all standing. I handed Crazy Giant a glass of water.

“Thanks, Chief,” he said. His hand trembled as he drank it down, the water spilling.

“Don’t forget to use your left hook,” I said.

“That’s right. A left hook to the jaw.”

“I love you, Crazy Giant.”

Crazy Giant nodded. “Me, too, Chief.”

The fighters faced each other on the stage, under the spotlights. I joined the girls next to Shams by the controls. We held hands. Droopy Eye got down on his knee and crossed himself.

“First one to knock the other out unconscious wins,” El Señor said. He sat down in a middle row. “Don’t want to get Crazy Giant’s blood on my suit,” he explained.

The fighters shuffled in a circle, their fists raised. Their heavy steps sent the stage creaking like an ancient ship on stormy waters. Crazy Giant planted his right foot forward, his left fist cocked back. One moment his back was turned to us, and the next we saw the broad shoulders of Droopy Eye. The stage seemed much smaller with the giants prowling around. Droopy Eye feinted a double-leg takedown. Crazy Giant sprawled immediately, despite the noticeable distance between them. He sprang back up and swung air with an overhand right.

“He’s scared,” El Señor said.

Droopy Eye jabbed and feigned another takedown. Again, Crazy Giant sprawled. When he got up Droopy Eye charged him and got into a clinch, pulling him in and locking his hands over his back. Crazy Giant stuck out his butt and slipped in a whizzer. Droopy Eye kned him in the ribs. We screamed. Zeina and Hind covered their eyes. Still in the clinch, Droopy Eye continued to knee Crazy Giant, producing a menacing sound of fleshy thuds. Crazy Giant stuck in double underhooks and kned Droopy Eye in his ribs. We cheered.

“There you go!” Bahaa said.

The giants swayed chest to chest, knees flying into ribs. They were slippery with sweat. Crazy Giant charged forward, only to be shifted to the side. Droopy Eye mounted a charge of his own, tripping Crazy Giant's heel. The giants fell like the crashing of a tree with Droopy Eye on top. The stage floor let out a groan.

“Shit!” Shams said.

Crazy Giant clenched onto Droopy Eye's chest to prevent him from throwing any punches. Droopy Eye pulled back on Crazy Giant's hair, loosening the latter's grip. In that separation Droopy Eye elbowed Crazy Giant, opening up a cut above his eye. Crazy Giant covered his face and Droopy Eye went on a vicious rampage, throwing right and left elbows.

“Stop!” we screamed. “Stop the fight!”

Droopy Eye's elbows were red with blood. He maneuvered into a full mount, his legs pinned on either side of Crazy Giant's waist, and began to swing away with all his might. Some punches missed and landed into the wooden floor. A tooth arced into the air in a spray of blood. Crazy Giant was getting beaten to death right before our eyes, and it didn't look as if anyone was willing to get in the way of Droopy Eye's swinging fists to stop the fight. Unless I threw myself between the giants. Unless I could—

## Intermission

The red light goes out in Murrone's room.

"What lousy timing!" Murrone says. The electricity has been cut. "The generator is out. I have candles."

I walk to her dresser and flick my lighter. She rifles through a drawer and finds a candle. She fits it into the candlestick and I light the wick, the flame reflected in the dresser mirror. The calls to the night prayer flood the room, the muezzins' voices echoing over the city, the prayers begun seconds apart from each other, such that the sky is filled with an uneven chorus of men singing out to God.

Murrone sits on the bed, propping a pillow against the headboard and leans back. I sit on the edge of the bed, watching the flame burn. The calls to prayer come to an end, one voice after the other. Moonlight filters through the window, casting my chair in a pearly glow.

Murrone's features are dimmed in the flickering light. I suggest we continue my story tomorrow night.

"You can't do that to me! Not at this point. You have to finish your story. All of it. Tonight."

If I finish my story and come back some other night, will she still care to listen to me?

"Please tell me you saved Crazy Giant," she says.

Crazy Giant turned over on his chest, flashing us his bloody face. It didn't seem like a good move because Droopy Eye slipped in a rear naked choke. Crazy Giant pressed his chin to his chest to protect his throat. But it looked as if Droopy Eye was about to break his jaw. With eyes shut, Crazy Giant lifted Droopy Eye's curled arm over his face, skin sliding over blood, and somehow managed to get on his knees and quickly turn into Droopy Eye, grabbing a leg. Droopy Eye sprawled, applying his weight onto Crazy Giant. Crazy Giant fell flat, only to slip out to stand back up on his feet. We clapped. Diala whistled between her fingers.

I held tightly onto Zeina's clammy palm. Her free hand covered her eyes; she was peeking between fingers.

The giants circled each other again, gasping, their fists lowered. Droopy Eye went in for a double-leg. When he didn't get it at first—Crazy Giant had sprawled hard—he switched to a single leg and lifted Crazy Giant's ankle. Crazy Giant hopped on his other foot as Droopy Eye tried to trip him with a kick to the back of his calf. Crazy Giant caught Droopy Eye with a quick back fist to the nose. Droopy Eye loosened his hold on Crazy Giant's ankle and Crazy Giant kicked his foot free. Droopy Eye flicked his bloody nose. And then it happened in a blink, without warning. But time slowed down in that blink, time suspended in memory, freezing the particles of sweat in the air. They were standing in center stage. Droopy Eye's back was turned to the audience. Crazy Giant threw a jab, which Droopy Eye reacted to by pulling back his head. As soon as he knelt in, his hands down by his waist, Crazy Giant had already launched a left hook. The punch was exquisite in its technique, a stealthy synchrony of Crazy Giant pivoting his feet, torquing his torso ever so slightly, cranking back his clenched fist at an angle, and

letting it spring loose with all his might, his elbow extending, muscles rippling. The hook crashed into Droopy Eye's jaw—a loud, popping sound—sending him flying into the audience. He landed on the men in the front rows, his limbs splayed. When he didn't get up, we realized he was unconscious. The room went wild, all of us cheering as El Señor's men tried to revive Droopy Eye. We ran on to the stage, where Crazy Giant stood under the lights gleaming with sweat, and hugged him.

“You did it!” I said. “You beat Droopy Eye!”

He was still trying to catch his breath, the blood coming down his swollen, pink face.

“I think I broke my hand,” he said, wincing. He was also missing front teeth.

Droopy Eye finally sat up, looking dazed. El Señor's men helped him to his feet, and holding onto him, his arms draped over their shoulders, led him outside. El Señor stubbed his cigar on the floor and walked up to the stage.

“Good fight, Indian,” he said. “I'll see you soon.”

Once the ringing of his spurs was gone, Bahaa said, “Three cheers for Crazy Giant!”

The men cheered.

“This is a house for all religions!” Bahaa said. Inspired, he stood on a chair and asked the men to repeat after him. “Muslims, Christians, and Druzes, we unite!”

We repeated his words, pumping our fists, including Bandar.

“And atheists,” Shams cried. “Don't forget about atheists.”

We were too invigorated by Crazy Giant's stunning victory to register the implicit threat in El Señor's parting words. He wasn't called a torturer for nothing.



## A Full House

For the next several days, his front teeth missing, all Crazy Giant talked about was his historic victory over Droopy Eye, feeding me boxing and wrestling terminology for hours. He spoke of his devastating left hook at the bar with clients, in the Shooting Star with Baba, over coffee with Elvis, and with the girls at Aunt Roula's, where he went to satiate himself. News of his knockout win travelled down Mutanabi Street and spread its feverish heat into the city. Newcomers visited Bandar's to see the great fighter for themselves.

"I hear an Indian lives here," one man said. "They call him the Nutcracker; he cracks skulls between his hands."

"It's said the Indian fought off an entire militia of Kataib men," another mentioned. "The militia had him cornered in an alleyway, but instead of surrendering, the Indian snapped their necks and—and then he scalped them!"

"We could use Crazy Giant in our war against Israel," a member of the communist party said. "Then our enemy would think Native Americans had joined our fight."

Some said Crazy Giant destroyed El Señor's bodyguard without a scratch to his face. Of course this wasn't true. After the fight we took Crazy Giant to the emergency room, where he received twelve stitches above his eyebrow and two in his upper lip, and had his left hand put in a cast. His face was still swollen and purple and he had three

cracked ribs, not to mention a sore jaw. He didn't want clients to see his pulpy face, and so during work hours, he wore his bear head.

To be served drinks from an Indian boxing-bear was an opportunity only possible at Bandar's. Men hoped another fight was in the making, and were ready to bet their wages on Crazy Giant. Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love *and* Boxing. Our nights were packed.

Upon returning home one night, ever watchful for Volkswagen vans, I found Mama in the kitchen preparing food for tomorrow. She was in a black dress. Baba was in the parlor watching TV.

Mama looked frail. She had lost weight over these past months. Her cheeks were deflated; her belly had shrunk. She was on a diet of depression.

I was too sad to say anything.

The next morning, Mama was wearing the same black dress.

"Why are you dressed in black?" I asked.

"Lamya's husband passed away," she said. "God rest him."

I was shocked. "He looked fine when I saw him."

"He died of a heart attack."

"Poor Lamya."

"As if you care."

Her words stung me. To prove a point, I put on a black shirt and slacks, wore my coat, and headed to Lamya's to pay my respects.

\*

On New Year's Eve, Baba telephoned Bandar's to tell me to come over to the store. I had been chatting with the girls in the parlor. They were excited about the big night, which would commence at ten. A play would not be staged. As much as Bandar valued the theatre, she decided to try something different. She had hired local performers to complement her own. One was Chawki Choueiri, a singer famous in the cabarets for his covers of popular Arabic songs. Following Chawki, two Armenian brothers, Vahan and Zaven Kassabian, a lute and drum duo, would take the stage.

Bandar had ordered finger food for the men—spinach and thyme pastries, meat and cheese pies, and miniature pizzas—and stocked the bar with beer and liquor and several boxes of Cuban cigars. She bought party favors, too: cone-shaped paper hats and party blowouts.

I told the girls I'd be back, and went over to the Shooting Star.

"Your mother hasn't been taking her pills," Baba told me. "Now her cholesterol and blood pressure will go up."

"How do you know she's not taking her pills?"

"I know your mother, and this is something she'd do. A week ago, I emptied all the pills from one of her bottles and counted every one. I recounted them last night. Same number."

I took a taxi home and confronted Mama about the pills.

"You're hurting yourself!" I said.

"Don't you dare yell at me."

"Please, Mama. Take your pills."

"You can't tell me what to do."

“Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“Maybe you and your father would prefer me not around.”

“How can you say that?”

She grunted, and went to the foyer and put on her coat.

“Where are you going?”

“To visit Lamya. Her husband is dead, remember?”

I waited with her by the elevator.

The elevator came. She opened the door and stepped in. I watched her through the narrow window of the door as she descended into the dark shaft. Not once did she look up.

I returned to Bandar’s. Zeina sat in a chair on the stage, playing chords on her lute.

“You look worried,” she said.

“The thing is—” I choked back my tears.

She set her lute aside and climbed down from the stage and held my hands.

“What’s wrong, Ammoura?”

When I didn’t respond, she led me into the parlor and sat me down. Soon, the rest of the household gathered around me.

“It’s my fault,” I said. “I’ve done this to Mama.”

“She’s putting a guilt trip on you,” Bandar said. “My mother did the same thing to me when I told her I wanted to be an actress. She refused to eat, thinking I’d cave in. It was her fault if she wanted to starve herself to death.”

“Show her your love,” Nisreen said. “That’s all you can do.”

“Tell her we’re your friends,” Zeina said.

“I have, but she doesn’t believe me.”

“She’s a nice lady,” Crazy Giant said. “Unlike my mother.”

“My mother was a witch,” Farah said.

“My mother was beautiful,” Hind said. “But she abandoned me.”

“Enough about mothers,” Diala said. “It’s New Year’s Eve,” she told me. “Have fun tonight—get drunk, maybe even get laid.”

“You need a drink,” Crazy Giant said. He went to the bar and returned with a rum and Pepsi. I took the glass and sipped it.

“Finish it,” Diala said.

I gulped it down.

“Très bien. Feel better?”

“Yes,” I said, wiping soda from my chin.

“Are you ready to party?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes!”

“That’s my boy.”

After dinner, I hung out in Zeina’s room as she prepared herself for the night.

Around nine o’clock—

A blast erupts, rattling the window. Murrone screams. Seated next to her on the bed, I reach for her hand. Another blast goes off, and this time I cry out. Murrone curls up against me and I wrap my arms around her. Rain lashes the windowpanes.

“It’s only thunder,” I say.

Murrone is shivering. I stroke her face.

“If war is coming,” she says, “I just wish it would start so we can get it over and done with.”

I lean back against the headboard with Murrone in my arms.

She tilts her face toward me. “At least we have your story to get us through the night. Go on, Ammoura.”

I headed downstairs to the bar. Crazy Giant poured two tequila shots. “Cheers,” he said. We clicked our glasses and threw down our shots. Crazy Giant poured his drink down his bear jaws.

“I’m worried about my mother,” I told him, still squinting from the shot.

“She’ll be fine,” he said.

“Baba’s staying with her.”

“See, she has company.”

“She can’t stand Baba.”

Crazy Giant poured two more shots. “Think happy thoughts.”

“It’s good to see you drinking,” Bahaa told me.

“I’m getting shitfaced tonight,” Charbel said.

Crazy Giant made me another rum and Pepsi. He was surprisingly agile with one hand. When Ralph Najjar stood at the bar to order a glass of red wine, Bahaa asked him if he was dying tonight. Ralph looked at Bahaa with disdain.

“Screw you,” Bahaa said. “I hope you do die tonight.”

Samer Saab ordered a shot of vodka and an Almaza. He raised his glass at me. I raised mine.

“Cheers,” I said, feeling giddy.

I looked around the smoky theatre room, which was getting warmer, offering a cozy refuge from the cold. I spotted the Fro Club and a handful of AUB students. Fuck them.

Shams came up to me and ordered her whiskey.

“Are you drunk?” she asked. “Your face is all red.”

“I’m having a good time. Are you ready for the new year?”

“It’s going to be another shit year.”

I ordered another shot and followed Shams backstage. Meanwhile, Bandar distributed party favors to the men.

At ten o’clock, Chawki Choueiri strode onto the stage and stood behind the curtains. His silk shirt was half-open. A gold necklace shone between his furry, black curls.

“Start the show,” he said. “They’re waiting for me. They *need* me.”

“Are you sure, habibi?” Shams said. “They’re a roomful of men.”

“Open the curtains!”

Shams announced Chawki Choueiri and opened the curtains. He stood under the lights and sang a romantic ballad by Fareed Al-Atrash with his eyes closed and a hand extended to the audience. He had a strong tenor voice that was at times whiney. Zeina joined him on her lute for a few songs and sang a duet with him. At ten thirty, he thanked the men and took his leave.

Fifteen minutes later, Shams announced the Armenian brothers, Vahan and Zaven Kassabian, to the stage. The brothers wore white skullcaps and had long, bushy beards. Vahan was tall and lanky and played the lute. Zaven, short and round, played the derbake. The brothers sang fast-tempo songs that roused the men. The men, some clad in cone-shaped hats, pushed the chairs aside, locked hands in a wide circle, and danced the dabke, stomping their feet. In the next song, as the men caught their breath and wiped their sweaty faces and downed their drinks, Diala belly danced onto the stage.

The singing and dancing went on until a quarter to midnight. All the girls stood on stage. The men began tooting their party blowouts at one another. Shams turned on the radio, which Bandar had plugged in backstage, to listen to the official countdown. When a minute remained in the year, Shams told the men over the microphone to get ready.

“Omar,” Zeina yelled from the stage. “Come out here.”

I joined the girls under the lights, before a sea of raucous men. Zeina held my hand.

Shams began the countdown, enunciating each number at the top of her smoke-filled lungs. The men joined her, as did everyone else on stage. As we yelled out the numbers, I looked across the theatre room cast in smoky red light. Crazy Giant was pumping his fist, a party blowout stuck in the jaws of his bear head. Bandar and Hassan



stood in the corner next to the Christmas tree, Bandar's clipboard in hand. The Fro Club and the students and the elderly and all the rest of the men were on their feet, their faces red and sweaty and joyful. The room was packed from wall to wall; it was a full house, which Bandar hadn't had in years.

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

"Happy New Year!"

Zeina pulled down on my shirt and kissed me hard on the mouth. "I love you," she said.

"I love you, too!"

The men were embracing one another. Many came up to the stage to kiss the girls, who stepped back, averting their faces.

When the ruckus was over, the men crowded around Bandar.

"One at a time," she cried.

The girls left the stage and went upstairs to their rooms. I returned to the bar and kissed Crazy Giant on his bear head. We had more shots. I didn't remember anything after that. I ended up in the parlor, where I passed out on the couch.

I woke up with a splitting headache, and a burning urge to pee. I stumbled to the bathroom and relieved myself. The house was completely silent. I entered the theatre room and nearly vomited at the stench. Chairs were overturned and cigarette butts and party favors lay everywhere on the floor. I kicked an empty Almaza bottle, opened the

front door, and stepped out into the blinding light, which hurt my eyes. I walked to the top of the street and turned into Martyrs' Square and hailed down a taxi.

At home, I vomited in the bathroom. I felt better, but my head was still pounding. I drank water and closed the blinds in my room and lay on my bed. Moments later, Mama entered. She was still dressed in black.

“Why didn't you come home last night?”

“I was at a party. Happy New Year's, Mama.”

“There's nothing to be happy about.” She turned to leave, but something malicious came over her. She clenched her jaw. “You've turned into your father!”

“Please don't yell, Mama. I don't feel good.”

“I'm the one who doesn't feel good. You're killing me,” she said. “You know that? You're killing me.”

I sat up in bed. My head spun. “Don't say that.”

Baba came into the room. “What's going on?”

Mama looked at him with a lifetime of spite.

“It's your fault,” she said. “You've corrupted our son.”

“I don't want to hear this, Salma.”

“Then don't ask.”

In the afternoon I returned to Bandar's. But first, I had a cup of coffee at Elvis' to wake me up. It was New Year's Day and he was working. All the stores on Mutanabi Street were closed. He made my coffee with his eyes trained on the rooftop of a building

across the street. I followed his gaze. A sniper in a black ski mask sat in a wooden chair, a Kalashnikov in his hands.

“He’s been there since the morning,” Elvis explained, adding sugar into the kettle. “El Señor is sending us a message for the new year.”

The sniper waved at me.

“Shit,” I said, looking away.

Elvis patted the bottom drawer of his cart. “If the time calls for it, I’ll shoot down the son of a bitch.”

