THE IMMIGRANT WRITER

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DEDICATION

For my mother who has taught me to imagine

ABSTRACT

The Immigrant Writer

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The Immigrant Writer consists of a collection of three short stories. Although the stories are semi-autobiographical, they still belong to the realm of fiction, a distinction that is important to me as a writer. Fiction allows the imagination to soar and the truth to become more palpable. The three stories included here are in a specific order, tracing the progression of the writer's life starting in his apartment in Brooklyn, his visit to the old country, and finally his presence in an apartment in New York. As typical of most immigrant writers, these stories straddle two continents. It is in the clash and polarization of the many settings and characters that something about life and the world is revealed. My attempt is to expose the way family, friends, settings create and re-create who we are. With all the trouble we go about trying to avoid people and situations, we find ourselves recreating the present through the entanglements and impositions of the past.

The critical introduction exposes the paradoxical concept of the immigrant writer, who, at the very end, hopes to become simply a writer. The research focuses on Juno Diaz, Jhumpa Lahiri, and John Cheever. The first two are immigrant writers, while John Cheever is the ultimate American writer. The inclusion of the first two writers helps emphasize the problems (the psychic split, the alienation) the immigrant writers go

through as they establish themselves in a new country. Cheever's presence is like a foil character, exposing the heretical concept of the immigrant writer while emphasizing writerly elements considered to be the domain of any writer who has been displaced. This research is in conversation with the three writers who have indeed experienced a sense of exile, have been displaced and have attempted through their writings to expose the world as it unfolds while trying to live and make sense of it. It is from these attempts that the concept of the immigrant writer emerges.

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INTRODUCTION

The immigrant writer: a true paradox. The noun flanked with an adjective creates a sense of division, with immigrant writers set apart from the native ones. We become a breed of our own, distinguished by a desperate voice (wanting to be heard), by a series of childhood experiences that climax with the immigration to the new land, by a constant feeling of alienation (which ironically has started before the displacement), and by a sense of being in exile, even after we have long settled in the new land.

In "New Ways of Being," an article by Parul Sehgal, the author argues that "the idea of a literature of migration seems to have fallen out of fashion—not with readers but with writers, some of whom chafe at being narrowly categorized" (27). After all, those elements that supposedly brand a writer as an immigrant one are, in fact, the bread and butter of all writers. Which writer doesn't draw from his or her own experiences? Which writer doesn't feel alienated? And which writer doesn't feel he/she is in exile? True, immigrant writers come with different emotional baggage. Our 'past' history is tied intimately to our present history. And we should not forget one irrevocable aspect of some immigrant writers: their skin color. That, by itself, brings with it another set of challenges. But even when color is not the issue, we cannot underestimate the losses incurred when a writer fully assimilates into a new culture. Culture, traditions, ritual, language, food and dress: all these will be sacrificed in one way or another. How does an immigrant writer deal with this loss? And at what cost? What happens to the psyche of an immigrant writer when he sees himself denuded of all what makes him 'him'?

In my search for my own identity as an immigrant writer, I have decided to explore certain writers such as Junot Diaz and Jhumpa Lahiri who, like me, are immigrant writers. They have crossed countries and continents in search of a new life. I purposely omitted the term 'better life' simply because it is, at the very end, all relative. As Mr. Meursault in *The Stranger* said upon being offered a job in Paris, "it was all the same to me…people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another…" (Camus 41).

It is indeed a matter of perception. Diaz and Lahiri depict people who live isolated, alienated from the main society. Their struggles are those of people who want and try to fit in, but in the process, something perhaps predictable, something from within, comes doubling down on them. The word 'predictable' purposely highlights the psyche that remains one of the most crucial forces preventing an immigrant from integrating into the main society. In that way, I like to show how, sometimes, the native writer becomes the immigrant himself when certain challenges and circumstances looms on his horizon, which leads us to another writer I chose to be part of my research: John Cheever.

I consider John Cheever, an American writer, a source of inspiration in the double sense that his writing has helped me understand my own, and as a writer who lived in his own exile, (something I shall explore in this paper), Cheever embodies the spirit of the immigrant writer par excellence. Perhaps his presence serves to highlight the fact that it is paradoxical to call a writer anything but a writer. In *Home Before Dark,* Cheever's daughter Susan writes "…I began to understand my father's sense of being an exile. Like

many of my father's stories, his version of the schism has an inherent truth, outside the facts (19). True, it is a schism or split, and while almost all writers deal with this factor in their writing, I would like this paper to support the claim that what makes an immigrant writer is this very emphasis on schism, which is the result of being in exile (or even the cause for exile in certain conditions), and ultimately shapes the concept of the immigrant writer. From the sense of exile, and from the split, a new sense of 'self' is born, replete with ordinary events, people and details, lots of details, making the writing even more idiosyncratic.

Cheever's stories document the harrowing sense of exile that penetrates the psyche of every writer. His characters are American people who don't belong, and consequently, "alienated by an idea of order implied by the suburb they presume inhabited by people antithetical to them..." (Facknitz). Similarly, Diaz claims that "there is nothing like the trauma of losing one's country and gaining another. It makes recollection very, very sharp" ("Guns and Roses"). And Lahiri is quite sympathetic to her parents' sense of exile, since it is that "that has informed her writing" (Lister). Indeed, it is the recollection that haunts the immigrant writer, for he has both the past and the present memories, and as he straddles two different worlds, his schizophrenic existence will accentuate the schism with one set of memories, values and traditions clashing with the new ones. In this psychic struggle, the mind is ever alert and the feeling of alienation augmented. I find sometimes a phone call from the other world symbolic of this psychic struggle, for while it tries to bridge two realities, it constantly reaffirms the exile, whereby at the end of the phone call, one sense of belonging is split

into two different orbs, so that even if one is living in a new world, forging new relations, the “I” is never cohesive. Alpana Sharma-Knippling, in "Loss And Recuperation Of Immigrant Identity,” reminds us that we cannot understand the essence of an immigrant writer if we do “not take full and passionate stock of the agony registered on the human psyche by a loss of ancestral identity and everything involved in the necessary mourning and recuperation of identity.” Clearly the loss cannot be understated. It separates the immigrant writer from the native ones, and in the vast chasm that presents itself early on as he embarks on his journey to the new land, the writing experience becomes the personal experience along with the excitement, danger and grief he will be experiencing on his journey. At the very end all writers are wanderers, like Odysseus. Immigrant or not, we all seek Ithaca. However, “for all Odysseus’s longing to return, he can never go back to the same place as the same person,” and if he does, he will find out that “things change, and, inevitably, so do people” (Kellman).

In my research, I have chosen to concentrate first on the short story. Burt Struthers claims that this form has “the same limitations of space, of concentrated emotion, of characters, of theme and events” (9). This is exactly why I like writing short stories. They reduce the events to one point of focus and open vistas onto the vast scope of the human struggles and dilemmas. As a research and writer, I have also decided to divide this paper into four distinctive parts which, I believe, will help enlarge the concept of the immigrant writer. The four elements I provide in this paper help understand myself and others as writers.

The four parts are:

Settings and props

Characters and Names

Themes of schism and exile

Voice and authorial presence

As I mentioned earlier, while these elements are not the strict domain of immigrant writers, I have found that in the intensity allotted to these specific elements, they become almost exclusive to the immigrant writer. By that I mean, they become the coat of arms that distinguishes an immigrant writer from the rest. In that sense, I would like to talk about setting in relation to props; about characters who exist with or without names; about themes that embody schism and exile; and, finally, about the specific voice and authorial presence that emerge only in exile.

I. Settings and Props (the surreal experience)

The three stories I have selected for this paper are set in the States and Lebanon; Lahiri's stories in India and America; Diaz in the Dominican Republic and America. Cheever's stories are set in the past and present, which also delineates the same problem: an existence that is splintered. Ashley Kunsa in "History, Hair and Reimagining Racial Categories" in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" talk about the author's experiment, suggesting that the novel "continually transgresses the usual boundaries, signifying its desire to place itself in an as yet undefined space. Moving readers back and forth…Diaz demonstrates the multiple and inseparable histories that combine to create racial categories." If anything, this crossing of boundaries displays "the shifting, mutable nature of classifications" (Kunsa 212). One of the elements that

distinguishes an immigrant writer is his inability to classify himself within one setting, or to accept that such defined setting exists. Early on, the immigrant writer is exposed to new environments, which constantly shape his consciousness. In my story "Gideon Bachman," the basement apartment in Brooklyn where the protagonist and his guest interact becomes the symbolic context that knits the story together. To get to the apartment, "one has to descend a few stairs, face a black metal gate, and beyond that another door, gray" (Trad 47). In this setting, the protagonist lives in isolation, in an incarcerated space that feels like a prison. And this prison replicates the state of mind where the protagonist exists: alone and hidden. Susan Cheever reminds us how the sense of homelessness and exile penetrated every aspect of her father's life and work. "Although we were often miserable about having no real home, we were also proud to be nomads" (83). Cheever's characters roam in destabilizing suburban environments, which act like a force in the same way the basement, the upper deck on a military boat, or a tiny tenement apartment in the village in my fiction do: they shape and exert power on the psyche.

In her book *John Cheever,* Lynn Waldeland claims that location in Cheever's stories "functions very much like a character in these stories" (63). It is also true about many of the settings described in this paper. Due to the unsettled and shifting environments of the immigrant writer, every place ensnares him and ultimately defines his consciousness. Again, the protagonist's presence between the two gates leading to his basement apartment becomes the ultimate nowhere territory, where his life has been meandering for a while ("Gideon Bachman" 47). A similar dynamic is echoed in my

other story "Aboard in the USS Nashville." There the protagonist, who is fleeing another war, finds himself estranged in the middle of nowhere between two cities in Lebanon, in a place that doesn't exist on a map, "a barren spot smack in the middle of nowhere," carved temporarily by the military to return American Lebanese immigrants back to the United States (Trad 100). While by the nature of wars, people feel stranded, the immigrant writer sees in this nowhere land more of a symbolic existential dilemma, for where he is, at this moment, is no different from being in his newly adopted homeland, and no different from the land he has long ago left behind.

Junot Diaz explores the same sentiment in one of the stories titled "Otravida Otravez" from his book *This is How You Lose Her*. The story revolves around Ramon, working immigrant, who is trying to buy a place where he and his lover will eventually move. The fact that he can, at this point in his life, buy a house is a miracle. Ramon's lover, the protagonist in the story, explains that "Only the ones who never swerve, who never make mistakes, who are never unlucky" (57), are finally able to buy a house. But the dilemma that presents itself is compounded by the fact that no one will sell a house to a Latino man. And worse, the protagonist wonders if he will take her with him when he finally finds a house. This inability to find or settle in a home displays a primal fear; that somehow in settling down, one loses his essence; that the struggle that defines one is no longer existent. Hence, the struggle to belong becomes, in itself, the goal—not the settling or nesting. Ironically, by losing the struggle, one loses his identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates what happens when we lose that goal in her short story "A Temporary Matter." The two immigrants become mere observers of life after

Shoba loses her baby during delivery. Because they need and depend on each other, they become like their neighbors—settled. They are lost and cannot relate to others. Almost at the very end of "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri writes that "they had stopped attending parties, went nowhere together" (15), and in the evening, due to power outage, they sit outside on the porch watching the Bradfords, their neighbors, and other people in the neighborhood, "walking arm in arm" (22). They become typical couples in a suburban home, watching others. Ironically, it is only during an outage with a few candles lit that the couple can communicate with one another. Using the simple prop of a candle, the author recreates a primitive setting, shorn of the encroachment of the new suburban culture. Our Indian couple is finally able to relate to one another.

The prop becomes the setting; its presence is crucial in shaping the atmosphere and reveals so much of the psyche of the writer. Waldeland writes that "The handling of setting and the placement of evocative details or anecdotes is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Cheever's fiction" (72). And it is true for most of Lahiri and Diaz's stories. The immigrant writer cannot avoid props. They define him. In "The Country Husband," Francis Weed "crossed the city and caught…the commuting train that he took five nights a week to his home in Shady Hill" (*The Stories of John Cheever* 386). Francis Weed catches that train after his plane almost crashed and he survives. The details of his house with the room "polished and tranquil" (386) becomes as mundane and trivial as the arguments his family has that night, as they totally ignore the fact that Francis almost got killed on the plane early in the morning.

Similarly, in one of my stories "The Biafra Man," the apartment's little details, such as the paintings, become the only marker the protagonist has left to remind him of who he is after a long sickness. And if it is not an object in his apartment, then it must be in the details he sees outside, which becomes part of his own setting. During the crucial phone call to his uncle, the protagonist first looks out the window into the schoolyard, which is empty. Then, facing someone in the window, he sees "a mother…holding a baby in her arm…In the early rising light, her face, the face of a passionate mother, with large protruding eyes that lent them a kind of devotion, was rather prepossessing**"** (Trad 167). The protagonist longs to be in her arms, "a child again, with no worry, no symptoms, and no pain to rock" his day (Trad 167). At that moment, the presence of that woman, positioned in another apartment across from his, brings the moment to a climax; it is always in the presence of others, situated in a specific milieu, in this case across from his window, and in Francis's case in the dining room around his family, that one's longing and fear are emphasized. Cheever does that over and over, when the bowl of fruit, an unimportant detail, becomes "the centerpiece, and especially the almost sterilized good housekeeping of Julia Wee is underlined," thus highlighting that specific trait in her (Waldeland 73). In "Gideon Bachman," the protagonist is face to face with an urn of ashes. "Squeezed neatly between two books as if it has always belonged there, the grayish ash sits tranquil in the jar" (60). Against that simple prop, the protagonist realizes his ultimate dilemma: his loneliness. "The resilience of burned flesh…the compacted essence of a soul is quite banal but freeing" (60). Freeing, in the sense that he knows he is trapped, alone, and he has so much work to do.

Immigrant writers have a keen sense of artifacts and props. In addition to the fact that they shape the setting, they also measure—in their idle presence—the extent to which the protagonist feels he or she belongs. In Diaz's "Otravida, Otravez," the main character's job is to clean the bloodstained sheets in a hospital. She decides which ones are worth cleaning or discarding (*This Is How You Lose Her* 67). The images of blood and stain on white sheets in the laundry room create a gloomy setting for the cleaner whose life has been "bloodied" and stained by her move from one country to another. However, it is in this setting where she feels most at home, for it reminds her what her life has been so far. Similarly, "A plate of peanut butter crackers and a Jesus trivet become, in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, icons of alienation and loneliness**"** (Bess). Sometimes Lahiri uses food as a prop. In "Mrs. Sen," the character with the same name wants to buy fresh fish. This act shows the character's inability to exist in the new culture and further "convey[s] her strong attachment to her [own] culture" (Lister). Cheever's story "O Youth and Beauty!" emphasizes the furniture of the house as the main character Cash, an aging athlete, moves them to "fashion a series of hurdles that [he] will use in a vain attempt to recapture youth" (O'Hara 35). His jumps in between the large props are crucial to Cash; this is his way to recapture his essence, the hero he was. Sometimes, I let the prop in the bedroom become the main part of the setting, so that the essence of the character is fully revealed:

> The space well organized: covers and sheets in the four drawers under the bed, an extra mattress stuck behind a large bookshelf, crates in every closet, every three or four forming a little bridge under which shoes or books fit snugly. A small oak

> desk in the bedroom against the window overlooks the little outdoor garden, a cherished space in the city. In the tiny kitchen, the same discipline is applied: ironing board behind the fridge, and a few pans and mugs hang from every possible space the six cupboards offer. ("Gideon Bachman" 48)

From the setting and the props emerges a character, not spontaneous but rather calculated, which is his way to be in control of his emotions and his life. The structured setting is important when Gideon arrives. In this invasion, everything is upside down, and the protagonist finds himself at times trying to control the heat the guest has generated by raising the temperature in the apartment during the night. The heat becomes the metaphoric image that displays the protagonist's incapability in forging strong, lasting relationships and which comes to haunt him the more the guest makes his presence more palpable. Even the Shakespeare hat becomes the focus in "Aboard the USS Nashville" as the protagonist is lost between two worlds. "Instead of worrying about the sun, I keep obsessing about the hat. I want to know whether it was purchased or given to my father. And if so, when? Would he ever have attended a Shakespeare Play? Which one? I even contemplate calling him" (126). This obsession is a psychological transference, projecting on the hat all the feelings of displacement and expecting a solution as he tries to find a symbolic meaning behind the hat. Immigrant writers need the props for their settings. Props, specifically props within settings, define them, they fuel their energy, and with all the anxieties and expectations they generate, these writers understand they cannot live without them.

II. Characters (With or Without Names)

Characters in a short story act like people in a dream; their presence represents the multi-complex personality of the dreamer. If they speak, they express (in one way or another) what is on the dreamer's mind. The writer does the same thing with his characters. Their existence belies the fact that he depends on them to define himself. Consequently, the assemblage of all these eclectic characters bring not necessarily comfort as much as a heightened awareness or even clarity of where he is now. In one of Cheever's stories, "The Enormous Radio," the couple becomes obsessed with the neighbors, eavesdropping on them through the radio. At first, they are intrigued. However, "by dwelling on the unhappiness of others, Irene [the protagonist]" ruins "her own life" (D'Amassa). This story epitomizes the plight of the immigrant writer who needs the others to gauge his well-being. In his dependence on people he encounters, he becomes splintered. In this way, the task is daunting: everything becomes double-edged: every face has its 'old' double, every feeling its antecedent, and every situation its parallel in a former world. Shifting from one place to another, he knows he cannot avoid the "other." The scenario is clear: through the mist of the unknown, he soldiers on. He ties himself to others so that he understands the culture.

He writes about his adventures through these interactions, but finds himself often excluded. It is like a tug-of-war, wanting to go there, yet worried about letting go. The split feeling (almost schizophrenic) cannot be avoided. In both "Gideon Bachman" and **"**The Biafra Man," the protagonist's phone calls to his mom and his uncle respectively serve to accentuate his inability to be present at the moment. That even if fifteen or twenty years have elapsed, a character from the past will emerge exerting power on his

existence. It is not a happy existence, for to be in both places means to be torn between the old and the new. Hence the writer's psyche is split, unable to bridge both existences.

Characters from the past are connected to a certain psychological dynamic. They lurk in the mind of the immigrant writer, they suffocate him, and he cannot extract himself from their grasp. In "The Biafra Man," the character of the uncle (the healer) ironically ushers a regression, which wreaks havoc on the protagonist's mind. At one point, he says, "If I have fallen back on him, my uncle, my enemy, it is only out of self-contempt or deep loneliness, and perhaps he's right, I need someone to sit at a table next to me, eat and converse with me…Walking back to my apartment, it feels I'm going back in time, with every footstep forward, two steps backward" (178). It is a regression that highlights the inability to escape. But if characters from the past haunts him, it is because his new ground is not solid. Will he ever be accepted? Will he be able to integrate himself fully in this new world? Will he be able to forget the past? As the immigrant writer is trying to exist in the moment, new people (or lack thereof) can usher in regression. For a long time, having lived alone with his mom, Diaz always has that fear of not being fully integrated. He claims that, "It's terrible to not see yourself reflected in the larger culture. You become a ghost" ("Guns and Roses"). No wonder many stories in *Drown* depict Yunior (the main character in almost all the stories) with his mom watching T.V. In this idle, lonely and wasted life, they have only each other and a television set. This is the same feeling that haunts Diaz's father as he first arrives in Miami. "In the darkness," the author tells us in his story "Negocios," "he could see little of Northamerica [sic]. A vast stretch of cars, distant palms and a highway that reminded

him of the Máximo Gómez" (*Drown* 167*).* Because he knows nobody, because he has no friends nor acquaintances, every little detail he sees becomes a mirror to his own lonely soul. His dad becomes unable to see the new place, rather focusing on anything that reminds him of home. For Mrs. Das, in "The Interpreter of Maladies," it takes an old character from the past (from her parents' ancestral land) to remind her of the moral transgression she has committed years ago against her husband. "Don't you see?" she tells the driver, "For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody…" (Lahiri 65). Kapasi reminds her that "she is mistaking guilt for pain" (Benson).

In Cheever's stories, most characters also live a double life. While the 'now' is not satisfying, the past they long to is rife with danger. Susan Cheever claims that for her father, "the past" is "a seductive and dangerous place...". While his mother saved the "quaint, the antique and the nostalgic," his father saw himself "diminish[ed]" by them (53-54). For Cheever, those who dwell in the past are usually condemned at the end of the story. Again in "Oh Youth and Beauty," it is exactly the living in the past or inability to reconnect with the moment that brings Cash to his demise (*The Stories of John Cheever* 259). Ironically Cheever creates for himself a persona from the past, a "New England background [which] was partly sham, and his patrician airs were mostly his own invention" (S. Cheever 151). No wonder most of his journals display this psychic split, this chasm between who he is and who he was that made him quite miserable.

Personally, with Lebanon and family left behind, I've acted occasionally as if I was born out of nowhere. This dissociation comes to haunt almost all my characters since they are unable to bridge the gap. At one moment in "Aboard the USS Nashville,"

the main character actually makes sure his American passport is not stamped as he leaves Lebanon so that "the Lebanese officer… will sign [only his] Lebanese passport...this way there is no trace to my existence in Lebanon for any American officer to see. I rejoice at this idea as if I am deliberately erasing my stay here in my birth country, pretending the whole thing has never happened" (Trad 135). At the very end of the story, upon his return to the States, he goes on with the same charade, recounting the trip he had just endured. He does it for the drama, for the act of telling, as if he has not really lived the experience.

Another psychological dilemma for an immigrant writer presents itself in the following way: if he wants to preserve his earlier identity, his traditions, his dress code, his way of interacting with other, he will do so at the price of isolating himself from the new culture, (even if this one remains undefined for him). That is even if he fully tries to integrate, he finds himself unable to feel his feet on the ground, for any little remembrance, any little visit from the other world, highlights his inability to fully shed the old part. Lahiri presents this dilemma in her short story "A Temporary Matter" where the Indian couple suffers while Shoba's mother-in-law comes to visit. To please her, Shoba had to pretend she cares to cook and clean. The mother-in-law's presence is suffocating to both. She is religious and creates a shrine where she prays. Her presence highlights the couple's detachment from their own culture. Shoba leaves her husband Shukumar with his mother. But then the simple act of "eating with his mother, tired from teaching two classes back to back" (Lahiri 17), makes him wish Shoba were here "to say more of the right things because he came up with only the wrong ones" (Lahiri 17). An

uneasy thing happens when the past encroaches on the present. Identity is quickly lost and a sense of suffocation ensues. "When I said one night that I had to stay late at work, I went out with Gillian and had a martini," Shoba confesses later to her husband (Lahiri 16). She prefers to go to a bar with a friend rather than submitting to the tradition of cooking and serving her mother-in-law.

The most intriguing part of an immigrant writer is the name he bestows on his characters. Or no names at all. I have been quite intrigued with the way I have dealt with this detail. In the three stories, the protagonist lacks a name. It is not surprising, considering that in two of them, he is in search for an identity, and in the third, he feels he is losing his newly acquired one. But names are like façades: even when they are revealed, they point at the constant erosion of identity. Mr. and Mrs. Das, first generation immigrant, have named their children Ronny, Bobby, and Tina, a fact that will accentuate how "unmindful of their heritage" they have become (Benson). Personally, I am conscious of the need to omit the name: until the protagonist finds himself, relates to his world and heal the split psyche, he remains anonymous. This example is best shown in "Gideon Bachman" where the main character faces his guest whose name reveals so much about the protagonist. "Don't you know what his name means?" his girlfriend asks him. "A destroyer and a lecher…Gideon fathered 70 children. How many women were in his harem?" (77). Gideon, the man whose name reveals so much identity, becomes to a certain degree the foil character that highlights the absence of identity in the main character. Only through Gideon's discussions about his dead wife Eva, their sexual experiences, and their intimacies, do we fully come to understand the protagonist whose

strong etiquette towards life is a sham, a sad masquerade. In fact, he lacks the ability to let his life spontaneously unfold. The same sentiment is echoed in "Aboard the USS Nashville," where the other characters (with full names) the protagonist meets are more formed, at least from the protagonist's point of view. The Captain, Rita and her child, and Chris all have definite plans, aspirations and intimate lives. Exposed to them, his presence and aspiration become like a blur, thus realizing he has been more like an observer than a participant**.** "What makes me meet these people?" the protagonist asks himself, "Fate, luck, what is it?... Evidence abounds as I mull over my loveless-state-of-affairs for the last two years. Constantly hitting cul-de-sacs, yet somehow spurred by tiny drops of hope, like dews that tincture the shriveled leaves under the bushes" (132).

Cheever does something different. In "The Symbolic Significance of Nomenclature," Byrne tells us that the writer "found an artistic delight in lists, specifically a list of names…a carefully narrative device." His revelations of names "intensifies the theme of ostracism through his ethnic arrangement of the names" (Byrne). In "The Swimmer," Cheever establishes a long list of names, people who owned the houses and the swimming pools, so that the readers sense the alienation between Neddy Merrill and his neighbors. On this journey, Neddy recognizes that his world is inhabited by "the Gramms, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups" (*The Stories of John Cheever* 714). This list highlights the "theme of social ostracism with aquatic nomadism through the meaning of these surnames" (Byrne). In "Beyond the Cheeveresque," George Hunt believes that "the recurring place-names like St. Botolphs, Shady Hill, Bullet Park" in Cheever's stories are "imaginative constructs

not social symbols…metaphors for human confinements" (20). They are there to ensnare rather than liberate the protagonists.

With or without the absence of names, both choices are important to the thematic build-up of the story. Jhumpa Lahiri's and Junot Diaz's use of Indian and Spanish names respectively is to emphasize their characters' inability to belong to the new culture. Mrs. Sen arrives with a great sense of hope to become a resident and a citizen. She does it by keeping her Indian identity intact while trying to adapt to the American culture. Slowly Mrs. Sen "loses both her sense of community and her sense of identity to the forces of the global market" (Bess). What is left is only her name to remind her of who she is, but it is exactly her name that becomes the reminder that she is not an American. Junot Diaz's characters are all immigrants whose names are the only reminders of who they have not become. Rarely do we see any interaction between his characters and Americans. They are all isolated characters living in ghettos, in tiny unhealthy apartments (since they cannot afford their own apartments or homes) and consequently the idea of calling each other with names again distills the importance of attempting to keep their identities intact. However, when dealing with a threatening character, Diaz omits names. In "Drown," one of the stories in the book of the same title, the character of Beto who is gay clearly threatens the narrator, who, in this story, distinguishes himself from the autobiographical character of Yunior, the protagonist. According to Dorothy Stringer in "Passing and the State in Junot Diaz's 'Drown'," Diaz's nameless narrator "plausibly denies that he is the same person as the autobiographical and homophobic and exuberantly heterosexual Yunior."

The existential zeitgeist to which most immigrant writers belong portray characters in the throes of uncertainty and confusion, their identities constantly eroding, which bring in a flux of unstable feelings such as alienation and psychic split. They cling onto values, names, habits, but the new global atmosphere does not help them heal. Some realize that on this new journey, it is better to have no names at all than being stuck with the old self. They struggle, they fail, and they struggle again. As John Milton reminds us in *Paradise Lost,* "The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (217).

III. Theme (of alienation, split, and exile)

Erich Fromm, an American psychologist, claims that "'The immigrants are normal human beings who in an alien culture face the problem of unadjustment [sic]'" (qtd. in A Critique of Immigrant Psyche…). If un-adjustment is the problem at hand, then it is clear that for any immigrant writer who adjusts fully to the culture, he ceases to be an immigrant writer. Tension and malaise are part of his daily recipe; without those two ingredients, any writer would find it hard to concoct a story. Personally, my dilemma as a writer lies in my inability to establish space, a place I call my own, and in which I can adjust myself fully to the new social codes and conventions. I find myself straddling two places at a time. The inability to belong fully to one culture (not necessarily that I have ever belonged to the old one) creates havoc in the mind. Out of fear and old traditions, the mind wants to preserve the previous social codes, while at the same time finds it compelling (perhaps rewarding) to adapt to the new ones. My stories embody that paradox: characters try to connect to the new environment, but their

archetypal quests to find a comfortable place effectuate the feeling of alienation. In "A Critique Of Immigrant Psyche…" Krishna Rao and Kasyap claim that "People who get displaced—geographically, culturally and spiritually—are always ill at ease and display the symptoms of psychological ailment." Diaz constantly talks "how dramatically this change affected his life, and it is clear that Yunior's feelings [the main protagonist] of being alienated and trapped between two worlds are drawn directly from Diaz's own" (Acciavatti). Here again the problem of adjustment comes back into play. Facing Gideon, whose life is as transparent as his dead wife, the protagonist realizes the limitation of his life. Gideon and Eva's amorous tales come to him "like one long shot in a movie interspersed with jump cuts" (Trad 85). At this point the protagonist sees in his life only discrepancies "that somehow snugly fit together" (Trad 85). It becomes clearer as the story unfolds, that one cannot live without giving up the past, in the same way Cheever's people find themselves unable to adjust as they move to a suburban home or an apartment. And why is that? Because they bring with them the old sets of beliefs and conventions. In both "Gideon Bachman," and "The Biafra Man," the protagonist sees the old dominance of the traditions and religion. Unable to give up himself totally to the new culture, he creates a façade behind which he hides not only from the outside, but from himself as well. In the attempt to remedy himself or overcome obstacles, the protagonist tries to rid himself of the earlier ghosts, so that he can tackle the new problems at hand. Unfortunately, in this major upheaval, sometimes the character falls into the same pattern and regresses. In "The Biafra Man," the sense that all that has been built so far comes crashing through a phone call is clear at the end when the protagonist feels as he walks

back to his apartment, as if he is going back in time. He suddenly realizes that "Eighteen years I've lived apart from my family, opened my arms to the world, and suddenly, out of sickness and a phone call, out of the cuds of insults and affronts, the little boy is regurgitated" (Trad 178). This throws him back to that same feeling, which Kellman, in "The Writer as Migrant," underlines when he says that "most migrant writers must accept the fact that they are…rootless."

Ironically, Cheever's characters embody that sense of rootlessness. They are nomadic and seek different and new experiences, and like the immigrant writer, those experiences can be extreme. Kazin tells us that "The subject of Cheever's stories is regularly a situation that betrays the basic 'unreality" of some characters' life. It is trying-out of freedom in the shape of the extreme, the unmentionable." In almost all the stories I have included here exists a temporary crisis. The protagonist is attempting to embark on a new endeavor if only to remedy the existential dilemma of not belonging. Loneliness drives these attempts. "Loneliness is the dirty secret," Waldeland tells us, "a personal drive so urgent and confusing that it comes out a vice" (65). Both "Marcie Flint" and "The Sorrows of the Gin," demonstrate what people can do when they feel lonely and alienated. In one scene, Mr. Lawton wonders why his daughter "want[s] to run away?" (*Stories of John Cheever* 248). For an alcoholic man, his realization that "home sweet home was the best place of all" (248) is a double irony since neither the girl is happy with her parents, nor he is a happy person. And after having "spent three days of every fortnight on the road," he knows about the "world of overheated plane, cables and repetitious magazines, where even the coffee, even the champagne, tasted of plastics"

(248). For Mr. Lawton, being at home or any place else, it is all the same: the problems will be the same.

Of course, while to many writers, many themes such as alienation, unhappiness, and loneliness can be recurrent, to the immigrant writer, these are ones he cannot avoid or resist. But let us say he gives up on the old values: by doing this, he relinquishes the sacred, comfortable space he has established between himself, his family and friends; now he must recreate a sense of himself, alone, in relation to a new set of people around him. Disorientation and displacement ensue since everything is new. And this feeling stays with him long after he has established himself in the new world. The split he feels now is constant, and he wonders, will he ever gel to become one again? Mrs. Sen has difficulty embracing her new American culture. The simple idea of driving the car, the traffic, the many people she sees on the road (and whom she does not know) overwhelms her to the point where even her English would falter (Lahiri 121). These are the same feelings Diaz has experienced since he has come to the States. In his reflection on "This American Moment" he feels "isolated, and 'cut off from my roots'…he [is] out of his comfort zone." His stories become rife with people displaced, living anxiously with themselves. They run away, they struggle, and they suffer. "I like human endings," Diaz claims. For him, "human endings are ones that represent the full complexity of what [he] considers human experience…the consequences of surviving sometimes give you great pause" ("Guns and Roses"). It does indeed give great pause, but this great pause is also problematic. For the keyword, here, is survival. How does a human being survive the displacement and the re-rooting?

There is a term which I like to use and which I call 'the split-second moment'. This moment, unique to the immigrant writer, is about the dilemma of choice; it's about reimagining oneself living back in the old place. It comes out of the present disorientation and displacement and the feeling of loss due to the transplant. Its occurrence usually signals the existential dilemma the immigrant writer is facing: what am I doing here in this new land? With thousands of miles apart, the protagonist in "Gideon Bachman" is suddenly drawn again to the idea of meeting a girl his mom is trying to set him up with. Overwhelmed by his job, his constant struggle to find himself, he cannot help but "think about this new girl and the awkward moment of going…to visit her" (Trad 76), when he goes back to the old country. But then the thought comes to him, "What if it's all as simple as the way my mother paints matrimony?' Imagine it's my wedding day. Would I be sitting near the bride's father? Would he make me hold a sword or a gun? I shudder at the picture and decide to go for lunch" (Trad 76). The 'split-second moment comes here out of a wistful and desperate longing. Diaz's writing is all about this sudden yearning to go back to the homeland. Girls escape their country of birth, come to the new city and suddenly they are disoriented, alone, alienated and miserable. Similarly, in "Mrs. Sen," the protagonist's accident at the end of the story proves she is unable to assimilate. When the policeman asks for her driving license, "she did not have one to show him" (Lahiri 134).

The sense of loss is a halo that accompanies all immigrant writers. Almost every story by Diaz, Lahiri and Cheever are about losses. Kellman claims that even in major novels such as "Mr. Shimerda in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918), Albert Scheal in

Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934)…are all broken by the pain of displacement." In his article "Jhumpa Lahiri: The Quiet Laureate," Lev Grossman claims that her stories "refuse to sum themselves up with a neat final epiphany." It is again this realization that things cannot be restored or rescued. Mrs. Das's stories is about the loss of identity: you submerge yourself in the American culture, you lose yourself. Ironically, she realizes the loss, not in the States, but on her trip to India with her family through the eyes of a local driver. In the "Aboard of USS Nashville," during the night while the ship is plowing its way to Cyprus where the evacuees will be escorted to the U.S., the protagonist realizes that nothing on this trip has any meaning. Try as he may to make sense of his life through symbols and metaphors that can rescue or heal the rift, he comes out empty. Again, in that story, the protagonist is not sure what to make of the trips he undertakes every summer to visit the family. After so many years of absence, he is not sure if he knows his country as well as he thinks. When he hears a famous singer sing, it brings to his mind "the Lebanon of old, the Lebanon of green trees and olive orchards, and citrus fruit and orange blossoms" (Trad 136). "This is my Lebanon, I try to convince myself, the Lebanon of no one else" (Trad 136). Later he realizes that his presence in the old country doesn't heal, but rather augments the void that fills his spirit.

The notion of homeland is a tricky concept for the immigrant writer: if one has escaped or left his old country for the new one, it must be either for economic, political or psychological reasons. One moves, reestablishes, and finds himself at odds with the new culture; he either fits in or does not. If he does, he risks doing that at the expense of losing his identity. So that the question about belonging becomes more urgent: which is

actually my homeland? Where do I belong? The 'split-second moment' is both a reaction to and a symptom of that dilemma. The irony is that even if the writer decides to move back, he will find out that things have changed, and nothing is the same as it used to be. At the very end, there is no redemption of any sort. Regardless, with all the loss and displacement, no immigrant writer wants to go back. He knows that such return is more problematic and does not provide the purgation of soul he wants. I was deliberate about the end of the three stories included here, especially in "The Biafra Man," where the protagonist is hurled back against his will towards a past he does not want. As for "Aboard the USS Nashville," the end summarizes all I have discussed. "I could also fantasize about this whole voyage as being a kind of ritual," he tells himself, "a baptism at the end of which a New Self will arise" (Trad 99-100). Later, at the very end of the boat trip, the protagonist's final words are anticlimactic:

> I stand up and look at the sea, the dark haunting sea, but alas I can't seem to find any ominous movement in the water or any mysterious play of the water against the light mist that could foreshadow my future. I am aboard the USS Nashville. That *is* the whole account. I feel small and abandoned, and I have no inkling about how to proceed. It's the desert sea, I tell myself, I've been there for a while, and I know there are no monsters, no serpents, no visions to rescue me from my quiet life. (Trad 138-139)

It would be futile to expect any sort of hero emerging out of these stories. As I said, most ending are dramatic, but anticlimactic. The immigrant writer will always be a lost soul trying to figure things out. However, Scott Donaldson in *The Impossible Craft*

tells us that a hero "is characterized by his sensitivity; he is [then] a man of feeling, not of action." In this case, we can claim that the immigrant writer is a hero of feelings and sensitivity, and that, perhaps, makes him more than ever closer to people than ever. At the very end, while it is true that the sense of exile can be invigorating at the beginning, still the journey can take one's breath away.

IV. Voice and Authorial Presence

In *Franz Kafka:* A Critical Study of his Writing, Wilhem Emrich talks about the "extreme tension existing between an impersonal 'one' that dominates everything and an unfathomable 'I' that sees itself 'pierced to the quick…'" (Emrich 133). This division resembles the voice of the immigrant writer as he sees in the exile a reminder of the division between who he was and what he is becoming. Emrich discusses the 'me' which is assaulted by work, demands and obligations; it is under pressure, spurred by the superego that demands responsibilities and success. The 'I' becomes the purer self that emerges out of the tension and domination, which, in Gregor's case, resorts to a primitive form, waking up "one morning from unsettling," only to find "himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (Kafka 4). Immigrant writers would not resort to that primitiveness because it would further derail their acceptance into the new world. They want to integrate, and in this noble attempt to do so, the authorial voice arises in a mixture of despair, fear, and pain. At times the sense of futility comes out of this feeling that he, the writer, will always be anachronistic in this new world. I can venture to say that it is the tension between the "me" and "I" that create the authorial voice in an immigrant writer. The responsibilities and obligations in this new exile make the search

for the "I" an imperative. In "Gideon Bachman," the "me" is assaulted from day to day. The narrator wants to excel in his job, in his relationship with the girlfriend; however, the struggle for the "I" becomes more transparent when the guest, Gideon, comes to live with him. The more interaction happens between Gideon and the narrator, the more the search for the "I" becomes exigent, even if his attempt to define and understand himself becomes more difficult. He asks his girlfriend not to marry him, but to contemplate marrying him. Her rebuff is sound and clear, which reminds the narrator that he, too, is unconvinced. He tries to take a solid vow not to revisit the pet shop where he and the employee are entangled in a sexual intrigue. Even that, the narrator realizes—as he is "walking the street, first a little wobbly, [with] a vague decision**"** getting hold of him—that such promise will be broken (Trad 79).

The "I" struggles to emerge. How much the immigrant writer must do to get rid of all the impositions and obstacles: to work, to fit in, to get rid of his identity, to acquire a new one, to re-examine his life. In that sense, the immigrant writer's authorial voice is not one: it is a spectrum. I never write solely about the Lebanese or American experience: I write about 'experience', and in it, the past mixes with the new one, and in this surrealistic admixture, the authorial voice emerges cosmic, filled with life, intense and heavy at times with countless human sensations. Diaz tells his audience, that "If you are saying I'm a Dominican writer, and that's an exclusive category, then I don't want that ("Guns and Roses"). It is the dilemma of every writer: to be placed in a box. Diaz add that "People are always trying to simplify you, but I think categories are meant to be the start of a conversation" ("Guns and Roses*"*). Like Diaz, I am not a Lebanese writer, for

what does that mean? Imagine the mind of the writer: it's like an active volcano, seething with the minutiae of places, people and events. This overwhelming nature of existence is well documented in the story "The Third and Final Continent," by Lahiri. The narrator who left his own country for the States reminisces about his life at the very end:

> I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri 198)

This is one insightful moment about the immigrant writer who, exposed to the world, understands that his voice contains a vibrant rainbow of unfathomable tones.

Even Cheever, the penultimate American writer, attempts this diversity of the mind and soul. Susan Cheever talks about her father's creating an authorial voice that is not fully his reality. "Is your father English or something?" (38). Later she claims that his accent "was a clipped mumble, a combination of swallowed words and low laughter, short a's and broad Yankeeisms. People outside the family often had difficulty understanding him" (38). This is an aspect that affects every writer and person. Who is the "I"? Personally, I have attempted to change my accent but with no success. The French and the Lebanese sound come together, and with the American accent intruding, the voice emerges like his owner, split into many parts, all parts equal, none of them claiming authority over the other.

It is true there exist typical challenges that will always define the immigrant writer's voice: acquiring a new language (Diaz and I share that), the accent, the look, religion, and of course the culture. Aware of them, the writer lives at the edge of life, with a tremor of anxiety and doubt that shakes his voice. In this hectic state of mind, Diaz blends the English and Spanish together. "The border between English and Spanish," Annie MacDermott informs us, becomes blurred, and so we find phrases like 'guapisima as Hell' and words like the hispanicized [sic] abstract noun 'besekeria.'" This slipping or blending helps Diaz establish "the many dualities he is forced to inhabit" (Acciavati 2). I do recall a moment in one of my stories when the narrator says, "Half of the seventeen years I've been in New York, I've been teaching English and still haven't got rid of that mixture of Lebanese and French accent. I've always wondered if the French accent (the consequence of being educated in French speaking schools) is an unconscious affectation I've kept if only to prove something about myself" ("Aboard the USS Nashville" 94).

Can the immigrant writer find happiness? To be happy, one needs to be connected to the place and to people. While the presence of others will mitigate the foreign sentiment, it also accentuates the feeling of exile. The immigrant writers cannot escape this paradox. One falls short, as is the case with anyone looking outside himself trying to seek recognition. "The Worm in the Apple," a short story by Cheever, consists of "seek[ing] depravity in others." Waldeland tells us that this sentiment "comes from those who are much slower to believe in happiness and uncomplicated pleasure in life" (72). Perhaps this is the dilemma of the immigrant writer: his inability to believe he can

find happiness. Not that he cannot see it, but in his need to understand every detail, analyze and assess it, and then move on to the next detail, happiness becomes a chore. True the voice comes out energized, filled with every feeling, little gesture, little encounter, and everything is aggrandized. This is what happens to the main character in "Gideon Bachman," as he strolls in the park during lunch. There, typically, he is observing others. For him it is always "a novelty to watch people," (Trad 57). But even the simplest thing of watching a couple, "two birds pecking, they seem so assured with their nesting in one another" brings envy (Trad 57). This is the same guy who says, "I'm barely able to commit myself to the sandwich I will order over the counter at the deli, the choices being so eclectic" (Trad 57). The paradox is clear: the immigrant writer sees the beauty and the happiness in others; he is attuned to find conjugal, happy scenes, but his voice reflects his inability to find this security and happiness in himself.

Perhaps the best element that defines an authorial voice for an immigrant writer is the intimacy and rapport he creates with the readers. But first let us discuss the role of autobiography. To a certain degree, all my writing is autobiographical, and this is the same for Diaz, Lahiri and Cheever. We expose our dilemmas, problems and tension, so that the extent to which the role of autobiography is given in fiction helps reveal a lot about the voice of the immigrant writer. First or third person, the writing is, to a large degree, autobiographical. And while the direct address or breaking of the fourth wall is not new, here it is important because it allows the immigrant writer to give his own version of the truth. Diaz, Lahiri, Cheever and I, all use this stylistic approach. Hunt tells us it is "a technique [that] brings to a story a unique dramatic force" (20). It is more

than that: the intimacy allows for complete revelation—someone is listening to us. Diaz uses so many expletives as if the reader is his brother or cousin. Cheever always refers to God or the "I" to make sure that the reader understands his dilemma. The third person Lahiri uses allows her to observe and comment.

It is a known fact that all writers seek attention. Somehow, beneath all the pain and torments, the voice comes out at times hopeful, at times restless, and at times hopeless, but at the very end, it is important to see that the notion of writing, in itself, is a hopeful act. James E. O'Hara claims that "Cheever's first impulse is always towards 'the light,' which in some cases means that he willfully overlooks the darkness" (58). I believe that the main impulse is the imagination, that fantastic force that tries to make sense of things even when omitting or adding details. Dorothy Stringer claims that "Diaz's fiction could be easily identified with this still-conventional, middlebrow immigrant narrative, arcing clearly from individual Bildung [sic] to national inclusion" (Stringer). In Diaz's case, it is perhaps the ultimate goal, considering how his voice contains "his sharp awareness of the underclass's active participation in maintaining the terms of its own exclusion (Stringer).

Like Cheever, even when the subject is dark and dreary, my voice contains a shade of hope that sees light at the end of the tunnel, even when most of my characters are stuck at a crossroad and have no direction as to how to proceed. For instance, in "Aboard of the USS Nashville," the last scene where the protagonist speaks on the phone with a friend who supposedly has seen the protagonist's picture in the New York Times, the misidentification that happens (all because of one prop: the hat) allows the speaker on

the phone to understand the dilemma of the protagonist. The friend exclaims, "What you must have endured?" (Trad 149). In this semi-invented moment, the protagonist connects with his friend. That the hat was given by the father to his son is true, but everything else is part of my imagination. And why? Because the writer lives for these creative moments; because they become true since he is telling about them; but more than that, they create the authorial voice, the immigrant voice that keeps trying to define his existence in a new world. The entire story which happens mostly abroad ends in the States, in New York, with a conversation with a friend about the hat. It brings the protagonist back to a place he wants to be, even if it is the imagination that provides that connection. As a writer, I have blurred the edges of reality.

Diaz does something similar in his fiction. In the last scene of the last story "Negocios," he imagines a scene visiting his father's girlfriend (for whom he left the whole family). For him, it felt "like two strangers reliving an event—a whirlwind, a comet, a war—we'd both seen but from different faraway angles" (*Drown* 207). Regardless if it is imagined or not, this scene from "Negocios"—dark and sad—allows Diaz' voice to make sense of his entire history, reconcile the present with the past. While it opens the door for the lover to tell her story, it also allows the author to accept his condition and move on. "When I got there [to her restaurant where she works] and stared through my reflection in the glass at the people inside, all of them versions of people I already knew, I decided to go home" (*Drown* 2017). It is an imagined moment that allows him to see the future for the first time. It relieves and unshackles him. He gets to know his father's lover and consequently gets to understand himself. He even imagines

an entire scene of his father's last time with his lover. "He drank a cup of black café in the kitchen and left it washed and drying in the caddy. I doubt if he was crying or even anxious…" (*Drown* 208). All are conjectures that elevate the moment from a simple autobiography and produce the authorial immigrant voice that tries to make sense of all the newness around him.

Conclusion:

If I have tried to seek similarities among the writers, it is not to establish a category called 'the immigrant writer'. For the more I see similarities I detect, the less I am inclined to call myself an immigrant writer. My aim is to understand the mind, as it travels to a new country, trying to redefine itself. Every story I used as a reference acts like an anecdote, where a temporary crisis inserts itself, reaches a moment in the life of the writer, and then moves away. Because it has become part of the past, its existence establishes a present and a future. In that sense, all stories help to anchor us by creating a temporal dimension against which we can gauge the present and look ahead for the future. So, is it possible that in the act of writing, we become a little less immigrant? Are we able to cheer ourselves simply by writing stories? I don't want to wax romantic about writing and its ability to heal. I believe struggles come and go, and as we write, we learn to manage and make sense of our lives. The ability to step outside oneself, looking at the world, and reverting inward allows one to feel perhaps more connected, less isolated.

If this is the case, then the question we must ask in this conclusion is the following: when does an immigrant writer cease to be so? When will I feel I am simply a

writer? Is it by losing my accent? In the case of Diaz and Lahiri, was it the time they published and made themselves a name? What about Cheever? Did he ever feel he belonged to his suburban setting? I am not going to dissect lives to see how integrated these authors have or had become. That is not my aim. Perhaps the other question that should dovetail with the first is: why is it important to cease to be an immigrant writer? Why do we need to be fully accepted? If diversity has taught us anything, it is to be content with what we are or have become. In this politically charged moment, I can easily claim that my life will continue as a writer. Again, Rao and Kaysap reminds us that "In the modern world of flux, uncertainty and confusion, and constant erosion of identities," the immigrant writer explores "major issues like cultural conflicts, immigrants' alienation', psyche and changing social values" ("A Critique of Immigrant Psyche…"). So, I would like to begin this creative dissertation by saying that since cultural conflicts and changing social values are more threatening than ever, perhaps all writers nowadays are immigrant writers and all immigrant writers are writers.

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"Gideon Bachman"

It has snowed for three days now. It is late afternoon, and the sun is finally breaking through the thinning clouds. Outside the streets are deserted; no children are playing, as if they're tired of the novelty of more snow. The city is quiet and most offices are still closed. The front doorbell rings. It is six o'clock. Someone for the cat, I say to myself. The cat has been my sole companion for almost a week. I found it outside the little garden, shivering, the corner of one eye bleeding. It is small, with white and gray stripes and has a studded red collar around its neck. The cat was lost. I had to feed it. Later, feeling less threatened, it let me clean the cut and just before the last snowstorm hit us, I nailed notices on all the trees in the neighborhood. I felt silly, even clumsy, but it was a duty I couldn't put off, the neighborly thing to do. I kept the cat outside, in a little box under the shed near the kitchen door. I don't want pets. I don't need one. I do believe they provide a mixture of affection and pleasure, but with my demanding work, my constant search for a mate (I am at the delicate age where one should settle, marry and have a family), a cat or any pet for that matter would gnaw at my time. But the cat was stubborn and remained at the back gate, so that when the first blossoms of snow shook the lanky stems of the trees in the neighborhood, I had no choice but to admit it to the apartment. In a way the cat let itself in.

I go to the door. A tall man stands there. He looks old. "Are you here for the cat?" I say. "It's good to meet you, don't worry, it's here, safe."

He looks at me perplexed, "I am Gideon," he says, "Gideon Bachman. Is this 29A?"

It is my uninvited guest, en route to Europe. David's urgent pleading over the phone from California rang clear: "He's a bit lost, needs to rest for a few days. He's quite a man, from Germany, a friend, the best overseas technician I have. Speaks at least five or six languages, I knew you'd be impressed, quite like you. You've got to hear his stories. You know how to play the good host." David's high-pitched voice streams with a pesky assurance from a life spiced with exotic people, travelling and champagne, and it is his duty, he feels, to enliven his friends' lives with a few sprinkles, some "high moments," we all desperately need. He had never mentioned the guest's age. Preoccupied as I was with the weather, I never thought he would make it here, but the rumble of a few airplanes overhead explains his sudden appearance.

I live on the garden floor of a three-story building in Brooklyn. To enter my apartment, one has to descend a few stairs, face a black metal gate, and beyond that another door, gray. Between the gate and the door stands a path of soft darkness in which the visitor is standing now, his face shadowed, his voice the only telltale of a man at least in his sixties.

"Come in," I say, my voice a bit hesitant.

He follows me clasping both a weathered suitcase and a large duffel bag. Once inside, a waft of his musty sweater, a mixture of mothballs and detergent, makes my eyes water. I look at him. Dark crevices nest under anguished eyes. He stands awkwardly in the narrow hallway at the edge of the living room, waiting for me. I am suddenly less angry with David than with myself for doling out favors with such ease, and the first strategy that comes to mind is to ensure he sleeps in the living room on the mattress. I'm

not ceding my only bedroom, I decide, with a quick shift of mind that sees in this specter something like an invasion I have to thwart.

The guest stands there for a while looking around. "Have a seat," I say waving him towards the white couch in the living room.

"I just came from Chile." He has a clear English accent.

"Chile," I repeat. "Lots of sun and wine and water, that's the place to be."

"Not really," he replies in a soft, trembling voice.

I study him closely. The absence of tanned skin strikes me as odd; instead, a pale tone spreads over the face where deep lines, like the ones on the cover of a Geometry book, crisscross at many angles all the way to the thin neck. His eyes are puffed as if he hasn't slept for days, and his tousled eyebrows, at their very ends, stand sharp. He must be sixty-five or older.

"I could have used some of that sun," he continues, "You need it especially when your mind is restless." His voice fails, but he quickly gets hold of himself. "Let me not trouble you with my problems. You are too young to worry about these things."