“Have you seen El Señor’s Mercedes pass by?”

“No. But he has eyes everywhere.” Elvis looked up at the sniper, who blew him a kiss. “Cocky motherfucker,” Elvis whispered.

“What do you want from us?” I asked the sniper.

“Shh,” Elvis said. “Don’t attract attention.”

The sniper lit a cigarette.

“He doesn’t speak,” Elvis said. “A cocky mute with a gun.”

I finished my coffee and continued down the street. I turned back to look at the sniper once more. His gun was pointed at me. I was too frightened to move. A pull of the trigger and I’d drop dead, my blood splattered on the street. I turned around, and trying my best not to run, my scalp tingling, I walked on.

At Bandar’s, Zeina asked me if I had had fun at the New Year’s party.

“I had a great time,” I said, and remembered the kiss she had given me.

“Diala’s been bit by the love bug,” Laila told me.

“Oh don’t bring that up again,” Farah said. “We’ve already heard the story.”

“You’re just jealous, Farah,” Diala said.

“Diala’s in love with Naji Haddad,” Laila told me.

“Who’s Naji Haddad?” I asked, attempting nonchalance.

“He was at the New Year’s party,” Diala said. “He was wearing a kafieh. He’s *gorgeous*. As handsome as the Marlboro Man.”

“She isn’t exaggerating,” Laila said.

“We only had an hour together,” Diala said. “But he promised to return.”

Naji Haddad was Palestinian, Diala said, and lived in the Shatila refugee camp. He was a fighter for Yasser Arafat’s Fatah, and had fought in many skirmishes against the Israelis in the south.

“He’s a warrior,” Diala said.

“I’m a warrior,” Crazy Giant said.

“I don’t know what you are, Crazy Giant.”

She continued on about Naji, which broke my heart. How could she fall for a stranger in only an hour?

“He has a boyish smile,” she said, “and a cute little chuckle. His eyes are as blue as the sea. And his smell! Mon dieu, he smells like—”

“There’s a sniper on the street,” I said.

“What sniper?” Diala asked.

The following weekend, I saw Naji for myself. To my dismay, Diala was right: The man was gorgeous. He looked like a movie star, not a fighter, with his blue eyes and

soft, black hair. He was tall and slim, and smelled of hashish. He wore a tan leather jacket and bellbottom jeans.

“We’re going to liberate Palestine,” he told me, and digressed about the political situation in the country. “The political parties are arming themselves every day,” he said, making me increasingly nervous about war breaking out. “The Christians want us, the Palestinians, out of Lebanon, but that’s not going to happen.” He pulled out his silver beaded necklace, from which hung a key. “This is the key to my family house in Bethlehem. I plan to use it again. Soon.”

Naji’s influence on Diala became apparent in the conversations she had with us.

“I’m willing to die for the cause,” she said.

“Which cause?” Farah asked.

“Which one do you think?”

When Naji wasn’t fighting, he visited Bandar’s. He came around seven or eight and stayed until the early hours.

“*Kidnapped Love* isn’t so bad,” he once told me.

During the running of the next play, another thriller called *Death in Beirut*, I arrived at the theatre house to find the girls uncharacteristically quiet. Diala and Laila were upstairs.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked Zeina.

“They’re leaving us,” she said.

“Who’s leaving?”

“The sisters. They’ll be gone as soon as *Death in Beirut* comes to an end. Naji asked Diala to be his mistress, and she accepted. Naturally, Laila’s following her.”

I ran upstairs to Diala's room. She lay on the bed. Laila was rubbing Bengay onto her feet.

"Are you leaving us?" I asked, panting.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with Naji," Diala said.

"As his *mistress*?"

"It's not like he'd marry a whore. The best I can be is his mistress."

"I thought you said one can't find true love on Mutanabi Street."

"This isn't exactly love, Ammoura. It's a golden opportunity."

"But what about the theatre?" What about me?

"The show's over," Diala said. "It's been over for a long time."

"Come and sit down," Laila said.

I sat on the bed. I felt like the world was turning against me, despite the theatre's success.

"Let him massage my feet," Diala told Laila.

I held Diala's waxy feet and massaged them, running my thumbs along their cracked and leathery soles pocked with calluses. The locket I bought her for Christmas hung from her ankle bracelet.

"Rub harder," Diala said.

I rubbed harder, wishing I was making love to her.

## Jasmine's Gift

We opened a new play called *The Abandonment* on a Friday night at the end of February. The play was about two sisters who leave home to pursue music careers. They become rich and famous, and in the process, forget about their loving family. Their mother needs medicine, but she can't afford to buy it and eventually dies. Unfortunately, her death wasn't romantic.

Diala and Laila thought the play was preposterous.

"We're not abandoning you or anyone else," Diala told Bandar. "And I can't believe you helped her write this shit," she told me.

Bandar ignored the sisters. Zeina and Farah chose a different route, knowing the theatre house couldn't survive without Diala. Farah spent her time trying to convince Diala that she would lose her independence if she followed Naji.

"Naji is progressive," Diala said. "He doesn't even mind my speaking French as long as I don't speak it in front of his comrades, or else they'll think I'm too Frenchy like their Christian enemies."

"You only know how to dance," Zeina said, taking over for Farah.

"It's time to reinvent myself."

"At least you don't have to leave, Laila," Farah said.

"I have to look after my sister."

"She's not a baby!"

When the conversation escalated into an argument, Nisreen intervened to calm things down.

“They’ve made their decision,” she told Farah and Zeina. “Diala has found love. We have to respect that.”

“Love my fat ass!” Farah said.

Since the start of the spring semester—I was repeating Accounting, which I had failed in the fall—I wasn’t able to spend as much time at Bandar’s. But I witnessed several arguments between the girls. Once, I was sitting quietly in the parlor when in the middle of a shouting match between Diala and Farah, I noticed Hind pulling on her hair.

“All you care about is yourself,” Farah screamed.

“Go eat a chicken,” Diala said.

“You obnoxious—”

“Girls!” I said.

“What’s your problem?”

“Something’s wrong with Hind.”

“Oh my God,” Nisreen said, and rushed over to her. Hind began rocking back and forth on her seat, breathing frantically. The girls crowded around her.

“Back off, everyone,” Nisreen said, and held onto Hind’s wrists.

“See what you did,” Farah told Diala.

Before Diala had the chance to respond, Laila dragged her out of the room. I stood there watching Hind. Her eyes were darting all over the place.

“Let go of your hair,” Nisreen said.

Hind’s eyes rolled to the back of her head and she fell to her side on the couch.



“Is she dead?” I screamed.

“Relax, Omar,” Nisreen said. “Someone get me a wet towel.”

Zeina hurried to the kitchen and returned with a towel dripping cold water.

Nisreen pressed the towel over Hind’s face. After a minute or two, Hind cracked her eyes open.

“What happened?” she said.

“You had a seizure, my dear.”

The shouting matches continued, though at a minimum whenever Hind was around. Crazy Giant kept out of the fights. He told me he couldn’t bear the negative energy in the house. His face was fully healed and his arm was out of the cast. He now had the habit of sliding his tongue across the roots of his missing front teeth.

“Bandar thinks they’ll only be gone for a week or two,” he said. “They’ll realize how good they had it here.”

When I didn’t find Diala at Bandar’s one afternoon, Laila told me Naji had taken her for a drive.

“Don’t look so sad,” she said.

Despite the troubles at Bandar’s, the girls performed as usual. Now, Diala only danced. Naji wouldn’t accept it any other way.

On Thursday, the sisters’ last day, I skipped my classes and headed over to Bandar’s in the morning, the real morning. I sipped my first cup of coffee at Elvis’ stall. We looked up at the sniper. He yawned.

“Let’s give him some coffee,” I said.

“We don’t serve the enemy,” Elvis said.

“It’s good to know our enemy in order to defeat him.” I was surprised at how much I sounded like Jidu.

“Hm. Good thinking.” Elvis cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled out to the sniper if he’d like a cup of coffee. He nodded.

Elvis made the coffee. “There’s only one way to drink it,” he told the sniper. “You’ll have to come down.”

The sniper disappeared from his perch, and moments later, came out of the front door of the building with the Kalashnikov slung across his back. He was a small man in army boots too big for his feet—he nearly tripped over himself. He wore a leather bomber jacket over green fatigues. Elvis gave him his coffee.

“What’s your name?” Elvis asked.

The sniper sipped from his cup.

“Don’t you speak?” Elvis said.

The sniper nodded.

“My name’s Elvis and this here is Omar.”

The sniper gave me the thumbs up.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“Truck Turner,” he said.

Elvis laughed. “What kind of name is that?”

“That’s the title of an action film,” I said. “It was playing at the Rivoli.”

“What’s the film about?” Elvis asked.

“I never saw it.”

“It’th about a bounty hunter,” the sniper said. He wanted to continue speaking, but stopped.

“About a what?” Elvis said.

“A bounty hunter,” the sniper repeated. “A very brave black man.”

“I love black women. Do you?”

“I like Truck Turner. He’th a throng man.”

“What kind of man?”

Truck Turner finished his coffee and returned the cup to Elvis. He walked back to the building and up the stairs.

“Now we know our enemy,” Elvis said. “A kid with a lisp.”

The girls were still sleeping. Only Hassan was awake. We sat together in the parlor, drinking Nescafé.

“I don’t sleep much,” he said. He had nothing more to say. I figured he spoke better through his hands, the way he built Bandar’s stage sets. I wondered, too, if he and Bandar had something going on between them. The frantic way that Bandar had rushed to his aid both times he was abused by El Señor and his men suggested more than a matron simply concerned about her own. Could they possibly be clandestine lovers? I couldn’t imagine Bandar in love, no matter her obsession with the theme. She seemed solely devoted to her craft, and didn’t have space in her heart for much else.

“I love your theatre work,” I said.

Hassan sipped his cup, slurping the coffee. He wiped his mouth and looked at me. “I don’t know the difference between a good play and a bad one, but whatever Bandar’s

been staging for all these years—it gives me life. I never knew I was creative until Bandar put me to work.”

“Do you think Bandar will close down the theatre house?”

“I try not to think about the inevitable. It’s easier that way. Because if I do, I’ll know that my time has come to an end. I can’t survive without this place.”

“Me neither.”

“You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. I don’t.”

“This is the only life I want.”

The girls started to appear one after the other. Farah made kishk for breakfast; we all ate together at the dining room table. No one was in the mood to talk. Following breakfast, Diala and Laila returned to their rooms to pack.

“Let’s walk down to the port,” Zeina told me.

“I’d rather stay here.”

“Oh come on.”

“I don’t want to go, Zeina.”

“Get over her,” she snapped.

I felt more anxious. I walked upstairs to Diala’s room and sat on the bed next to Hind and Crazy Giant. Nisreen and Laila were helping Diala pack.

“I still remember our first night here,” Diala said. “We were so nervous.”

“We were virgins,” Laila said.

“I didn’t think you two would last this long,” Nisreen said.

“You comforted us,” Laila told Nisreen.

Diala looked up at her poster of Tahia Carioca. “I thought I’d be the most famous dancer in the Middle East.”

“You’re the most famous dancer on Mutanabi Street,” Nisreen said.

“That’s not saying much.”

“We’ve seen Tahia’s films,” Crazy Giant said. “She can’t dance nearly as well as you.”

“Nowhere close,” I said.

“Merci, mes amis.”

In the evening, I sat at the bar and waited for the clients to arrive. Baba had already said goodbye to the sisters. Before heading home, he told me to protect my heart.

Naji sat next to me. He was the last person I wanted to see. His movie star looks sickened me. I wondered if he felt the least bit jealous of all the men Diala had slept with.

“You better take care of Diala,” Crazy Giant told Naji.

“She’s in safe hands,” Naji said.

I wanted to break his hands.

During Diala’s act, I watched her from backstage. She shook her hips to Laila’s drumbeats, following the same routine we were all accustomed to. I took note of her movements, as if I were seeing her dance for the first time. Her bangles jingled as they slipped down her forearms. As I closed the curtains, I kept my eyes on her, sparkling under the lights.

Following the play, I returned to the bar and ordered a rum and Pepsi.

Naji bid his farewell, and said he’d be back in the morning. I gulped down my drink, burped, and asked Crazy Giant for a shot of vodka. He poured two.

“To Indians!” he said.

I slapped the glass on the counter. “Another one.”

“To Crazy Horse!” Crazy Giant said. “And his pal Sitting Bull.”

I knocked back the second shot and left the bar. I walked up the squeaky wooden staircase and parted the curtains of Diala’s room. She sat on the bed in a chemise, rubbing Bengay on her feet.

“Let me help you,” I said.

“My feet are all yours.”

I stretched her feet onto my lap and massaged her soles, my fingers spreading the Bengay.

“Mm,” she said.

I rubbed her heels and ankles and went up her calves.

“Oh, mon chéri, that feels nice.”

I scooped up more Bengay from the tin can and spread the ointment over her muscular thighs, feeling her tendons loosen. I kissed her waxy knees.

“Merde,” she said. “I’m with someone, kid.”

“Please,” I said. “I’ll pay whatever you want.”

Diala sat up. “Is that how you see me?”

“Of course not. I love you, Diala.”

She reached for a bottle of brandy at the side of the bed and took a swig. I told her to pass over the bottle and took a long swig myself, wiping my mouth. She looked at the curtains hanging from the entrance.

“Merde,” she said. I passed her the bottle. She sipped and squinted. “It’s my last night.”

“I won’t ever see you again.”

To this day, I’m not quite sure why Diala let me sleep with her. She wasn’t one for sentimentality, and she certainly didn’t owe me any favors. I had helped bring the theatre back to life, but *she* was the one who had kept it afloat for all these years. *We* owed her. I’d like to think that she had feelings for me, not romantic feelings but feelings nonetheless, an appreciation for me such that I wasn’t considered a client, an insignificant number in the countless men she had serviced. I was of greater value. Or maybe Diala simply wanted to consummate my multi-year obsession with her, to leave me with the memory of our only night together so that I’d never forget her.

She removed her chemise and slung it across the dresser chair. She was naked, save for the keys hanging from her neck. I placed my clothes and underwear on the seat of the chair.

I held her arm and planted kisses on her shoulder down to her fingers, spotting a tiny freckle on the edge of her palm. I sucked on her toes and licked her leathery sole and ran my tongue across her arch, my mouth burning with Bengay. She remained impassive. I worked my way up her calf and thigh and buried my face between her legs. I licked the pink folds of her vagina and dug my tongue inside. I licked the thin love trail leading up to her bellybutton and brushed my tongue across her potbelly and sucked her breasts. I licked her keys. I kissed her smoky lips. She pushed me back and reached for a condom from beneath her pillow and opened the wrapper. I slipped it on. She turned and got on top of me, her keys clanging, and guided me in. Her frizzy locks swung to her

movements as she looked at some spot on the wall. I lay there in awe of her, engulfed in her spicy scent. Noises blossomed: the squeaking of the bed, her breasts slapping against her body, my own deep gasps. When I clenched the bed sheet, she quickened her pace, and when I moaned, she placed her hands on either side of my head and looked down at me. Her hair fell into my face.

She slipped me out and removed my condom and wiped the dripping head of my penis with a tissue. As I lay on the bed, she stood by the French doors, looking out onto an alleyway, smoking a cigarette.

“I should have left this place a long time ago,” she said, standing beautifully naked in the red light. “I’ve wasted my better years.”

“You’re still young.”

“This place has made me old.”

“Will you still dance?”

“Naji has talked about me working for Fatah. I’m willing to give up the stage if I don’t have to sleep with any more clients.”

“Naji doesn’t deserve you,” I said.

“It’s the other way around.”

“You’re the strongest person I know.”

“That’s your problem, Omar,” she said. “You’ve done the worst thing imaginable and romanticized us. Here’s the shitty truth: We’re all miserable on Mutanabi Street; we’re all dying slowly. I bet you think Nisreen is caring and understanding. But no, she’s horribly manipulative. She’s got poor Hind wrapped around her pinky. Hind’s practically her slave. She washes and irons her clothes, combs her hair, cuts her nails, brings food up



to her room. Nisreen is a great actress, maybe the finest that ever lived, because she's done a great job fooling you and your father all this time. You see—forget it.”

“Tell me.”

“I promised Laila I'd never tell anyone.”

“What is it? You can trust me.”

Diala returned to bed and took another swig of brandy. “Promise me something. You'll keep this to yourself. If you dare tell your father, I'll come back here and rip your tongue out. I'm serious. Because this secret would only break his heart.”

“You don't have to threaten me. I can keep a secret.”

She looked me straight in the eyes. “Nisreen's story is nothing but a lie.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, sitting up.

“Growing up in Mount Lebanon, falling in love with Milhem, the purple figs they ate under the willow tree, him getting shot by her father—she made it all up.”

“I knew it!” Murrone says. “See, Ammoura, I was right.”

I'm too wrapped up in my story to respond to Murrone, and continue on, despite the pleading look on her face, beseeching me to commend her.

“There was always something about her that I never trusted,” Diala said. “I tried to find her village, Ozlah, on an official map. Didn't find anything.”

“Maybe it's too small to be listed.”

“I checked with the municipality. The village doesn't exist.”

“Maybe she didn't want to give you its real name so as to protect herself.”

“Protect herself from what? Don’t fool yourself.”

“Why would she make it all up? What does she have to gain from it?”

“She’s a performer, Ammoura,” Diala said. “You can’t trust performers. Her story turned her into a sympathetic character, made listeners want to feel sorry for her. She’s been telling this same lie for so long that I wouldn’t be surprised if she really believes it to be true.”

“So Milhem doesn’t exist?”

“Fuck no, and neither does his reincarnation. She’s been waiting twenty-eight years for nobody. You know that lock of hair Nisreen keeps in her cedar wood box? It’s a prop, and a pretty convincing one, too.”

“Why didn’t you ever say something earlier?”

“Only once did I confront Nisreen about it. You should have seen her face when I said her past was a lie. She turned pale as death. When she tried to defend herself, I told her not to waste her breath. She needed her lie to come to terms with her life here at Bandar’s. I understood that. I told her as long as she didn’t make my life difficult, she could believe in whatever she wanted to believe and I’d let her be.”

I knocked back the brandy, but the alcohol failed to relieve me. How well did I really understand the girls? And how did Baba never pick up on the fabrication of Nisreen’s story? He had spent most of his life believing it to be true.

“So what’s Nisreen’s true story?” I asked Diala.

“I have no idea, and I couldn’t care less.”

We lay together in silence. Diala lit us cigarettes and stared at the poster of Tahia Carioca. Every now and then I stole a glance at her naked body. We fell into a deep, delicious slumber. I woke up in her arms, my face pressed between her breasts.