My apartment is small, but the space well organized: covers and sheets in the four drawers under the bed, an extra mattress stuck behind a large bookshelf, crates in every closet, every three or four forming a little bridge under which shoes or books fit snugly. A small oak desk in the bedroom against the window overlooks the little outdoor garden, a cherished space in the city. In the tiny kitchen, the same discipline is applied: ironing board behind the fridge, and a few pans and mugs hang from every possible space the six cupboards offer. If space mirrors its owner, then it won't take much time for one to know me, what with the way things lay out, with my simple yet practical approach: bike

hanging from the kitchen ceiling, two heavy speakers from the living room's, along with an assortment of pictures adorning the walls. I didn't take or buy one picture; all are leftover, remnants of friendships and relationships, most of which never matured enough to go sour.

Into this space my guest is admitted, finding himself in the living room facing an unusable fireplace, with a framed picture of my family on the mantle, a colorful group of Lebanese who appear from that safe distance to have little or no cares at all.

"I'm sorry the place is not bigger," I say.

"I am grateful to you for having me. I do not know what I would have done without your kindness." I detect a painful tremor in his voice, a belabored quiver as if it's arguing with or chasing away pain. He puts his suitcase on the floor of the living room, his duffel bag on top of it, and stands behind one of the armchairs. "David was kind enough to make this arrangement. I work for him, sometimes. I was supposed to be in Barcelona but I won't be able to make it this time. I've got to go home."

"Is that where David is now, in Barcelona?" I ask.

He nods and pauses, stares at the gray rug, a typical Ikea strip of crude cotton with a vermilion whorl in the middle that teases the eyes with a sense of minimalist artistry.

"It is very hard," he says. "Did you get my message? I left a message on your machine."

"It was in Spanish," I say. "I don't know much Spanish. I thought it was a wrong number."

"I am not sure which language I speak sometimes. I am all confused. It comes with age, you must forgive me."

"I speak French, you know. Where I come from, we love languages." Languages and love strike me as oxymoronic, but I need to dispel the quick gloom that settles in as soon as he plumps himself into the white sofa. I should've put a throw on it.

"*Je suis enchanté de faire votre connaissance*," I say to him.

"M*onsieur, je vous remercie, vous êtes très gentil de me recevoir*."

His French accent is perfect. From where does David cull these people? His Spanish, French, English, and, of course, German, all perfect.

I show him the bathroom and the kitchen. The bicycle hanging near the light fixture frightens him. "Is it safe?" he asks.

"Quite safe," I reply a bit curtly. "Would you like a sandwich?" I quickly add.

"I do not want to trouble you." Humble, he is. Not phony, but not real. I play the same game at work, as a manager in a fancy boutique hotel in Manhattan, where my French, Arabic and English are the sole reason behind my instant hiring. That and the fact that David also knew one of the executive managers, something not lost on me when, two or three weeks ago, David asked for a favor. There were no exciting phone calls during the hiring, no waiting and sweating—a simple quid pro quo with no dickering or bartering: you have it, we need it, you're in.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" He doesn't answer. It is free, I say to myself a bit irritated, but of course stop short.

He sits at the little table, his eyes staring at the floor.

"Is Swiss cheese OK?"

"Anything is fine, it does not really matter." The cat shows up in the kitchen, his tail lifted and crooked, brushing it against me. I think about Suzanne, the assistant

manager at work. Her love for cats is admirable, although a bit obsessive. I place the sandwich on the table. My guest cringes. "Is something wrong?" I ask.

"The cat," he says. "Please keep the cat away. I don't like cats." I lift it in my hands, take it near the kitchen door, and place food in the bowl. Meanwhile the guest holds the sandwich in his hand, contemplating it in that suspicious way children eye food. Looking at the cat, then at my guest, both eating at the same time, I am struck with the vision of The Good Samaritan, a story that comes from childhood encased in acts of charity my mother had done over and over on her way to any function with my father and all of us children. She'd stop the car, rush to a beggar, give him money and return to us feeling elated. Here I have two uninvited guests for whom I'm playing the good host. Strangely, I feel unmoved—both presences quite intrusive.

No sooner has the cat finished eating than it comes near the table. "Please, get it away from me," my guest says loudly. I don't want the cat in my bedroom, but with no door between the kitchen and the living room, the bedroom is the only place to lock the cat. I lift and take it inside, bring water, food and litter box and close the door. I face the window in my bedroom, standing, unable to move. If the Good Samaritan and mother succeeded in their endeavors, it is only because they encountered beggars outside their homes. These acts should always be done on the periphery of one's life, not within.

Back in the kitchen, the guest seems preoccupied, looking for something.

"Where are you heading after New York, Mr. Bachman?" I ask

"Call me Gideon, if you please, just Gideon. Germany, Rome, maybe Israel, I am not sure. I have a little studio in Rome. It's rented now. I never thought I would be back so soon…" He stops. "Someone took my watch, maybe at the airport. I don't know

where it is. I remember having it around my wrist in the airplane. I can't seem to find it..."

Suddenly, he stops eating, goes to the living room. I follow him. He kneels and unzips his big suitcase. His wardrobe is minimal; instead, trinkets fill the suitcase, some of which he removes—bracelets, wallets, little flags, pieces of burnt candles; only someone fleeing disaster could have thrown together this hodgepodge. Bent over the suitcase, he searches, flips things from one side to the other. He then goes to the duffel bag and with a renewed frenzy, opens it, unrestrained by my presence. "Where is it?" he keeps repeating. Lifting his suppliant eyes towards me, "My wife gave it to me. She would be upset...she cannot be upset. It does not matter." He pauses. "You have to forgive me, *je ne suis pas dans mon assiette*, as the French say. It is worse than what you think, but please let me not trouble you. You are too young. I should be listening to you. I am too tired, do you mind if I go to sleep? I have not slept for two days now."

He tries to lift himself up but his knees seem to knock against one another. I rush and hold his hand. "Thank you," he mutters. "You are too kind." I sit him in the armchair facing the sofa. I go to my bedroom, slide the mattress all the way to the living room and lay it on the floor beside his bags.

"If you get cold, the thermostat is in the kitchen. Please feel free to turn it up. Are you cold?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Thank you for your patience. You are a kind person."

I am happy he retired to bed early: I like to go to bed knowing the part of the world around me is already asleep. It's only eight o'clock and I'm not ready to sleep. The T.V.—not that I watch much of it—is in the living room, beyond my jurisdiction

now. Eating dinner is also not easy, I can't move lest I disturb my sleeping guest. In the bedroom, the cat sprawls on my bed, a slight smell of urine already in the air. I shiver. Something is amiss. Outside, the wind lifts the snow in an ecstasy of vortices. I want to call Danielle, supposedly my girlfriend (between us, we restrain ourselves from using such a word), a writer with strong thighs and large breasts, who likes to sit on me and pretend to bury my thing inside her. I know she won't answer the phone. Once the muse hovers, she locks herself in and shuns the world. Danielle wants to write a feminist masterpiece that will shock the world. For a month now, she hasn't returned my phone calls and when she finally shows up, she emerges thin, emaciated, her brain having roasted on a cocktail of hash and pills—"to stir creation"—and a diet of cucumbers and zucchini—"to counteract toxic creation." There is something about her voice that reverberates along the same waves I hear the world, even though we never seem to listen to the same tune.

Tonight, everything seems out of reach. From one of his many trips, my father had brought with him a silver flute in a wooden case, which he gave me. I've always loved the tranquil blue velvet in which the instrument resides. After a few years of practice and a few dull lessons, it still feels like I have the wrong instrument in my hands, which prompts me to put the three pieces back in the case the moment I start playing. The flute is still with me, and the fact that I own it lays down an obligation on my part to do something with it. Tonight I feel an urge to play, but it is out of reach. I have stored it along with two pieces of gold jewelry, a cross and a chain my mother has given me, in the unusable fireplace where my guest is. It is one thing not wanting to play, another thing not being able to. I look at my calendar. It's Sunday. Tomorrow I have to report

to work. The following Saturday, my guest is supposed to leave. I should have checked with him, given myself a sense of finality. And the cat must go, I must find a home for it. By then, I tell myself, everything will go back to normal.

I wake up early and take my shower, then go to the kitchen to make my daily protein shake. I usually leave around 6:30 and take the #2 train to midtown Manhattan. I like to be at least an hour ahead, browse the papers, nibble on a croissant, and ease myself into work. I leave a note for him with the keys on the kitchen table. Passing through the living room, I see Gideon lying down in his clothes, with his bags and belongings next to him. I don't know why I chafe at the fact that he's so relaxed. I go to the train, then to the hotel, and bury myself deep in work. I close the door to my office, run all sorts of schedules, and issue due remittances. I usually take a little break late afternoon and go for a fifteen-minute walk to a nearby park. Today I stay put. I call David, but no answer. Suzanne arrives around 7:00 p.m. We confer for twenty minutes; I give her the daily folder, which she will return to my desk before she leaves. I've known Suzanne for a year now. She always ends our little conference with something about her husband, then a fast segue to her cat. I know everything about the cat's diet, her doctor and even her toys. I haven't mentioned a word about the cat I found, if only to avert long, meandering discussions. In the last meeting she suggested we place a Siamese or Persian cat in every bedroom. The executive manager and I looked at her, not sure if she was serious.

I leave work, stop by a diner, eat, take my time sipping my tea and then proceed to go to the apartment. By the time I get home, it's ten o'clock. I know I have purposely delayed my return. When I come in, I realize my guest has enclosed the living room by hanging two long scarves through the archway. It's not fully partitioned, but somehow I

have this impression I'm peeping into the living room space. The main light is turned off and only the side lamp is on, the one near my family photo. He is sprawled out on the floor. Just when I hear him move, I go to my bedroom. I'm happy I don't have to entertain. I decide I have to get hold of David tomorrow. I need some explanation**.**

I wake up at five, sweating. The apartment is blistering hot and pulling myself out of bed is like plowing through a fog of sweaty drowsiness and angst. I finally manage to stand up and open the door. It's my guest; he has turned up the thermostat. I tiptoe my way into the kitchen, feeling my way like a thief, reduce the temperature by at least ten degrees, drink water and then go back to my bedroom. I can never go back to sleep. The cat is sleeping at the edge of my bed. I sit next to it. I touch it. It opens its eyes, and then shuts them, unruffled. How fast it has made itself at home! Just to think that a week ago it was hissing at me, frightened by anything that moved. Now it sits, calm, given to who knows what kind of feelings and dreams, of life, of desertion, and happy endings.

I get ready. I pass quickly through the living room. It feels as though I'm sneaking out of my apartment. But once I eye the scarves again, hanging like colorful lanterns on some magical door, I stop. It's all there on the floor: tubes, pills—yellow, white, red—and weird, distorted vases, passports, lenses, pictures—lots of pictures—toothbrushes, razors, keys, pencils, money, coins (a life's collection), CDs and cassettes (who listens to them?), more scarves, multicolored and varying in lengths, and just near the duffel bag, a glass jar filled with what looks like gray sand. I stand there, my heart beating. I can't say a word. Kneeling on the floor, like a destitute whose house has just burned, whimpering, he suddenly turns and faces me. I step closer. He lowers his head

as if prostrating. Has Gideon heard the voice of some god? Hovering over, I see myself a dark angel at doomsday, analyzing the evidence before the final judgment. I think he has lost his mind. I force out a good morning, but he doesn't seem to hear me. "It will be all packed in no time," he says to me, the tremor more noticeable.

I stand there, my eyes staring in disbelief. "Did you sleep well?" I finally manage to say.

"Maybe an hour and that's a plus. Are you leaving?" His voice is pleading.

"I've got to go to work. There is an extra set of keys for the house on the kitchen table."

"What do I need them for? I am not leaving," he replies.

"Help yourself to the food in the fridge, there is all sorts of stuff."

"I don't eat much, Eva liked all kinds of food. My wife." He gets very quiet.

"I have to leave, I'm sorry I can't talk. Please feel free to use the apartment. You should try to go out, you'd feel good. I know nothing beats the sun in Chile. Did your wife stay there?"

"I lost my wife in Chile." His voice is loud. "I lost my poor wife." Tears come to his eyes. "Please go to your work. You do not need this." His right hand rises like a baton**.** "You are going to be late." It rings like an order. I obey. I run to the train station. I've got to call David. An old man, sick, smelly. Is he making fun of me? It all feels unnatural—his presence, his belongings, his dead wife—nothing hidden, nothing contained, all lumped together with no order. I almost trip going down the stairs to the subway. It's the glass jar, the unequivocal urn that strains my mind with the forced

drama, the ultimate climax, the quintessential soap opera, typical of a world that yearns to hobble toward the end or to use the clichéd word, closure.

I bury myself in work, planning schedules and teaming up employees. Something about the soul of this place soothes my nerves. At least rich people pretend to be quiet. I try calling David—no answer, so typical. He's busy with Annie, his new love. It won't last long, that I know, but at least with David, despite all his bragging, he keeps things in perspective, the mystery of togetherness a halo even when his words are streaming visuals about Annie's breasts to me over the phone.

I take a fifteen-minute break for lunch. I walk to the park. It is always a novelty to watch people. Today I marvel at the way a couple sitting abreast of me interlocks fingers. Two birds pecking, they seem so assured with their nesting in one another. I envy this. I'm barely able to commit myself to the sandwich I will order over the counter at the deli, the choices being so eclectic**.** Which brings Danielle back to my mind. I imagine the scenario I'll provide, and her varied reactions to my story, to Gideon, who, within 48 hours, has, for some reason, ruffled my feathers. And because Danielle isn't responding (I ring and expect no answer), I think of the long subway ride back home tonight, of whether I should take the A or the #2 train, which usually is the antecedent of another thought—it sneaks in—a familiar one. I know what it is. As I slowly walk back to the hotel, I resign myself to it: part of me knows where I am heading this afternoon.

Back at the hotel, I am unable to complete a simple task. I keep seeing the glass with the grey sand in it. A dead woman in my apartment, that's what it's all about. I'm not worried about Gideon, nor about his weeping, even though he looks quite out of sorts; I'm more in awe of the displacement this old man has undertaken, finding himself all

alone in a basement apartment in Brooklyn, in the company of a stranger. When my grandfather died, so many people came around his deathbed for three days. At the very end, when the priest came in, it felt like the whole village had lifted his coffin to its final abode.

I try calling David again. I reach a voice. I leave a brief message. The thought that came to my mind early during the walk is fully present on my mind. I've already called Suzanne and asked her to come earlier. It's not the first time I let the subway ride dictate my destination. And it's not only to avoid my guest. But perhaps it is.

I greet Suzanne, give her the folder, and leave before she broaches the story about her husband or Teresa.

I take the A train, one that will leave me in Brooklyn Heights. I walk the avenue until I get to the pet store. I am aware of a faint excitement, something I don't fuss about. It's there and its subdued presence dis-alarms me. I get closer to the store. I stop before the front glass that curves outward like a bay window. I look inside. I see him talking to a customer. He notices me; he smiles. I wait. It's a bit chilly, but I don't mind the wait. The expectation warms me up. I look at the display; every dog and cat gadget, blanket, bowl, feeder, is encrusted in all sorts of heart shapes. Valentine's Day is two weeks away, and already some stores have decked their shelves with the motif. At the hotel I will order one large bouquet of orchids in the lobby and small chocolate strawberry packages for every room. I wait. I have no urge to go home. I know at this point I can't let go.

The client finally leaves. Five seconds later, he comes outside. He looks right and left, smiles again and nods his head, his sign to follow. Inside he looks at me and

shows me the way; it's the same path. I tell him I have a cat, and I feel stupid for saying that. Just before he follows me, he locks the door to the shop. I go all the way inside and wait. He comes in. We don't talk. I've forgotten his name, and he has also forgotten mine. The quietness of the whole act enthralls me. He places one hand on my head and rubs it. He's tall and broad. I let him do his routine. He pushes me against a tall leather chair, where dogs and cats are groomed. The floor is strewn with hair; no Valentine's gadgets here. There is a slight smell of chlorine that couches a built-up smell, it goes through my nostrils and appeases a bit the sudden shaking. I always shake at the start, but I soon let go once we are in each other's embrace. The act is fast, but thrilling. The way we come on the floor, the way we lift our pants and tuck our shirts, the hand that brushes again against my head, all stay with me, like successive pictures in an album, as I am walking the boulevard, that is until I reach my place.

I turn the key to the metal gate. I wait a few seconds before I unlock the grey door. I always like the little wait, as if to rid my mind of all clutter before coming in. Now, all of a sudden, I have a vision of my place being burned, and instead of an urn, a mountain of ashes sits in what was the living room. I rush inside.

I look through the scarves. To my surprise, my guest is lying on the mattress in jogging pants. In his hands are some colorful strings of beads he plays with.

"I am terribly sorry but I had to sleep. I can sleep only when the sun is shining." He lifts himself up. Most of his belongings are still scattered. My eyes search for the jar. It isn't on the floor. But then looking straight ahead, I see he had cleared a few books, delegated my family's portrait to a side table, and instead placed his jar on the mantle. I go around the mattress all the way to the urn. I've never seen one so close. My guest

looks at me and says, “Does it bother you?” I shake my head. A strange calmness overtakes me. Squeezed neatly between two books as if it has always belonged there, the grayish ash sits tranquil in the jar. The resilience of burned flesh, I say to myself, the compacted essence of a soul is quite banal but freeing. The tightness I felt all day long is now gone.

“I can remove it,” he insists. My hands are on the jar. It looks distorted with the bottom part twisted. The top doesn’t fully seal the ashes, and a piece of white tape dangles next to the top.

“It’s fine,” I say. Even death can be tamed, squeezed into any form.

“Eva was young,” I hear his voice saying. “Forty-three.”

“How did she die?” I ask, my eyes still glued on the jar.

“Cancer. She knew she was dying but she was so full of life, she wanted to travel. She was in pain, still she wanted to go to Chile.”

“Why Chile?”

“Her parents took her there as a child. She remembered the sea. She didn’t want to die in the cold. We stayed there for four months; I spent all that I had on her. She was worth every penny.” He laughs a bit. “You know she loved to drink, she loved to have friends. I did everything I could to make her life pleasurable.” I turn around and face him. The sweatpants on the skinny bones somehow don’t fit the lifestyle he’s proffering.

“You married her young,” I manage to say.

“Very young, her parents hated me for it; she was English, I was German; I was forty-five, she was twenty-five. Marrying a Jewish person was not on her parents’ mind, they were quite Christian you know; and I was too old for her. Not quite the ideal

combination. They thought I played with her head. They don't know their daughter; no one could mess with Eva's head. It's true I taught her everything, how to read a good novel, how to drink, how to have fun. But she had a flair for everything, that is everything I taught her—it all became hers. Look at the urn: she made it herself, just before she died." He says it with a wisp of smile, and then lowers his voice. "She was stubborn, and did it all, anything she wanted, regardless." He quiets down. I stare at him. His agony seems gone. When he talks about her, the tremor in his voice disappears; he becomes obsessed. "I did everything for her," the voice regains the full plaintive tone as he sees me looking at him. "She wanted to travel and have apartments everywhere. I sold my house in Germany, quit my full-time job, bought an apartment in Rome, and rented one in Israel. We barely had money to furnish the two apartments, barely had money to spend, but she was happy."

"Why Rome and Israel?" "She was religious, believe it or not, she always wanted to be in Rome, see Jerusalem. It is quite something, you know, Eva religious."

"Some of us need that comfort," I say.

"It is more like a show," he suddenly says. "Women love to show off. In a way, men too, but men do it with money. Women have their subtle things, religion, affection." He pauses, "Have you ever married?" I shake my head. "You're young, I know, Eva was my second wife, I married younger you know."

I hear a little bragging, even when angst seems to trail every word he utters. "My first was a Slovak, her parents were in the People's Army, a Polish group, they ran away to Russia, diehard communists, left her in the camp in Poland, an abandoned child. She was sixteen or seventeen. They gave her up in order to escape with their lives. I met her

a few years later, I was twenty or so, we married but we never had one happy moment together. It seemed we married each other out of pity."

"Did you divorce, Mr. Bachman?" I ask him.

"Please call me Gideon. We're friends, at least I consider you a friend. I didn't divorce." He pauses. "She committed suicide." He looks at me as if searching for something. "It was meant to happen, she was raped you know—gang raped by the Germans—women can never forget that. I guess that's why she married me—you know, a German—to remind herself everyday about what has been done to her.

I see myself sitting across from him, the mattress between us, an endless sea. Gideon has known concentration camps, sat in cold churches on the outskirts of Rome, touched the Great Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. What if he asks me about my day? What will I tell him? I hear the cat scratching against the door. I excuse myself and hear myself breathe hard as I go to my bedroom.

The cat jumps at my feet. I open the window to air the room. I change the water, bring food and pat it; it won't eat without a little touch of intimacy. At this moment, my world appears to be split between a needy cat and a desperate stranger. I don't know how to feel: sorrow, pity, or envy. The cat licks itself every time it gulps a morsel of food. This would be the crux of my life, I say to myself, the time I decide to adopt this lonely cat.

The few times I sneak outside my bedroom, my guest is busy sorting out his treasure. I make a tuna sandwich with slices of lettuce and tomatoes, and bring it to him. He thanks me. He knows how to thank, that's for sure. I leave him alone. In the bedroom, I think of Eva and the Slovak. Did he mention his first wife's name? I must

have missed it. I go to bed thinking of concentration camps, of misery, and most of all of people's ability to survive. In the other room, on a lonely mattress, Gideon is lying, Eva's cremated, the Slovak buried, while I've been shifting in my own little world from the subway to the immaculate hotel, perusing the world in the *New York Times*, drinking from a mug made in Bangladesh. Real moments must surely belong to the few. From others, these tales would've spilled out with the ponderous beat of a drum, for to live nowadays is to make noise—to shock. From Gideon, it all comes naturally, subdued, lacking vulgarity—and yet, out for the world to see. I think of all the things I did today, the phone calls, the meetings with some staff, the minute details of an upcoming function, even my ordinary promenade to the shop. I want to believe they form one large meaningful lump, but somehow, they all seem to fall short, splintered at the edge of my mind.

I sleep heavily and wake up feeling ensnared in my own apartment. The only path to cross is the one that leads me to Gideon. I want to avoid him, but I can't. Something about him begins to irk me.

I pass him by. He's sitting on the sofa, his hands playing with the same beads, his eyes on the floor. I can tell he hasn't slept at all.

"Do not worry, everything will be out of your way when you come back today." I don't feel I care about any of it at this point. Let him spread his stuff, air his laundry. It's already Wednesday, and in a few days he'll be gone. I want him out, I tell myself on the way to the subway, but somehow I'm not convinced that's what I want.

I try to keep myself busy at work. I call David again, still no answer. During lunch, I suddenly hear from Danielle. I manage to tell her something about what is going on.

"Fascinating," she tells me. "Here I'm struggling with something to say and you have it landed on your doorstep. I want it," she tells me.

"What do you mean?"

"Get yourself here, I want it." I tell her I can't stay over, that we can only meet for dinner. "Fine with me," she says. "Just get yourself here, I want the story."

"You'll love this place, best tempeh with sauerkraut," she says to me as we wait in the narrow entryway of a vegan restaurant in the East Village. The scent of burning candles and incense is strong. We talk for a bit.

"Typical of you," she says as we sit down at the table. A large Buddha statue sits in the corner, his hands are filled with beads. I think of Gideon. Danielle orders immediately a large tofu plate with sesame seed. This is the start of her cleansing period after a month of dizzying writing.

"So typical of you, somebody asks you for a favor, you don't question, you accept. How long is this thing going to last?"

"Until Saturday."

"Saturday?"

"Do I have any other choice?" I ask her. We order, we eat and I relate the whole story.

"You don't want him in your apartment," she says.

"What?"

"Get rid of him. He's nothing unusual. A sleazy bastard who lusts for younger ones. I know the type. And coming from David, does it surprise you?"

"Hey, I thought you were the writer."

"I mean even his name seems made up. He could've invented it for all I care. You know it's biblical." She pauses then, suddenly, "Kick him out!"

I look at her.

"You know what I mean."

"I can't, you wouldn't do it either. You don't know, he's fragile, he needs a place, he needs me." I feel as if I'm lying.

"You're too kind. You know that much about yourself."

We eat and drink iced tea.

"Are his harem stories exciting you? Is that what it is?"

Her quick, skewed account of the whole thing becomes her, and I resent her for it.

"I find his life unique," I tell her. "A bit special."

"I have written four stories; one is about you." I look at her.

"Don't be so surprised, I love guys who are in between." I stare at her again.

"You know your type, those who haven't found themselves yet, who are looking for a female figure to fill their want, even though I doubt you know what you want…well, that's you in a nutshell."

"It's been more than a month since I saw you, you know things might have changed for me," I tell her.

She laughs. "Freakin' nonsense. I know you by heart. You're here and there. And all you need is this weirdo to make you more not here. Did you know how long the story is, the one about you?"

I shake my head.

"One page. Nothing thrilling. I wanted to prove to myself I could do it. Damn, I need a fuckin' glass of wine, not that organic Sake they serve. What else do they have here?" She snatches the menu stuck in the lap of a mini-Buddha. "Fine, Sake will do." She orders one.

"They say Sake is great after dinner, don't you think?" She pulls herself close and kisses me. "What about Thursday, tomorrow?" she asks. "I need you tomorrow."

On my way back, I stop by a deli and get soup and salad. I have this strong need to feed Gideon, to make him feel better, but I'm not sure if that's what he needs. In the subway, I envision my guest lying on the mattress. I imagine a fire going on even if the fireplace doesn't work. Danielle is missing the whole point, I tell myself. She already thinks she knows Gideon, in the same way she thinks she knows David, all our friends and me. Gideon's presence is real. He's like one of those heroes whose momentary existence is encapsulated in a halo of passion, suffering and ultimate sacrifice. I'm in the presence of such a character. Would David have brought him to me (instead of putting him in a hotel) as a way to avert a tragedy? David *must* know about Gideon. In that case, I could be the *deus ex machina*. But what am I to save him from?

As I open the black gate, an unusual excitement pins me in my place. I suddenly want to know. What exactly, I'm not sure. When I enter the house, I smell his odor. His presence has me in its grips. I go inside, peek through the scarves and say hello. He's

wearing shorts, with a long black T-shirt on which a country flag is embossed. The red and orange rectangle clashes against the white star, as if his stomach is burning. His skinny legs look like stanchions barely secured in the ground. I try not to look at him, finding it hard to reconcile the image of a hero with this outfit.

"Have you eaten anything?" Even the question falls unnaturally.

"It is so kind of you but I am fine." His voice is cracking, and I am suddenly tired. I prepare the salad, heat the soup and bring it to him. He thanks me without looking at me. I place the tray on the floor since both coffee tables are filled. Everything is on the floor.