“Let’s get something to eat,” she said, her breath sour.

We got dressed. Diala pulled off the bed sheet and stuffed it into a laundry basket in her closet.

We walked downstairs to the kitchen. Crazy Giant and the rest of the girls stood around the counter, eating labneh.

“How are you feeling, Chief?!” Crazy Giant asked. “Appears you had a fun night.”

“Great,” I said. I avoided making eye contact with Nisreen, still incredulous at the secret Diala imparted to me. I had yet to process my night with Diala. I was tired and hungry and sad, but beneath it all, something indescribably electric was brewing within me.

I said hello to Zeina. She ignored me. I was too dazed to care. I tore a piece of bread and scooped up the labneh. Farah talked about the clients she had had for the night. Nisreen said she didn’t think the men would enjoy *The Abandonment*. Laila asked which one of them got the new guy with the crew cut.

“I did,” Hind said.

“How was he?”

“My favorite type: a preejaculator.”

After breakfast, the conversation turned to Diala and Laila.

“That was our last meal together,” Nisreen said.

“Let’s not get sentimental,” Diala said.

Diala and Laila returned upstairs and bathed. Naji arrived at dawn in a pickup truck. He helped Crazy Giant and me carry down the sisters’ suitcases. We all stood outside on the street. The sky was bright blue and sunny. A sea breeze blew a flat, red balloon down the street.

Farah broke into tears.

“Quit crying, beautiful,” Diala said.

“That’s the first compliment you’ve ever given me, Diala.”

“You know I love you. I love you all.”

When Diala hugged me goodbye, I whispered to her that I’d never forget our night. I didn’t care if Naji overheard me.

“It was my gift to you,” she said. “Au revoir, mon chéri.”

Before Diala and Laila got into the truck, Nisreen told us to look up at the house. Bandar was standing on her balcony in the sunshine.

“Thanks for everything, Bandar!” Diala said.

“We’ll miss you!” Laila said.

“Shut the fuck up!” the boar of a prostitute from A Thousand and One Nights said from her balcony. “We’re trying to sleep.”

I returned home and noticed Mama seated in the parlor. I went to my room without bothering to greet her and lay on my bed, smiling. I was picturing Diala’s tiny freckle on the edge of her palm when Baba came in, already dressed for work.

He narrowed his eyes. “I know that look. You slept with Diala.”

“It was the best night of my life.”

As tired as I was, I was too restless to sleep. I changed out of my clothes and went down to AUB, with the scent of Bengay still on my skin. On my way to Nicely Hall, I said good morning to a girl with big-framed glasses sitting on the steps down from the cafeteria. Her black hair was in a French braid. She was eating a mankoushi as she read from a book. She smiled at me. Thyme was in her teeth.

“Do I know you?” I asked. “You look familiar.”

She was tall and skinny. She wore a wool coat over bellbottom jeans and Converse sneakers.

“I don’t think so.”

“Youmna?” I said. “Youmna Yassine?”

She put down her mankoushi. “Yes. Who are you?”

“Omar Aladdine.”

“My God,” she said. “I didn’t recognize you. You look—you look so different. Like another person,” she said, blushing. “Are you a student here?”

I nodded. “Still writing poetry?”

She laughed. “I gave that up. Realized I wasn’t any good. I’m studying chemistry. What about you?”

“Business. But I’m a fulltime playwright at Madame Bandar’s Theatre of Love, which is on Mutanabi Street,” I said with pride. “I’m living my dream.”

“Um, Mutanabi Street is in the red-light district, no?”

“Sure is. You should come and see a performance.”

She nudged her glasses up the bridge of her nose. I wondered if her arms were still hairy, or if she had begun to wax them. The excitement was gone from her face.

“Got a cigarette?” I asked.

“I don’t smoke.”

“Shit. Well, see you around, Youmna.”

## The Last Room on the Left

Not a day passed without someone reminding me of Diala: a student's frizzy hair or plump breasts, her big, black eyes, her raspy voice. It was as if Diala was sharing her features with these women. Whenever they combed their fingers through their hair or covered their mouths when coughing, or lay their palms against their faces, I searched longingly for Diala's freckle. The tinkle of keys or the sound of French being spoken pulled at my heart. I feared she was lost to me forever, which made these remembrances all the more bittersweet.

Bandar's house was quiet without Diala. There was no one to curse aloud or answer back with a biting remark. Farah attempted to fill the silence by chit-chatting and offering wisecracks about the clients, but her efforts were forced, and her intention all too obvious.

Zeina gave me the silent treatment. But one day, she took me aside and said she didn't understand what I had seen in Diala.

"She wasn't a kind person," she said. "She didn't even love you. Was it her breasts that did it for you? Her legs? Is that the kind of man you are? Just after our bodies?"

"Leave me alone!" I said, not intending to sound so harsh. I went upstairs to Diala's room, which was bare. I lay on the bed and imagined her straddling me, her keys clinking. I saw her standing naked at the French doors, looking out onto the alleyway,

dreaming of a new life. I saw her sipping a cappuccino at Amélie's. I saw her belly dancing on stage, shaking her hips, stretching her shawl above her head.

"There you are," Crazy Giant said, and sat next to me.

I asked if he was in love with someone.

"I'm not sure, Chief," he said. "My favorite girl is Jihan—she works at Aunt Roula's. She also likes Indians. We like each other, but I also pay her. So."

"What about Bandar? Do you think she's in love with Hassan?"

"Hassan?! What makes you say that?"

I explained, mentioning Bandar's reactions to the times Hassan was struck in the face.

"I thought she was only worried about him," Crazy Giant said. "Bandar and Hassan? I can't see it, Chief. But if it's true, they've done a great job hiding it. Bandar goes to church every Sunday morning. Maybe she lights candles for them both."

"Bandar has spent years writing romantic plays. Why would she be afraid to show her love?"

"That's the great mystery about her." He turned to the curtains and looked back at me. "The girls think," he whispered, "that she may even be a virgin."

"A virgin?! How's that even possible?"

"Anything's possible with Bandar."

I had trouble sleeping that night. Thoughts of Diala kept me awake. She was probably in bed with Naji, which made me miserable. I turned on the light and sat at my desk. I opened the leather-bound journal Zeina had bought me for Christmas and started describing my heartbreak. I wrote and wrote, in a feverish, melancholic trance. As the



hours melted into the night and my anguish swelled, my prose turned into dialogue and the dialogue into a play about a young man in love with a dancer. I was well into the play when I finally dozed off.

Following my last class the next day, I sat at a desk in a forgotten corner of Jafet Library, eager to return to my writing and my blue mood, for the two were inextricably linked. It seemed that the only way to make sense of my melancholy was by putting words down on the page, and although a heaviness remained in my chest, it became more bearable, my mood somehow even intoxicating. I finished the play and typed it up at Bandar's and left the manuscript on her desk.

"The play's a bit rough," Bandar later told me. "It needs some tightening."

I was feeling drowsy from lack of sleep. "I wrote it in two days."

"It looks like it. Do you know what else I think?"

I shook my head, expecting the axe.

"I think you've broken down that secret door."

In an instant, my drowsiness was gone.

"This might be the one," she said.

"The ultimate romantic death scene?!"

She nodded. "There's only one way to find out. We'll stage it as soon as possible."

"What about *The Abandonment*?"

"We'll cancel it. It's a shit play."

My play was called *The Last Room on the Left*. It was the first semi-autobiographical piece I had ever written, which also paid tribute to Baba. The play

begins with a fifteen-year-old who has just lost his mother. His father owns a grocery store on Mutanabi Street. The father gives his son money for a night with a prostitute. The son visits Madame Bandar's Theatre of Love and pays for a girl whose room is down the hall, on the last room on the left. The boy ends up falling in love with her. The girl, Samya, is a few years older than him. She's a seductive belly dancer. Years later, Samya is diagnosed with terminal cancer. The boy, who is now a young man, takes care of her in her dying days. Following Samya's death, the young man visits other brothels in the hope of finding a girl who reminds him of Samya. He never finds one, and though he sleeps with hundreds of prostitutes over the years, he remains forever melancholy.

Before the start of the show on opening night, I peeked out at the audience. The room was half-full. Ever since Diala and Laila's departure, many men had stopped coming.

I was happy to see Baba in the front row. My play was as much for him as it was for me.

When Shams announced *The Last Room on the Left*, she said, "Tonight's play has been written by an up-and-coming playwright named Omar Aladdine, whom you already know."

The men whistled and clapped. Hearing my name being announced gave me goose bumps.

The play progressed smoothly. Zeina's performance as a young, grieving boy was convincing.

"This role isn't hard for me," Zeina had told me during one of the dress rehearsals. "I lost my father."

Hind was the young boy grown up, and Nisreen the dancer, Samya.

During the deathbed scene, neither Hind nor Nisreen spoke. I preferred silence. The audience was completely silent.

In the final scene, as the young man searches the brothels for a prostitute to heal his broken heart, I noticed Baba dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. And so were others, including Ralph Najjar.

“He never found love again,” Shams read from the script, “and would die a lonely man.”

There wasn't applause when I closed the curtains. I feared the men hated my play. I had failed. When I reopened the curtains, I was shocked to see them in tears. Bahaa was sobbing into Charbel's chest. Ralph Najjar had his head in his hands. Samer Saab was looking down at the floor.

“I'm as lonely as the poor young man,” an elderly man said, weeping.

“Get a hold of yourselves,” Shams announced.

The men looked at the actresses on stage and began to applaud. Their applause grew louder, and soon they were on their feet.

“We love you all so much!” Bahaa said in tears. I felt like crying for all who suffered.

On my way to the bar, the men congratulated me.

“Bravo,” Baba told me. His eyes were puffy. “Your play brought back a lot of memories.”

We sat together at the bar for a drink and smoke.

Before returning home with Baba, Bandar whispered in my ear that I had done the impossible: I had achieved the ultimate romantic death scene.

“You’ve become a soul doctor,” she said.

All I craved was to write another play, to feed off my heartbreak.

The next day, Bandar ushered me into her room.

“Once you graduate from AUB, what do you intend to do?”

“I just want to write for the theatre.”

“I’ve spent all these years trying to write the ultimate romantic death scene to no avail,” Bandar said. “You got it right after only a few attempts. I think my days as a playwright are over. You, on the other hand, are at the beginning of your career, and what a promising career it’s been so far. You saw the men’s reaction last night. You blew them away. Nisreen told me some of her clients wept in her arms.

“The girls shouldn’t be so worried about their futures. When I first arrived here, the house was in financial ruin. Omayma, my predecessor, came close to selling it. I convinced her not to, promising we’d revive the place through theatre, which we did. We nearly became as popular as Marica.

“This theatre house will survive and even prosper, but not through me. Through you.”

“Me?” I asked, stunned. “I wouldn’t know how to run this place.”

“That’s the easy part. I can teach you. The hard part is putting on plays that the men will enjoy, and I think you’re up for that. Follow me.”

I followed her up to the roof for the very first time. The view was spectacular: the Mediterranean and the snowcapped mountains to the north, the buildings of downtown, and Mutanabi Street and the surrounding neighborhood. I even spotted Truck Turner on the rooftop. We stood among pigeons pecking around for food.

“I come here to clear my head,” Bandar said.

I felt more confident than I had ever been. Forget the Shooting Star, the theatre house could be mine. Mutanabi Street would be mine. I’d put on plays the men would never forget. We’d be the talk of the town. The rich would return, money would flow. A renaissance is what we’d have.

“When you take over,” Bandar said, “promise me you’ll donate a small percentage of the monthly earnings to the church, the one up from Gemmayzeh Street. I’ve been giving them money since I first started out here.”

“I promise. But the priest doesn’t mind where the money is coming from?”

“Money is money.”

She held my arm with the tender grasp of a mother. “Imagine it,” she said, “Monsieur Omar’s Theatre of Love.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Soon this will all be yours.”

If Monsieur Omar’s Theatre of Love was ever to happen, Bandar had to find replacements for Diala and Laila. She still believed they’d return. I hoped they would.

“The same thing happened years ago when Omayma ran this place,” she told the girls. “The girls would leave and always return.”

Fewer clients turned up as the days passed. All the students were gone.

“Diala and Laila aren’t coming back,” Nisreen told Bandar.

“Be patient,” she said.

What if things hadn’t worked out between Diala and Naji? Then she’d certainly come back to Bandar’s, to me, and this time around, I’d convince her to stay because soon I’d be running the show.

And then one night Jawad from the port visited Bandar’s to say that he had finally encountered Don Juan. Don Juan and some other Fatah men were unloading boxed weapons from a Cypriot schooner. They got to talking.

“What does he look like?” I asked.

“He’s a handsome man. Tall. Blue eyes.”

I took a deep breath. “Black hair?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he give you his real name?” Crazy Giant asked.

“Naji Haddad.”

Crazy Giant waved Bandar over and whispered in her ear. Her face went blank.

“We need more weapons,” she told Jawad. “I want a pistol. A small one to keep on my person.”

“You got it, Madame. Tell me, has El Señor been back since Crazy Giant’s fight?”

“Not yet,” Bandar said. “But now he’ll certainly return.”

I looked at Crazy Giant. “You’ll have to fight Droopy Eye again.”

Crazy Giant rubbed his chin. “I’m not sure the next fight will be with our fists, Chief.”

I wondered if Diala had known Naji Haddad’s secret identity all along. Would she have risked her life and ours for a new start? My Palestinian muse was more considerate than that. After all, she had offered her bed to me.

That night, I looked over my shoulder as I walked up Mutanabi Street. At the top of the street, I spotted the orange glow of a cigarette on the rooftop across from where Elvis parked his stall.

“Truck Turner?” I called out.

The sniper flicked his cigarette on the street; it landed by my feet.

“Get lost, kid,” he said. His voice was deep and gravelly, and there was no lisp. He was the night shift.

A week later, Bandar, now armed with a pocket pistol she concealed somewhere beneath her long black dress, finally came to terms with our dire situation. It had been years since she scavenged the city for performers. She decided to canvas the cabarets around town, the small-scaled theatres, and the cheap restaurants where singers performed on Friday and Saturday nights. She conducted these searches at night, leaving Nisreen in charge of the house.

In all likelihood, Bandar’s search meant that Diala wasn’t coming back. To cope with this loss, I began writing more plays. Bandar had lent me her typewriter. I spent nights typing away in my room, fuelled by melancholia, which spread like a warm glow

through my body. No sooner would I be reminiscing about Diala than I had another scene on the page.

I now paid closer attention to Nisreen's behavior. As usual, she was kind to me. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. We were once lounging in the parlor when she asked Hind for a cup of tea. Hind obliged.

"Is your lower back still hurting you?" Hind asked her.

"It's tight. Maybe you can rub some oil on it."

I asked Baba if Diala had a point about Nisreen's abuse of Hind.

"That's nonsense," he said, frowning. "Nisreen has a heart of gold."

He was wearing a striped scarf. I refused to wear mine. I stared at him sitting behind the register, cleaning his teeth with a miswak. It pained me that he believed wholeheartedly in Nisreen's lie.

"Do you think Nisreen is a good actress?" I asked.

"I told you a long time ago: She's the most famous actor on Mutanabi Street."

"But do you think she's good?"

"She's the best. She moves me every time."

"Have you ever been to Ozlah, her village?"

He put his miswak down on the counter. "No. That's part of her past. Our story, Nisreen and mine, started at Bandar's when I was fifteen."

I was too worked up to sit down. How could Baba be so naïve?

"Doesn't her obsession with Milhem bother you?" I asked.

"Enough with your questions," Baba said. "What's your problem?"

"I just wonder if Nisreen is always telling the truth about things."



Baba got up from his chair and slapped my face. I was too shocked to respond, feeling my jaw tingle. He hadn't ever hit me before.

"I'm sorry," he said. He left the store and lit a cigarette out on the pavement. As I watched him smoke under the awning, I thought only one thing: I hated Nisreen for manipulating my father for all these years. She had taken advantage of a grief-stricken fifteen-year-old and never let up. Why, I had no clue.

\*

Bandar had women audition in front of the girls and Crazy Giant. I wasn't able to attend all of these auditions, but heard about the ones I missed from the girls. About a dozen women auditioned on stage. Some sang and others danced, and a few acted scenes from one of Bandar's scripts. Most were lousy. Bandar selected one potential actress named Ursula, and offered her Diala's room. Unfortunately, Ursula didn't make it through her first client. As soon as she saw Charbel the Sinner enter through the velvet curtains, his beard smelling of beer, she screamed. She left that night.

A dancer left after a week, figuring she could make more money at another brothel. Bandar kicked out a young woman who couldn't remember her lines. We all liked Jumana, who was a fine singer and helped Farah with the cooking. But she only lasted three days. Her husband, whom she had run away from, found her and dragged her by her hair out the front door and down the street.

We were all losing hope when Bandar discovered Tala Diab and Randa Sarrouh. Tala had caramel-colored hair. We were mesmerized by its glossy sheen. She knew she was beautiful, and strode around the house expecting to be served. No one waited on her.

Tala was in her early twenties. She had run away from home when she was nineteen to pursue a modeling career. Her modeling never panned out—her manager was a notorious pimp who beat her. She had made her living as a dancer at the cabarets. Unlike the aggressive belly dancing of Diala, she danced as if she were in a spiritual trance, with her eyes closed and her arms stretched. She swayed from side to side, rolling her head. As she danced, Zeina played enchanting tunes on a reed flute.

When she first took the stage, I saw the confusion on the men’s faces.

“Is this Sufi dancing?” one said.

Tala’s dancing was also sensual, and the men lusted for her. She quickly became the most sought after prostitute. And she was apparently experienced in bed. From what I heard, she adopted the same spiritual aura of her dancing to her bed, straddling her clients and rolling her head, swishing her hair from side to side. Men left her room with the sensation that their souls had been exposed.

“She saw right through me!” Charbel told me.

Tala didn’t pay me any mind. I didn’t impress her. Nothing impressed her, including Farah’s cooking.

“Aren’t you going to eat your meat?” Farah once asked her over dinner.

“I’m a vegetarian,” Tala said.

“What?! We’re all carnivores here.”

“I’m an *herbivore*,” she said, as if she were privileged to be one.

Randa Sarrouh, on the other hand, was a carnivore. She ate her meat without complaint. She was older than Tala, in her early forties. Though she was past her prime

and heavy in the legs, she was still attractive. Her husband was serving a ten-year prison sentence for armed robbery.

“He’s innocent,” she said as an afterthought.

“You mean he was framed?” Farah asked.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Randa only spoke when spoken to. She played the derbake and could also sing. She was, however, a chain smoker. She’d light a cigarette with the burning one in her mouth.

The men complained to Bandar that Randa had sex with blatant indifference. She lay on her back with her legs spread and smoked cigarettes. Once, while Samer Saab was taking her from behind, she filed her nails.

“You have to act in bed,” Nisreen instructed her. “Pretend that you’re enjoying it.”

“I’ll try harder,” Randa said, and lit a cigarette.

I had become a smoker. I smoked at the bar, while nursing a rum and Pepsi. I was always horny at the end of the night, and a little tipsy. On my walk back up Mutanabi Street, I was tempted to answer one of the catcalls. The glow of the sniper’s cigarette burned bright.

On a dreary Sunday afternoon, I was too distracted to study. I was feeling blue. Diala had been on my mind since the morning, and I was aching for her. I needed fresh air. I put on my coat and shoes and was about to leave the apartment when I saw *Don Quixote* on the side table in the parlor, not having moved a millimeter all this time. I had

no more patience for Mama's silent protest. If she chose to sulk all day and harm herself by not taking her medicine, that was her problem.

I grabbed the book and headed down to Jafet Library to return it. The library was empty, which I found comforting. After visiting the circulation desk, I walked between the stacks, going from floor to floor. I lingered in the secluded corner where I had finished writing *The Last Room on the Left*, resting my palm on the desk. I could see myself coming back here over the years to write my plays. As long as the theatre prospered; as long as the country didn't disintegrate into civil war.

I turned down the hallway and came across one of the smaller reading rooms. I froze in mid-step at the sight of Mama. She sat in a chair by an arched window, reading. Her long brown coat was hung on the back of the chair. Her purse lay at her feet. No one else was in the room. So this was her secret refuge.

"Hi," I said.

"Dear God," she said, startled.

"How'd you get into campus? You need a Student ID."

She closed her book. "Talking isn't allowed."

"We're the only ones here. Tell me, how'd you get through the Main Gate?"

"The security guard let me in. He knows me, and so do the others."

I was impressed. Mama had swindled her way into the university.

"How often have you been coming to the library?" I asked.

"Almost every day."

"But I've never seen you."

“That’s because you weren’t looking for me. But I’ve seen you a couple of times.”

She stood up, gathering her belongings.

I told her I’d check out the book for her.

“I don’t need your favors.” I followed her to the stacks where she returned the book.

“Where are you headed now?” I asked.

“For a walk down the Corniche.”

I decided to join her. We walked down the shaded steps to the lower campus and exited through the Sea Gate onto the Corniche. The sky was overcast with swollen, grey clouds. The deep blue of the sea had turned grey-green, and was choppy. Out in the distance, a scintillating beam of sunshine broke through the clouds and illuminated the rippling waves in a circle of white light.

The winter coastline lent itself to melodramatic scenes. The grey sky, the sole beam of light, the crashing waves, the palm trees swaying in the wind, the snowcapped mountains rising from the shore.

A man was pushing a cart of corn-on-the-cob down the Corniche.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“No.”

“Want coffee?”

“No.”

We sat on a bench. The waves were crashing hard into the rocks, the salty spray arching over the railing.

“What kind of business do you think I should get into?” I asked. “Once I graduate from AUB.”

“My opinion doesn’t matter to you.”

“Of course it does. I want to make you happy.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“You can’t be sad forever.”

“I can do whatever I want, just like you and your father.”

A light drizzle wet our hair.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

When it began pouring, Mama finally stood up. We were getting drenched.

“Would you like to see a film at the Rivoli?” I asked. “It’ll be like old times.”

“I’ve seen all the films in downtown.”

So she had also gone to the movies alone. “Did you see Robert Redford’s film?”

“Three times.”

“Let’s have lunch in downtown.”

Mama assented, which relieved me.

We hailed a taxi and had lunch at a café in the souks. Though Mama wasn’t talkative, she became more responsive.

“I think you should work at a bank,” she said.

After lunch we walked in the souks. The rain had abated. The slick alleyways gave off a smell of wet earth. Mama bought fruit from the farmer’s market.

“Do you need anything?” she asked me.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

On our way home, I hoped I had finally broken Mama’s silence. I told her that I’d returned *Don Quixote* but would check it out again.

“I already read it,” she said. In other words, she had read another copy at Jafet Library.

\*

During the running of *The Last Room on the Left*, the girls complained that items had gone missing from their rooms. Farah was missing a bottle of perfume. Tala cried that someone had stolen a wad of her bills.

“Those were all my tips,” she said.

Randa said she was missing a comb.

One day, I arrived at Bandar’s to find Hind comforting Nisreen, who was in tears.

“Someone stole her cedar wood box,” Zeina told me.

I rolled my eyes.

“Why’d you do that?” Zeina said. “That’s not nice. Milhem’s lock of hair is inside that box.”

“I’m tired of Nisreen’s story.”

“You’re acting strange.”

In the parlor, Nisreen said she only had Milhem’s lock of hair to remember him by. “Who would want to steal a lock of hair?!” she said. “I don’t care about the box. Let them take it. But leave me the hair.”

When I had a moment alone with Nisreen, I asked her if I could visit Ozlah. “I’d love to see where you grew up. Oh, and I’ll look for the fig trees down in the valley, the ones you and Milhem planted.”

“Someday I’ll take you,” she said.

“Let’s go now.”

“I’m too distraught.”

“Whose hair was in the cedar wood box?”

“You know the answer to that, Omar.”

“But it could be someone else’s. It’s a fantastic prop.”

“How dare you?!” she said. “What are you trying to say? I’m breaking here, don’t you see that? I’ve had that lock of hair for nearly thirty years.”

“You’re a great performer, Nisreen. I don’t believe you.”

“Believe me about what?”

“Everything. Do me one favor: Leave my father alone. You’ve hurt him enough.”

“I’ve done nothing but love your father!”

Hind walked into the parlor. “Is anything wrong?”

I shook my head. I looked back at Nisreen and told her she couldn’t fool me.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Like I said, you’re a great performer.”

The house was once again in turmoil, but it wasn’t because of me or Nisreen. Randa had left without notice.

“She must have left in the early hours,” Crazy Giant said.



“Guess what I found on my dresser?” Nisreen asked me, smiling. “Milhem’s lock of hair.”

It appeared Nisreen had no recollection of our previous dispute. To make things easier, I went along with her act.

“The bitch was stealing from us,” Farah said.

“What’s Bandar going to do now?” I asked.

“She’ll have to find another girl,” Nisreen said.

Bandar spent evenings searching for a new girl. The ones she found never lasted more than a couple of days.

“I don’t mind fucking,” one girl said. “But acting is a pain in the ass.”

Bandar was forced to release a girl named Isabella for her recklessness in bed. She nearly killed Ralph Najjar by choking him with her thighs when he went down on her.

“I want to die from pleasure,” Ralph told Bandar. “Not be strangled!”

“Let’s see if she can handle my cock,” Samer Saab told me, before his appointment with Isabella. I was at the bar when I heard him howling. I ran upstairs to Isabella’s room, where I found the rest of the girls and their clients standing naked by the entrance. A look of horror was cast on their faces. Samer stood by the dresser, whimpering. His penis was bent at an angle, pointing awkwardly to his right. From what I gathered, Isabella had been riding him when she fell on her side with his penis still inside of her.

Bandar came into the room and gasped at Samer's broken penis. She asked a client to drive him to the hospital. We never saw him again.

As Bandar continued her search, Tala began to pay more attention to me.

"I want to act," she told me.

We were sitting in the parlor. She was dressed in a bathrobe with a towel wrapped around her head. Her robe loosened, exposing her pear-shaped breasts. They were milky-white, which brought out the deep purple of her nipples. She caught me looking at her and said, "If you want some, pay up."

A rush of desire heated my skin. I found it fitting that she had moved into Diala's room, though she'd never replace her; no one would.

Zeina looked at me.

"I'll write you into my next play," I told Tala.

Bandar never cast Tala for *Yasser and Youmna*. She thought her acting was lousy. Infuriated, Tala ran to her room. I felt sorry for her—I had promised her a role. As the actresses rehearsed the opening scene, I walked upstairs to Tala's room to console her. She was brushing her hair in front of the dresser mirror. She sat there topless, her nipples hard and pointy. She saw my reflection and asked what I wanted.

"You," I said.

"Pay up."

"I'll pay you when I get paid."

I stripped myself naked, hung my clothes on the back of the dresser chair, and lay on the bed. She threw me a condom and slipped out of her stockings and joined me.

“Let’s make this quick,” she said.

I cupped her shoulder and stroked her gently, sliding my hand up and down her arm. I traced the edge of her palm with my fingertip, searching for a freckle. Her skin was soft, but her body cold.

When I attempted to kiss her, she turned her face.

“Just fuck me, damn it.”

I fucked her with an urgency that left no room for her sexual antics, and returned home that night smelling of fresh strawberries. Once again, I had become a client. Perhaps this was my destiny—to pay for my loving—or the inevitability of any man who spent considerable time on Mutanabi Street. Diala was right: The street had corrupted me, even though I could leave it whenever I wished.

I visited Tala’s room as often as I could, using the money I had made as a playwright to cover the expenses. We fought to possess each other. She liked to be on top, and swished her hair from side to side and slapped my chest.

The more I made love to Tala, the better I was able to get over my heartbreak. One day, as she was straddling me, I noticed Zeina peeking between the curtains, chewing on her pinky nail.

Toward the end of March, with bougainvillea blossoming along the walls of courtyards and the buds of the willow trees in Sanayeh garden sprouting, their purple branches arcing over the metal gate, and the sunny air filled with the smell of gardenia garlands young boys had begun to sell at traffic lights, we put on *Yassir and Youmna*.

Although the men reacted positively to the play, I failed to achieve another ultimate romantic death scene.

“You’ll get them next time,” Bandar said.

I was disappointed, and thought I could do better. I *had* to do better. The house hadn’t been full in a while.

That night, I made a kettle of coffee, lit a cigarette, and began work on another play, one about Jidu and Teta. I imagined a shooting star of moles arcing across Nisreen’s cheek, as only she could play the part of my grandmother.

In the afternoon, Baba called me from the Shooting Star.

“Crazy Giant’s gone missing,” he said.

## Intermission

The second candle has melted into the glob of the first. Moonlight illuminates half the room, leaving us in shadow. We lay with our backs against the headboard.

“I know what’s coming next,” Murrone says. “Stay silent for a moment.”

We postpone the inevitable, hoping it forgets us even though we’ve been caught in its web. I light us cigarettes and we smoke in silence, the ashtray between us.

Act Three

## Stains on the Street

I took a taxi down to Mutanabi Street.

“Ammoura!” Elvis cried out from his stall.

I waved him off and entered the Shooting Star. Baba sat at the register, smoking nervously. I pulled one of his cigarettes and lit up.

Earlier this morning, Baba said, around five a.m., Crazy Giant had gone out to throw the trash. When he didn't come down for breakfast, Bandar went upstairs to his room to check on him. He wasn't there. She checked at Aunt Roula's. The girls said Crazy Giant hadn't visited them. She went down the street, calling out to the girls on their balconies if they had seen him. None had. She called the hospitals. No word of him.

“Bandar hired a taxi,” Baba said. “She's been going around the city, trying to find him.”

I went down to Bandar's, where Hassan stood by the front door, too anxious to sit on his stool set out on the pavement.

“Any word?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

The girls were in the parlor, distraught, even Tala. I hugged each of them.

“We'll find him, habibi,” Zeina told me. Her nails were bloody.

“Why should we find him?” I said. “He'll be back.”

“He's never done this before,” Nisreen said. “Gone missing.”

“There's a first time for everything,” I said. I hated the sound of my voice.

Bandar came later in the day. She sat down on the couch, gripping the handles of her purse.

“I’m afraid we might have to drive up the Beirut-Damascus Road,” she said.

The girls broke into tears. If Crazy Giant’s body had been dumped on the side of the highway, I didn’t want to see him.

I rushed out of the theatre house and back up the street. I stood next to Elvis and pointed at Truck Turner.

“Where’s Crazy Giant?” I said.

The sniper shrugged.

“Where is he?!”

“Easy, son,” Elvis said. “He’s got a gun.”

“So do we, Elvis.”

Baba came out of the store. “Omar, come inside.”

“The sniper knows where Crazy Giant is,” I said.

Truck Turner lit a cigarette. I ran across the street and tried to open the entrance door of the sniper’s building. It was locked. I banged on the bars.

“Open up!” I said.

Baba came out onto the street and held my shoulder. “Omar, come inside the store.”

“The sniper works for El Señor, Baba. He must know where Crazy Giant is.”

“What if El Señor has nothing to do with Crazy Giant’s absence. Maybe Crazy Giant went down south to visit his family.”

“I’m not *fucking* stupid, Baba.”



“Calm down, Omar.”

“Ammoura, habibi,” Elvis said. “I made you a cup of coffee. Extra sweet.”

“I don’t want coffee, Elvis.”

“I’m jutht a thniper,” Truck Turner said.

I walked into the middle of the street and peered up at the rooftop. Truck Turner’s masked face was looking down at me. “I’ve got nothing to do with anything,” he said.

“I want to talk to you.”

“I’m thorry, but you’re not allowed up here.”

“I’m looking for my friend. He’s gone missing. You must know something about his whereabouts.”

“They jutht pay me to thtay up here becauthe I have a really good thot.”

“A good what?” Elvis said.

“I rarely mith my target,” Truck Turner said.

“I just want to talk to you,” I said. “Tell me all you know.”

“I know nothing.”

“I’ll bring you a cold bottle of Pepsi and a sandwich.”

“Omar, he’s armed,” Baba said, gripping my forearm. I shook my arm free.

“What kind of thandwich?” Truck Turner asked.

“Whatever you like.”

“I like mortadella,” he said. “With chips.”

I went inside the Shooting Star and around to the glass counter. I cut the roll of mortadella in the meat slicer, laid the slices on pita bread, and added some Swiss cheese.

“It’s not safe to go up there, Omar,” Baba said.

“It’s fine,” I said, rolling up the sandwich and wrapping it. “He’s not going to hurt me.”

I took the sandwich and a bag of potato chips, pulled a Pepsi from the fridge and opened the cap, and walked outside.

“Unlock the front door,” I said, looking up.

Truck Turner gave me the thumbs up and disappeared from view.

Baba joined me on the pavement.

“Back off,” I said. “We can’t make him nervous.”

“Be careful,” Baba said, and stood next to Elvis.

Truck Turner came down, his Kalashnikov slung on his shoulder.

“Are you armed?” he asked.

“My hands are full with your food.”

Truck Turner opened the entrance door. He told me to go first. I walked up the staircase to the top floor. His clumsy footsteps followed me close behind. Truck Turner unlocked the door to the rooftop and let me in.

He offered me his wooden chair, which overlooked the street. Baba and Elvis waved at me.

Truck Turner sat down on a cement block and took a bite from the sandwich. “I’m thtarving,” he said with his mouth full. He looked ridiculous eating with a ski mask.

“You can take off your mask,” I said.

He shook his head. In a matter of weeks masked snipers, Muslim and Christian, would sit perched on the rooftops of buildings, smoking cigarettes. They concealed their identities in case they returned to work with their counterparts.

Truck Turner sipped his Pepsi. Flakes of potato chips clung to the wool of his mask. I noticed a glossy magazine called *Lui* on the floor next to several chocolate wrappers. On the cover of the magazine was a topless redhead, her hands on her hips.

“You like French porn?” he asked me.

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Take a look.”

I flipped through the pages, naked women flashing me by.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” Truck Turner asked me.

“Do you work for El Señor?”

“Doethn’t matter. Who’th your favorite?” he said, pointing at *Lui*.

“I don’t care for them.”

“You like men?”

“Do you?”

“No.”

He offered me a cigarette. I pulled one out of his crumpled pack and he lit it for me.

“Thankth for lunch,” he said.

I took a long drag. “So this is your full-time job? Sniping?”

“For now. I’m good at it.”

“Have you ever shot someone?”

“No. But I might, tho don’t try anything.”

He asked if I was in school. I told him I was a student at AUB.

“You mutht be thmart,” Truck Turner said. “AUB. Wow.”

“You don’t care to go to school?”

“It’s not for me.”

“But sniping is?”

“I’ve been blessed with a good shot.”

He had grown up in the north, he told me, close to Faraya, and had spent his childhood hunting birds.

“But sniping can get really boring. If you don’t try anything funny, you can come up here again.”

“If you hear something about a man named Crazy Giant, will you please tell me?”

“Okay. But do you like men?”

“I’m in love with a belly dancer.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

I nodded.

“Lucky man. Did it feel good?”

“It felt great.”

Truck Turner said he wanted to sleep with a prostitute, but he was under strict rules that if he did, he’d be in serious trouble. I found it odd that such a young and curious man would be placed as a sniper in the red-light district. I said as much.

“I’ve got the best shot in the militia,” he said by way of explanation.

The sun began to set, sending golden peach rays across the street, emblazing the windows of the brothels. A church bell tolled, and the call to prayer drifted on a sea breeze. A few prostitutes had stepped out onto their balconies to watch the sunset. Baba sipped coffee with Elvis, every now and then looking up at me. A man in a shabby coat

walked down the pavement swinging a swollen plastic bag, and in a droning, nasal voice, repeated: “Lightbulbs, batteries, adaptors. Lightbulbs, batteries, adaptors.” A Peugeot drove by, glazed by the lingering sun. A couple of teenage boys walked up the street, giggling. A car honked—beep, beep, beep. I turned to the very top of the street and saw a burgundy Mercedes Benz. I stood up.

“Get down!” Truck Turner said. “If El Theñor theeth you up here, he’ll kill me.”

“Relax,” I told him.

Sunlight reflected off the windshield; the rearview mirrors had turned into molten silver. The sedan drove slowly, such that one could keep up with it on foot. Beep, beep, beep. More prostitutes came out onto their balconies, cupping their foreheads. Beep, beep, beep. The sedan passed right under us, a metal chain attached to the tow hook. The end of the chain was coiled around a pair of ankles. A body was being dragged, its arms splayed. The body wore tan leather pants with fringes, and was bare-chested. It lacked hair; a pink blob for a head bounced off the asphalt. Beep, beep, beep. Baba and Elvis stood back against the wall, their mouths covered. Women began to scream.

“Oh my God,” Truck Turner said.

The car left a trail of blood down the middle of the street. I got down on my knees and threw up. Truck Turner patted my back.