Later, I hear a knock on my door. I open it. Gideon is trembling and shaking his head, "I cannot sleep; her face wakes me up. Would you like to talk a little more?" The cat leaves the bed and goes straight at him. He immediately shuts the door. How could a man, I ask myself, who had many affairs, lived in many countries, and explored many continents be scared of a cat?

When I step outside, Gideon is in the kitchen, drinking water. His face is stamped with an agonizing look.

"Did you eat?" He shakes his head.

"That's not good, you have to eat, you're traveling soon and you need the energy."

"I have to take my medicine. My doctor insisted I take them as long as I am traveling."

Two bottles are on the table, one Xanax, the other unknown to me. I give him a glass of water. He goes to the living room. I reheat the soup and bring it to him. He tells

me about his trips all over the world. "Eva went with me on every trip. Every single one became an adventure of some sort. Did David tell you about our trip to Africa?"

I shake my head. He talks about safaris and people—so many people.

"Where are you heading after this?" I ask, wanting to change the subject.

"I have to go back to Rome; I have to sell the little apartment." His breathing is heavy.

"Are you having difficulties?" I inquire.

"Financial, yes, that's one reason. She ruined me." He stops and looks at me. "I can't imagine myself in Rome without her. The whole city reminds me of her—it is very hard to be without her."

"What about Spain or Berlin? Aren't you going to help David?"

"He understands I cannot do it right now. That is why I am here."

"Where are you going to live?" He shrugs.

"Not in Rome for sure. She loved Rome. She learned to do pottery there. Have I shown you her vases?"

He sits on the floor and starts rummaging through stuff that seems to materialize out of nowhere. He then pulls out a piece of pottery and puts it in my hands. I don't know what to make of it. One part is bent out of proportion, the bottom resembling a full belly; the other part looks like a receptacle, long and bent, reaching out to the belly. Either Eva was really sick or else quite untalented.

"She called it the New Baal. You know what I mean, the Goddess, but with a twist." The metaphor is not hard to decipher, I want to tell him. "Look at it," he says to me. "It is not your typical pottery thing. She had a vision. Can I give it to you?"

It's not the twisted shape I dislike; it's more finding a spot for it in the apartment. It's incongruent with anything I own, and the fact I will *own* part of Eva unnerves me.

"Mr. Bachman, you don't have to, I think you're kind to..." I stop. I sound like him.

"Gideon, please, call me Gideon. Take it, I have another one."

I take it, look at it, and keep it in my hand, then place it on a shelf by the books near the mantle. Tears come to his eyes. "That's it," he says. "Look at it, that is her. You could not get any closer." An omen, I tell myself. How much I want to send this insidious token to David, with a 'Thank You' note.

Suddenly I hear, "She was not what you think she was." His voice suddenly grows deep. I look at him. "She was not an angel, you know. Her parents thought I corrupted her. She was not an easy one."

"What do you mean?"

"Sex."

"Sex?" I repeat. I look at him.

"She needed it like one needs water."

"Sex?" I ask again.

"She wanted sex. She used to go out a lot when we were on the road. This was our deal, early on after we married. She wanted to explore life. She had a lot of partners." His voice betrays no anger.

"Were you okay with it?"

"Oh, I did the same thing. This was the only way to keep us going—the only thing to keep anything going. She did it more often, but once in a while I had my thing, you know."

"Did it work?" Just before he says anything, I add, "I mean it didn't bother you knowing where she was. Did you really know?"

"We never cheated, if that's what you are asking me. We knew what we were doing. She always let me know. A few times I helped her pick. One trip I'll always remember, we were exploring the ruins in Petra. We lost each other for an hour or so. It's hard not to be drawn to the vibrancy of the place, the sandy stone hills, the red, the pink, the white—it moves you. Eva disappeared with one of the tour guides, totally drawn to the labyrinths that make this place enchanting. Some people swore they heard unusual noises coming from within; some thought the deeps were haunted. It was my wife for sure." His eyes are alive again, his eyebrows perched like two distant swallows. Even the crevices under his eyes seem to disappear.

"Are you sure it was her?"

"No one else but my Eva. She was full of life and energy." His mouth breath comes to me as a revelation. I know what's haunting about his smell: as if buried under the skin are all these flesh encounters, the bodily secretion of a lifetime, the sperm, the heat, the sweat, all elements of a life filled with life.

"How can people not do what they need to do? We all have urges. Just take them, own them—it's a matter of appreciation. You must have yours too. We all do."

"I have a girlfriend," I blurt out.

"No doubt," he says. "No doubt. But you still have urges."

He quiets down. My hand is going numb, but I don't stretch, as if one little move would betray something. I look at him; he looks at me. I realize I'm next to him, on the floor, with some beads in my hand, and around us, a little sea of pills, more vases and scarves. I'm not sure at this point who's who, as if one of us is melding into the other. As if for the last two days, we have aged together.

"It's not Eva in that urn, she is *dead* all right. Still I am happy she is cremated. It gives her life what her parents had always wanted: some quietness."

He snorts as if to belittle them. "The world is like that, my friend, but not for Eva, not for me." I want to stand up and leave, but I'm incapable of moving.

"I spoke with them earlier on the phone. Please let me know about the bill." Suddenly he whispers, "Cremation was out of the question for them. They are very angry, you know, nothing new."

"Well, if that was Eva's decision…"

"It was *my* decision," he quickly adds. "Such things Eva would have never discussed. It would have depressed her; besides she would have been against it. She was Catholic, like I told you."

"But, she…" An urge to laugh sweeps over me. A little smile escapes me.

"You can be Catholic and be something else," he says in a voice not too soft. "We are all many things. Until the very end, Eva wanted to have fun. A few months in Chile. At least we attempted to do so. But then I had already made up my mind once we left London. I called her parents from Chile to tell them she was cremated."

"Why didn't you let her parents ship the body?"

"They did not offer to pay for it. I had no more money to spare. Once she was dead, I had no obligation to please them. During Eva's treatment, we used a little studio in London her parents own. It had some furniture and appliances. They would come often and check out all the stuff. They were more worried about the pasta maker they lent us than about their daughter's treatment. I have no obligation to please them." His voice is stern; the agonizing look vanishes. My guest, or Gideon as he wants me to call him, is on his feet again, all alive. "Would you mind heating the soup again?" he asks me.

I go to the kitchen. I've got to do my share, I tell myself. "I'll do something else," I shout, feeling buoyed by some inscrutable feeling, as if I'm the one who's rescuing Gideon. I cook some pasta, heat some tomato sauce with vegetables. On the table, I put grated cheese, salt and pepper. He sits down and thanks me. It's the first time he fully eats, as if the energy he has unleashed needs to be replenished. He makes weird noises as he chews and swallows, and his long fingers push the sauce against the spoon. There are no heroic tales here. No climaxes. No resolutions. It is only his smell, a senescent smell emerging out of some wild tales, yet not so wild after all, but for which, I feel at this moment, I am yearning.

It is two in the morning. We both stand up and walk from the kitchen to the living room. Silently we rearrange the mattress, fix the sheets, all in tandem. I then wait for him to go to the bathroom. I stand by his mattress for a few minutes waiting. I look at my furniture, my rug and the white sofa all buried beneath his life treasure. I feel like a fool. What's an apartment for someone like Gideon, when the whole world has been one large dwelling?

"You are a kind person, you listen, no one listens anymore," he tells me as he comes out, his voice no more humble, but definitely not huffish. That word again, 'kind'—my whole being defined by a word, my shadowy existence silhouetted against the sunned lives of people like Gideon and Eva.

I go to my bedroom. I sit at my desk and face the garden. I know I'm on edge. An uneasy feeling takes hold of me. His composure, as he was recounting his exploration, is so matter of fact. No remorse. But then why should he feel remorseful? And Eva—the notorious Eva with the funny shaped vases who needs sex and churches—why did she marry him? Why did she even live with him? Did she really love him? This is not Romeo and Juliet; I know that, it's beyond those two romantic caricatures (who really in this world die for the other?). I sleep at the edge of my bed, the cat having declared itself the owner. I pat it and for the first time, I look at it. It's a male. I should've mentioned that fact on the fliers which I had pinned on trees a week or so earlier. I try to go to sleep, but my mind is restless. Eva's story comes back to haunt me, and I resent it. She has heard her own voice echo throughout the ruins, and yet she managed to keep at it. This pleasure (is it hers or his?) that erupts out of his twisted account springs not from some surprise or amazement: it is a simple acknowledgment, a recognition. If it feels good, it is true. No need to slather it with meaning, no need to bury it. Strangely, I am so at ease when I say that; I want to hold onto it. And yet. And yet. While I feel no more distant from Gideon, I see myself sidling closer to Eva. Even if part of me is still skeptical of the whole account.

I doze off, wake up many times. At one point I think I hear him snoring. He's finally able to let go; meanwhile I can barely get my eyes to close.

I wake up with a thought that seems to energize my whole being: Gideon is lying, his whole story is a lie. That and the fact he's leaving on Saturday morning prompts me to take a quick shower and ready myself. Just before I leave, I urge Gideon to take advantage of the sunny day—to go out and explore. He looks rested, and he agrees with me. I suggest a few diners, a few areas to visit, and then, just before I step out, knowing it's the right time, I ask him about his flight on Saturday.

"Do you want me to check on your reservation?"

"I will do it myself," he says. No whimper in his voice.

His acquiescing further confirms my suspicion that this man has not told me one bit of truth. That the jar is full of sea sand and that Eva has rather deserted him in Chile for someone else, both are strong possibilities. I rejoice over this fact, but I don't know why.

On my way to the subway, I open the paper. I read and make no sense of any word. My mind is searching. I think of Danielle sleeping late until ten or eleven o'clock. And David who is traveling with Kathleen. And Michael who married Dana because she got pregnant. And my uncle who eloped with a younger wife. It's all one sea of scattered waves, and they leave wakes behind, to which some of us are drawn, in which some of us drown. But then Eva's voice emerges, coming from the ruins of Petra. In the din of *that* voice I drown. I drown and reemerge energized, and I can't pinpoint the source of it except that now I look at the life I lead, the one I will be leading, and a sense of hope that all will come together grips me at the moment.

Today at work, I arrange a cocktail party for a small group of lawyers from Wisconsin. Then I call contractors for some bathroom leaks. Later, I meet with the staff,

reaffirm the idea of teamwork. I hear myself going crescendo as if I am leading a battalion out into the forest. "But let's keep things to ourselves," I keep telling them. "No guest is eager to know about our shortages, it is not theirs but our business." They look at me as if I have two heads.

The moment I'm ready to take my break, the phone rings.

"I haven't heard that beautiful voice for a week now."

I've told my mom to call me at home, but I know asking her is useless. Soon she gives a full narrative about the family, and more about her brother who eloped with a younger English woman, and then her favorite subject. "I have the girl for you."

"Mom," I say, "I live in New York, she's in Lebanon." That's not the first girl she has mentioned in the course of the last ten years.

"She'll go anywhere with you. You'll meet her this summer."

"What's wrong with her?" I tell her, this being one of my sisters' favorite repartee, which she urges me to use with my mom.

"What's wrong with her? Suffice it to say that her father is a general in the army and she will inherit his villa and money. That's what's wrong with her. And she's your age. She's 37."

I remind her I am 35. "Two years? Your father is ten years older than me." Her twisted logic shines over the wavelength.

"Is she pretty, mom?"

"Don't act like your sister now." The voice becomes impatient. "Of course, she's in good shape. Then a sweet tone reaches my ears. "*Mahdoomi, mahdoomi kteer.*" That

is the word for 'pleasant' and of course, a not-so-subtle hint that the girl's not particularly blessed with beauty.

"She's educated, of course, like you, she likes music and arts, and that's all what matters. That is, to you." She pauses. "You're not getting any younger, no one lives alone. If you come for Easter, we'll have dinner with them. Under the pine tree in their villas. You're coming for Easter, aren't you?" She pauses again. "Did you call your uncle, did you congratulate him?"

"Mom, congratulate him for what? He deserted his family. Weren't you crying over the phone last week?"

"That was last week. She's pretty, that much I can say. Are you coming for Easter?"

When I finally hang up the phone, I am all fatigued. I briefly think about this new girl and the awkward moment of going with my parents to visit her. Knowing Lebanese girls, she'd be more insulted than I am. But then the thought comes to me, 'What if it's all as simple as the way my mother paints matrimony?' Imagine it's my wedding day. Would I be sitting near the bride's father? Would he make me hold a sword or a gun? I shudder at the picture and decide to go for lunch. My mother manages to exhaust me even with thousands of miles between us.

Walking through the park, I think of calling David. How much does he know about Eva, I wonder. I also want to call Danielle, but I'm afraid she'll smother the narrative if I divulge Eva's entire episode. She'll transform it into one of lust and betrayal. I sit down and watch people scurrying before me. That we are all involved in our own dramas, that I know and expect, but what I see today is not the secrecy that

defines and quarters our lives but more the notion that things go on and on, uninterrupted, for all of us. Even my mom's invitation to meet the girl is fine, as long as the girl knows it's fine.

I stand up and stretch and realize not one bone in my body is aching today. Not that I have any serious health issues, it's more the feeling of being connected to every part of myself that prompts me, once I'm back at the hotel, to reach for the phone and call Danielle. Out of the blue, I ask her if she ever considers of marrying me. She almost chokes on whatever she's eating—always fruits between meals.

"This must be the most uneventful marriage proposal, even if I've never had one before. 'Consider.' Is that your word-du-jour? 'Consider?' For god's sake, can't you frickin' kneel and ask straightforward like everyone else? Does it have to be under the table?" Next she goes on a tirade about marriage and love, and "Frankly speaking my dear, what's marriage but a huge sell-out? It happens when two people stop loving each other. We haven't gone through the honeymoon stage so far. Are you coming tonight or what?" I remind her about Gideon.

"Still with you? Enough is enough. Let him go."

"He can barely eat without me, he's like the cat I have." It feels as if I'm bragging.

"Don't worry about Gideon, he's a fighter. Don't you know what his name means? A destroyer and a lecher. Did you check your bible, like I told you? Gideon fathered 70 children. How many women were in his harem? You do the count. His parents must've been omniscient; they knew what to name your friend." She finishes her

words laughing. For god's sake, put him in a hotel. I'm keeping Saturday open," she proceeds to tell me. I then mention the other drug Gideon is taking along with the Xanax.

"I'll check for you. If it's new, then it could be good," she says laughing. "Is your Gideon taking it?" I say yes.

"Why don't you try it? For god's sake, it won't kill you."

I hang up the phone and feel short changed. That's nothing new with Danielle—her twists are predictable. But I really wanted to know.

I take the long ride home. I want to buy canned food for the cat. I know I'm fishing for an excuse, but I can't figure out why I need to see him, as if I want to get to know something, like his name. This time, I promise myself, I'll remember it. But then walking the boulevard, I see myself slowing down, as if someone is behind, watching me. I can count on my fingers the few times I've been to the shop: twice in a week, never. I keep hearing the echo, Eva's echo. The whole world heard it, and she kept at it as if in tune with her own existence. Her parents are wrong. Eva was the quiet one. She cherished life as she saw fit: no great moments, no transformations, just her own way. Getting closer to the store, I feel a little tremor, an unsubtle agitation that comes in sharp contrast to Eva's ways and disposition.

I stop at the door of the pet shop. The place is abuzz with three workers, including him, all setting up shelves and redecorating. Dust is everywhere. He sees me, he winks, and he continues to work in a semi-oblivious way. In his hand there is a large heart with two kittens hugging each other. I keep looking inside—still expecting. A minute stretches painfully, endlessly. I then proceed forward towards the apartment. I'm less annoyed at him than at my wavering, the pause, the uncertainty which brings to mind

so many questions I rarely ask once I'm in and out. Walking the street, first a little wobbly, a vague decision gets hold of me: I'll never visit the pet shop again.

As I lock the black gate, I see my hands shaking while trying to insert the key in the second door. Sadness invades me, like in the aftermath of a rebuke, as if I have failed twice today. I enter. I hear his voice on the phone. I stand at the threshold watching him; I feel I'm intruding.

"*Elle avait seulement 45 ans. Mais Nicole, J'ai pas eu de la concentration. J'ai tout payé pour elle."* He puts his hands on the phone and whispers, "Rome, Nicole, an old friend, from Paris." He smiles at me as if we're both in cahoots. "*Je ne veux plus rester á Rome,* I cannot stay there. *Je ne peux rien faire là bas. Il faut que je vende l'appartement,* it must be sold. Can I stay with you? No more than two weeks, I promise..." He whines and laughs, for a while. "Give your best to your *maman*, a sweet lady, that's for sure." He hangs up.

"That's it, it is all taken care of. She will take me in." A sense of relief comes from the voice. He talks about Nicole for a while. I look around: papers, envelopes and letters litter the floor. I leave for a second and go to the kitchen to brew some coffee, worrying a bit about the phone bill. "Do you want a cup of coffee?" I yell from the kitchen. He says yes. When I bring his mug, I see him in his typical dejected existence, on the floor, holding a letter in his hand.

"I've been writing all day long. I have to sell the apartment. I have to do it fast. Nicole will have me only for a few weeks, after that I have to go." Almost all letters have one or two lines written on them.

"What about all of Eva's friends?"

"They have nothing to do with me. I do not blame them, I took her away from them. It is a verdict I have to live by. No one knew Eva. You are too kind to have me in your apartment." His eyes are set on me.

"Gideon. " It feels like I am talking to a kid. "Don't you have plans? Don't you have work to do?"

"Plans. I never plan. Perhaps at the very end when Eva was sick. But we never planned. What's the point? Nothing comes out of it anyway."

"But you must know where you'll be living. Don't you? Where are you going to work? I mean…"

"I'll be working, I'll be living somewhere; it's just a matter of time. But planning? Who has time for it?"

I leave him alone and go to my bedroom. I feel tired of this man, of his moaning, the nonsense he utters. I sit on my bed and look for the cat. I find him under the bed. I pull him close to me. He's shaking hard. I pat him for a while. I refresh his water and put more food. He doesn't touch it. I don't know what to do. Do I call a doctor? I keep patting him, and as I'm doing so, I feel my day hasn't been what I had expected it to be. I feel like a beggar who has begged and begged but somehow came out shortchanged. As if I have straddled many worlds only to find myself now on my bed, depleted, barely able to take care of this cat.

I try to go to sleep. I place the cat next to me and close my eyes. In a second I go into a weird reverie, with Danielle reading a children story, the cat between us, and somehow in the background, there's Eva, not Gideon—Eva staring at us from some dark place. I don't see her, but her presence is palpable. I wake up to the sound of the cat

convulsing and retching. I keep patting him while thinking of so many things. Will Danielle ever marry me? Will I keep this job? Will I ever go back to the shop? Will I go with my mother to visit the General's daughter? Suddenly, the cat vomits on the bed.

I go to the kitchen to get paper towels, water and soap. I glimpse the living room. Gideon is enthroned in his mess. Where does it all come from? I myself want to vomit, as if by doing so I will purge myself of this man, his smell and his belongings. What day is it anyway? How long has Gideon been with me? Even if he leaves, I tell myself, his smell will always stay here, attached to the doorknobs, to the unusable fireplace, to the white futon. I clean the cat, remove all the sheets, clean the floor, and open the window to air the room, but the suffocation is coming from within. Now that the cat is feeling fine, he rubs himself against my legs.

Back to the kitchen. Gideon is sitting, his face buried in his lap. Not expecting him, I panic and drop the garbage out of my hand.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, trying to lessen my awkwardness.

"I don't know what this word means anymore. I am used to myself. You get used to your problems, no doubt about it. I should have died with her." The whimpering and the drama are all back. I don't react. Danielle is right; the man is a harem owner with cancerous Eva, his suicidal first wife, the Slovak, and perhaps 'French' Nicole, all his victims.

"I should have," he repeats. Suddenly the cat jumps on him. Startled, Gideon stands up shaking. I hold the cat, bring it back to the bedroom, and close the door. He's still standing when I come back.

"I cannot deal with cats," he tells me, "I am sorry." I ask him if he wants to go for a walk. There's a small garden in the neighborhood. Until my room has aired, I feel the need to go out. He goes to the living room, puts a sweater and shoes on and follows me. This is his first time out since he arrived to the city.

"When I was young, I always dreamed of New York City. My father told me it's a special place. He never made it."

"Where is he now?"

"He died during the war."

"Was he killed?"

"Yes, but it was his own mistake." I look at him, this time fully irritated at his choice of words.

"During the war, a German family hid us, they had a farm outside Berlin. They put us in a chicken coop. For three years in a chicken coop with chicken all around us. My father could not stand it, got restless, insisted on checking on the house. He never came back. It was his doing. He should have stayed. My mother, my sister and I stayed there until the end. After the war, my mother married a German soldier." Gideon is silent for a while. "She was like me—no waste of time; do what seems the best. My sister never recovered, never forgave my mother's marriage. She never spoke to her. She thought I should have stopped her from marrying a German soldier. Where do people get this idea we can change people's minds? I mean wars, marriages, affairs—these things are beyond us. The day after the wedding, I left home and walked away, walked to Paris. I had been there once with my father. I kept walking and walking until I got to the city. I cannot remember anything except walking. I woke up in a hospital.

This was where I learned my French, from nurses and patients. The French government did a great job after the war to help us."

The stories! Listen to his stories! I keep hearing David's voice. "This must have been horrible," I tell him. "Did you ever revisit the place?"

"The coop, you mean. People always get defensive about it, what's in a word, my friend? Nothing." He pauses for a few seconds. "A doctor told me once, you know they made us see head doctors to alleviate the pain—so he tells me one day, 'every time you think about the coop, think of yourself as a chicken. This will make you feel better.'" I stare at Gideon, not sure if I should laugh or not. "If you think of yourself as a chicken," Gideon proceeds in a serious tone, "then the coop is the right place to be. This is the only way you can make sense of it, the only way you can survive the memory. No sooner I get in the grip of it, you know the full ordeal, I transform myself into something else. We all do it in one way or another."

"That's kind of…"

"Trust me, it works, it worked all these years, no need to be amazed. This is life. And this is how it works for a lot of people. Don't you have moments like these? You're young, you must. We all transform ourselves temporarily. All young people do that. Old people do it too, but when habits settle, it is all done, finished. Do not ever settle into habits."

"What happened to the people who hid you during the war?"

"Wonderful people, all dead."

"And your mother, your sister?"

"Kept in touch through postcards, once or twice a year, I don't remember which occasion or holiday, they all look the same to me. My mother died four or five years ago. My sister, she vanished. We all have to pay a certain price, that is fine, no need for a show."

The chill of the snow is catching us. Gideon is not shivering. I am. It's not so much the story as his way of recounting it. The word 'price' echoes in my head, while at the same time I become aware of a shadow, of a sound lurking behind us. It is the same one that trailed me earlier today on my way to the shop. I turn around. Nothing. I look back at him. He's staring at the ground. The tale is horrific, all of his tales, the coop, the wild nights, the orgies, the sex, the untethered belonging. There are so many gaps, so many discrepancies, and yet they all melt in the fluid tale of his life.

"Eva was never scared—stubborn, that's about it. She got sidetracked; people get sidetracked. Like Eva in a church, what a waste of time. To live a full life, you must get rid of most of its blabber even if people will hate you for it. They want the introduction, the whole narrative, uninterrupted. The coop, the chicken, my father's death, what are they for me? All little dots in this great life." He suddenly looks at me. "Do not let anything sidetrack you. Do not ever waste time. Do not ever be scared," he tells me as if he has read my thoughts.

The shadow I felt behind me is gone.

"You know what is the most painful part? It's not that Eva's gone, she is gone all right; it is waking up in the morning without someone in my bed. I cannot wake up alone. Now that is a gap for me I have to cross." We both stand up, looking at one

another, and I have no idea how to proceed next. I feel I want to say something smart to him about keeping the faith. But the cliché of it forbids me from saying a word.

"In any case," he quickly changes his voice, "I think I will be in love soon. On my last trip to Israel with Eva, we met this wonderful gal. She is…"

I'm not listening anymore. We walk back. I open the black gate and let him in. We stand in the narrow hallway between both doors. Looking for the key, I feel we're both fully caught between two worlds, stuck in some sort of an underpass. Either we both move forward, or stay there forever.

I go to my room. I close the window. The cat is on my bed. I lie down and pet him. He too has become a part of me, and soon he'll become another dot in my life (as Gideon was saying). Gideon and Eva's tales come to me like one long shot in a movie interspersed with jump cuts—but the continuity sprawls and spreads and conquers everything. Even when I think of my life, of all the people I know—family, friends, routines I carry day-to-day, Danielle, David, and yes, the pet shop owner, (what's his name for god's sake?) and my flinty investment (from which I'm expecting a good return)—they also seem like jump cuts, discrepancies that somehow snugly fit together. They feel equally important: no one is less of an entity than the other. It's not the details we need, but the steady sense that everything keeps moving to a place, somewhere**.**

I leave so early; I don't know if Gideon is asleep or not. At work, I supervise the little gathering from Wisconsin. I work and keep counting the hours. I want to see Gideon again.

Coming back home, I try to unlock the black gate only to find it already open. I panic. I know for sure I've locked it this morning. The gray door is also not locked. I

run inside. Gideon is not in. Nothing is packed. I call his name. No answer. I look for the cat, but quickly realize that the back door to the kitchen is opened. The cat is gone. I start calling, "kitty, kitty, kitty." I'm upset with myself for not naming him. I call both names, alternating. Nothing. I keep the kitchen door open hoping the cat will come back. I go outside on the street, and look around. No Gideon. I go back to the living room and sit on the floor.

If Gideon doesn't come back, all this becomes my onus, including the urn. It has stood there on the mantle for the last five days, staring at me. It looks so familiar, as if it belongs there. As I gaze around, a piece of paper sticks out of the mattress. It's one of the letters Gideon's been writing. The others are gone. I quickly take it in my hand and start reading. "Dear David," it says in a perfect cursive hand, "I have been here for six days and everything is going fine, I am on my way to recovery. The only voice I hear now is of Eva, as expected. Your friend has been nothing but a great host, a kind man. Like all of us, he is looking and searching, as you have mentioned it to me, and that's all good. With time he will know, as I have come to know many things this last month." It stops there.

David has always been a schemer. In restaurants, he assigns seating, so that "people can mingle." Doubtless he's doing it now with Gideon at my own expense. In a way David's like my mother, mocking time and distance, rearranging people's life from afar. And what's this thing about searching? Have there been talks behind my back about me? What has been said? If I agree with Gideon on anything, it is that life doesn't need drama, even if his is full to the brim with it. Why is David so concerned with my life?