The screams of the Mutanabi women intensified. It was a horrible chorus of wailing. I looked down the street. The sedan had stopped at Bandar’s. Bandar stood on her balcony. Droopy Eye got out of the car and unhooked the chain from the tow hook, pinned something on the corpse’s leg, wiped his hands on his pants, and returned to the driver’s side. Beep, beep, beep. The car turned the corner and was gone.

“Ith that your friend?” Truck Turner asked, looking out at the corpse. I pushed him, knocking him on his ass, and ran down the stairs and onto the street. I crashed into Baba. We both fell down on the pavement. He got back up and held me.

“Let go of me, Baba!”

“Please, Omar, don’t go down there.”

I brushed him off and ran down the street. Bandar and Hassan were kneeling by the corpse. Bandar was stroking the corpse’s pulpy face, its eyes swollen shut. A pinkish, jelly membrane specked with dirt and cigarette butts leaked blood from the head. The man had been scalped.

A note was pinned to the tan leather pants.

*This is what happens to those who harbor Palestinian militants.*

The sun set, darkening the street. The wind turned chilly. The billboards remained unlit. Bandar went inside the house to call an ambulance.

“Let’s go inside,” Hassan told me, and pulled on my wrist.

Bandar left with the ambulance. She told me to stay with the girls to comfort them, but I didn’t know how to comfort anyone, including myself. Baba, Elvis, and I sat with the girls in the parlor. Every now and then Farah would sob. I sat next to Zeina, who rested her head against my shoulder.

“This reminds me of the time Milhem was killed,” Nisreen said. “It was utter devastation.”

“Who cares about Milhem?” I yelled, feeling my throat constrict. “Nothing compares to this.”

“You’re right, habibi,” Zeina said, stroking my arm.

Baba asked me if I’d like to go for a walk to clear my head. Was he afraid I’d disparage Nisreen?

“I’m staying here,” I said.

Prostitutes from other brothels poured in to offer their condolences.

“God rest him,” the Syrian prostitute from A Thousand and One Nights said. “He was the strangest fellow I ever saw, and also the most handsome.”

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Ayesha said, and then wept into Elvis’ chest.

The blondes came over with food, but no one had an appetite to eat. A prostitute from Marica found her way around the kitchen and made tea for everyone. Katie with the cleft chin recited passages from the Bible she knew by heart.

When clients started to appear and heard the news, they comforted the girls in the parlor. Bahaa rocked Farah in his arms. Charbel sat at the bar, too stunned to drink or speak.

“I’ll immortalize him,” Ralph the obituary writer said. “Soon the entire country will know about Crazy Giant.”

Bandar returned from the hospital later that night and said she had contacted Crazy Giant’s father in Tyre. He was driving up with the undertaker to take the body. Since Crazy Giant was Muslim, he had to be buried the next day.

“We should bury him in Beirut,” I told Bandar.

“His father wants him buried in the south,” she said. “He might have been a bad father, but he’s Crazy Giant’s father nonetheless.”

She looked around the room. “We have to stay strong, just like Crazy Giant.” She cleared her throat and went upstairs to her room.

I decided not to return home with Baba, and instead sat up with the girls. We were in too much shock to begin to reminisce about the great warrior or exchange stories about him, such as that one night he leapt off the stage in a bear costume and terrified the audience. The moment we reverted to our memories was the moment we accepted Crazy Giant’s death, and none of us were prepared for that.

In the middle of the night, I got up from the couch in the parlor and opened the door to Crazy Giant’s room and switched on the light. His bed was unmade, the blanket swept to the side. Dumbbells lay on the floor. His overcoat hung on a chair and his snake leather boots were strewn beneath the window, their laces undone. Everything inside suggested a continuing life.

I sat on the bench press, looking at my reflection in the mirrors. Bandar stood at the entrance. I turned around.

“I should have seen this coming,” she said. “It’s my fault.”

I was too somber to come up with a response. She joined me on the bench and thumbed the beads of her rosary, and in a soft voice suited for a lullaby, she recited:

*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep....*

I leaned against her and fell asleep in her embrace.



Farah made coffee and cut slices of cheese and tomatoes for breakfast. We stepped out onto Mutanabi Street armed with sponges and buckets filled with soapy water. We got down on our hands and knees in the middle of the street and scrubbed the asphalt. The blood had dried. It was nearly impossible to scrub off, but we scrubbed nonetheless, back and forth, our arms tiring. It was mind-numbing work, which was exactly what we needed.

At noon the prostitutes of the street spotted us from their balconies and joined in the cleaning. Soon the entire street was crowded with women on their hands and knees scrubbing away, soapy water splashing our faces and clothes.

## East Beirut, West Beirut

Bandar closed down her house for a week to mourn the death of Crazy Giant. I skipped all my classes and spent my time at Bandar's, only leaving to sleep at home.

"I heard the news," Mama told me. "God rest him. I enjoyed cooking for him."

"He liked your food."

"It's not safe to go down there. You've hurt me enough by your actions. Don't get yourself killed."

"I'll be fine."

"Your father told me they dragged Crazy Giant down the street from the back of a car. Is that what you want for yourself?"

I didn't respond.

Mama was still wearing black, and I understood it wasn't for Crazy Giant. She was mourning the loss of her family.

"There are armed gangs in the streets," she continued.

I was reminded of the hooded men she had frightened me with when I was a boy. Mama was trying to frighten me again, but only this time, the threat was real.

"Leave me alone, Mama."

At Bandar's we tried to find solace in routine. Bandar remained in her room. Hassan would carry a tray of food upstairs and leave it at her door. She barely touched the food.

Zeina strung melancholic tunes on her lute. Sometimes she sat on stage under the lights and played before an empty room. I sat backstage and listened to her.

“It’s Diala’s fault,” she once told me, abruptly ending her song. “If she hadn’t gone off with Don Juan...”

As broken as I was over Crazy Giant’s death, I wasn’t ready to blame Diala.

Nisreen and Hind were inseparable. They took turns combing each other’s hair. Nisreen kept bringing up Milhem, and went on and on about the night her father killed her lover.

“Milhem doesn’t even exist,” I said.

“Don’t say that,” Hind said, looking at Nisreen, holding her hand. “Milhem is coming back. Any day now.”

“Maybe when you’re older,” Nisreen told me, “you’ll understand things better.”

“I’m old enough.”

Tala, who had been filing her nails, caught my eye and pulled open her cardigan sweater. She wore a low-cut nightgown, her breasts sagging. I stood up and went to the kitchen, where Farah was preparing a feast of macaroni and meatballs for lunch. She refused to make less.

Over lunch, Nisreen said she didn’t understand why I had turned against her. “I love you like a son,” she said.

I didn’t bother to look up from my plate.

One afternoon at the Shooting Star, Baba told me his Muslim suppliers’ deliverymen refused to drive here anymore, forcing him to switch suppliers.

“It’s the beginning of the end,” he said.

“Nothing’s ending,” I said. Baba’s mood grew more depressing. I went outside to have coffee with Elvis.

“Hi Omar!” Truck Turner said.

“Shut the fuck up,” Elvis told the sniper.

“Curth at me again and I’ll put a bullet in your head.”

“That prick thinks he’s the boss,” Elvis told me, putting the kettle over the burner.

“Ignore him,” I said.

“I’d like a mortadella thandwich and a Pepthi, Omar,” Truck Turner said.

“We’re out,” I told him.

“We don’t serve murderers,” Elvis said.

“I’m not a murderer,” Truck Turner said.

“You’re a fool with a lisp.”

Truck Turner stood up from his chair and aimed his Kalashnikov at Elvis.

“Put your gun down,” I said.

Baba came out of the store and crossed the street. “What’s going on?”

“The sniper kid’s pissing me off,” Elvis said.

Baba looked up. “What do you want from us?”

“I want a mortadella thandwich and a Pepthi,” Truck Turner said.

“I’ll get them for you.”

“Don’t,” I told Baba. “He works for El Señor.”

“If we want to survive,” Baba said, “we’ve got to play it smart.”

He went back to the store.

“Omar, I’ve got thomething to thow you,” Truck Turner said. “A new magazine.”

“I don’t care to see it.”

“I knew you liked men!”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t curth at me.”

“Then don’t talk to us, you piece of shit,” Elvis yelled.

Truck Turner raised his gun.

“Shoot me, punk!” Elvis said. “See if I care. You don’t have the balls to come down here and face me like a real man.”

Truck Turner’s rifle was shaking.

“Shoot me!” Elvis said.

“Stop it, Elvis,” I said.

Baba poked his head from the front door of the store. “Elvis, stop yelling.”

“Shoot me, punk!” Elvis said. “You’re all cowards. A bunch of pussies who slaughter the innocent.”

A shot was fired, sending Elvis flying off his footstool. I leapt to the ground and covered my head. Baba ran out of the store and knelt by my side, shielding me from Truck Turner.

“I’m all right, Baba.”

Elvis sat up with wild, bulging eyes. There was a massive hole in his pompadour. He grasped his chest and legs.

“Did you get hit?” he asked me.

“No.”

“Was anyone shot?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

He touched the top of his head, collapsing the damaged frame of his pompadour.

“My pompadour!” he screeched. “He shot my pompadour!”

“Next time I’ll thoot you in the face,” Truck Turner said.

“My pompadour!” Elvis repeated continuously. Baba and I tried to calm him down, but he pushed us away. He opened the bottom drawer of his cart, took out his Kalashnikov, released the safety, and aimed for the rooftop. Truck Turner had lowered his rifle. Elvis fired a volley of shots. Truck Turner stood there, seemingly unfazed. He took a step to his right and left and then fell backwards over the ledge, crashing down onto the street.

Wisps of smoke swirled from Elvis’ barrel. The air smelled of metal. Prostitutes tiptoed out onto their balconies. Elvis glanced at Baba and me, placed his gun over his counter, and ran down the street, waddling from side to side. At Aunt Roula’s he bent over with his hands on his knees to catch his breath. He cried out for Ayesha.

“My African Queen!” he said. “My African Queen, it’s time to go.”

Ayesha stepped out onto her balcony.

“Run away with me!” Elvis said.

We were too far away to hear Ayesha’s response. All we heard was Elvis beseeching her to leave with him because he’d never be able to visit the street again, and that he’d protect her for the rest of his life and love her no matter what anyone said about the color of her skin.

“We have no time for packing!” Elvis cried. “Just come down.”

Moments later, Ayesha stepped out of Aunt Roula’s and held hands with Elvis. In her free hand, she clenched a box of Turkish Delights. They ran back up the street, Elvis barely able to keep up with Ayesha, who was practically dragging him, his arm outstretched. When they reached us, Ayesha’s silver tinkling, Elvis grabbed his gun from the counter and swung it across his back. Ayesha stared at Truck Turner lying on his back in a pool of blood, his legs folded awkwardly under him.

“Kneel, young man,” Elvis told me. He gave me a big, sweaty kiss on the cheek, and then kissed Baba. He turned to the street. The balconies were full. “God bless you all!” he said. “I had the greatest honor of serving you coffee and listening to your stories for all these years. I’ll never forget you, and I’ll never forget Mutanabi Street.”

“God be with you, Elvis!” the prostitutes cried.

He clasped Ayesha’s hand and they were off, never to be seen again.

“We have to leave immediately,” Baba said. “It’s not safe to be here.” He closed down the store. Meanwhile, I crouched next to Truck Turner. He had been shot twice in the chest. His mouth was open. I pulled back the ski mask. Locks of brown hair were matted to his brow. His face was ravaged with acne. He had a big nose just like me.

“Let’s go,” Baba said, pulling me up.

“What about Bandar?”

“They’ll be all right. El Señor will be after Elvis.”

The coffee cart looked forlorn without its master.

Later that night, Zeina told me over the phone that Mutanabi Street remained eerily quiet. In the morning, there was a new daytime sniper, a big hulky man. A silver

skull hung from a chain he wore around his neck. Truck Turner's blood had congealed on the asphalt, adding to the stains.

\*

Baba was right: It was the beginning of the end, and the end was fast approaching. On a Sunday in April, I remained at home to catch up on my studies. I was in the middle of midterms, barely passing my courses.

Mama was out. Baba was watching TV. At one point, he told me to come.

"Something terrible has happened," he said.

On the news was an image of a bus riddled with bullets, its windows shattered. Emergency medical technicians in red jumpsuits carried bloodied men, women, and children into ambulances. Soldiers flooded the street, keeping back bystanders. A veiled woman was clutching her head, screaming for God's mercy.

The bus, packed with Palestinian refugees, was gunned down in the Beirut suburb of Ayn al-Rummana. The Palestinians were headed home to Tall al-Zatar following a commando parade in Beirut. Over two dozen had been killed. The gunmen were members of the Kataib.

Earlier that day, the news reporter explained, Pierre Gemmayel, head of the Kataib, had been in the same suburb at a consecration of a new church. During the consecration, unidentified gunmen drove past the church in a car with covered license plates and opened fire, killing four people, including two Kataib members.

"Your mother shouldn't be out of the house," Baba said.

I feared the worst. "I know where she is."



We drove down to AUB, but I didn't find her in the library. Nor did we find her on the Corniche. The city was empty.

"She might be in a movie theatre," I said, full of sickening dread.

When we got home, Mama was in the parlor, listening to the news. She didn't tell us where she'd been.

In the evening, Radio Lebanon reported that leaders of the National Movement, led by Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, had met at Jumblatt's house to discuss the incident of the bus massacre. They called for the dissolution of the Kataib and the dismissal of two Kataib ministers from parliament.

Baba telephoned Bandar's to check up on them. Bandar said Mutanabi Street was empty. Not a catcall or whistle was heard. She didn't expect any clients, and none came.

Not a single client turned up over the next three days. Gun battles erupted across the streets of Beirut between the Kataib and Palestinian commandos. It was too dangerous to leave home, though I didn't hear any gunshots. I wondered if Don Juan was fighting, and if Diala and Laila were safe under his care.

Bandar, however, said they had heard gunshots and mortars and gunmen running in the streets. They didn't dare step outside.

"Farah's been a mess," Bandar told me. "She screams every time she hears a gunshot."

Unlike the Six-Day War, which had been fought on foreign lands, these gun battles took place in our city streets.

A ceasefire was called on April 16. The gunmen withdrew from the streets.

"We're back in business," Bandar told me.

The fighting may have ended, but in its wake a silence descended over downtown. Masked snipers stalked the rooftops of buildings. I tried not to look up at them, worried that if we made eye contact, they'd put a bullet in me. When I joined Bandar and the girls on a walk in the souks, few people were out and about. All the tourists were gone. Storekeepers sat outside their front doors with nothing to do. The hakawatis had no one to recite their stories to. Mutanabi Street shared the same fate. Only the most loyal clients appeared at the doors of the brothels, and most were Christian. The Muslims were too frightened to enter the East Side of Beirut. To attract more clients, Bandar reduced the rate of her girls by half.

“We've become second-class whores,” Farah said.

Hassan, who was now the bartender, made the drinks extra strong.

Bandar suspended the running of *Yasser and Youmana* and put my other play in the works on hold. The men weren't in the mood for melodramas, she explained, and didn't have the patience for any romantic death scenes. The only entertainment Bandar provided was Zeina's singing and Tala's dancing. At least the stage was still in use.

“If I get shot by a sniper,” Shams told me, knocking back her whiskey, “make sure I'm cremated. And then scatter my ass in the sea.”

Bandar was losing money by the day. And so was Baba. I was helping him count the till at closing time when El Señor and Droopy Eye entered the store. They were both wearing green fatigues and boots—El Señor wore his cowboy boots with spurs. He was puffing on a cigar, the strap of his holster unbuttoned.

Baba gripped my wrist. I placed my free hand on the counter to steady myself.

“It's time you left this side of town for good, Halloumi,” El Señor said.

“We’ve been on this street since the 1920s,” Baba said, trying to keep his voice level. “We’re all brothers.”

“The Druzes aren’t welcome here,” El Señor said.

Baba swallowed. “You don’t own this street.”

“I own East Beirut, Halloumi. I own all the brothels and their whores. I want you guys out, unless,” he puffed on his cigar, and then pointed its red tip at me. “Unless you’d like me to take your son for a ride in my car.”

“Chained to your car,” Droopy Eye added.

Baba shoved me behind him. El Señor laid his hand on his holster. “It’s a pity what happened to that Indian. He was a good man, but sometimes good men die young.”

“He squealed like a hog as I scalped him,” Droopy Eye said in his soft, innocuous voice. “We’ve got the scalp at headquarters. Nice, long black hair.”

In a matter of seconds, I told myself, I could be in the backroom. I’d grab the Kalashnikov and open fire.

El Señor surveyed the shelf of chocolates and picked out a bar, ripped open the wrapper, and took a bite. He smiled, his teeth smeared brown.

Droopy Eye pulled a Pepsi from the fridge and placed change on the counter.

“Open it, please,” he said.

Baba reached for the bottle opener and peeled back the cap. Droopy Eye drank.

El Señor licked his fingertips. “Say, Halloumi, have you seen Elvis around?”

Baba shook his head.

“I hear he left with the abdi from Aunt Roula’s. Where does he live?”

“I have no idea.”

“You’ve known each other for years. Surely he must have mentioned his neighborhood.”

“*This* was his neighborhood.”

“But—that chocolate bar was really good.”

“Want another one, Captain?” Droopy Eye asked.

“No, no. Need to watch my weight,” he said, patting his stomach. “Maybe your son knows where Elvis lives.”

“I don’t,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Oh, by the way, we found Don Juan. He’s safe at our headquarters. He’s given us plenty of information. He’s got a loose tongue.”

“We’ll be taking him for a car ride soon,” Droopy Eye said.

My eyes stung with tears. Were Diala and Laila dead? Had they been raped and tortured? Chained to the backs of cars and dragged through the streets?

“You know, on second thoughts, I will have another chocolate bar,” El Señor said.

“Which one was it?” Droopy Eye said.

“The chocolate-covered coconut bar.”

Droopy Eye picked out the chocolate bar and handed it to El Señor and dropped more change on the counter, along with his empty bottle of Pepsi. El Señor opened the wrapper and broke off a piece.

“Delicious,” he said. “Anyone want a bite?” he said, extending his hand.

“I’ll have some,” Droopy Eye said. He ate with his mouth open.

I took a step closer to the backroom. Baba stood back and blocked my path, giving me a stern look.

“Anything wrong?” El Señor said. “Is there something your son would like to tell us?”

“You’re a murderer,” I said.

“Shut up, Omar,” Baba said.

“I’m a married man with kids,” El Señor said. “I’m doing what’s best for the country. You can’t see it, but years from now, when you’re older, you’ll thank me.”

“Crazy Giant had nothing to do with politics,” I said. “He was just a bartender who loved Indians.”

“Omar, quiet!” Baba said.

“Listen to your father,” El Señor told me. He took a drag on his cigar.

“I wouldn’t mind a sandwich,” Droopy Eye said.

“Then order one,” El Señor said.

“I’d like a ham and roast beef sandwich,” he told Baba.

Baba looked at me and then walked around to the glass counter to make the sandwich. I had a clear path to the backroom.

El Señor walked up to the register. “Come closer,” he told me.

“Leave my son alone,” Baba said.

El Señor turned. “Relax, Halloumi. Make the sandwich.” He waved me closer. I stepped forward. He held the back of my head and pulled me in and kissed me on the cheek. His breath smelled of cigar smoke and coconut. “The whores must love you.”

“Here’s your sandwich,” Baba said, thrusting it to Droopy Eye. He returned to the register, gripping the back of my shirt.

“How much do I owe you?” Droopy Eye asked. He took a bite, consuming half the sandwich.

“It’s on the house,” Baba said.

“That’s nice of you,” El Señor said. He checked the time on his watch. “God bless,” he said, and left the store with Droopy Eye.

“Dear God,” Baba said, rubbing his face.

“We should keep our gun up front,” I said.

“Don’t be crazy, Omar. They’ve got an entire militia backing them. We have a street full of women.”

“The women are armed.”

Baba loosened his shirt from his belt and wiped my face with the tail end.

“You’ve got AUB,” he said. “Concentrate on your studies.”

Despite the ceasefire, clashes between the Kataib and Palestinian commandos continued in the northern suburbs of Beirut. A month later, toward the end of May, the fighting got worse. The gunmen returned to the streets and took control over neighborhoods, setting up roadblocks and barricades. News spread of kidnappings and car bombs. Bodies appeared in the streets with missing fingernails and limbs, bullets lodged in the back of their heads. A prostitute from Marica said one of her clients was found in a ditch with his testicles stuffed in his mouth.

It became more dangerous for Baba and I to cross the city. It was impossible to leave the house without Mama pestering me about my goings.

“Don’t you dare think about leaving Hamra,” she said.

I kept in constant contact with Bandar. She told me that the House of Blondes was closing down. The matron had found a temporary house for her girls in the suburbs. Other brothels followed suit, shuttering their windows. Dozens of prostitutes left on their own. At night, Bandar said, fewer neon lights illuminated the street. No one stood on her balcony anymore.

“I keep telling the girls the fighting will be over soon,” Bandar said.

Tala wasn’t convinced. She left Bandar’s on a morning in June without saying goodbye.

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The insufferable humidity returned. I sweated throughout the day. At night, the mosquitoes sucked on my blood. Their whiny buzzing kept me awake and frustrated. But the good news was that I had finished my semester and had the summer to myself. And even better, the fighting had eased, which made it easier for me to visit Bandar’s. One TV pundit credited the calm to the appointment of the new Prime Minister Rashid Karami. His predecessor had resigned, unable to restore peace to the country.

Bandar and I believed in a revival of Mutanabi Street. The girls spent an entire day cleaning the house from top to bottom. However, with only four girls, Bandar had little to offer her clients. She still staged my play about Jidu and Teta, entitled *Down from the Mountain*. The men were indifferent to it.

“What’s wrong with my writing?” I asked Bandar, distressed.

“It’s not your writing that’s the problem. It’s this country. There’s too much shit on everyone’s minds.”

And in September the fighting resumed.

“Ammoura!” Murrone says. Completely lost in my story, it takes me a moment to register my surroundings. “You’re rushing through things.”

“But that’s what it felt like,” I explain. “The war got out of hand so quickly. There was nothing we could do to prevent our lives from spiraling down.”

“That’s Lebanon for you,” Murrone says. “A bomb might go off any second.”

“Civil wars are the ugliest.”

My parents and I barricaded ourselves at home. My only consolation was calling Bandar for updates. She said the clients had disappeared. Shams had finally retired as stage manager.

“Farah is hysterical,” she added. “Hind had a panic attack.”

One day, she said, she had gone up to the rooftop for fresh air when she heard hissing sounds. Rockets pierced through the clouds, leaving smoky white trails in their wake. They were being fired from positions manned by the Kataib. Their target: the Muslim militias stationed in downtown. Plumes of smoke rose from the souks.

“I couldn’t believe my eyes,” Bandar said. “The souks and the Grand Theatre; the entire area was being destroyed.”



I failed to register what Bandar was telling me. How could an entire area that had existed for decades, which I had frequented for years, be wiped out? Perhaps in her state of mind, Bandar was exaggerating.

The bombardment of downtown lasted four days. Afterwards, on a relatively calm day, I accompanied Baba to Mutanabi Street—we avoided driving near the souks. I looked up at the rooftop sniper with the silver skull necklace. He waved at me. I feared El Señor would appear at any moment.

Baba was short on supplies. Suppliers were charging double and sometimes triple for their goods, which Baba couldn't afford. There was a major fuel shortage, too.

At Bandar's, the girls had devised a plan. Bandar had found them temporary housing in a suburb of Beirut. The girls would live there until the fighting was over.

“We've already started packing,” Zeina told me.

I asked Bandar if this was the beginning of the end of the theatre house. I felt the despair of a lover who knows his partner plans on leaving him, and yet they're still together, their days numbered, his inevitable heartbreak looming over every waking moment.

“This house is going to be yours soon,” Bandar reassured me, “so don't look so sad. In the meantime, I'll take care of it.”

Hassan would stay with Bandar. “This is the only home I know,” he told me.

The girls withdrew all their savings from the bank and packed a suitcase each. Baba and I were present when a taxi came to pick them up.

“I'll see you soon, kid,” Zeina said, embracing me.

Baba's shoulders were shaking when he said goodbye to Nisreen. I had given her a distant farewell.

"Don't worry," she told him. "You'll see me again."

After the girls left, I followed Baba to the Shooting Star, where he told me he was closing it down. He saw no point in keeping it open as it had become too dangerous to drive to Mutanabi Street. And with that, Baba began to box canned foods and supplies and carried them down to Bandar's.

I looked around the store, at all the chocolate and candy on the wooden shelves, the glass counter filled with cheese and cold meats, the fridge packed with icy Pepsis. The first time I had visited the store when I was six I thought this was a magical place filled with treasures and women with Crusader blood. I returned as an eleven-year-old during the Six-Day War and marveled at a prostitute with honey-colored breasts and a missing front tooth. A couple of years later, at thirteen, I came on my own initiative, desperate to prove my manhood to Ali and his gang. But then there was the incident at Marwa's Muse, and I stayed away for the next five years. It was here, at the very same store Jidu opened up in the 1920s, that I learned how to run a business and answer to the red-light district. Imagine, Murrone, if Jidu had opened his store on another street? Our lives—Jidu's, Baba's, and mine, even Mama's—would have been completely different. There wouldn't have been a theatre. My second family wouldn't have existed: not Bandar or her girls or Crazy Giant, or Hassan, Elvis and his African Queen, Elizabeth the III, the blondes, and the rest of the Mutanabi girls, or all the clients—Bahaa the Assman, Charbel the Sinner, Ralph Najjar the obituary writer, Samer Saab and his enormous penis, and all

the others who passed through Bandar's front door. There was no way Jidu would have closed the store. He'd defend it with his life. I said as much to Baba.

"Beirut's going to the shits," Baba said. "It's not our fault. All we did was live our lives."

I helped him box the remaining supplies. Baba put the Kalashnikov in the trunk of his Beetle—he'd later store it in his bedroom closet. Once we were done, we bid our farewells. Bandar gave me a bear hug reminiscent of Crazy Giant's embraces. Her concealed pistol pressed against my chest. She placed her hands on my shoulders, and as I stood there in the sun looking into her face, her furry upper lip dotted with sweat, grey hairs poking from the mole on her chin, she said this: "Whatever happens to this theatre house, to Mutanabi Street, to us, our stories live within you. Let the world know that we once prospered here, on a narrow street in downtown Beirut." She kissed my cheek. "Don't forget that you're a soul doctor, Ammoura. Break a heart."

On our way down Mutanabi Street, I stuck my head out the passenger window and looked back. Bandar stood under the neon sign, waving, her rosary swinging. The street was quiet and empty behind her.

\*

Beirut became claustrophobic. I was confined to the West Side. If I ever dared venture over to the East Side and encountered a roadblock, a masked militiaman would have checked my identity card and seen that I was Druze. Then, he'd tie my wrists behind my back, put me on my knees, and slit my throat.

My days were routine: I left in the morning to attend classes at AUB and returned home. It was too risky to wander at night. The entire city feared the night, leaving the

streets deserted. One evening, the silence was broken by the sound of gunfire. We hurried to the stairwell.

My classes got cancelled whenever the fighting was bad. I hated those days because I was trapped yet again inside the apartment, listening to the sad news on the radio. Sharif Al-Akhawi, a newscaster, told us which streets to avoid.

Our superintendent said the families on the second and fourth floors had left Beirut. One family traveled abroad to France and the other sought refuge in the mountains. They'd return once the fighting was over. At night fewer lights glowed in our neighborhood.

One evening, I tried writing another play. My dialogue came out flat. I was too worried about the fate of Bandar's to think straight. If the theatre closed down, what would happen to the girls? They'd be stranded. I'd be stranded.

As the days passed, I tried again and again to write, but I was unable to produce anything meaningful. I called Bandar and told her about my stalled writing.

"You're frustrated. We're all frustrated," she said. "Just wait until the fighting passes. Things will improve and you'll be in a better state of mind to write."

"How's it over there?"

"Most of the girls have left. Most of the stores have closed, too."

Baba called Nisreen at her new housing. She said they were managing, despite the nasty looks people in their building and on their street gave them.

I spoke to Zeina.

"I'm prepared to use my lute as a weapon if the time calls for it," she said. "I'll whack the son-of-a-bitch over the head."

“I really miss you.”

“Me too, kid.”

Baba was increasingly restless at home. He took long walks along the sea to clear his head. In the evening, he brooded. He had become a chain-smoker.

“I need to find temporary work,” he told Mama and me. “Our finances are running low.”

He asked around the neighborhood and found nothing. Mama came home one afternoon following a visit to Lamya’s and told Baba that a husband of one of Lamya’s affluent clients needed a fulltime driver.

“I’m not a driver,” Baba said. “I own a store—I have my own business!”

“It’s just an option,” Mama said.

Baba withdrew money from my tuition fund to see us through the month.

“You’ll graduate from AUB,” he told me. “I promise you that.”

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In late October, heavy fighting broke out in downtown. Bandar said the Magic Castle had been hit by a mortar.

“You have to leave Mutanabi Street,” Baba urged her.

“We’ll give it a few more days.”

The very next day, we were unable to reach Bandar’s. No one was picking up the phone.

We tried calling again day after day but got no response.

“Should we go down there?” I asked Baba.

“That’s impossible. We’d be killed.”

Baba called Nisreen. She said she also had been unable to reach Bandar.

As each day passed, we grew more anxious about the fate of Bandar and Hassan. For all we knew, Mutanabi Street might be in flames.

One night, smoking a cigarette with Baba on the balcony, I told him we should go down to Bandar's. If they were injured, they needed our help.

"I told you, Omar, it's too dangerous."

He was giving up too easily.

Long after Mama and Baba had gone to bed, I left our apartment building for Mutanabi Street. I considered taking the Kalashnikov, but if I retrieved it from my parents' bedroom closet, I chanced waking them up. Instead I left unarmed, dressed in a black sweater and black pants. I only had two ways of getting to Mutanabi Street: down the Corniche, in which case I'd eventually come across the bombarded souks; or the closer route in the opposite direction, which was to walk past Sanayeh Garden and circle above and around Martyrs' Square and wind my way down through streets and alleyways in East Beirut until I found Mutanabi Street. With either option, I risked encountering a roadblock. The more I considered the risk I was taking, the more I wavered. If I didn't go now, the little courage I had would dwindle. I took the second option.

I walked in pitch darkness down the stairs of our apartment building and tiptoed in the foyer, hoping the superintendent wouldn't hear me. I delicately closed the entrance door behind me and walked up a few blocks above Hamra Street and made a wide arc through dimly lit streets around Sanayeh Garden—I avoided walking down the main avenue, thinking that would be more dangerous. I was in the neighborhood of Karakon Druze, which put me at ease since it was a Druze area. No one was out, only stray cats

scrounging around for food. It was a cool night. I kept walking east, under awnings and alongside the metal grilles of stores, approaching the Christian sector of the city. A cat leapt out of a metal barrel, and I screamed. My heart still pounding, I moved on. I was walking down a sidewalk reeking of urine when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around to find a flashlight in my face.

“One move and I’ll blow your brains out,” a man said.

I was too frightened to speak. The smell of urine filled my nostrils.

“Give me your ID,” the man said.

“Please,” I said, barely audible. “I mean no harm.”

“Your ID. Now.”

I reached for my wallet, my hand trembling, and pulled out my ID and handed it to him. He shone his light on my card, and it was then that I could make out his features. A kafieh was wrapped around his face and head, leaving a slit open for his eyes. He was on the Muslim side, which meant I was safe. He was wearing green fatigues and black boots, a Kalashnikov slung on his shoulder.

He returned my ID. “What are you doing out so late?”

I explained the situation.

“Are you crazy?” he said. “They’ll catch you on the other side and slit your throat.”

“Then how do I get to Mutanabi Street?”

“You don’t,” he said, and disappeared into the shadows.

Avoiding the glow of streetlamps, I treaded down the streets as softly as I could. Martyrs’ Square lay somewhere behind the buildings to my far left. The call to prayer

rang out from a nearby mosque. I prayed the fatha, a prayer I hadn't prayed in years. Please God, just get me to Bandar's, and then I promise You I'll—I didn't know what to promise. But I prayed and prayed, mumbling words under my breath, a feverish cadence that calmed me. At the sound of an approaching car, I quickly hid behind a couple of metal barrels filled with trash. The car was in fact a green Volkswagen van without rear windows. The driver parked on the side of the street a few meters ahead of me. Armed men got out of the van, wielding Kalashnikovs. One opened the back door and pulled out a chain with spikes and laid it across the width of the street in front of the van. The men lit cigarettes and stood in the dark.

“We've got to catch more tonight,” one of them said. “Last night Iyad's platoon caught six Christians.”

“But Captain, I'm sick of waiting. All we do is wait and wait.”

“We'll try a few more spots and then report back to headquarters.”

There was a scream from inside the van.

“Shit, Aziz,” the Captain said. “I told you to gag her.”

Aziz went inside the van, and a moment later, came back out.

“She won't be screaming anymore,” he said, brushing his hands against his pants.

The men stood in silence. The firefly glow of their cigarettes came and went. I covered my mouth with both palms, wanting to cry, even though I knew this wasn't the same van I had come across months ago.

“I miss the mountains,” Aziz said, a smallish figure. “Beirut isn't for me. Never was.”



“The fighting will soon spread into the mountains,” the Captain said, “and you’ll get to fight from home and become a legend.”

“Will you ever go back to medical school?”

“Depends on what happens here. The militia needs me.”

“Well, I’m going to call you El Docteur from now on.”

The Captain looked up at the rooftops and then seemed to focus on the barrels. I leaned back against the wall and prayed.

“Let’s get out of here,” the Captain said. They returned the spiked chain to the back of the van and drove off, a flying roadblock preying on the streets of Beirut.

I was reluctant to continue walking east. But I had to; I had come this far. When I spotted a poster of Virgin Mary plastered on the wall of a residential building, I knew I was in hostile territory. And that’s when I started to run as fast as I could in the direction of the sea, cutting across side streets and down alleyways and through the garden of a church, losing myself in an urban maze. I stopped at a street corner, gasping for breath, having no idea where I was. But at the end of the street I recognized the striped awning of an ice cream parlor, the same ice cream parlor Elizabeth the III had taken me to. I went down and turned the corner and came upon Mutanabi Street. Or what was left of Mutanabi Street.

In the faint moonlight that filtered through the smoggy sky, I saw a street of broken buildings. Floors had caved into each other; balconies tilted awkwardly. Rubble and shards of glass and wood lay across the street. The smell of dust and burnt flesh lingered in the air. Bandar’s house stood in ruins. The top floor had caved in. The billboard was missing, along with Nisreen’s balcony, which lay in pieces on the sidewalk.

But the front door was still intact, and I pounded on it. I pounded and pounded, but no one answered.

“Bandar,” I whispered. “Bandar,” I whispered again and again. I walked around to the back and climbed over the wall into the garden. The windows were all shuttered. I tried jamming my way through the back door but couldn’t get through. I rapped on the shutters.

“Bandar!” I whispered. “Hassan. Hassan, it’s Omar. Open up.”

Nothing. I walked around to the front and pounded again on the door. Maybe Bandar and Hassan had already left the house. Bandar might be busy finding a new place and getting herself situated; or maybe Hassan had been injured, and she was at his side in the hospital.

I walked down the street among the smoldering wreckage, glass crunching under my high-tops. A blonde wig was caught between the rubble. The roof of the Shooting Star had fallen through. The midnight blue awning was flattened on the ground.

All of a sudden a mortar landed in one of the brothels, bursting into a mushroom cloud of flames. I leapt to the ground, covering my head. A ringing buzzed through my ears. More mortars began to drop from the sky. I ran for my life.

In the morning I told Baba about the nightmare I had seen. I had yet to sleep and felt drained, a buzzing still ringing through my ears. He began to reprimand me for risking my life, but once I started speaking, he listened. Blood drained from his face. He called Nisreen and gave her the news.

Later in the afternoon, the fighting spread from downtown and into Hamra.

“Don’t leave your homes,” Sharif Al-Akhawi warned us.

From the balcony, I spotted two militants crouched at a street corner, one yelling into a walkie-talkie.

“Come inside!” Mama said, pulling me into the parlor.

Later, she asked me for more details about the conversation Baba had had with Nisreen. Baba told her the store had been hit. She reacted to the news with indifference.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“About the street.”

“It’s destroyed.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“They deserve it.”

“Who deserves it?”

“You know who.”

“The girls? The prostitutes? The *whores*?”

“Don’t raise your voice at me.”

“Bandar is dead,” I cried. “Bandar is dead!”

I stormed into my room and slammed the door behind me. I stayed there until the evening, unable to eat or think clearly. My head was pounding. I finally came out and joined Baba on the balcony for a smoke.

“We’re in trouble,” he said. “I can’t afford to renovate the store.”

“You can use my tuition money. I don’t care about AUB. I can attend a public university.”

“No, you’ll need your AUB degree. It will get you places.”