I stand up and decide to pack this man's belongings and put him in a hotel for a night. I need no one to tell me where and how to proceed.

I go to the kitchen to get some water. The phone rings. I rush to it. It's Danielle. "Kick him out tonight. The man is dangerous. Schizo. Do you know what I mean? The drug. It's for Schizo. So far it's Dr. Jekyll. Mr. Hyde will make his visit tonight. Full moon. What's wrong with you?"

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure? Do I joke about these things? David must be really sick. I'll come over and help you." I vehemently object to it. I hang up and rush back to read the letter.

I hear someone at the door, someone playing with a key. I freeze. He's back. He's having problems opening the door. I don't move. I stay in my place, waiting to see what he'd do next. He keeps manipulating the key and then stops. He rings the bell twice. I'm still unable to move, I want to prove to him what an ungodly host I am. But then the ringing and the jiggling stop. I stay in my place for a few seconds, and then proceed to open the door. He's leaning against the wall, wearing a sheer sweater and light pants, shivering.

I hold his hand and help him inside.

"I had to go to the drugstore," he tells me, "I ran out, and I'm traveling tomorrow." "Don't you have a coat or something?" He shakes his head.

"I thought we would never leave Chile."

"Were you able to get your medicine?"

"I have a letter from my doctor."

"Did you see the cat?" my voice is loud.

"The cat..." he looks at me perplexed, "It was scratching at the door. I opened the door to the garden, then let it out."

I don't say a word about the cat. I think of the chicken coop and shut my mouth. For the rest of the afternoon, we don't say much. Gideon keeps going back and forth to the kitchen, to the bathroom, to the living room, sorting out his things. I eye him like one eyes a thief. He doesn't talk, he mumbles, emits weird sounds. I'm so upset with Danielle. She's stolen and altered the whole narrative, all according to her whimsical imagination. Meanwhile, I keep going to the kitchen door, look into the garden and wait for the cat. I sit on the sofa, and watch him desperately put, remove and replace things from one bag to another.

At one point I hear a noise near the gate. I panic. It can't be Danielle. She can't have come unannounced. She can't see me in this way. I rush to the door, open it. No one. I sigh. I feel relieved as if I'm the one under scrutiny. As if at this specific moment, Danielle will see both of us and get to know who we really are.

I go back inside. His breathing is loud, and I hear now some of his words, 'It is the end.' He keeps repeating it like a dirge, a lament. I get very scared. David and his silly schemes. He must have known. He knew all about it.

"Did you take your pills?" I ask him. I come close to him. "Did you take your pills?" I repeat.

"You are a kind man, I would not have survived without you." Every word falls heavy, like the antecedent of despair. We go to the kitchen. I make him a little salad, and watch him swallow his pills. I look at both bottles. I shake my head. Later we walk the boulevard, and together we pick out a coat for him. I pay for it. Every move I make

seems like a betrayal, a smashing of a narrative—my own narrative—I've constructed for the last four days. The more I stop believing in Gideon and Eva's life, the more splintered mine becomes.

On the way back, he stops by a perfume shop and buys a small thing for Nicole.

We go into the apartment, and this time I help him put his things together, pack the two suitcases. I watch him put the little urn with the ashes in the small duffel bag.

Neither of us is able to sleep. I hear him moan and I sit the entire night in the kitchen dozing on the chair, watching for him, all worried. In the morning, we sit at the table, drinking coffee, staring at our mugs, as if both leery of one another.

At 7 o'clock, the phone rings. The taxi is here. I had called yesterday, planned and paid for the full fare. I tell him so now. Together we go outside, each with a suitcase and for some reason, I have this longing to go with him and leave everything behind. I put the suitcase and the duffel bag in the car, and give him the flight information. Just before I close the door, Gideon leans close to me and says, "One day, you will be fully happy, I have no doubt about it." He doesn't smile. No mockery, no sarcasm. The urge to slam the car door overwhelms me. I turn my back and go inside.

The first thing I do is clean the apartment. I'm not talking about dusting and sweeping the floor, but a full blast cleaning: Windows, back and front doors all open; mattress and carpets outside in the garden. I remove books from shelves, spray and dust the entire surfaces. As I'm taking the books down, I notice the vase he's given me is gone. I vacuum, wash the floors, wash all the dishes. I make two piles of laundry—his sheets and towels in one—and take them to the cleaner. I rearrange the shelves with books and trinkets, and spread the gray carpet in a different angle. It takes me five long

hours, at the end of which I see myself collapsing. When I finally sit down, I see the light on my machine blinking with messages. Two from Danielle, one from David and my mom again. I ignore them all.

I lie on my bed for hours. I don't want to think about Gideon. I call Danielle and cancel for the night.

Later during the evening, I become restless. I want to call Danielle but can't get myself to do it. "We all have a price to pay," I keep hearing Gideon's words. Where is my salvation? I ask myself. I'm not thinking about the wrongs I've committed, but more on what had not been yet started in my life; what for years I've averted.

I look around me and see nothing but clean walls, the scent of lemon in the air, as strong as Gideon's sweater. I shouldn't have overused the ammonia, but then I know I'd do the same over and over. I take the flute from behind the fireplace, put it together. I sit on a cushion on the floor, where Gideon's mattress was. I don't play. I'm tired of the same tunes. Once in a while I keep hearing scratches; I rush to the door. Nothing.

I sleep at the edge of my bed as if the cat is still here.

"Aboard the USS Nashville"

PART I: The Chosen Ones

The evacuation call comes suddenly. At three o'clock in the morning, Susan, my uncle's wife, clicks her cell phone and hears the voice: *You should report to the bay by 4:00 a.m. This morning. You will be escorted first to Cyprus then to the States…* "A nice voice," she would tell us later, "like all the staff working at the embassy. Very nice." Following the instructions on the television, my uncle insists we leave the big suitcases and take only the carry-on bags with us. For the last three days, we've been glued to the news, all gathered at my parents' apartment. With every newsflash, my uncle would rush to his apartment lugging his wife with him to re-pack their two small suitcases, sorting things out, adding and removing different items.

I oblige my uncle. Most of my luggage, in any case, consists of summer clothes destined to stay in Lebanon mixed with heavy winter jackets, donations my youngest sister Zeena had insisted I bring along, and the remainder, all presents for my ever-multiplying family—two brothers, three sisters and thirteen nephews and nieces whom I feel pressured to bribe with presents or money if only to solidify the tenuous ties or else to keep this aura of the well-off relative (the one from America) alive in their minds.

What you witness when leaving home should evoke the crucifixion scene, not inasmuch in its religious fervor but more in its power to perpetuate itself annually. The Mary character must belong to my sister Yasmina because no one has the power to conjure tears so profusely, or to exude such anguish and pain as she with her Modigliani face. She is the cue: when she cries, we cry. When she laughs, we laugh. My father and mother stand at the door. Father, typically himself, a little detached, perhaps inured to all

the comings and goings. Judging from our past, he is neither sad nor happy. Now in his early seventies, he kisses me goodbye with much tenderness, but knowing he has had many lovers, I wonder if this tenderness is not tainted by wistful thoughts of women from long ago. Mother kisses me like a real mom and her sadness has less to do with our sudden leaving than with her constant realization that her life has been nothing but a departure from wealth, beauty and youth, her obesity a bitter pill she constantly swallows. As for the rest of the family, my youngest sister Zeena is quietly sad. It's moving because it has the power to make us aware how intransigent sadness can be, almost hereditary. The gambler, Pierre, my brother, along with his family, is as usual not present. Gambling has transformed his life into that of a nocturnal bat seeking the caves where men lose their shirts to creditors who have become power brokers; they stand as a social class distinguished by their ability to add yet another strain of misery to a country that has known nothing but misery. Two days ago, Pierre showed up unexpectedly at the house around 4:00 p.m. Clutching a glass of whiskey in one hand, a cigarette in the other, he seemed upset. "I just came back, it's really bad, everyone is leaving." He paused, then continued, "All the Russians are leaving," referring to the working girls. "They were crying. We took them to the bus and we waved goodbye to them. I almost had tears in my eyes." He looked at us. We were silent and perplexed. "They don't want to leave. We're dealing with a real war," he told us as he took another sip and puffed at his cigarette with an uncanny ability, almost a gift—to drink, smoke, lament and pour grief over the Russian whores—all in one gesture.

Going down the steps, I see my oldest brother already in his car; he will drive us to the port today. My sister Yasmina's two sons, tall for their age, stand close to her. All

of us, in a daze, watch Akram, the young Syrian servant load the small suitcases. Early this summer, Akram came to live with us after his brother's accidental death.

As the car moves away, Yasmina's face becomes a blur of tears and lines; mom and dad slowly retreat into the house; my nephews don faint smiles; Nada, my oldest brother's wife, smokes as she leans against the car's window and says, "Summer 2006, the year has been talked about; the number is an omen." Zeena waves at us. She will be the one to restore some element of sanity until we have become a distant memory.

This is only my tenth day in Lebanon. I was planning to stay for the whole month of July. My Uncle and Susan came a month earlier, planning to spend two months in the country. But the Israel-Hezbollah unexpected skirmish is forcing all of us to leave. We're all silent in the car as my brother cautiously drives the spiraling descent to the coast. I am suddenly struck by a yearning for sweet food.

"Do you think we should have brought food with us?" I ask.

"No need to. Soon we'll be sailing," my uncle responds.

"Do you want anything to eat?" my brother asks.

"Well, since we're leaving rather early, we might as well stop at *Sea Sweet*," I say. *Sea Sweet* is one of many pastry and breakfast shops along the coast.

"We shouldn't," my uncle claims. "We'll be late. We can't be late." He looks at his wife as he utters those words. I know he's thinking about his school, their school in Pennsylvania, and the fact it won't be opened on time mars his vision with dark, impenetrable notions.

"You won't leave that early," my brother immediately informs my uncle. I leave it to my older brother to take immediate action. Some wise dervish must have

hypothesized long ago that the only way to get someone to say yes is by saying no. And I am sure this sage must have thought of specimens such as my brother, for whom choosing detours regarding any issue in life is the only way to get somewhere. He's known to be the voice of opposition with a pestering sense of Know-it-all-ness, who has the power to pre-fabricate facts, believe in them, and throw them point blank in your face. In short, a narcissist who drowns in his own voice, and needs neither a pond nor a mirror to complete the myth.

"No siree, you'll be waiting for a while but you'll come back today." Mind you his American accent still amazes me, considering he had lived in the States for only eight years, and frankly I hate his guts for it. Half of the seventeen years I've been in New York, I've been teaching English and still haven't got rid of that mixture of Lebanese and French accent. I've always wondered if the French accent (the consequence of being educated in French speaking schools) is an unconscious affectation I've kept if only to prove something about myself.

"As a matter of fact, you may not leave today," my brother adds in a more serious tone.

"We've got to leave," my uncle still insists. "One of us must leave today. Who will open the school? The airport was hit today, it is closed, this is the only outlet. We've got to go."

"There is a possibility," his wife interrupts but very nicely, very sweetly. The moment the conflict started, she sent emails every day to the U.S. immigration and to the Embassy, trying to secure a place for us to leave.

"Don't you have someone to do it for you?" my brother asks.

"No one," my uncle clamors. "No one can open that school except me. We've got to go, we have no choice. Who will be there for the students? You know the work we have to do, who can do it?" The image of their successful Montessori school flashes in my mind. I had witnessed those children working independently without a looming garbed figure hovering above; how envious and cheated I felt. "No one can do it, except me and you," my uncle tells Susan. He's seated in the front with his sunglasses on. She reminds him to place some drops in his eyes. "Keep the small bag in your hands not in the suitcase." The small bag, I guess, contains the passports and the medicine. He is clenching it like a child holding a bag of marbles.

"You're not leaving today," my brother insists. "I guarantee I'll pick you up later today." And the irony is? He would prove himself right for the first time in the forty some years of his life. My brother's cell phone interrupts his words. "It must be her," he continues in the same breath. "Your favorite niece, from Cyprus. Didn't we ship her daughter already?" he jokes. He's referring to my niece Athena, whom we escorted two days earlier to an area in Beirut close to the Cypriot embassy where, after a long night sailing, she finally reunited with her mom, my sister. I had tried to leave with Athena on a Cypriot ship but having an American passport prevented this. And the American Embassy also declined my request to have my niece come with me on their ship. She's not American, they reminded me. When I explained to both embassies that it was I who had escorted my niece from Cyprus to Lebanon eight days before, neither felt that my reasoning was substantial enough to allow a 'foreigner' on their ship. I couldn't sleep for two days knowing that I couldn't accompany Athena to the island. And my sister's

phone calls didn't alleviate my insomnia either. From the time her daughter left until she reached the island that day, she called more than twenty-four times.

"Yes, they're okay," I hear my brother telling her over the phone. Pause.

"Yes, they have food." With an uncanny flair for tragedy, my sister concocts dire situations if only to torment herself, even though her daughter was now safe with her.

"No, they won't leave, trust me, they won't." Pause. "I repeat: they won't leave today." As he hands the phone to my uncle, my brother pulls into a gas station.

"We'll be there, we'll be there, don't worry about us," my uncle reassures my sister, "we'll see you today." A few minutes later he hands the phone back to my brother. "Do you have to upset her?" No one answers.

My uncle leans forward, as if crushed under a heavy load. For twenty-five years he and his wife have opened the school year with both of them standing in the hallway. Twenty-five years they have stood every single day near the door smiling and greeted one student at a time. It isn't about missing a day, but about breaking a tradition held sacred to both of them; a signature to that delightful, open-room school they had built one step at a time, day in day out, and wound their intimate lives around. My uncle and Susan must leave today, I tell myself.

We're still in the mountains. The gas station is built at the edge of a road. It's hard to avoid the gorgeous backdrop of the hills swirling deep into a gorge where a village and a convent sit. Here and there the claws of modern technology disfigure the beauty of the mountains through the scars of a careless quarry (all sanctioned by politicians), or else some rich Lebanese has decided to build his villa on top of a hill leaving part of the mountain denuded of trees. The erosion of the Lebanese soul, I tell

myself, as if it's the reason itself for the conflict at hand. Who could stop that erosion? A consuetude of tribal force keeps the abuser more abusive. I feel an urge to prove this theory to the world, as if by airing it, I can hope for a panacea to our troubles today.

The attendant holds the nozzle. He's one of the few Syrian workers remaining since the beginning of the hostility. What would the Lebanese people do, I wonder, without their maids and drivers? My mother would simply die rather than sever herself from the Ethiopian lady who lives with them. My brother reaches for his wallet. My uncle rushes to pay, but my brother is quicker. As usual he overdoes it with the tip. The Syrian is thankful and smiles, but he looks bored as he sits on a small rickety chair watching us leave. He is of medium height but with a strong tan. I think of the days I must spend on the Jersey shore in order to color the pale patina of my body. I am so pale, I tell myself. So damn pale.

As expected, the highway is empty. This is the main conduit leading to Beirut, a nightmarish road with no hints of lane markings or road signs. My brother speeds up; Susan looks at me, surprised by this sudden acceleration. It's very telling watching her face, the little curve of the mouth, and the slight arch to one eyebrow; it's like an unalienable right, an urgent prod to the Lebanese who by nature dislike criticism.

"Susan, your facial expressions are embarrassing," my uncle always reminds her. "You do not respect the Lebanese way. Breaking the rules is like breathing for them. You want to change it? No one can. It's Lebanon, my dear, not the States. Americans can't understand this culture at all. This is how they live." This speech could be given at any time as when Susan, for example, witnesses someone throwing garbage in the street, or when my nephew speaks loudly, demanding fries instead of vegetables, or my mother

decides to tell a funny joke at the expense of my father, an act deeply rooted in her elaborate but spontaneous story telling. It's omnipresent like the Cedars on Lebanese flags (and believe me, neither can be altered).

"It's hard to stop," Susan has confessed to me many times, "when I see something wrong, I have to say something. I don't see what's wrong with that. Do you think I should say something in Lebanese? I can but he forbids me to do so. So what else can I do?"

Prior to living in the States, My uncle and Susan lived in Beirut for eight years. She learned to speak and read the Lebanese dialect, which is by itself a feat. Whereas some expatriates reject the culture, she embraced it. She has sat close to my grandfather to learn Arabic, listening and taking in all his eccentric admonitions. She has sat with my grandmother in that smoke-filled living room in the South of Lebanon and knitted with her or waited for languishing raucous poker parties to end to go home. My grandmother always referred to her as my uncle's wife and Susan must have accepted it as part of the tradition, having heard at least three versions of her name, Suzie, Sue, and Saw'san. I guess she could've stayed in Beirut had the Civil War of 1975 not started. Thirty years later, she, a true blooded American, returns with my uncle, willing to learn as much as to give, perhaps out of some cultural precondition: early walks with my father, advice for my sisters, flute and English lessons to the children, movie and music sharing with the family. It's like an anachronistic Ben Franklin common sense sprinkled amongst the not-so-ungrateful Lebanese people.

We stop at *Sea Sweet* and I dash in. There is an artful display of all kinds of local pastries and the large clean pans with a variety of desserts look like halos of manna, gifts

from heaven that remind me life can still be good. My brother and my uncle follow me. My brother orders six 'knaffee,' the sweet cheese bread, and again the same dynamic is replayed whereby my uncle, this time, insists on paying but my brother refuses. He even tips the cashier. My uncle and I look at each other. In the car I instantly devour one. My uncle keeps his in his hand along with the passport bag.

"Aren't you going to eat it?" my brother asks.

"I can't, I am not hungry. I'll die if I eat it," my uncle responds.

Being on a special restricted diet that had saved her life, Susan looks at our food, smells it and declines. My brother eats one. A few minutes later he curses loud, "Damn it, I did it again." He's also on a special diet, which he hasn't started yet. When, earlier in the week, I reminded him that he's like my mother, a totally compulsive eater, he swore that I am so not on target and that he truly fears for my life in the States, what with my inability to tell the good from the bad. "I mean for God's sake, look at yourself, just look at yourself." He laughs by himself and I put the other two 'knaffee' in my bag and notice that my mom has placed mini-sandwiches in my backpack. Between the sweet bread and my mom's sandwiches, I feel I've already gained three or four pounds. In the States, I promise myself, I will work out vigorously for a whole month to remove those extra calories. In this way, it feels like there is a rapprochement with my whole family, since we all are on some kind of a diet.

We are lost. The army has closed the road leading to the port area. A sergeant tells us we have to make a detour. We are literally *in* the sea, my brother jokes, referring to the concrete two-mile square coastline that was once part of the Mediterranean. After a few detours, upon the insistence of my brother who always knows his way, we finally

reach the designated area, a barren spot smack in the middle of nowhere between Beirut and Joonee—another city to the north. Everything around us is barricaded. Holders of U.S. passports are syphoned through a blockade where thousands of people are waiting outside. For what? No one knows.

We leave my brother. We exchange hugs and kisses just in case we leave today. "I'll be back," he tells us. "Wait for me, in the same place, sometime around 4 or 5."

For once, my uncle doesn't say a word. We move with our carry-on bags. Everyone else has large suitcases, not only one but two or three. "They shouldn't let them in," my uncle clamors.

They are all let in.

We move past the first barricade, where an open area awaits us, a big space where babies and mothers are already waiting. We keep walking until we get to the next barricade. There we stop and we wait. What's around us? Nothing. The Lebanese sun is beating on us. I don't have a hat. No water. Eight marines stand apart behind the wooden barricades. They don't seem unfriendly. Two of them are holding papers with names on them. Spread along with the marines is the Lebanese Special Force, all tanned, broad-shouldered, sweating out of their tight shirts. We assume that the force present here is mostly Christian and that they harbor no ill will towards the marines. As a matter of fact, some of them are wearing badges that display their names in English, and under it the title, 'American Embassy' is emblazoned in a bold black thread, a reassuring touch that some powerful protective force is in place. We are in the middle of the Christian enclave: it becomes so by the sheer fact that the Shiites' towns and villages are being bombarded. The Christian areas along with the Druzes' and the Sunnis' are not attacked,

with some exceptions of course. Even the land seems to connive to keep the sectarian tribal laws at work during the war.

Susan is multi-tasking. First, she conjures a hat out of one of the heavily filled carry-on bags. She gives my uncle the hat and some lotion to put on his skin, then reaches for a pen as we suddenly hear a marine reading names from a list he's holding. Has he been doing that prior to our arrival? We don't know. Every time a name is called, a commotion starts up around him. First you hear a scream, "it's me, it's us."

Now the whole crowd must make room for the family to come through. If you're late in responding, and someone else's name is mentioned, then the commotion is doubled. For now we must make room for two families trampling on each other and everyone else on their way to the next area. Desperate screaming of "louder, louder" is constantly hurled at the marine.

"Henry T."

"We can't hear you."

"Ali D."

"Louder, we can't hear you,"

"If you shut up we can hear him."

"George S."

"Louder! Did he say earlier Tannouri? Because if you said Tannouri, that's me and my family."

"He said Hannoori, not Tannouri."

"I could swear they said Tannouri." And on and on.

Another thing I learn fast is the way things move. The ground imbued with frenzied energy takes me unaware. I suddenly see myself somewhere else with people I haven't noticed. Space, like time, becomes malleable. The only thing that defines me is my aim: leaving. As abstract as it sounds, I am 'leaving' since I have arrived to this spot. But I am also attuned to the fact, as I watch Susan scurry towards a Marine, that I, or should I say we, have become all of a sudden part of a sub-family, a species that has branched out of another and migrated to another location. So here we are leaving together, what's so bad about it? Two days from now we'll be in the States, with this nightmare behind us. With a few phone calls to my family, we'll restore order among us, we'll pretend this never happened and that the two enemies will soon realize they have hurt each other enough and cease their brawls. Because from a distance, it truly feels like a Shakespearean play, people feuding, one party brandishing a knife, the other a sword and then the uproar before things calm down.

Still I feel that something beyond us is taking shape, something I see in everyone's faces, not fear, not anxiety, but antipathy which has devolved on many Lebanese ever since they had witnessed and buried a brutal civil war that had lasted for fifteen years. I was a child when the war started. I remember the bombing, the fear, the chaos, the ever-growing dysfunctional family I came to know. We relocated to the mountains, to my grandfather's resort, and war became something that happened to others. Occasionally we heard gruesome stories, but soon our routine was re-established. But then war, like weed, spreads anywhere, everywhere. And all I remember after that was the running, from one village to another, from one city to another, from one airport to another. Even now, after I have settled for a long time in New York City, I still feel

even with the little apartment and my few belongings that I'm at the beck and call of some ulterior force, some threat that will displace and take me to another destination. I should've stayed put with my family. I didn't have to listen to my mom urging me to go. I could've stayed, borne the brunt of their little wars and then left as usual when roads and airports re-opened. Then I would've felt like a tourist visiting the old country and when it was time to go back home, leave with a large suitcase in tow. If anything, I'm right this moment a refugee of my own doing.

Susan comes back. "Nothing on the list, at least his list," she says. "But in a while, they're bringing a new list. We should be on it. They're really nice."

"Oh, my gosh, it's him, it must be him," my uncle suddenly screams. We all look towards where he's pointing. An old man is standing by himself, holding a large plastic bag in one hand, a battered suitcase in the other. He seems to lurch as if he's going to keel over.

"We've got to go over there," my uncle tells his wife with urgency in his voice. "We've got to." It's one of his father's old friends, a man from the same village, who has moved to the United States with his daughter and her family. "Look at him, he's by himself. He can't even walk. What are we going to do?" He asks his wife.

"Poor guy, he has a heart problem," she says.

"Anything but poor," my uncle snaps. "The bastard has at least five million dollars stashed under his mattress. I've got to help him." Something about the suitcase makes this man look even older.

"Does that mean he'll travel with us today?" I ask her.

"We don't know, but we can't leave him. He's by himself," she says as she follows my uncle. I stand on the side watching as they rush towards the old man.

I notice more Marines emerging from behind the barricades. All fearless, at first glance. But their looks belie an existential dilemma, a deep bewilderment like, "What the fuck am I doing here?" I also realize that my skin is slowly getting red. I don't have a hat, and even if I had one, I wouldn't wear it just because it would mess up my hair, and frankly speaking, under the circumstances, a hat does impart the feeling of being a refugee. Besides, I'm more aware of my thirst and slight hunger as the sun seems to tilt menacingly closer to us. I dig in my carry-on and grasp one of my mother's little sandwiches. I gobble it before my uncle and Susan return. I don't know why I feel the urge to be sneaky about it. He wouldn't eat it even if I offered it. But something makes me do it as I watch them inching closer to the Old Man.

The crowd has thickened and it's harder to get from one point to another. I wait for a while and then, spying two crates one top of the other, I decide to stand on them. All the way across, I spy the Old Man with his bag, now sitting in some sort of a makeshift tent with a newspaper on his head, his suitcase between his hands, his plastic bag on the floor. How fast humanity slips into homelessness, I tell myself. My uncle is talking to him. Only he would do that. He is my grandmother's son. She, out of habit or sheer boredom, without expecting anything, helped and fed people. Until the very end, when she hadn't much in her possession, she managed to find something to give. Here my uncle is busying himself with a person whom he had invited a few times to his home back in the States. Now he has secured a little place for him to sit until departure.

I walk around and finally stand near a barricade. I look around. It's hopeless. My brother is right, we won't be leaving today**.** Suddenly I feel something squeeze my calf. I couldn't be burning, I say to myself. I am Mediterranean after all, we don't burn that fast. Somehow this notion of being Mediterranean seems to inject my spirits with a distinction hardly special among this crowd, but it is a distinction, which I gladly grab onto.

A loud voice is heard, "You have to let us in." It comes from one of the two women standing on my left side, both wearing silky scarves covering the neck and the hair but not the face. They are from the South: their accent, their clothes, and their tight scarves. And of course, the brood of children around them—three boys hug the metal grid and two girls hold tight to their mothers' skirts. One of the women is holding a baby in her arms, the other is flailing her arm towards a Marine standing a few feet behind the barricade. I finally manage to look down and notice a little child clutching onto my calf. I try to shove him aside, but his little fingers keep a tight hold on my foot. Mother can't notice; she's pleading with a Marine whose tag says "John." He looks like one of those beefy wrestlers. His neck is unable to squeeze itself smoothly under the collar. His red face is kind, and his voice is reassuring.

"You have to wait ma'am," he says to her. "I don't have you on a list. I can't let you in."