I wanted to tell Baba that I preferred to work at Bandar’s. But her place was gone, and so was she. And yet I still had her typewriter, which I had never returned.

Following the October skirmishes, we emerged from our apartment to find that Hamra had been transformed overnight into a bazaar. Storekeepers from downtown and elsewhere had relocated to Hamra and opened stalls out on the streets. Antiques and clothes and clocks and books and fruits and vegetables and live chickens and eggs and dried goods and nuts and TVs and radios and furniture and silverware and much more were for sale.

A handsome middle-aged man in silver-framed glasses, his black hair swept to the side, sat at a table covered in watches. His cheeks were red from the sun. I recalled Diala’s father, who had once owned a clocks store in Jerusalem. The man said all his watches were on sale. I asked him where he used to work.

“I owned a watch store in the souks. It got hit by a mortar. I was only able to save these watches.”

I told him about the fate of the Shooting Star. I wondered how he was going to make a living now, even if he did sell all his watches. But he didn’t seem too concerned, and I wasn’t sure if he still might be in a state of shock or denial.

“Are the souks really all destroyed?” I asked him.

He nodded. “I’ll have to relocate. But God willing I’ll be back on my feet.”

His restrained optimism was spoken out of a need to survive. His attitude would soon spread among Beirutis, not only during the civil war but even now. Perhaps it’s this

attitude, as positive in its resiliency as it may seem, that politicians take advantage of— they know their people are acclimatized to war and will do little to nothing to protest against it, and so they don't mind risking our lives to seek further political gain.

I helped my parents stock up on groceries and carried several bags home.

One day, workers installed an iron front gate to the entrance of our apartment building.

“We're taking safety precautions,” the superintendent told me. “You never know when the enemy might show up.”

We followed our neighbors' example and installed an exterior iron front door for our own apartment. Now, we had two front doors.

The nights passed in foreboding silence.

Nisreen told Baba that she and the girls were at a breaking point. They had grown tired of the nasty looks people gave them and were anxious about the continuing violence.

“They're thinking about moving to Cyprus,” Baba told me.

“Why Cyprus?”

“Because it's close and safe.”

“What would they do? Open another theatre?”

“I don't know.”

Baba arranged the girls' departure. He drove down to the port, which wasn't safe, and found Jawad and asked for his help. Jawad said a boat was leaving for Larnaca the next morning.

In the early hours of the morning, Baba and I drove to the suburb to say goodbye. As we waited for the taxi to arrive, Baba told Nisreen to call him as soon as they arrived in Cyprus.

“This might be for the best,” Nisreen said. “We’ll make a fresh start in Cyprus.”

“I’ll open my own restaurant,” Farah said.

“I just want to sing,” Zeina said.

“You can sing on Friday and Saturday nights at my restaurant.”

“Whatever we do, we won’t return to whoring,” Nisreen said. “Believe it or not, I’m looking forward to this move. I never had the courage to leave Bandar’s—was too scared of the unknown. And I loved the stage. Now, I have no choice. I have to begin again. But I still can’t believe Bandar is dead. God rest her. I thought she’d never die.”

A car honked. Zeina looked out the window. “The taxi is here.”

Baba and I helped them carry their suitcases down to the street. We tied two suitcases to the roof of the taxi. We weren’t sure if we’d ever see the girls again.

“I’ll write to you,” Zeina told me. “I’ll always write to you.”

As soon as the taxi drove away, Baba and I turned to each other in the dark. We embraced, and with our chests pressed and our faces touching, we wept. In silence, we drove home.

\*

Baba began drinking whiskey regularly, especially at night to help him sleep. He once passed out on the couch with the glass still clamped in his hand.

“Tell your father to quit drinking,” Mama told me.

“Why don’t you tell him?”

“He won’t listen to me.”

One night on the balcony, I relayed Mama’s message to Baba.

“I drink as much as the average man,” he said.

I pulled a cigarette from his pack. “You drink a lot, Baba.”

On another night, Baba awoke us with his ranting.

“They destroyed my store,” he yelled from the balcony. “Those motherfuckers ruined my business. They drove out the girls.”

I held his hand, trying to lead him inside. An empty whiskey bottle lay at his feet.

“Get off of me!” he said.

“Come inside, Halim,” Mama said. “Please, come to bed.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

Lights turned on in the apartments across from us. A man walked out onto his balcony and told Baba to shut up.

“Fuck you!” Baba said. “I’ll go over there and kick your ass.”

“We’re trying to sleep, you lousy drunk,” another man said.

“You woke up my children,” a mother said. “Shame on you.”

“Let’s sit down inside,” I told Baba. His breath was toxic. He kicked the whiskey bottle against the wall, shattering it to pieces.

“Don’t ever lay your hands on me again,” he told me, and returned inside. He lay on the couch and passed out. I removed his shoes and socks. Mama swept up the broken glass.

In the morning, Baba woke up feeling sick. He was bleary-eyed, his hair oily and disheveled. He had a two-day stubble. Mama and I heard him retching in the bathroom.

He skipped breakfast and listened to the radio as he smoked and drank coffee. Later, he apologized to us for the previous night.

“That won’t happen again,” he said.

But he didn’t lay off the alcohol. I told him he had to be strong like Jidu.

“Strong like Jidu?” he said, and laughed. I smelled the whiskey on his breath. “Do you still believe all his stories? The ones about the Turk? About him being the strongest man in Mount Lebanon? You do, don’t you?” He laughed again. “When are you going to grow up? Everything your grandfather told you were lies.”

“You’ve been drinking,” I said. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Why do you think your grandfather stopped visiting the girls?”

“He was old.”

“He was impotent. He couldn’t get it up.”

I went to my room before Baba had the chance to continue. I sat at my desk and placed my fingers on the keys of Bandar’s typewriter. Nothing came out. It was then that I realized I needed Jidu’s stories to be true—or for me to at least believe they were even partially true—as much as Baba needed to believe in Nisreen’s stories to survive.

Without these stories, I wasn’t so sure we could contend with what the day brought forth. It didn’t matter if they were lies; as long as we believed in them. Because if Baba knew Nisreen had made up Milhem, what would that say about their relationship? About all the years he spent pining for her?

“We need money,” Mama told Baba. “We can’t take out any more from Omar’s tuition fund.”



“I’m looking for work.”

“The job I told you about is still open.”

“I’m not a driver. I don’t work for anyone but myself.”

That night, Baba had another row on the balcony.

“I’m going to kill those motherfuckers,” he cried. “Going to kill them with my bare hands.”

Moments later, the superintendent rang our door.

“You have to control him,” he told me. “Neighbors are complaining.”

Mama and I begged Baba to return inside, but the more we begged, the louder he yelled.

The next day, he asked Mama to call Lamya for her client’s number. As he spoke to the husband of Lamya’s client, Mama and I waited nervously in the parlor. He hung up and joined us in the room.

“I start tomorrow morning,” he said.

Baba got up early. He shaved and slicked back his hair with brilliantine and scented himself with Bien-être. His collared shirt was neatly tucked into his creased pants; his shoes were shiny and emanated talcum powder as he walked.

He drank a cup of Nescafé and had a smoke at the kitchen table. Mama made him a labneh sandwich for breakfast. As he waited for the elevator, Mama and I stood at the front door. When the elevator came, we wished him good luck.

“See you later,” he said, and descended.

Baba returned at dusk. He retired to his room to change out of his clothes and took a long bath. At dinner, Mama asked him about his day.

“It was okay,” he said.

“How’s your boss? I mean your employer.”

“Fine.”

“Do you think this job will last?”

“Let me eat in peace, Salma.”

\*

On a cold December night, Baba and I sat together on the balcony. We had spoken to the girls earlier in the evening. They were waiting for their work visas to be processed before they looked for jobs. Meanwhile, they were trying to keep their expenses to a minimum.

“Larnaca is an ugly city,” Zeina told me. “But we’ve encountered a lot of Lebanese. They all fled the war. Guess what? I know a few words in Greek, like ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ and ‘thank you.’ I figure I should start learning the language. Maybe one day I can sing my songs in Greek.”

Baba was nursing his fourth glass of whiskey.

“It may be a while before this war ends,” he said.

The war was turning more barbaric. December 6 had been dubbed “Black Saturday.” Christian militants roved around the city streets in trucks and vans and set up roadblocks to round up Muslims for slaughter. The bloodbath continued into the following day. The victims’ bodies were later found on streets with their throats slit and

some with missing noses and ears. Many Muslims working at the port had been targeted. Baba and I feared Jawad was dead.

The Muslim retaliation to Black Saturday came swiftly. Muslim militias descended upon Christian sectors of the city, barged into apartments, and opened fire at families.

“We have to come to terms with our situation,” Baba said, looking out into the darkness, as if he were speaking to himself and not me. “I’m a driver now.”

“It’s only temporary.”

“Everything that I once had is gone. The girls are gone. The store is gone. Bandar and her theatre house are gone. Crazy Giant is gone. Mutanabi Street is gone.” He shook his head. “Our family history is gone.”

“We have to hope for the best,” I said, cringing at the sound of my banality.

“This war will kill us all, the whole damn country.”

“No, Baba. It’s ending.”

“Wait and see, son. Wait and see.”

The war would last for fifteen years.

## Epilogue

“Epilogue?” Murrone cries out. “You can’t just end your story like that. You need to cover the years from the breakout of the civil war until now. There has to be a *transition*.”

It’s nearly dawn. The electricity’s returned, which means we’re back in the red. A distant rumble of thunder doesn’t frighten us.

“There’s still a little more to go,” I say.

We smoke a cigarette. Once done, I go to the window for a breath of fresh air when I see him standing on the sidewalk, cast in the streetlight. I let out a small gasp, which Murrone catches. She throws her blanket aside and rushes to the window and looks out. She quickly draws back and stands against the wall.

“Get away from the window, Ammoura!”

Badr el Din is looking straight at me, his hands dug in his trench coat. A light rain falls on him, but he’s abandoned his umbrella.

“Omar!” Murrone screams.

I can’t stand the man’s presence anymore. He’s got Murrone scared for her life. Someone has to put an end to this. I walk to the corner of the room, pull off my overcoat from the rack, and slip it on.

“Where are you going?” Murrone asks. “You’re not done with your story.”

“I’m going to have a talk with Badr el Din.”

“He might kill you, Ammoura!” She rushes over to me, holding my hands. “It’s not safe out there.”

I loosen my hands from her grasp and hold her face, kissing her forehead. She looks up at me with frightened eyes.

“Wait,” she says. She goes to the bed and reaches for something between the mattress and headboard. A revolver. She hands it to me, saying the chamber is fully loaded.

“So you actually had a gun,” I say.

“It’s my last line of defense.”

The gun feels cold in my hands. Murrone points out the safety. I put the gun in my coat pocket and leave the room. I walk down the stairs and into the empty bar and unlock the front door. As soon as I step into the dark and smell the wet asphalt, powdery rain sprinkling my face, I see Badr el Din across the street.

“Excuse me,” I say, barely able to hear the sound of my voice. He walks down the street. “Excuse me!” My voice echoes across the neighborhood. I pick up my pace and spot Badr el Din turning the corner by a pharmacy, the tail end of his trench coat billowing behind him.

“Hey!” I say, and now I begin to run, splashing into puddles, hearing my heavy footsteps, passing overfilled dumpsters, but I’m not sure how fast I’m going, like the quicksand running we do in dreams. A cat skirts out of my way and growls. For a moment I see myself running through darkened streets on my way to Mutanabi Street, praying for my life, hoping that Bandar is still alive. My chest burns. Badr el Din turns down an alleyway. I stop and take a big, deep breath, and begin to cough. “Hey!” I say, my mouth filled with saliva. I spit, but the saliva sticks to my chin. I wipe it off and continue my chase, only now I’m in a cold sweat and I’m not sure how much longer I can

run. I turn into the alleyway. Badr el Din stands in the middle of the street. There are no streetlights, but dawn is breaking, the sky fading into a deep blue.

“Leave Murrone alone,” I say, panting.

Badr el Din walks toward me, water spraying from his shoes. I reach into my coat pocket.

“Hands out,” he says.

I keep my hands by my sides.

“Why are you after Murrone?” I say. “She doesn’t want to see you.”

He’s standing about a meter in front of me, looking at me in silence. His features come into focus with the brightening sky, his silver-black hair, his thick unibrow, his pink, bulbous nose.

“Can’t you just let her live in peace?” I say. “She’s been through enough.”

“Stay out of this,” he says in his accented Arabic that I can’t place. “I won’t warn you again.”

“You don’t scare me. I’ve seen worse thugs than you.”

“You have no idea who I am.”

“I couldn’t care less. Don’t come by the Candlelight anymore.”

“That place will be gone soon,” he says, his hand by his waist. “And so will Beirut. A change is coming that no one can stop. A revolution.”

He takes a step closer and I dig my hand in my coat pocket. We draw our guns at the same time.

“Put that down,” he says, his eyes steely cold. His gun is aimed at my head.

“Not until you put yours down,” I say, my hand shaking. I click off the safety.

An elderly man turns into the alleyway, sees us, and retreats. An upstairs window swings open and a woman pokes her head out. "My God!" she says, and pulls her head back in.

A calm comes over me. My hand has stopped shaking, my finger pressed on the trigger. I see Elvis aiming his Kalashnikov up at Truck Turner, and a moment later, following a volley of shots, Truck Turner falling down from the rooftop and crashing onto the street, hitting his head against the asphalt. His blood spreads thick. A pull of the trigger and Murrone will be safe from this man.

Badr el Din smiles, and returns his gun to his holster. I keep mine raised. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it. The sky has turned a clear blue. The rain has ceased.

"May God be with you," he says, and turning his back to me, walks down the alleyway. I follow him, but once I turn the corner, he's gone. I don't see him anywhere, and suddenly, I'm worried that he's on his way back to the Candlelight. I run to the brothel, where before I can even try to open the door, it's opened for me.

"Thank God!" Murrone says, pulling me inside and locking the door. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," I say, and sit on a barstool. "I need water."

She gets a jug of water from the kitchen and I drink greedily, tilting the spout above my open mouth.

"What happened?" she says.

"Let's go upstairs and I'll tell you everything."

We stand at the window, waiting to see if Badr el Din will return. The sweat has dried from my button-down shirt. Upon telling Murrone about my chase, I returned her gun. Once again, I refrained from mentioning Badr el Din's warning.

Birds chirp in the branches of the magnolia tree. A car honks down on the street.

"I can't believe you risked your life for me," Murrone says.

"He's still out there. You can't stay here anymore. It's not safe."

"I've got nowhere else to go."

"You can stay at a hotel for a while, or in a furnished apartment. I'll pay for it."

"I still need to make a living."

"We can find you another job."

"'We'? That's interesting." She returns to bed, crawls under the covers, and pats the side I've been lying on for hours. "You need to finish your story."

"After all that's happened? Really? I don't even remember where I left off."

"The epilogue," she says, and lets out a wide yawn.

"But you're tired. I'm tired."

"Finish your story."

I wonder about the life I could have lived if things hadn't taken a turn for the worse after the breakout of civil war in '75. Those fifteen years of war were a routine existence of depravity. My parents and I lived in a confined world in which clean water and electricity were limited. We preserved fresh water in plastic jerry-cans, which I filled from the neighborhood water tank. I'd wait for hours in line in the heat or cold.



Our nights were often lit by candles. Whenever the bombs started to drop, we went downstairs to the basement shelter and spent the night on foam mattresses among our neighbors. A child was always crying. A woman was praying. A man was cursing.

Food and petroleum shortages were as constant as the raining bombs. We spent our evenings in front of the TV. Going out to the movies were pastimes only remembered.

I became sluggish, benumbed by the daily routines. I was often depressed. Once I started working, I knew my playwriting days were over. I had to support my family. Baba was barely making any money as a driver.

One day, I gathered all my scripts into garbage bags and threw them out into the metal barrels. They were gathering dust in my room. But I didn't have the heart to toss out Bandar's typewriter, and kept it in a cardboard box in my closet.

As the years passed, Baba's drinking continued. He gained weight and looked scraggily, not always bothering to shave in the mornings. We'd smoke together on the balcony. Whenever I tried to reminisce about the past, he cut me short. He found the past too painful to mine, and tried his best to avoid memory triggers. If Abdel Wahab came on the radio, singing his sad romantic ballads, Baba quickly turned it off. He refused to watch televised plays. Once, when Mama brought home a wreath of gardenias, he told her to throw it out, as if the flowers were cursed. When she asked him why, he yelled at her. As for me, memory triggers—a woman's frizzy hair, the smell of Bengay and cinnamon, someone biting on their nails, the creak of a wooden floor, red light, red curtains, pistachio ice cream, Turkish Delights, a rosary, a large, muscular man—filled me with delicious melancholy, and reminded me that I once had meaning in my life.

As Baba slowly deteriorated, Mama remained strong and healthy. She had resumed taking her pills and began part-time coursework in Arabic literature at the Lebanese University, where she eventually earned her BA. In her spare time, she knitted blankets and outfits for my future children. She encouraged me to buy land in Kornayel. I did as I was told. I wasn't in the mood to argue.

I felt terribly lonely during the war years. I managed to sleep with a divorced woman from work—we dated secretly for half a year—but I hadn't been in love with her. And she wasn't interested in listening to my stories about Mutanabi Street, which I felt compelled to tell her.

“Get over it,” she told me. Maybe I didn't know how to tell my story?

I sought solace in the confiding letters I exchanged with Zeina. The girls were still living in Larnaca, and had done well for themselves. They put their finances together and rented a restaurant, which they called Farah's. Farah insisted the restaurant be named after her since it was her idea, and because she was the chef. The restaurant served traditional Lebanese home cooking. Three nights a week, Zeina sang songs on her lute in Greek and Arabic. Nisreen and Hind helped with the cooking and served the customers.

They all lived together in a rented house by the sea.

“You should visit us,” Zeina wrote to me.

I couldn't leave my parents alone, I explained. They needed me here.

In the winter of '88, Baba died of lung cancer. We buried him in Ras-el-Metn. Weeks later, Mama insisted that I marry. She said I didn't have to be embarrassed of Baba anymore, now that he was gone.

“I was never embarrassed of him,” I said.

The only consolation I got was from the girls.

“Your father was very dear to me,” Nisreen told me. “But he’s alive and breathing as we speak.”

Not surprisingly, she was still waiting for Milhem’s return.

Two years following Baba’s death, the war ended in 1990. Although peace was tenuously maintained, it was possible to walk the streets without fear of being killed. I drove to East Beirut, which I hadn’t ventured into for fifteen years. On my way, I passed through the wasteland of downtown. The buildings on either side of the streets were blackened and pockmarked. Floors had caved in. Metal wires twisted from gutted rooms.