"But we've been here for ages, since six o'clock this morning, look at my children, look at them. This is insane. We can't go back to the South. We have no home." She turns towards the woman next to her and says, "What do we do, what do we do? We can't come back tonight. We have no place to stay."

The thing is it's hard not to be sarcastic. How much I would've liked to tell her that she should've stayed in the South in order to liberate it, as their leaders from that part of the country are claiming to do, but of course I don't say a word. Meanwhile the imp is clutching onto my foot. I wiggle it so hard he starts whimpering. I immediately pull myself away under the cold stare of the mother.

I check my Lebanese cell phone that I purchased a year ago for the sole purpose of using it here. The battery is low. Full five messages from my sister in Cyprus and one last from Zeena, prodding me not to worry about any messages from Cyprus. "Just ignore them," she says, "they're all the same and they'll drive you nuts." Both sisters are worrying about me. How much I'd like to turn it off, right now. Usually I wait until I'm in the airplane, on my way back to the States, to turn it off, and then reach for the American one. It always feels like a split, a ritual cleansing, that numbs one part of me and opens the other. In the U.S., I am an American, I always remind myself. And now that I am leaving, I feel I am part of the Chosen Ones. I think of the luxury boat everyone is talking about, something about a cruiser, "the happy reaper" escorting us to Cyprus. I think of the showers, the swimming pool, and the gourmet food. All this would've escaped me had I stayed with my parents, only to find myself later leaving through Syria.

I keep walking and reach for my other 'knaffee', nibble on it. I am happy with the sweet texture in this spilling sun. Like an idiot, I roll up the sleeves to let my arms tan. Then I start counting the hours I've been in the sun. From a distance, I hear a song; it's Fairuz. Nothing is more depressing and uplifting than hearing this Lebanese woman sing something about minutes clicking away, about more sadness, but also about a final return to the land, decked with the most beautiful sky. What people, what land? I ask

myself. I try to wave all feelings aside, but the song sets a roaming frenzy within. I think of my loneliness on some Sunday mornings in New York, then wallow in litanies of wishes about the present, the future, and all the money I should be making, about my teaching job which I hate and love, about students I find both irritating and endearing, and writing I could do if only I put my mind to it. There is nothing more irritating about wars than this sheer awareness of what you have become or accomplished so far in your life. Even if death is not part of the equation, it's that gnawing sense of who you are that I resent.

I look around: I want to believe in all that I see, that somehow lurking under all the threat is some metaphor to lift one's spirit, like the way people look, whisper, scream or yell at one another; like the way I should believe in the existence and in the inherent goodness of others, and that all that will unfold today is a harbinger of some goodness in this world. But the truth is I am numb, and the only thing I'm aware of is my indifference to all the suffering along with a need to leave—to take back my life in the United States, unscathed. My family is now a mountain away, and the sea is our escape. Perhaps being close to the water feeds this obsession with tanning and losing weight. Or is it my only sense of normalcy I am clinging to?

I try to locate my uncle. As I'm walking, I notice another Marine holding a list. I get closer and instantly inquire about our names. It is there, my uncle's name, only his: not mine, not Susan. Ecstatic, I rush to find them.

"They've got it. Your name is there," I scream.

"What about ours?" Susan asks.

"Only him," I say.

My uncle becomes very alert. He leaves us behind.

"What about the Old Man?" I ask Susan.

"He almost fainted. We got him inside. He's on his way."

"You don't have to take care of him?"

She shrugs. "Only if we end up together on the same boat."

I see my uncle and a Marine. He waves his hands towards us. We become excited; it's almost the end.

Both the Marine and my uncle come closer.

"She's my wife," he tells him. No mention of my name.

"I'm sorry, sir, but if her name is not on the list, I can't let her in. *You'll* be able to go in. Just wait five minutes until we read that list. Stay here, don't go too far." The Marine turns his back on us.

"But she came with me."

"I am sorry, sir, if her name is not on the list, I can't let her in."

My uncle looks at his wife, his wife of forty some years, his eyes wide open, his lips tight as if he's going to spit, and says: "I *am* going; if you have to stay, you stay."

The face is serious. She looks at me. I give half a smile.

"I am honest. If you have to stay, you stay. I have to leave," my uncle repeats.

She doesn't say a word, doesn't even display any facial expression. Only a slight anxious rise of one eyebrow of which my uncle cannot disapprove since it didn't match his earlier admonitions about grimacing or frowning.

He turns his back again on us, leaning against a rope. The hat on, he looks like a tourist who's ready to take a picture, the last one before departure.

The gap is growing. A few people stand in between. Susan is closer to my uncle than me, but still behind, rigid like a statue. She looks at me once, then quickly looks towards her husband. If anyone is entitled to a boat ride, it's her. She's the true American. She is the one whose great-great grandparents came on the Mayflower and whose line of descent is plastered under a glass in her bedroom with every grandparent and uncle and aunt's name embossed on that family tree. We are the expatriates.

I keep looking at him. I desperately want to unravel this absurd moment. I think of their lives together, their home, their world, so intricate and intimate to one another.

It must be the summer, I tell myself, this long hell of a summer with its discordant, somber prelude. Waking up the very first morning in his apartment in the mountains of Lebanon, he realized that the kitchen and the living room had no electricity. His first reaction was to find Nabeel, the Syrian servant, who for the last ten years had become the family handyman. Unbeknownst to my Uncle, Nabeel decided to fix the problem on his own. Down to the fuse box he went and, within seconds, received an electric shock that sent him reeling to his death. When my Uncle found him lying on the floor, he screamed and screamed, then called my brother for help. It was too late. Later the body, dark and shriveled, was taken to his hometown in Syria for the funeral, accompanied by my brothers and my mom. How could he have stayed in Lebanon after that? How could he have resisted not telling his wife then that he had to leave, even if it meant going without her?

I am so lost in thought I do not hear a list being announced and names being called. I must have drifted a little, but now I hear my uncle's name being called again. I see him inching towards Jason, another marine, and a long exchange ensues whereby

hands are pointed towards his wife. I see her standing there, quietly resigned to her fate. Her lips are moving as if she's praying, but somehow, I know nothing will ever save her from that moment. Then all of sudden, Jason waves to her; she gets closer. Another long minute. I keep waiting for them to call on me. Now I see them both clutch the two carry-on bags, while Jason opens a makeshift gate, and finally both recede behind the barricade. With every blink of my eye, as if holding a kaleidoscope, I see them both rushing, my uncle ahead, she trailing behind, like a maharajah's wife. He doesn't look back at me, nor does she, as if to do so, they would both turn into stone. At the very end, almost a hundred feet away from me, a large blue tent spreads all the way to the sea. It undulates and rises as if it's the gate to heaven. I keep looking as they enter the area, their pace now steady. He goes inside. She follows. They disappear.

Part II: The Last Supper (At the *Pêcheur*)

Now that my uncle and Susan are gone, I keep looking around, suddenly aware of an emptiness inside of me, as if I have come here to meet friends who didn't show up. I walk a bit, but it all comes back. Susan and my uncle turning away, walking one behind another—blending their fate with the few chosen ones, they disappear. How long will it be, I wonder, before I will see them again in the States? Would they dare look at me in the same way? I hear planes in the distance, their rumble a constant reminder that war is raging. We feel secure though; we bask in the feeling that no one would dare attack American citizens. But anything in this country is wishful thinking. Up ahead, a commotion breaks out: a sudden deluge of bottled water, tokens from the American Embassy to its colorful immigrants. I reach in the bag for more sandwiches, but nothing

is left. I must have gobbled them all, fat and calories galore. The fact prompts me to pinch my side. Around two o'clock the announcement comes: "We apologize but only those who are already inside the gate are leaving today. All of you will leave tomorrow, but you must, again I repeat, you must sign your name before leaving today to secure a place for tomorrow."

Confusion erupts on the spot with the Lebanese forces attempting to do what they didn't try to do for the whole day, forming lines, not one but two. A large makeshift tent is set up under which four Marines sit to serve at least four thousand evacuees. Some women scream at no one in particular as they see themselves trailing with their brood, unable to reach the front of the line. By the time the two lines are formed, I find myself on the side. My uncle and Susan have made it. I feel neither excited nor sad for them.

I move away from the crowd. I thank my uncle for his advice about carrying a small suitcase. I sit on the asphalt on top of a cardboard box and wait; I feel no need to hurry my departure. To my family, I'm gone. To Lebanon, I don't exist. To the States, I'm in limbo. From where I am now, I can watch people pushing and shoving, babies crawling between feet, older children playing or crying, the sea in the far, far distance, blue as the sky, and the sun hotter than ever still beating down on us. I'm starving, burning, can't touch my face, and my neck is tender. I take a T-shirt from my carry-on and place it around my neck. And I wait.

Around 3 o'clock, I see a Marine drift past me. It is Jason, the one who had let Susan in. He greets me with a smile and I immediately ask, "Is this possible?" He stops, looks at me.

"We should've done a better job. I agree with you."

"Nobody in charge," I say. He's slightly thin, but the voice, the words, and the thin leather chain with a pen attached to it hanging around his neck, all imply an authority officer. His left hand is fidgeting with a notebook filled with names and scratches.

"I am the coordinator," he tells me, "not that I can do much except to follow orders from the embassy. But I assure you, you'll all be evacuated. Make sure you sign and get a paper today. You'll leave early tomorrow. Sorry again for this chaos." He pauses. "Did you come to Lebanon for the evacuation?" he asks with a little smile.

"Just for that," and I quickly add, "You're here as a tourist, I guess." We laugh. It comes out more like an obligation.

"Where're you from?" I suddenly ask, wanting to know from where these people are uprooted.

"From North Dakota."

It's hard to imagine Jason or any Marine waking up early in the morning in North Dakota only to be rushed along on one of those humongous ships, all the way to the land of vengeful djinns where 'thyme bread' and sweet cheese sandwiches are served for breakfast instead of eggs and bacon.

"Do you know there are Lebanese settlers there, from the 1900s? What do you think about that?" he asks me.

"I guess we're everywhere," I tell him, but in my mind I wonder if those immigrants are still considered Lebanese after all these years. At what point, does one cease to be one? A friend once told me that when he got his American passport, he gladly discarded the Lebanese one, burning and scattering its remains in the same way one scatters someone's ashes. If it were only that simple, I remind myself. I look at

Jason, at his tag, his hair, his demeanor. The real American with all his accouterments. How do I define myself when persecution, poverty, and illiteracy, the typical spices immigrants bring along as they cross the border, have not been part of my recipe? I've peppered my existence with the struggle of living, but that is the trademark of all people, immigrant or non-immigrant, living anywhere and everywhere in this world.

"Which is better?" I finally ask him, "here or the States?" Of course I'm being ridiculous, but this is how war, I like to believe, transforms you. You finally become daring and careless when facing people you've never met before.

"It looks good from here," he tells me. He has a little smile on his face. "It's a pretty darn great country." Another Marine comes closer. Jason stands up; they exchange a few words. "Don't forget to put your name on the list," he tells me as they leave. I am alone again and the crowd has not thinned.

I sit watching. An eerie quietness settles over me. It actually feels peaceful not wanting to be a part of anything. Just quietly watching this world unfold. I look at the sky; not a cloud mars its blue expanse. I know I'm still searching for something, for a sign, anything that will in time wax larger, something that later will pull me out of a bad dream, something that will mesmerize the world with its intensity. But like the sky above, it's all terrifyingly clean.

The phone rings. It's my friend. Dan with all the girlfriends, the conspiracy theories, and his far-out politics. For him the truth is clear, the machination of this whole world stems from a capitalistic grinding machine that oppresses all of us and for which Dan strikes back with a vortex of rhetoric filled with curses towards politicians. Dan

resorts to the same strategy regarding women, since their earthly existence is primarily to suffocate him.

"How did you get this number?" I ask him.

"The world is small my friend. I spoke with your mom. What's going on?"

"Oh, Dan," I say, "the war, it's everywhere."

"Of course, it's Lebanon. But it's your damn mistake, if you want to hear the media here, not Israelis', not Syrians', not Yankee's fault. It's all the same my friend. History, have you heard of bloody history? We all repeat the same fucking history." I don't want to be drawn into any argument, so I say, yes, it's history.

"So, what's next for you? I know what's next for me. Angela, is gone, my friend, gone."

I have no idea who Angela is. I've met so many of his girls over the last few years that I can't keep track.

"Do you remember her, the big-breasted one? You know, the lawyer from Kansas." I say yes, I remember. "It's all trouble, all trouble. Are you ready to hear it?" he asks. Saying no won't do, so I have to say yes. "I'm preparing a letter," he informs me, "something that will blow her mind." He pauses. Static takes over. I hear someone talking but I quickly realize he's actually composing the email. "'You're a cunt…you know you're one.'" He pauses. "Do you think women know when they're screwing you or do they pretend not to?"

"I don't know," I tell him, "I'm really not sure."

"'You have made it hell for me and it's time to shield myself from your missiles.'" He pauses again then says, "You like that, don't you, missiles, wars are everywhere my friend. Even here, in the 'Land of the Free.'"

I look around me as Dan is composing his un-romantic letter. Helicopters are suddenly overhead. What if bombs are dropped? I ask myself. In which direction would I run?

"I'm done with her," I hear him say, "I'm sending it tomorrow. No rubbish in my life anymore." He changes his tone into a lower pitch, "Don't marry. Never marry, bitches they become, my friend, once you marry them. Look at me, I'm not married now, will never be married and I'm happy. Sure, I am aggravated right now, but tomorrow I'm free." I first remind him I'm not married, then I tell him what a wise thing he's doing. "Hey pal, anything I can do for you?" I say no and that soon I will be in the States. He hangs up the phone. I smile as I picture Dan emailing his letter and getting as usual no response. When his girlfriends decide to leave, they leave.

I wait again, the crowd is still milling around the tent. When suddenly I hear a voice asking for information in English, I am immediately drawn to the accent. It's not American. It's not French and as I look at him, I feel lost. He's of a medium height, with short brown hair, a bit thin, but someone whose thinness implies having run a few miles every day to keep in shape. I manage to ask a few questions to get more hints. Later he would tell me he's Californian but with Hungarian blood since his mother was born there, and has lived a few years in Budapest.

"Do you think it's wise to leave without putting my name on the list?" He looks at me intensely as he introduces himself. "I'm Chris." I shake his hand and introduce myself.

"Do I leave without putting my name?" he asks again.

"Don't," I tell him with an exaggerated tone, "you don't want to be stuck here for another week."

He sits close by. He tells me about the charity work he is doing, helping homeless Lebanese displaced during the 1975 Civil War find a place to live.

"I love it here," he tells me. "I don't want to leave, but the Foundation insists."

"It's not the best choice to stay."

He sighs, "I love it here, really do." He proceeds to tell me about his fascination with the food, the weather and the people.

In a way, it has always been gratifying to meet people, here and in the States, who are willing to share their fascination and love for this country. They impress you with their knowledge. But today it comes at a cost, as if I'm the alien one, the one who doesn't give a damn about the whole thing.

"I love this country," I hear Chris repeat. "Should I stay or leave?" he asks me. Is he a fool? I wonder. Why would an American or any foreigner really want to jeopardize himself and stay?

"You need to put your name on the list. You never know what could happen." The truth is I need his company right now. I need to speak English, try to feel I belong in my adopted country. Chris proceeds to tell me about the refugee center located quite by happenstance in the outskirts of the same village where I had spent most of my childhood

summers. A thought grips me: while as a child I played under large pine trees, other kids from far away villages were squeezed with their families into cubicles waiting to be brought back to their own homes in the South. Over the long run, history has mastered the art of repeating itself.

"There is so much work here," he says as his hands make a large sweeping gesture. It feels like I'm talking to a local. "Look around you. How can I leave?" Chris's sighs seem to deepen. He looks at me and blurts out, "I have had my heart broken many times, you know. This is the second time I've fallen in love in this country. Twice." I look at him, not sure what to say. His words are restrained, but it's not only the space, the air, the sense of absurdity that seem to divest Chris of clarity; it's our presence as well, face to face, in unchartered, perhaps threatening territories that make Chris not fully divulge his thoughts, and make someone like me not fully want to comprehend. It's like déjà vu—I've been there before.

But I am also moved by the need that prompts someone to come all the way to this country to fall in love. I do admire, even envy him for this. Chris opens his heart about his friends, family, and work. I lie down on the cardboard box and listen. He does the same thing. He keeps talking. I keep listening, something I always enjoy doing. I'm better at it than anything else. But for some reason, I feel a weight being lifted, as if we are two hikers, resting before climbing another mountain.

Around four o'clock, I shake Chris's shoulder. We both have dozed. "It's time," I say. He opens his eyes and says, "The best nap ever. Only war can provide that." He smiles at me. Something about his smile brings a sense of recognition, as if we have already met in a café in New York. The crowd has thinned down considerably. He looks

at me again, “Man, you’ve got to put some lotion on your skin; the sunburn, it doesn’t look good.” We approach the makeshift tent and proceed to place our names with the Marines.

“You’ll definitely leave tomorrow,” Jason tells us, standing around the other marines. “Be early. By eight o’clock you’ll be gone.” He winks at me as if we’re old buddies.

Chris and I part. I worry for him because he’s going back to Beirut. I offer him a place to stay, but he insists he has to remain in the same hotel where he can be contacted. “People are expecting me there.” We exchange numbers and decide to meet the next day.

I call my brother.

“Didn’t I say you were not going today? Meet me at the same corner where I dropped you off earlier this morning. I’m picking up, you *know who*, first?” He laughs so hard.

I don’t understand what he means, but later when the car comes closer, I see my uncle and Susan, one in the front seat, bending forward, the other in the back, almost slouching.

I don’t say a word in the car. My uncle talks about the wait, the bus ride to the port, and the ordeal with the Old Man. “There were not enough places to take everyone. They told us that on the bus. His name was not on the list but they took him anyway; he claimed he has a heart condition. We arrive to the dock. On his own, he goes to the one of the Marines and puts his name with ours, like one family. There were enough places for two, three, not enough. I was going to kill him, I swear. He tells Susan, ‘we’ve got to stick together like a family.’”

My uncle is not looking at anyone. Just staring ahead of him. Everyone has his own sense of a family, I want to tell him, but I don't say a word. I want to feel vindicated, but even that is elusive today.

"At least, we're going by helicopter. We'll be there fast," Susan informs us. "That's because we were almost evacuated. And they asked us to come back tomorrow. It will be fun."

"It will be hell," my uncle interrupts her. "Hell. The bastard. Do you believe I had to pay for his taxi to send him back to his village? We could've been in the States by now." I wonder what that 'we' means at this point.

"That was nice," she says. I look at Susan. Her face is calm. The more I look at it, the more irritated I become. Shouldn't she be lashing at him?

"Nice? The man is loaded. Ten million dollars at least. He thought he could come and stay with us until tomorrow. I called the taxi myself. Let his sister take care of him. Did you see the bag he was carrying? It was leaking."

My brother is laughing. I don't smile.

"It was truly gross," Susan tells us. "All soggy food."

"All food? He brought with him a falafel sandwich and some *tabbouleh* in this damn paper bag, all leftovers, all leaking. He didn't want to pay for meals. I asked him if he wanted a bottle of water while we're waiting on the bus. Do you know what he said? 'Does it cost money?' What *is* that?"

My brother is howling now. Susan is shaking her head, and I pretend to smile.

"I don't want to see him tomorrow, Susan, I don't. He'll ruin everything for us." He looks at Susan and with a plaintive voice says, "Do you understand what it means not

to open the school? Do you understand the liability of not being there? If we don't open the school on time, we are doomed."

"We will," she tells him. "We will."

My brother says that he has a treat for us. His wife Nada has prepared something special. "I hope you're starving," he tells us.

"We've got to relax, and we're not hungry," my uncle claims. "Can we stay at a hotel tonight, somewhere along the coast?" he asks my brother. "Honestly, we can't go through the same scene in the morning. It's too much for your mother and sisters, too much."

As my brother offers yet another grand theory about the necessity to go back to the mountains, Susan looks at me and in a serious tone whispers: " I don't know how to deal with it. I mean he really meant it. I don't know how to take it."

I look at her a little befuddled.

"He was going to leave me. I believed him."

"He was joking," I manage to say, unconvincingly.

Not that I would've said anything, and not because I'm feeling part of it again, but simply because, in relation to my family, I never understand where to place myself, never know how to measure the dimensions with which people relate to one another. What to say? What to leave out? How much I would like at this moment to tell my older brother to stop preaching, and how much I want to take the other brother, the gambler, in my hands, shake him, and preach to him about family and selflessness. And what about my mother and her jokes about my father? Will I ever be able to dissuade her from doing so? Sometimes it is the sheer lack of distance— I, in New York, my uncle in Pennsylvania,

my brothers in Lebanon—which propels us not to look at one another. But what about Susan? What made my uncle not look at her? I guess in that sense Susan and I will always revisit that moment like a series of eidetic tableaus: she looking at him then looking at me; I looking at her, at him, and finally their exit. After that—nothing.

The surprise my brother mentioned earlier is *Le Pêcheur,* a restaurant frequented by local celebrities. It sits above a rock formation at the edge of the water with a view of Beirut. From this vantage point, the city looks like a giant eagle swooping down the water. Below us waves crash against the massive rocks, hugging them intimately before they withdraw to the sea. We all sit down, exhausted and my sunburn seems to spread from my neck to my legs.

The sounds of airplanes or bombs are rarely heard now. The place is almost empty. Patrons like all the tourists—one million of them—have all but disappeared. Most have already fled the country.

The waiter hands us a typed menu. Nada tells him it's unnecessary. "Whatever Chef George brings is fine by us." She smiles, my brother smiles, and we smile too. "Trust me," she tells us, "he's the best." Life in largesse is her motto, of which chain smoking and spending money seem to epitomize both her and my brother. My uncle tries to remind Nada that Susan doesn't eat meat. "Oh, there will be plenty of food," she says. "Plenty of vegetables." Two tables down, there is a couple, with a spread of food. They don't look at one another as they eat. They gaze at the water and are quiet, as if they are listening to something in the water. Somehow their presence makes the restaurant feel more desolate.

"What does the *Le Pêcheur* mean?" asks Susan. Not that it's surprising that it comes out of Susan—this innate curiosity, but something about the timing doesn't sit well with any of us.

"It's the sinner," Nada explains and she laughs, "or the fisherman. Whatever you like."

All the fishermen are gone, and only sinners remain in this country, I want to say, but I don't.

Soon the waiter begins to fill the table with meze, a culinary tradition I have only seen in Lebanon: two kinds of Hummus, *Fattoosh* and *tabbouleh* salads, a variety of lentil dishes, delicately wrapped filo pastry filled with cheese and meat, aromatic rice and all sorts of vegetables, and for the main dish, the '*kibbe*,' minced lamb with bulgur wheat, a traditional dish. We're all eating, including my uncle. I reach for everything except for the sushi, a dish the chef has to provide in this trendy restaurant, but which feels at the moment like another sort of invasion. Nada only eats the sushi. With a cigarette in one hand, a diet Coke in the other, she gives us one of her big smiles. No one talks about dieting or not being hungry. It's as if we are all humbled by the meal, or else feel that food, when times are threatening, is the last good thing we take with us if we happen to perish.

The waiter serves us dark coffee. It's magically potent with the pungent scent of cardamom; you cannot but feel full of energy once you imbibe the dark liquid.

When we finally stand to leave, my uncle says the usual, "Susan, I ate too much, I can't move." My brother and Nada beam with happiness, as if they have themselves cooked the meal. Susan's face remains quiet. As for me, well, all other worries cease to

exist once I realize I have again added more calories around the waist. In the car Susan reminds me one more time about the ordeal of the whole day—no one says a word. We all seem to ponder the evening ahead and the long, long night; our silence, a harbinger that things could go wrong. My uncle's body is slightly tilted forward. I think I hear him mutter, "Who will open the door?" but I'm not really sure. I suddenly feel sorry for him because I know his summer has evolved into a most unforgettable one.

The car starts circling the torturous, windy mountainous road. This is the same road we took as kids with my sisters almost every weekend. I would always feel nauseous but excited to spend the weekend with them at my grandfather's resort. I think of Chris, alone in the hotel in Beirut. Would he venture out and meet someone, and fall in love again? Would he end this journey by staying in Lebanon forever? What about the Old Man? I picture him sitting quietly next to his sister, finding solace in the old house.

We drive for twenty minutes. At one point, I look out the window and glimpse the Statue of the Lady of *Harissa*, a large religious shrine visited by so many people. I have lived in the next village and visited the shrine many times as a child. Tonight, though, through that little vista of shrubs and trees, she appears phantasmagoric. Engulfing but not frightening. If only I believed in her, I tell myself, my world would've probably been safer.

I enter my mother's house. She's excited and immediately sets the kitchen in motion even as we plead with her. Then all my siblings, nephews and nieces come storming in. They all look at me. There is a pause, a respectful 'taking it in' before Emily, my niece, says, "You're really burned, you're red, you're dark." They start to

giggle one after the other. A little later my sister Yasmina looks at me and says, "You must be burning. You must." She gets me a lotion she keeps for her children for such occasions. She insists I apply lotion every half hour. "This way you'll be able to sleep."

At two o'clock in the morning, I wake up to the sound of the phone ringing. I am flushed. Once I hear my name, I recognize the voices of my two best friends, Ben and Idith. Something in me is stirred. I love these long distance calls. They always remind me I live there, not here. It's all about the time when I used to visit Lebanon and still didn't have my American passport. Then I would have nightmares about being stuck somewhere in a non-descript airport where officials, mute with no faces, with the sheer presence of their uniforms, would wake me up in the grip of anxiety.

I quickly tell my friends about the whole day. I feel as if I am exaggerating even if it's all true. Part of me senses that what I'm living now, this unfolding narrative, is unique; sharing it makes it all the more powerful. My two friends are expatriates like me, Israelis who truly understand war, how it evolves or wanes, all in a matter of a month, days or even hours. They listen for a while, then, "we want you here, right here, with us." I tell them about Cyprus, that we can still meet there once I am evacuated. They insist on meeting in New York. "We want you here," they keep telling me. We hang up the phone. I stretch in my bed for a few seconds, relaxed, as if the conversation has soothed my burn.

It's early in the morning; I realize I won't be able to sleep. I daub lotion on my face, and then go to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. I feel suddenly sad. It is all twisty. Going to the deserted restaurant, coming back, my uncle leaving without his wife, Chris with or without his lovers, Dan with his email, the humor about my burn: nothing is what

it is supposed to be, everything is slipping away, and whatever I hold or have been holding is not necessarily real. I could go back to the States or stay here in this village—it won't matter anymore.