I parked in an alleyway and walked up to Mutanabi Street. The street was unrecognizable. Many of the French Colonial style buildings had disappeared. I learned from a resident that there had been a cleanup in 1983 during a lull in the fighting. Half-destroyed buildings were razed to the ground and rubble was cleared. The Shooting Star was among the missing. For those buildings that still remained, their charming facades were riddled with bullets and blackened by fire.

I continued on, looking up at demolished floors and peering at interiors of rooms through gaping holes. The neon billboard of Aunt Roula’s hung vertically. Not once had I spotted Aunt Roula in her bridal gown.

At the end of the street, Bandar’s house still stood in ruins. Pigeons were roosting on the rubble of the caved-in floors. Through a hole in the wall, I peeked into the theatre room. The chairs were gone, the shelves of the bar torn down. Tiles were ripped from the black-and-white checkered floor. But the red velvet curtains with gold fringe still hung

above the stage, filled with the dust and mildew of decades, waiting for someone to pull them open.

I sunk into a deep depression. Mama thought marriage would pull me out of my despair. I didn't object.

My son Nadim was two or three when an unexpected change came over Hamra: Brothels sprouted in alleyways and side streets. They were easy to recognize with names such as the Candlelight, Tico Tico, and Guy's Bar, and by their neon signs and windowless walls and the doormen who sat outside in plastic chairs by the entrances. Some brothels were located in basements—one climbed down a flight of red-lit stairs to reach his savior for the night.

On my walks home from work, I intentionally walked past these brothels, hoping to glance inside when their front door was cracked open. I was a married man now, a family man. But the temptation was unrelenting.

The first time I entered one of these brothels and was immersed in red light, I became eighteen again. I looked at the bartender, expecting to find Crazy Giant. Instead, an old man asked what I wanted to drink. I ordered a rum and Pepsi and two shots of vodka. I knocked back the shots and sat down on a stool to gather myself. I surveyed the room. It was bare. There wasn't a stage at the other end.

The matron offered me a virgin. I wasn't sure if I wanted to talk or make love or both. And I didn't want to betray my wife. Either way, I preferred an experienced girl. A virgin would only unsettle me with her own anxiety.

The matron led me down a hallway and into a musty room in which a middle-aged woman named Noha sat on the bed. I had paid for an hour. I let her massage my back and shoulders.

“Take me into your arms,” I said.

She held my face to her bosom. I wrapped my arms around her and told her to stroke my hair. When the hour was up and the matron returned, I paid for another hour.

In the second hour, I spoke about Mutanabi Street—Noha had never heard of the street—and Baba’s store and Bandar’s girls. At the end of the hour, I paid for a third and continued my story.

I left the brothel feeling lighthearted for the first time in years, and also invigorated: I had brought Mutanabi Street back to life. I could almost smell the asphalt from all those years ago; taste Elvis’ sugary cups of Turkish coffee; feel Elizabeth the III’s leathery skin and the sensation of her false teeth landing on my bare chest. Importantly, I was still a faithful husband.

From that point on, whenever I felt blue, I visited Noha. We only talked, or rather, she only listened to my story. It was from our nights together that I began to shape my family history into a narrative.

“You’re a performer,” Noha said.

“Bandar once called me a soul doctor,” I said.

Perhaps all those years I had spent listening to Jidu’s stories, as well as Mama’s as she knitted, her metal needles clicking, and also listening to the stories of the Mutanabi women and Baba and the hakawatis of the souks in downtown, and all that time I spent watching films and writing screenplays and ultimately working for Bandar, perhaps all

that had prepared me for what I was now: the last performer of Mutanabi Street. It didn't matter that I paid my audience, as long as I had one to keep the story of the street alive. My stage was a room for hire, my spotlight a red bulb burning bright.

But one night, the matron introduced me to a new girl with frizzy black hair—she had a mole above her upper lip, I remember. I made love to her with abandon. It was the best sex I had had since sleeping with Tala. When I returned home, I headed straight to the shower.

I canvassed all the brothels of Hamra, and became known among the girls. I performed for them as well, keeping them up through the early hours with the twists and turns of my narrative.

One evening, Mama and Lamya, who were out on an evening stroll, spotted me leaving Guy's Bar. I pretended not to have noticed them and continued on. At home, Mama pulled me inside her room and in frantic whispers, said she saw me leaving a brothel. There was no point in denying her allegation. She slapped my face. "You're as bad as your father!"

"Leave Baba out of this."

Mama was screaming at me when my wife Ayda entered the room. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh nothing, my dear," Mama said.

"Ayda, I have something to tell you," I said.

"No you don't," Mama hissed.

I motioned for Ayda to follow me into our bedroom.

“There’s a lot I need to tell you,” I said, and began with Jidu’s move down from the mountains in the 1920s. I gave her an abbreviated version of my past so as to explain my visits to the brothels of Hamra. Following my story, Ayda said she couldn’t sleep in the same bed as me. I ended up sleeping on the couch. I slept on the couch for months.

Ayda wanted a divorce, but divorce, as she saw it then, was a worse option. And we had a child to raise.

“If you love our son, I want you to stop visiting those dirty places,” she told me.

“I love my son regardless of what I do.”

I continued visiting the brothels, and got used to Mama and Ayda’s silent treatment.

“You’re a selfish husband and father,” Mama told me.

“You don’t understand me,” I told her. “You’ve never understood me.”

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These days, whenever I enter a brothel in Hamra, I first look to the bar, hoping to find one of Bandar’s old clients: Bahaa the Ass Man and Charbel the Sinner; Ralph Najjar, the obituary writer; and Samer Saab, who broke his penis one fateful night.

As for Bandar’s girls, it’s been thirty-nine years since I last saw them. I’m only in contact with Zeina; we exchange emails once or twice a year. She married her longtime boyfriend Dmitri KaKoulidis. In a picture from her wedding, the girls stand together on a terrace overlooking the sea, decked out in glamorous gowns—Zeina is in a flowing white dress. Her boyish hair is dyed dark purple. She’s aged, and so have Nisreen, Hind, and Farah, who all have grey hair. It’s difficult to look at them without picturing the other members of Bandar’s house.

The girls still run their restaurant, which they eventually bought. They have Cypriot nationalities and speak fluent Greek. Although it's a short flight to Beirut, they're disinclined to visit. They consider Cyprus home.

I've contemplated visiting them. But I fear if I see them in person, the image I have retained of them in my memories will be broken. I cherish them as they once were. As for Nisreen, I hold no grudge against her. She needed her story as much as I need mine today. The truth is what you're willing to believe.

"I'm sixty-two years old," Zeina wrote in her last email. "I never thought that I'd meet someone who'd accept my past. I think I'm finally happy."

My daughter brings me much happiness. Loulwa's the only person in the house who feels for me. Although she's sixteen, she's mature beyond her years—I worry that she's too mature for her own good. She's an exceptional actress. She's got the role of Miranda in a school production of *The Tempest*. Opening night is a couple of weeks away. I like to think that my influence on her turned her to acting. As Nadim was more interested in playing basketball, I took Loulwa out to the movies. I told her about the plays I wrote for Bandar's, including *The Last Room on the Left*. She couldn't believe her father was once an artist.

"Did you save any of your scripts?" she asked.

"I threw them all away."

Loulwa aspires to be a professional actress. Mama and Ayda both want her to be a doctor, and blame me for corrupting her.



Unlike Nadim, Loulwa asks me about my past. She loves listening to stories, especially the ones about Jidu.

“Did the hulky Turk really exist?”

“That’s for you to decide.”

One of my greatest pleasures is watching Loulwa perform on stage, having helped her memorize her lines by reading the other parts. Seated in the audience, I hear like a song from the past the creaking of Bandar’s stage and the swish of the velvet curtains. The spotlight is hot on my face, the room smoky and reeking of sweat and spilled beer. Bandar stands in the back with her clipboard pressed against her chest and Crazy Giant serves drinks at the bar, dressed like an Indian warrior. Shams announces my name in her husky voice over the microphone—“Tonight’s play has been written by an up-and-coming playwright named Omar Aladdine”—and the men cheer me on.

I conceal my emotions as best I can from my mother, wife, and son. They think I’m ultra-sensitive. Whenever Nadim catches sight of my gleaming tears, he avoids me.

Before every one of Loulwa’s performances, I wish her the same: “Break a heart!”

## Curtain Call

I take out a hundred-dollar bill and place it on the dresser. My throat is sore.

“Come over here,” Murrone says. I sit on the bed and embrace her, her breasts pressing against my chest. She kisses my forehead. “Thanks for your story, Mr. Soul Doctor. I’m not sure how much I believe in what you’ve told me for all these hours, but I feel very sorry for you.”

“You’ve lost a lot, too.”

“No, it’s not that. I was lucky enough to fall in love. Real, romantic love. I know I was a kid when I fell for Saladin, but still, I got the chance to experience the thrill of being in love, the electric joy of waking up every day to thoughts of him. Even his text messages invigorated me. I ached for him—literally, my heart would hurt for him. But then the war broke out.”

I ask Murrone what she’s trying to get at.

“Ammoura, habibi, you might be a lot older than me, but I don’t think you’ve ever been in love. And that makes me sad for you.”

“Of course I have,” I say, raising my voice. “How do you explain Diala?”

“That’s not love. Call it what you will, but it’s not love.”

“I never felt more loved than when I was on Mutanabi Street.”

“I don’t doubt that.” She yawns, covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

“My name is Maryam Sadek. Next time, ask for Maryam.”

“I’ve seen you at the Concord movie theatre,” I confess. “A few times.”

“I’ve seen you, too, eating your chocolate bars all alone.”

I kiss her lips, our tongues locking. We kiss hard, my palm on her face, her fingers combing through my hair. Saliva leaks from the corners of our mouths. On and on we kiss. She moans. I harden. But then she turns her face, breathing hard. We laugh.

I tell her she's the best audience I've ever had.

"I'll be waiting for you," she says. And then she sits up, her eyes ablaze. "Do you still have Bandar's typewriter?"

I nod. "It's still in its box."

"What if we write something, Ammoura? Like a film script?! We'd work great together."

"I haven't used that typewriter since I was eighteen. I'm not sure if it even works anymore."

"If it doesn't work we'll use a laptop. We'll even include a romantic death scene in our script!"

At this I perk up. "I wonder if I've still got it, if I had it in the first place. It's been a long, long time."

"There's only one way to find out. My days are free."

"I work during the day."

"We can write at night. I'll make you as much coffee as you want," she says, clapping her hands excitedly. "And if we write a really good film and sell it to a producer and make money, I can leave this place for good. What do you say, Ammoura?"

A part of me worries that we're running on false hope. That we're naïve as children who believe wholeheartedly in achieving their ambitions, no matter how farfetched the ambitions are. But to write again excites me.

“If we’re going to do this,” I say, “we should start by brainstorming ideas.”

“Come back tonight.”

“It depends on my family,” I say, feeling deflated. “I’m not sure I can get away.”

“Please try,” she says. “What if Badr el Din comes back while you’re gone?”

“Then you’ll call me immediately.”

We exchange cell numbers. I insist on putting her up at a hotel.

She shakes her head. “I’m getting myself out of here. But I don’t mind your help when it comes to writing. I’ve never written a screenplay before.” She stretches herself out on the bed, yawning. “If our film is picked up and Saladin sees my name in the credits, he’ll be impressed.”

I wonder if I can replace Saladin.

She closes her eyes and is fast asleep, her breathing as soft as misty rain. My performance is finally over. I’m not the least bit tired, wired on hours of storytelling and the prospect of writing a new script.

I put on my overcoat, tighten my scarf around my neck, and walk down the stairs. The house is silent. I take my umbrella from the foyer, unlock the front door, and step outside. Puddles of rainwater sparkle at the curb. I look to and fro, grateful not to find Badr el Din. I turn the corner and at a bakery order a thyme mankoushi with pickles and radishes and wash it down with a bottle of laban ayran. An army truck passes by. I continue down Bliss Street toward the sea.

At the Corniche men and women in track suits walk up and down the promenade. A teenage couple on rollerblades weaves between joggers. A sunburned man sells fresh orange juice from his wooden cart. The waves crash into the rocks, sending sprays of

seawater over the railing. Greyish-black clouds hang in the sky, and yet the sun is still bright, breaking through the sludge. A seagull perched on the railing squawks.

I buy coffee from a vendor, who lugs around a thermos and a tower of plastic orange cups. The coffee tastes bitter. I sip it at the railing. Freighters dot the horizon. A plane cuts across and descends for landing at the runway jutting out into the sea.

I move on, arriving in downtown where construction cranes tower above. The area has been rebuilt and bears little resemblance to its former self. The new souks are a collection of fancy boutiques and western shops that only the wealthy can afford. The hakawatis have disappeared.

The Martyrs' Statue stands in the center of an empty square, its bronze figures pockmarked with bullet holes. The garden that once lay in the center of the square, outlined with palm trees, is gone, as is the Rivoli Cinema and the rest of the shops that once lined the avenues. A Virgin Megastore now stands tall, and an enormous sandstone mosque with blue domes of Turkish style. Down from the mosque is a memorial site for the former prime minister, who was assassinated in 2005.

I pass the port and walk down the highway, on the right of which are wide empty spaces used for parking. Mutanabi Street once occupied this land. The surviving buildings from the cleanup in '83, including Bandar's, were demolished in the early nineties when the city was being rebuilt.

I come across Gemmayzeh Street, which reminds me most of Mutanabi Street with its French Colonial style buildings. Cafés and restaurants and pubs and clubs line either side of the one-way street. At night, it becomes raucous with the partying youth.

I walk past the police station and stop at a small grocery store to buy a pack of cigarettes and a bar of chocolate. On my way out, I spot a young woman dusting an iron-wrought table on the balcony of a second-floor Argentinean restaurant. Potted plants hang from the balustrade. I light a cigarette and watch her, remembering the baskets the Mutanabi girls lowered down from their balconies. I wish I had had the foresight to collect objects from Bandar's so that now, all these years later, I could touch and smell them in dusty, archival bliss. I could have saved combs and brushes and bottles of perfume from the dressing room; the bed sheet Diala and I made love on or her tin can of Bengay; Crazy Giant's headdress; a wooden chair from the theatre or an ashtray from the bar. All I have is a striped red scarf that Nisreen knitted, the one around my neck, and Bandar's typewriter. Thinking of the typewriter, I wonder if my adolescent dream of becoming a screenwriter will finally come to fruition. As in my past, I'll have a co-writer. I'm sure we'll work well together—she's as bright as can be—but as soon as I think this, I'm reminded of logistics. How do I explain this to my family? Where do I even start? And what if Badr el Din returns tonight?

The woman on the balcony finally notices me. "We're not open."

"Oh, I'm just looking."

She becomes suspicious. I walk on.

"Ammoura!" someone cries out.

I turn around. I only see the backs of people walking the other way. I look up at the balconies and find them empty. No one is ahead of me. But someone keeps calling my name.

The End

## G H A S S A N   A B O U - Z E I N E D D I N E

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### Education

- University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2011-present)  
PhD in English with a Creative Writing Emphasis  
Magna Cum Laude
- Columbia University (2003-2005)  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
- George Washington University (1998-2002)  
Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Minor in Creative Writing  
Cum Laude

### Teaching and Work Experience

- Teaching Assistant, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2012- Present)  
(Courses taught: Introduction to Creative Writing, Writing Fiction)  
  
Assistant Coordinator of the Creative Writing Program (2012-2015)  
  
Program Assistant, Arab and American Lecture Series (2012-2013)
- Instructor, American University of Beirut (2008-2011)  
(Courses taught: Introductory and Advanced Composition, Introduction to Creative Writing, Advanced Fiction and Creative Nonfiction).  
  
Faculty Advisor (and founder) to *The Banyan Tree*, AUB's literary journal, and advisor to the UNESCO Club (2009-2011)

### Publications

- "The Matriarchs of Margarida," *Fiction International*, Issue 48 (Fall 2015)
- "The Prince of Martyrs," *Witness Magazine*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (Spring 2015)
- "The Curse of the Al-Turks," *Iron Horse Literary Review*, Vol.15, No.15 (December 2013)
- Co-editor of English Composition Textbook *Shades of Gray* (Pearson, 2009)

- *My Summer Birthday* (a book for children) (Beirut: Asala Publishers, 2009)

### **Awards and Grants**

- Distinguished Dissertation Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2015-2016)
- American Writer's Program Association Journals Fiction Award Winner (2013)
- Thomas Bontly Faculty Fiction Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2012-2013)
- Sheila Roberts Prize, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2013)
- James A. Sappenfield Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2011-2012)
- Andrew W. Mellon grant for the humanities, American University of Beirut (2009)
- Writing fellowship, Columbia University (2003-2005)
- Vivian Nellis Memorial Prize for exhibiting professional promise in the field of creative writing, George Washington University (2002)

### **Service**

- Assistant Coordinator of the Creative Writing Program, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2012-2015)

Duties: serving as a bridge between the student body and faculty; mentoring incoming creative writing instructors and graduate creative writing students; organizing all creative writing events, including United We Read Student/Faculty Reading series; working in conjunction with bookstores, cafes, and other venues across Milwaukee in hosting departmental readings; updating the program website and social media page; communicating with prospective students, etc.

- Program Assistant, Arab and American Lecture Series, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2012-2013)

Duties: scheduling lectures, readings, and sale of books; organizing itineraries; promoting the series over social media, etc.



- Founder and Managing Editor of *The Banyan Tree*, American University of Beirut (2009-2011)

Duties: assisting student editors with selection of pieces for publication, editing, layout and graphic design, promotion, distribution, etc.

### **Conferences, Readings, Interviews**

- American Folklore Society's Annual Conference, 2012  
New Orleans, Louisiana  
Panel: Contextualizing Narrative  
Paper: "Stories within Stories: The Personal Narrative as Frame Tale in Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati*"
- An Evening of International Fiction with Thomas E. Kennedy and Ghassan Abou-Zeineddine (2013)  
Hosted by the New American Press  
Friday, September 20 at People's Books Cooperative  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Mohsin Hamid, author of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, in conversation with Ghassan Abou-Zeineddine (2013)  
Co-sponsored by the Eleventh Annual UWM Spring Writer's Festival  
Friday, March 8 at Boswell Books  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

### **Languages**

Fluent in English, Proficient in Arabic

### **Research interests**

Anglophone Arab literature, comedy and folklore in fiction writing, short story cycles, creative writing pedagogy, food in novels, modern playwriting