By five o'clock I finally close my eyes. It takes me a long time to hear the heavy banging on the door. The doorbell doesn't do it for me.

It is a rush to the bathroom, to the shower, to my mom's apartment next door, to the kitchen where she places sandwiches in my suitcase, this time with a bottle of water. My father insists I wear a hat. He holds one with the inscription, "Shakespeare Festival." There is a date on the back of it. I want to ask him about the absurd hat and the fact that he has it in his possession. But the rush to get to the car makes it impossible to ask any question. Still for a long time in the car, I feel the urge of wanting to know about the hat, as if by knowing, everything would fall into place.

And the scene repeats itself. It's quite eerie to think that within one summer the whole ritual is repeated. It's like a tableau vivant where words or any utterance have for a while, in this family, become obsolete.

We leave. This time I won't be coming back. This time I won't see them again.

Part III: Madonna and Child

As we drive back this time, no one utters a word. When my brother asks if he should stop for food, I am the one to say no. The only urge on my mind is to leave. The news, this morning, is worse than ever. Hezbollah warmed the day with rockets falling on Israel, not only on the North, but also on Haifa. Israel took the message to heart and destroyed any remaining bridges in Lebanon, cutting the roads off and leaving many

people stranded or missing. I am as usual detached, but I know the heaviness in my body this time is real, like a burning sensation that won't heal. Soon, I know, I'll be lying one more time on a couch or sitting in front of a therapist talking about everything else except Lebanon, waiting for him to throw some hints or goad me to speak.

I don't recall how we parted or what we said to each other. I guess I was the first one to leave the car. My uncle and Susan were then driven to the American Consulate for a ride on a helicopter to Cyprus. This was their lottery ticket for not being allowed to depart yesterday after being escorted to the boat and then at the last moment brought back to shore. At 8 a.m. today, they're scheduled to leave.

Upon my arrival at the very same spot, I quickly realize something is amiss. Is it more chaotic? Absolutely. I do not attempt to look for Chris, nor do I have the patience to wait for anyone. I want to gain time, so I step inside and keep moving. Marines and the Lebanese Armed Force are working together, their presence more palpable. The crowd is much bigger, and it is only seven o'clock. The sun is high and I realize two things: I left the hat in my brother's car, plus I am wearing shorts today. If the evacuation starts right this moment, I know we won't be leaving before noon. Instead of worrying about the sun, I keep obsessing about the hat. I want to know whether it was purchased or given to my father. And if so, when? Would he ever have attended a Shakespeare Play? Which one? I even contemplate calling him.

People look more desperate than yesterday, clenching their suitcases and children as they melt into one another. And they seem to be everywhere, which makes it hard to know which vantage point would be closer to the gate of demarcation. But soon I realize there are more barricades to cross in order to get to the final point.

I stand for almost an hour. No sooner do I enter another area, I find myself again in a line that grows and snakes all around to a makeshift gate. "How long is that one?" I ask a woman ahead of me. I don't expect an answer, but then she turns and says, "Another hour, maybe." Her voice is calm and soothing. She is holding a baby in one hand, a carriage in another, and two huge suitcases by her side. How did she get to that point, I ask myself.

"This is not moving, we'll be here for a while." Her dark eyes, like her smile, exude a kindly patience, an 'un-Lebanese' attitude. Her dark brown hair is abundant and held with a clip at an angle across her left side, as if she is posing for a picture. The baby in her arms, a few months old, brings to her face a wisp of quiet misery that reinforces the bond between mother and child. She reminds me of a Madonna in one of those paintings by Italian Renaissance artists with the two heavy suitcases supplanting the cross. We introduce ourselves. Her name is Rita. I ask her if she needs help. She accepts my offer. From that moment on, I become the one who lifts Rita's suitcases as we move from one line to another, making sure that nothing happens to this Madonna and child. I feel I've been given a raison d'être today. Still if it weren't for Chris who shows up as soon as I start helping Rita, I don't think I would've been able to manage the whole push and pull I would endure for the whole day.

"I waited for you outside," Chris informs me.

"I did too, I didn't see you, I tried to call you." I know I'm lying, and I've no idea why it is necessary to do so. It's the Lebanese thing to do, the two-way street, one for the sake of comfort, the other for the sake of the act itself—a compulsive act, I guess. To change the subject, I introduce him to Rita.

"He's from California," I said. She looks at him, offers her smile, and with no delay, as if prompted by his American presence, tells us about her own life, her town, and her husband, an Irish-German from Boston. "He's an architect, he's busy, you know. He couldn't come with us. I should've waited for him. Don't you think so?" Her eyes are fully riveted on Chris. "He called me ten times yesterday. He cried when he knew I didn't make it."

We were silent, Chris and me.

"I can't tell you how worried he is," she informs us with that tone of voice that contains both humility and pride. The fact that her husband had shed a few tears seems to energize her at the moment. She wipes her eyes and smiles again. Burdened with the baby and the suitcases, it's her duty to suffer as long as she and her child have not reached the shores of Massachusetts and reunited with her husband. A wonderful Lebanese pilgrim tale: leaving decadence and horror behind and meeting the spouse on a peaceful, untainted shore. I wonder how, where and when they met: love stories seem to abound on the way out of Lebanon. As long as she doesn't tell me they met here in this land—a fact which is certain to depress me—I'm truly content with any other narrative. That's why I won't ask her about it.

Suddenly, organization seems the order of the day. A Lebanese Lieutenant, perched atop a chair and holding a megaphone, demands that we form a new line, "and get closer so that more people can fit in. This way names can be called and heard, and I repeat," he says in Lebanese, "only the ones who signed yesterday are allowed to leave today." A Marine standing close to the Lieutenant repeats the same line in English. "Only the ones who have the signed paper will be called to go in."

I immediately search in my pocket for the passport and the signed paper. I feel relieved. I ask Rita and Chris if they have their papers. They both nod.

Now the major hurdle is settling in another line. Rushing is out of question; my worry is for Rita and the baby. Very slowly Chris and I take one suitcase each and move to the new line, semi-oblivious to the melting rush of people trying to get ahead of us. I am of course frustrated, but I don't show it; I have a slight headache, and my body is riddled with sore points. It's almost 9:30—we have not budged an inch.

We keep waiting. From afar, I see the Lebanese colonel, my uncle's friend, sitting by himself on one of his suitcases. He's smoking. Twenty years ago he would've been the one standing behind the barricade and commanding the crowd before him.

Around ten o'clock, Chris and I decide to sit at the edge of a curb across from the line. Rita is watching all suitcases. She doesn't move, she doesn't want to sit. Her silence is profound, as if she has taken a sacred vow, and you can't help but respect her for it.

Chris suddenly talks about someone he's leaving behind. Someone he had met while working in Lebanon. His heart is broken, he tells me. I listen without questioning. I don't want to force out any detail, even though he is aware of a tacit approval, of some sort of a bond that seems to form between us, which fact seems to irk me. As he talks, I keep eyeing Rita standing straight with the baby in the carriage. She's not even looking at us, and if she is, she feigns indifference. As if a new barrier has already been erected between her and us.

When I look back at Chris, I hear him saying, "People can break your heart." It sounds like a James Taylor or Elton John song. People? I want to say to him. Is that a

code he's using? He and I seem to have fallen into a duplicitous intrigue, and all we need is the code, "People can break your heart," to reconnect, here in this chaotic abyss, with my accomplice.

And he keeps repeating it, rubbing it in my face. "Lebanese people can easily break your heart." I admit, it has an edge to it. Still I do admire his audacity to face someone like me, a stranger, to encrypt his life with vague words and pronouns and expect some sort of a rapprochement.

"Do you think I should stay?" he asks me.

"I don't know," I tell him, "but it's preferable to leave since the whole war campaign is intensifying." Unnerved I stand up. He does too. He keeps talking, but my mind goes back to the night before, to the family sitting all around me, and to the way I was greeted with laughter and humor over my appearance. Sadly, the only thing that keeps me anchored right this moment is the notion that I *will* have a perfect tan.

Up ahead, I notice an opening near one barricade where a few Marines seem to be congregating. I scan the area carefully: it looks as if it's the real place, the real exit and there are no people lurking around or aware of it. As a matter of fact, all attention now is riveted towards a mother holding two children in her arms. She screams defiantly, "I must go in, I have no place to stay tonight." It is her daring voice which makes people look at her. As if she possesses something the rest of us don't have. I inform Chris and Rita about the opening. Chris shrugs and says, "It's all the same. Let's wait."

I don't want to wait. I instantly devise a scheme. Chris and I each grab one of Rita's suitcases and walk nonchalantly as if we are exiting. No sooner do we get closer to that barricade before a wave of people trails us. Meanwhile we establish camp with

the two suitcases and Rita and her baby follow us. Rita congratulates me, but Chris seems unimpressed. When he's not talking about his love life, his face is stern. He reminds us about the signed papers we have in our possessions. "Does it matter where we stand?" he asks. Rita and I laugh.

"It's Lebanon, my friend," I inform him, "they will usher the ones who have the signed paper but only if they're close to them. Otherwise, you come back tomorrow."

An hour passes by. A Marine appears, reiterates the same thing: you must have a signed document to go in. Like a miracle, within a few minutes, the barricade opens; Rita and her baby, Chris and I rush as more people are also let in. Rita has tears in her eyes. She thanks me. Behind us we hear a woman's voice screaming. I look behind me. I recognize the same mother who has provoked a commotion early on. "I have no place to stay tonight, no home, you must let us in. My two kids are sick, look at them," she tells him. Now as we merge into a new line, I see her behind us with the two kids holding onto her. She wipes her tears and tells us in a very sly voice, in Lebanese, "I *know* it's going to work. It works all the time. It's the *only* thing that works." She is shaking yet totally elated by her ability to slip in.

It's noon. We have finally reached it: The Visa Line. As usual, I have entered Lebanon using my Lebanese passport and now as I'm leaving, I have to use the American one. The fear about being questioned resonates in me, but I am more aware of the fact that the line here is 'civilized'—an American territory by the sheer presence of so many Marines, swarmed by Lebanese immigrants who are not shoving, nor pushing, just waiting for their turn. I know we have at least another hour before reaching the officers. I'm starving. I have eaten all the sandwiches and there is nothing left. Chris is also

hungry but doesn't complain. I am not sure to which ethnicity—American or Hungarian—I should attribute his stoic façade. Rita opens a little bag hanging on her shoulder, reaches for some sort of cereal, closes the bag, then slowly eats. For her baby, she has milk and water. "What's his name?" I suddenly ask.

"Megan," she tells me, "it's a girl." She smiles. Megan, I say to myself, Megan. How Irish has this woman gone? Aren't there some names that can bridge the gap? Something like Teresa, Renée. We have those Christian names in the Land of the Cedars, and I am sure they exist in the land of the Shamrock. We keep slowly moving, slowly pushing Rita's suitcases. By now I have totally accepted this as a mission I've got to accomplish until we get to the boat. I must reunite Madonna and Child with the husband, I tell myself. And while I don't think I'll soon meet her angelic prince, I do picture him at the airport, a tall man wearing sadness and happiness in his bright eyes, with baby Megan in his arms.

Chris is quiet, reserved, pushing the suitcases half-heartedly. Leaving Lebanon seems like a betrayal for him. What makes me meet these people? Fate? Luck? Or is it nature's disguised nudge? Are they subtle reminders of where my life hasn't been yet? Like a natural imposition to resettle or pave a new path? Should I brood over what it means to meet someone like Chris? Evidence abounds as I mull over my loveless-state-of-affair for the last two years. Constantly hitting cul-de-sacs, yet somehow spurred by tiny drops of hope, like dews that tincture the shriveled leaves under the bushes.

I could also fantasize about this whole voyage as being a kind of ritual, a baptism at the end of which a New Self will arise. But with the war all around us, and with this immense outlet that the sea offers, my escape is funneled through this infinite void that

fills my soul as I lift Rita's bags and my bag and move slowly towards the line of demarcation, while Chris, like a prophet exiled to a bleak island, keeps lamenting his exit.

All of a sudden, the Captain appears, my uncle's childhood friend. The Captain was a major player during the Lebanese Civil War that ended in 1990. After that, he immigrated to the States. He is tall, bald, holding a brown plastic bag in one hand.

"I was looking for you and your uncle," he tells me as he munches on what looks like a burger. "Are you okay?" I nod and introduce him to Rita and Chris. They all shake hands.

"There is food, if you want." He lifts the brown bag and shakes it, "Real American food." He informs us about the kitchen area.

Chris decides to go to the bathroom. "I will meet you there," he tells me.

"The mess hall is near the tent where visas are being processed," the Captain tells Chris and in the same breath adds, "I am done." We look at him, a little envious. "All is done. You're almost there. Where is your uncle?"

I tell him about the helicopter ride to Cyprus.

"He's lucky," the Captain tells me. "We'll be on the Nashville. You know the military ship. It's gigantic."

"What about the cruiser?" I ask.

He chuckles, "These are for the Europeans, not American Lebanese. Anyway, I'll see you soon."

"We may need help with the suitcases," I tell him. "No worries," he reassures us, "all these Marines are there to help. They're nice and all."

He leaves us. Rita seems a little scared, holding the baby so close to her. "Don't worry, we'll manage," I reassure her. She thanks me but barely says anything else. Any superfluous talk would hamper her devotion to the baby. Would she ask me for my number in the States? Would she send a little present with a picture of her, the baby and Mr. Husband, all in one embrace? I leave her alone and go after the food. I feel a bit disappointed. What is a military boat like, I wonder.

I walk almost 200 feet. Where the line ends sits a huge tent sectioned into three parts: the immigration officer with a medley of Lebanese and Marine officers; the mess hall where bags of plastic food lay all along a wall; and a dining area for people who have passed the immigration line. People eat and smile while children are playing around as if they had found a tiny Shangri-La. I don't see Chris at all. I go to one of the two Marines who are doling out brown bags. One is a heavy black woman with fine features like Queen Latifah and a generous smile. I ask for three bags. "I can't fathom how much food can be stored in them," I tell Queen Latifah.

"Oh, you'll be surprised," she tells me.

"I'll be damned," I hear Chris saying as he comes closer. "What is it?" he asks. Queen Latifah hands him another bag.

"Thanks," he said. Together we go back in line. Rita is already struggling with the suitcases. We help her and then we open the plastic bags. Inside snuggle little packs of cheese and some patty meat. All vacuum-sealed. Mine is a burger with the word 'Vegetarian' writ over the plastic bag.

"Exclusive rations of food," Chris says, "that's luxury." A thermal device is included to heat the burger. It's a fantasy bag, I tell them. Very soon we realize that

nothing is tasty. The burger feels like a piece of plastic; Chris and I quickly put it aside. As to heating it, it is out of question. We do however devour the bread and cheese. Like children, we make a face and laugh together—this is the only time I would see him smile—and it is at this point when the thought comes to me, that months from now, when things are less hectic, I will be writing about all this, somewhere in the recess of my apartment, at my desk, drinking coffee, and looking at the plastic bag and the thermal device which I will have kept with me until this day, and feeling proud to have been on the USS Nashville, since I will never get to know any military ship. Is it also a spy ship? Perhaps. Action ship? Why not? After all this is a war, a real war. And I am getting a full taste of what wars are about.

The wait to the immigration tent lasts for more than an hour. I soon realize as I approach the desk that there is a Lebanese officer flanked by two American ones. I need to go to the Lebanese officer. He will sign my Lebanese passport and let me in. Once in Cyprus, I will leave the country with my American passport. This way there is no trace to my existence in Lebanon for any American officer to see. I rejoice at this idea as if I am deliberately erasing my stay here in my birth country, pretending the whole thing has never happened. Even Chris and Rita will soon become little more than shadows of an earlier time.

Rita and Chris go to the two American officers. Once the Lebanese officer is free, I go to him. He asks me for my American passport; I take it out and ask him not to stamp it. There is a little shake in my voice, as if I am acting. The officer understands and obliges me, a gesture I find friendly, as if he has understood my dilemma. I go in and join Rita and Chris. The sea before us and children all around induce a faint

cheerfulness, which is dispelled as I hear Fairuz's songs on someone's I-Tune, her voice now a harbinger of war and sadness. Yet again something of its presence soothes me. She brings to mind the Lebanon of old, the Lebanon of green trees and olive orchards, and citrus fruit and orange blossoms. This is my Lebanon, I try to convince myself, the Lebanon of no one else. The one I never deigned to care or know about except in the last days, watching a whole country wither with a blink of an eye, I have felt my heart plunge into an irrevocable sadness.

It's almost five o'clock. Two hours have elapsed. Only children's voices are still heard. They will soon cease their play. At this point a surge of navy officers materializes out of nowhere. As if the sea has vomited them up. Swiftly they mingle with the marines and Lebanese forces while an esprit de corps seems to establish itself among them. Then they summon us. We stand up and slowly move under the declining light. Our heavy steps shuffle under an ethereal shadowy light as if pushed by some indiscernible force, all against our will.

At the very end, we see the steep, pebbly decline into the sea. There is no line this time. We all move silently like mourners behind an invisible casket. Rita holds the baby in one hand. I put my arm around her, and together we move down. All forces have joined to help the elderly while some keep lugging suitcases down to the water. The first casualty is a woman; she trips over a rock and comes rolling down. She is slightly hurt. Marines quickly come to the rescue.

"I told you not to wear those high heels," an older woman tells her. Two Marines are now holding her. "She insists on wearing them," the woman now addresses the two Marines. "That's how she is." Everyone else keeps going down.

As we approach the water, I scan the sea: no ship but a little engine stands at the edge of water. It's an LST, I tell myself. I have seen it in a Spielberg movie. I remember its presence in that bloody opening, and even now, it still sends chills down my spine. Its compactness belies its capacity to hold four hundred people. What is happening to us, I ask myself. What have we done wrong? We all squeeze in, suitcases, babies, grownups. The gate comes up. The boat moves. It will take another forty-five minutes to get to the main ship. I sit on one of the suitcases, Rita on another, while Chris is standing. We look at each other and we smile.

At one point, I stand up, and I look for my cell phone. I want to call my brother and tell him I have left. I don't know why I care to do that, but I feel I have to do it. I hold the phone for a second: no signal. I raise it high in the air then closer. Still no signal. It is then when I hear the voice of a Southern Lebanese woman, whose head is covered in a scarf, telling me not to take pictures of her or her family. I look at her totally amazed. I want to tell her that it's an old phone and that it doesn't have any camera but what I blurt out is totally different: "Why should I want to take a picture of *you* and *your* family?" I stress the "you" and I know that my voice contains in it anger and fear, which makes me further resentful of this woman and her accusation. I look at Chris and Rita. They look away. Something in me snaps; I speak louder. "Do you believe it? Taking pictures of her?" Chris doesn't respond, nor Rita. And I feel a slight embarrassment.

"She's just scared," Chris finally whispers; in his voice I recognize disgust, of me, of the way I have become at that moment. For the rest of the crossing I hold onto the net that wraps the boat and keep looking at the sea. I am eternally exiled, I tell myself.

The USS Nashville keeps looming larger as we see ourselves being swallowed into the maw of this humongous ship. As soon as we enter it, a certain giddiness swells around us. It's 6 p.m., and everyone is exhausted but relieved.

Part IV: The Sea Desert

Inside the bilge of the USS Nashville, hordes of us await orders, but no one knows what to expect. At the very end, near a series of stairs, sailors and Marines are busy hauling suitcases up the steep stairs all the way to the lower deck. We are not allowed to help; we just wait and watch until all baggage is hauled up. And it's a relief to know we don't have to exert ourselves. The three of us are still hanging on together, but Rita seems withdrawn. She won't look at Chris or me. Once a suitcase is lifted, its owner goes after it, climbing stairs with the help of the personnel who are forming a chain, lugging people and suitcases. Rita is eyeing them, and the closer we get to the stairs, the more concentrated her look becomes, as if out there on the deck, a message is awaiting her.

A scream pierces the air. Not a normal scream, more like a howling of a beast that resonates through the ship. Two Marines lead, shoving people. "Let them pass, let them pass," they keep screaming. They open the way for two more Marines who are rushing, one of them holding a baby in his hand. The baby is quiet and ashen gray. The mother scurries behind them with a little boy clinging to her. She keeps screaming until they disappear into the deep recess of the ship.

I have never seen such a ghastly color on a human being, never mind a baby. I do comprehend why Rita, all of a sudden, clutches onto her baby and starts moaning. Chris

tells her the baby is probably dehydrated; he's seen a few cases of this with refugees. I'm not sure whether he wants to calm Rita, but I do voluntarily add that the doctors on board will save him. I am lying; I feel I have to do it. There is a hush all over except for the sound of suitcases being hauled up.

Rita's turn comes first. One sailor clutches the first suitcase, another one comes to hold the baby. Rita's body sways back. The man looks at her and smiles and tells her not to worry. He is very gentle in the way he holds the baby.

"You don't have to fear, ma'am, it's all taken care of. Would you like to be in the same area where all the mothers are? We have a tent built on the lower deck. May I take you there?"

She says yes. Susan's words echo again, "They are so nice; they really are." Rita turns towards us, doesn't smile and then quickly moves on. Her mouth has tightened, her breath is heavy; at that moment, there is nothing angelic in her face. She goes up the stairs and disappears. I will never see her again. I look again at Chris. He doesn't say a word. Is that the way it's supposed to end? I want to go after her, but I know better than to do that.

I want to believe that it is the incessant drone of pushing and pulling and climbing stairs that renders one incapable of saying goodbye or dispensing a mere thank you. The Shakespeare hat haunts me again. As I climb the stairs behind Chris, I keep staring at him. I'm worried if I look away, he too will disappear.

As soon as we reach the upper deck, I instantly engage him. "Let's get food." Many people around us have Styrofoam plates in their hands, eating, seemingly content. I keep looking for Rita, but I can't find her. All luggage now is relegated to one area on

the lower deck, where Rita and all the mothers are. Here, on the upper deck, passengers spread around, forming little encampments out of foam mattresses. From the sea, you see the Mediterranean shore, now a sliver of a serpentine line. I wonder what my family is doing at that moment. Chris insists we first get a few mattresses so we can create our own little space. That same giddiness that has started when we had boarded the ship seems to spread faster now. Around us, in the water, small boats surround the big ship, all filled with marines, their eyes watching. I can't but feel safe in their presence.

"They're for our protection," the Lebanese Captain tells us. "They have to make sure no one gets near this ship." I greet him, then introduce him again to Chris. "Where's your friend?" he asks alluding to Rita.

"Somewhere on the boat where all the mothers are. Frankly I am happy she's there, I can't keep lugging suitcases," I say to him. I know I'm lying again.

"She's pretty. It's worth all the pain," the Captain responds with a little smile. Chris doesn't react; I smile. "So where're you heading?" the Captain asks us.

"We need to find a place to rest, a mattress or something," Chris tells him. The Captain decides to join us.

Every corner and mattress is taken. We walk and walk; our feet hurt. The novelty of being aboard a military ship soon wanes. Most families have taken more than their share of cots and mattresses, a fact I do not find unusual. It is a culture of entitlement and hoarding, fueled by the need to survive one little war after another.

After many turns, we find one cot. We rejoice and the three of us slump down. The sea is quiet. There seems to be a lull here, away from the chaos of the last 48 hours. I look around and am struck by the sheer size of the USS Nashville, its immensity hard to

fathom. This is not the only upper deck, I realize, but one of many that rises on top of another. And it's real, my presence here, on this military ship, which is plowing the sea in search of a safe haven. That I am experiencing a trip aboard a warship suddenly makes me, I must admit, very American. To think that this ship has witnessed wars; that it has plied many shores hurling its wrath on the enemy; that anyone here, including me, could have been on the other side in any of these belligerent countries, including Lebanon, facing the ire of that war machine: That is a vision one cannot easily shake off. I do want to share these thoughts with the Captain but I suddenly hear: "They want us to pay for the trip. They're marching up in arms in Washington and almost every American city."

The Captain is listening to a man with a heavy Southern Lebanese accent, his family all around him. "What if this war happened in any European country, would they make them pay?" the man keeps asking. "Of course not."

"But we are being evacuated. And we are aboard an American ship," The Captain keeps saying. The man doesn't even respond.

"What if we were Jews or English, would they pay for it?" the man asks the Captain. They nod to each other as if in agreement.

Later, the Captain turns towards me. "The bastard," he says referring to the Southern man, "he wants the U.S. government to pay for his trip; let his leader who started the war pay for it." He lies down on the mattress and keeps shaking his head as if considering what could have possibly gone wrong with him or his life. "Let's go get some food," I tell Chris. He follows me.

The food court, as I like to call it, is a huge mess hall where all famished evacuees and American sailors and Marines are eating. The smell is overwhelming, a mixture of

stagnant odors trapped in the enclosed space. It's as though the wood itself is reeking of meat and macaroni. At one corner, behind the isle, a little opening allows a cook to ladle a slab of meat with a heavy cream sauce to the hand that shows a plate. From another window, one can get hot dogs, mashed potatoes and chicken nuggets. Everyone is eating. I remind myself I am a semi-vegetarian. I only eat fish. Chris eats some of the grub. Across the aisle, a little table is set and filled with fruits. I rush to take some grapes and one apple. I eat them and go for another round. The fruit is going fast and I don't see any replenishment of any sort. So I grab as much I can. Chris goes for the coffee and brings me one cup; it's weak but I force it down. Chris doesn't react, but winces a little. He is, as usual, detached. He has become more laconic ever since we stamped our passports and crossed the final line. I do want to ask him if anything is the matter with him, but I realize I don't know him that well.

When we return, the Captain and the Southern man are deep in talk. They are now assessing the losers and winners, even if the war is still raging on. A sense of animosity has spread as the Captain talks about the inanity of a man declaring war on another nation without the approval of its own government. "Your party and your leader have betrayed Lebanon, you might as well slice your own little country." The Southern man responds by saying that only his party has proved itself worthy of defending Lebanon. If it weren't for his baby screaming his and our heads off, prompting the father to tend to it, a little war would've erupted here aboard the ship. The Captain decides to turn his back, stands up and moves a bit away. "We need two more cots, this can't do," he tells us. Close to me, he whispers, "These bastards want to rule us."

At this point, navy personnel inform us about going all the way to the uppermost deck to secure mattresses and space. We are reminded that the trip is going to last another ten hours.

"Ten hours to Cyprus," I say. "It's half an hour ride by plane," I inform him.

"Civilians on the ship, that's the fastest we can go. Better get the mattresses."

At last we stand, and the three of us decide to move all the way up.

Climbing the stairs, one series after another, proves very challenging. They are set at a forty-five-degree angle. Even hoisting our little carry-ons is tough. But we plough on. At one level, we see lots of Marines and sailors talking and smoking. Together they are an impressive force. On the next level, some families have spread themselves on old mattresses and look relaxed. Next comes the uppermost deck. From that vantage point, the sea opens up. The wind is strong, which is the reason why most families didn't invade that part of the ship. We locate three mattresses and soon we establish our territory. Light is falling away and soon darkness will engulf us. It's both eerie and splendid.

The Captain lights a cigarette, offers me one but I decline. Chris takes one. "Another war to go through," the Captain tells us. "Another war, as if we really want it." He stops, exhales and then continues, "as if the first one wasn't enough." The Captain is alluding to the 1975 war that ended around 1990, when the Lebanese Christians were split into two camps: Christian army vs. Christian militias.

"You were too young then, you don't know what really happened. The first Iraqi war was looming on the horizon. "'The Powers that Be'," he stops and laughs. "I like that term," he says. "'The Powers that Be'. Well, anyway, they were able to create a

schism between the Christians. Bush Père," he laughs again as soon as he said the French word, "there are two of them, as you know. Well, the first one solicited the help of Syrians by letting them go into Lebanon, invade every inch including the Christian stronghold, and dominate the entire country for the next fifteen years. What did the Syrian soldiers do when they fully penetrated Lebanon?" I look at him as he pauses.

"Many mini-massacres," he whispers, as if afraid of someone listening to us. "In a civilized world we called mini-genocides. Of course they took many prisoners from the Christian army, including me." He quiets down and looks into the sea.

"As if I didn't have enough." He repeats it twice, yet no sense of defeatism seems to color his voice. It's quickly followed by, "Life is good now. Life is good." He takes something from his wallet. "Look at her, she's expecting another baby." It's a picture of his daughter with a full belly and a baby already in her arm. I pass it to Chris. He quickly looks at it and gives it back. He decides to go to the bathroom. He leaves us.

Being in the open air, the darkness slowly envelops us. The few people around us, including the Captain, become blurry, indistinguishable from the air. I hear him exhaling the smoke. "I rarely talk about this. But sometimes it comes back to me. It's damn absurd after fifteen years to go back to this, doing wars, wars that serve someone, or a party. They are all in cahoots, Syrians and Israelis. I know you know that. Have you ever seen them fighting each other? What happened when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982? All Syrians left their posts. No one stayed. I met then with the Israeli officers. They told me that they have to do our dirty war in Lebanon. And they're doing it again. They have to."

"Why did you leave the army?" I ask him.

"I had no choice. They made me sign papers. At the very end, when the Syrian army had taken the whole country, they came after us. Actually, I had to go to them with my friends. They invited us to coffee in a Druze village they had fully occupied. They were settled there. So off we went, the four of us, thinking this would be a nice way to patch things up, and it was then we were told we were to go with them, an invitation, another trip, nothing else. They put all of us, four captains, in a truck and soon we were in their prisons.

"Where?" I ask

"*Mezzeh*," he tells me. I cringe. Since I was a boy, I heard about *Mezzeh*, a prison for Syrian and Lebanese whom the Syrian government deems as "criminals." *Mezzeh* is an abyss of hellish proportion. Prisoners are beaten with cables and laid to sleep in spaces no bigger than coffins. Many imprisoned Lebanese people never came back. In an absurd association, I think of the famous lyrics 'You can check in any time you want, but you may never leave'. Even though it was dark, I start to look at his hands, his neck, his eyes for any sign of torture, a ridiculous thing to do now, almost seventeen years later.

"What did they do to you?" I ask

"Nothing. We were treated very well. Occasionally I would hear screaming and shouting. But this was a prison. I was confined to a 4 by 4. For six months. Still they gave us water and food and didn't mess with us." He quiets down again and I find the space around us suffocating, as if the two of us are incarcerated on this boat, incarcerated by our somber talk, condemned to drift for eternity. I breathe hard and he hears me, which makes the moment more awkward. I pull myself together and ask, "How did they

let you go?"

"The Lebanese government, which was then working with the Syrians intervened, and the Americans, of course. But we had to resign from the army. We could never reenlist. Of course, it was forced on us. The only way to get out. We had to sign the resignation." He pauses. "Without the American's interference," he continues, "I would've been still there." The American's interference, I ask myself. I want to say something about it, but I know there will be no answer.

"You have to live the moment, be thankful for all that's been given to you. You change things, you live somewhere else, and you go back, thinking you can bridge the two parts. And I'm not sure if this is the way with all people who leave and come back, but with us, in this damn country, there is no way in, no come back. Things get out of hand, this war, partly planned, partly gone mad. Listen to me, better forget it. Forget you belonged at one point to this place. Live as if you were born American. What about you?" he says all of a sudden. "Not married yet?"

"Not yet," I respond.

"It'll happen when it happens," he tells me. "You are not there yet," he reassures me. He quiets down again.

A total darkness has now swallowed us. The words keep coming, but somehow I feel betrayed by the account. Something ineffable is taking place, something that started long ago in our mutual history and has come to haunt us now, again, as individuals, as people, as immigrants. Our plight, the plight of this country, is more tragic because it's muddled, like the account I just heard. It's the plight of American Lebanese, of expatriates, of any immigrant in this world, I tell myself, to speak only a few words. Not

unlike my own account, narrowly narrated here, in this story. Not unlike all accounts of any people scattered around the earth, hurt and scared.

"It's all over now, I am a happy man. You saw the pictures. Who could ask for more?" I hear the Captain saying.

At this point we are lying close to each other on dirty mattresses. Chris has not come back yet. I want to hear more but I know his story has ended. Looking at the stars above I realize they are glowing. Like a child, I start counting them. For every star I witness, I see a story behind it, but it is a dead story, rendered futile through years of burnishing, its light frazzled and scattered across the universe.

Who can reconstruct their stories again?

I think I dozed for a while. Then I wake up and hear whispering. I raise my head only to see two feeble shadows, one I recognize as that of Chris, the other a total stranger. It's hard to listen for the wind is strong and the Captain is lightly snoring. Somehow they seem engrossed with their talk. Later, they exchange phone numbers and then Chris lies down on his mattress. He doesn't say anything and goes to sleep. I still want to know why he has become so quiet. A jumble of questions comes rushing through my head, something about my father's hat, about my uncle wanting to leave his wife behind, about my teaching, my life, and the Captain's word to me, "You are not there yet." It's such a relief that all these thoughts come simultaneously with such intensity to the point where it becomes hard to remember my initial question, let alone answer it.

I stand up and look at the sea, the dark haunting sea, but alas I can't seem to find any ominous movement in the water or any mysterious play of the water against the light mist that could foreshadow my future. I am aboard the USS Nashville. That *is* the whole

account. I feel small and abandoned, and I have no inkling about how to proceed. It's the desert sea, I tell myself, I've been there for a while, and I know there are no monsters, no serpents, no visions to rescue me from my quiet life. Visions are rare for some of us; I grapple with life in a one-on-one moment, ironing this, smoothing that, a little opening, then to the next thing. I lie down and try to go to sleep.

When I wake up, we are already in Cyprus. We have reached Limasol, a beach town with a large Cypriot army presence. The Captain and Chris are already up and about. They are leaning against the banister**,** watching the unloading of baggage with a crane. Then our turn comes. As we rush down the stairs, a sense of excitement takes hold of everyone. The moment we touch land, Chris disappears. The Captain wishes me goodbye and leaves. I try to find Rita. I am still hoping she would ask for my number or address. But it is the end. I know I won't ever hear from anyone again. I go inside a building, and people there inform me about the possibility of catching a bus all the way to Nicosia, where I will meet my sister.

Soon I join her; my uncle and Susan are also here, awaiting the bus that will take them to the airport. Their initial return tickets are not valid anymore. They either have to pay for new tickets and stay a few more days in Cyprus, or go back today with the American convoy, which is offering a free ride back to the States. My uncle wants no delay. He wants to open that school with this wife. He wants to greet the children and restore life as it was forty days ago.

I am staying. I have come to Lebanon through Cyprus, will spend part of my summer here—in lieu of Lebanon—and return home with the same ticket.

I spend the first week in bed. Sick and lethargic, I can barely move. The second week revolves around the pool in Nicosia. When my friends call me from the States, I talk to them about how sick I feel, but I am not sure what I am suffering from.

When I return, friends are awaiting me at the airport. They hug me, greet me with smiles and warmth, and together we drive to Manhattan to celebrate my arrival over a late dinner. I talk incessantly, telling them all the details, enjoying the theatrical moment, and for the next few weeks, keep doing the same thing with any friend I encounter. By the end of the second week, I receive an old copy of the *New York Times* sent by a friend from Washington. 'Is That You?' is boldly written at the right corner of the picture with a big question mark. It is the same evacuation spot, with the LST behind us. The long shot offers a few details but the faces remain unclear. On the phone with her, I tell her it's me. I even suggest the time and how keenly aware I was of the daring journalist who had come all the way to Lebanon to document our horrific departure. "Oh, my God!" she says, "What you must have endured?" When I hang up, I look at the picture again, look at the person who is supposed to be me. He is wearing a hat

The Biafra Man

"You must call your uncle," my sister tells me over the phone.

"Do I have to endure this? Like everyone else?" I hear myself pleading like a 10-year-old.

"Either this or continue to suffer, which do you prefer? Sometimes we've got to choose. Besides, what can words do? You're in New York, Uncle Jacob's here. Remember what grandpa used to say, 'Listen to the message and spit on the messenger.' You know in some countries Uncle Jacob is considered patriarchal and even polite?"

"Which countries?" I ask her.

"Say what you want, you've got to call. But don't call now; it's too late. If you call tonight, you'll get the Royal Treatment, so to speak." Zeena laughs; I hear my other sister Yasmina next to her laughing too. "In any case, he's expecting you to call tomorrow and don't wait. Remember there are seven hours' difference, not five, not six. You call tomorrow, at noon here, Beirut time…"

"That's like 5:00 am in New York," I blurt out.

"One hour later, he'll pick up, insult you and hang up. Early mornings—don't even try. Afternoons—he has his visitors and holds court. Evenings are for the masochists, the ones who like to get hurt. You know, there are tons of them here."

"Fine, I'll call at 5. But what did he tell you, seriously, is there hope?"

"Hope! Hope!" she screams, "Don't even use this word with him, oh my God." She shouts to my other sister. "Did you hear what he said, something about hope?" She lowers her voice and says, "Hope, Wish, Pray. Don't use these words with him. Please

don't. Don't inflict more pain on yourself. Hope is for the un-believers. You must believe in him. In any case, enough said, call him tomorrow. And call us back."

I have no choice. The phone call at this point is crucial to my survival. Two days ago was the pits. As soon after I left the specialist's office, I had the attack: the same symptoms. But this time, it must've been a reaction to his words. Or the coffee I had later.

I've come to call it the Olympic Torch Disease: little guys racing and carrying torches of pain. The first pang starts low, below the abdomen, and then slowly wiggles itself up until it reaches the lower stomach. There it hands the torch to another, who goes in circles until it lights all sorts of fires, which I try to extinguish by drinking seven or eight glasses of water and after which 'distention' occurs (in the specialist's jargon). At this point I stand in front of the mirror and watch the bloated form I've become. It all ends at the throat, with a vibrating reflux. I try vomiting but don't succeed since I've barely eaten anything. At that point I lie down on my bed and wait. Sometimes an hour. Sometimes two. And when it's really bad, it lasts a whole afternoon, at which point the torch is extinguished and the race is off. When I rise, I realize I've gone through some sort of hallucinating disquisitions with my three doctors about removing some pills, adding others, more tests, on and on.

But calling my uncle would be as painful as the thing itself. It's like watching yourself going backwards against the flow of time. Mr. Fruits and Vegetables, that's what my mom, his sister, calls him. Or Gandhi. The more my uncle insults her diet and weight, the more she insists on her name-calling. Then the bantering goes on, which is never ending in my family. And there's the split: those who favor him against those who

tolerate him, with all kinds of shades in between. I've long ago left all that behind me. But somehow the urgency to call, because of a disease I can't seem to rein, seems to threaten everything: my little apartment, my ability to travel, to date and to enjoy the life that many of my married friends claim to envy. Unlike many of those who seek new countries, I never fell into the trap of wanting a fortune; my only concern was, and still is, being as far away as possible from my family. I remember a character in an old novel I've read a few years back, who kept saying to himself, "If I had my druthers…," and ever since, I've fully committed myself to that expression. I never get too close to someone for fear of losing that privilege. After all, what would that significant other do but push you to eat a steak tartare instead of a hot dog? Or adopt a cat over a snake? Meanwhile the fluid sea of Choice becomes a dry lake, muddy at times, suffocating to all the fish you can choose from. And suppose you find that person, can anyone deny the fact that one of you will be snoring? Earplugs disappear in the cavernous mess of a cabinet and forget about having a good night sleep.

Why not call my uncle first? I've asked myself this question many times. Well, if I had had the courage to call him, then perhaps the whole idea of Uncle Jacob would've collapsed—his persona, his charisma, and his magic all gone. We all need someone like him, a fortress of conviction, a saint whose deeds live in the mind of the faithful with stories bantered about him, in family and social circles, no doubt embellished, but nevertheless there, bantered and renewed, for this is a living saint whose stories are endless. He possesses the Midas touch—my mom always says, transforming his every little story into a saga. But he is no saint, and somehow between the suspension of

disbelief and reality exists a voice of fire and brimstone which haunted me as a child, and, as much as it pulls me in as I get older, it still scares me.

But two days ago, I heard the word 'cancer' and things changed; then I knew I had to do something. Leaving the specialist, I walked home, stunned. I kept repeating his words, "This *could* mean cancer." I wasn't sure if he meant to say it aloud, but then he repeated it again. The words felt hypnotic; I couldn't move nor look at him, just staring at the certificates hanging on the wall. The moment stretched like a détente after which, once he put the stethoscope aside, things exploded with pellets of possibilities: Crohn's disease, Gastritis, adhesions, a constellation of ailments I've become familiar with, and plied me with brochures as if wanting me to confirm his suspicions. "More tests must be done. We have no other choice." His moustache, so unusual for a doctor, twitched adding a frisson of disquiet to the words. Really? I asked myself, two MRIs, upper endoscopy, upper GI, all within the last eight months and nothing but a conjecture of conditions for which I've been doled a colorful array of medicines. And now this.

At that point, I was desperate for someone to pave the way, to prod me for the dreaded phone call. And who better to call than my sister Zeena, who always worried about me. For her, the specialist I saw was a charlatan. She, like my mother, has no fear, neither of the devil, nor the saint. In her I confided.

One thing was clear, I didn't want to be confined to the opinion of one person. In a twisted (but not atypical) way, I enjoyed the freedom of exploring different doctors, eliciting many opinions, even if they have all failed at this point. And now, going to my uncle feels like the last choice I have. And since it is, it somehow feels like I'm consorting with the devil. You sell your soul and you become indebted to him. He has

the capacity to insult you while insulting others—with my uncle, no one knows where lies the next victim. Zeena tells me I always exaggerate, even with my simple metaphors, which, being a teacher, is expected of me. In a sense, it's true: I keep trying to find alibis to avoid the phone call. Even at this point, after consulting with doctors, I'm still hiding from myself, pretending that sooner or later my dogged ailment would vanish. There always exists, I believe, a survival mechanism (perhaps in all of us) that opens all life lines, even though the specter of doom lies two feet ahead.

When did my uncle become the healer? When did this whole practice start? It must have all converged around the time of his divorce, the new practice, the new wife, the grand villa, and the organic acres. It was only a few years back when he was handed a book written by a Canadian doctor; a few months later, he was dispensing advice as if he had written the book himself. By the same token, I wonder how a lawyer by profession could become a healer? No clinic, no degrees, just books he read—a fountain of them; and patients—hordes of them. And no consulting fee. Never takes a penny, as if to prove the saint is still doing his deeds. Did this new stunt surprise any of us? Not a bit. It was tinged with the same "All or Nothing" flair that came to engulf all his actions.

I made sure I didn't see him last summer when I came home to visit. I was worried he'd look in my eyes. He has this ritual, once you come to greet him, of grasping both your hands like a lion's paw stomping its victim, his face in yours, ready for the kill. As he probes your eyes, the circles and the lines, he inhales and releases bits of negativity about your diet and lifestyle. How does a 70-year-old man manage to see all these details? The truth is after a harsh New York winter, I came home last summer with two things on my mind: go out, drink, and suntan the pale self that I had become. I had no

desire of my uncle's probing into the dark pools of my soul. In this sense, I did break a summer ritual my mom held dear and for which she wasn't happy. Usually, no sooner do I return to the old country than she chaperones all of us on a grand tour to my uncle's villa, which seems to grow and grow, summer after summer. The visit starts with hugs and examination, especially if he hasn't seen you for a while.

"Where is Joseph?" my uncle asks about my father.

"Trying to make money, what else?" My mom says. They look at one another and nod and agree on the only thing that will never be discussed.

It was only recently that my uncle acquired his large fortune. For years, when he came to visit, his old white Peugeot stood, an eyesore, in front of our elegant car. And the fact he was penurious, and now rich, has made his visits to us rare, and my father's visits to him even rarer. Mom plumps down on her large armchair and tells Joy, my uncle's wife, "I don't hear action in the kitchen." Joy laughs and asks us what we want to drink. "And eat," my mom insists. "We didn't drive for two hours all the way here for an English tea and crumpets." Joy calls her maid and asks for coffee, tea and special cake she has prepared herself. No bread, no cheese, nor meat is ever offered throughout the whole visit.

Uncle looks at my mom and says, "God bless, God bless," then shakes his head. Mom goes on the defense, paints herself as a woman who is full of life and energy, to which my uncle musters his ever-ready, colorful lexicon, discharging one word after another, "Fat killer, plump engine, barrel of dirt." Mom usually sits, quietly listening, with her hands covering her bulging stomach, as if wanting to hide that part of herself from the world. Once he finishes, mom, who sees in her brother merely a brother,

responds with some creative epithets. The last one was conferred upon him two summers ago. Out of nowhere, she conjures those words: "Look at you, you're like a man from Biafra." The starving images of poor children didn't sit well with my uncle. He denounced 'Fat' as the ultimate kiss of death, pointing his finger at my mom while looking at us. When on his typical rant, my uncle's face usually evinces no disgust, only bewilderment at a world that doesn't seem to fathom the gravity of his words. My older brother claims he deserves an Oscar for every speech, what with his intermittent pauses, his dramatic turn of the face if someone dares to oppose him, and the eyes resting on everyone but the darer. We, the clan—cousins, children, grandchildren—typically laugh, joke and find in the cruel bantering something so habitual, an emblem of distinction that makes our family rise above all others in eccentricity and wit.

Just before the end of our visits, we drift towards the gardens. My uncle, with a wooden staff in his hand he has himself cut and polished, leads the tribe, his head straight as if surveying a new world. First, we hear, "Watch for the snakes, they don't hurt, just don't step on them." We all giggle and the grandchildren scream. With some of us holding baskets, we follow a slithery path of pebbles and sand where oregano, thyme and sage nudge each other, all vying for the sun and air. Soon we see ourselves in the middle of an oasis of orchards, fruit trees, oranges, pomegranates, plums, apples, pears, loquat, figs and almond trees and lush trellises of vines rushing down a long stony path all the way to the empty swimming pool filled with brown crates of organic seeds flowering under the sun, waiting calmly to be lifted out of their enclosure.

"Sayeed Brahim," my uncle calls to his help, "how are the figs, today?" Out of nowhere, Sayeed Brahim emerges from some bushes, in his hands plump black and green

figs, which he offers to all of us. Sayeed Brahim has a wizened face with a stout, lean body. My uncle picks one, savors it and we follow suit. "This is like honey," my uncle says, nodding a few times. "Sayeed Brahim, you're the wise man," my uncle tells him. Sayeed Brahim smiles. We move on.

Later, with the trunks of two cars filled with boxes of fruits and vegetables, we say goodbye and exchange hugs. "Tonight I will start the diet," my mom reassures her brother, who nods a few times and says, "It's never too late, never too late." No one seems either sad or happy, except for my mom who sits in the front, smiling and waving goodbye, praising the miraculous fruits and wishing her brother and Joy a long life. Once the car pulls out, my mom looks at us and says, "If Sayeed Brahim works for one more month for your uncle, he'll vanish like him." We laugh, dig into the fruit.

Walking on McDougal Street, on my way back from the specialist, I stopped by Café Reggio and peered into the dark nook. The coffee scent wafted through the air as if being distilled by aging paintings and sculptures wedged into the walls. It was four o'clock, a cherished time to have coffee and a little sweet. Impulsively I bought a cup of coffee. As I took a few sips, some bitterness emerged as I kept thinking of the phone call to my sister, and cursed my luck. Would things have changed had I seen my uncle this last summer? Would he have noticed something terrible in the lines around my eyes?

I proceeded to walk head down towards the park, hands behind my back, like a philosopher pondering the afterlife. Near the fountain, on the different yellow patches of grass, hundreds of people were sunning themselves. They looked dazed. It was almost the end of April and the menacing winter air still hovered.

I felt a chill and decided to walk back to the apartment.

But I kept stopping to spit, so fearful was I of any residual coffee taste. I felt a deep envy of people taking pictures in the park while plunging their noses in foamed lattes. Near the entrance, I spat again, this time forcefully. I understood then what sickness meant: neither death, nor sadness, nor fear, but more like the negation of choice. I imagined a long life with curtailed prospects and anticipations, with no friends, no sex, no late nights out, no drinking, no smoking, barely eating. For what has the last ten months been but an obliteration of everything I am, wound around a single misery that fluctuates throughout the day. Life has totally eluded me.

By the time I got to the apartment, the attack was on. My 30-inch waist, my pride, was stretched to the point where I couldn't recognize myself. Who is this gross person? I asked myself before the mirror. What has started as a recent development felt at that moment as if it had always been with me? All my friends, my colleagues, my exes, all seemed lost in a space I couldn't reach. If it weren't for my little apartment and the many paintings (which I've accumulated through inheritance and gifts), I would've seen myself irretrievable—unrecognizable to myself. Even my last sexual encounter appeared enmeshed in an aura of pain and masochism: as kisses were exchanged, we both suddenly reclined. The passionate move, as one is expected to make, was too quick, prompting a blob of acidity to surge in my mouth. I rushed to the bathroom and stayed there until the attack had passed.

I wake up around three o'clock thinking of the phone call.

I wake up again at the sound of my alarm: 5:00 a.m. Outside the window, it is dark. The apartment is heated and I stay in bed for more than ten minutes, so reluctant am I to initiate the call.

I finally dial.

The phone rings at least five times. I hang up. Now I worry about upsetting my sisters. I think of the specialist and his prognosis. "You could have cancer." On the way out he added, "We need more tests. We have to rule out this possibility."

I dial again. This time my uncle picks up.

"*'Meen maai'?*"

I say my name. Mom's words, the 'Biafra man', come to my mind, but I can't laugh.

"Was it you who called just a few seconds ago?"

"It was me."

"And you didn't wait? Oh, you're American now, you must excuse us. Americans like fast service. We don't have it here in this country."

"Hello, uncle," I manage to say, a bit cheery. "How are you, how is Joy?" my voice is thin, and when I don't hear him, I go on, "How is Antoine? How is Florence?" Why did his first wife give all his children French names? Usually we go for a mixture of Lebanese and French. The fact suddenly irritates me as if it is the problem I'm calling about.

"Did you ask me how I and Joy are doing, did you ask about Antoine and Florence? You don't have to do that. You don't have to ask how we are." His voice is calm. "When someone eats well, lives well, you don't insult him with a question like that. You can ask your mom such a thing, the one who keeps eating like a pig. You can ask your dad, whom she feeds, and who eats now like her, but no, you can't ask about me or your cousins. What distinguishes a human from an animal?"

I don't know what to say, but for some weird reason I think of naked and clothed, and something about paradise, but I know better than to give him this answer.

"I asked you a question. Did you hear me? I thought the problem was your stomach, not your hearing." The voice is no longer calm.

"Animals are animals and humans are humans," I say.

"I am an intelligent animal and you are human. That's the difference. An animal knows when he's sick what to do. Have you seen a dog or cat eat when they're sick? No. They fast until they feel better. Now that we have defined the difference between animals and dumb-ass humans, let's you and me decide who's who. Now that you're sick, you must be a dumb-ass human, and you're not alone, don't worry, so many like you to keep you company."

I suddenly cough, more from the need to laugh than from the cold I had entertained for three weeks.

"Did you cough?" The voice is now loud.

"Oh nothing," I tell him. "I had a little cold, but I've been drinking hot water with lemon. No medicine, nothing. Just an Advil to reduce the fever. A bit of fever," I curse myself for adding the last detail. The negation of medicine is calculated to warm his heart; by now we all know his sentiment towards medicine.

"'Ohhhhhh'. 'Wonnnderful'. '*Habeeebi, inta'*. Joy, did you hear that? Joy, oh, Joy, you must hear that one." He roars. I pull the phone away from my ear. "The American had a cold, and he decided, smart as all Americans are, to cook the lemon. So who inspired you with that amazing recipe? Mind you some chef must have given it to

you, because it *is* a recipe. What happens when you add hot water to the lemon? What is a lemon?"

At this point, I sense a gurgle in my stomach and I worry about the onslaught of the first symptom. To evade the question, I tell him that his brother, my other uncle (who lives in Pennsylvania) taught me about this 'recipe.' I feel I've betrayed that kindly man, but I can't help it.

"Oh, the other American!" he exclaims. "Two Americans in our households. That is a blessing. What have we done in this little country to deserve this honor?" He alters his tone to a sweet one. "And where did he learn that cooking a fruit is the way to heal the body? In nature, do you see fruits boiling at hundred degrees? No. Why then do you need to alter the fruit? If it is healthy the way it is born, it is healthy the way it is eaten. Nature, have you heard of nature? God, that one living above us somewhere, created a garden of fruits for the first two smart animals. That is before they became humans. What were their names?"

"Adam and Eve," I swiftly reply, knowing there is no trap in this simple question.

"Excellent. Adam and Eve. And why did they live long, do you think?"

I don't dare answer, sensing a pitfall camouflaged by the quick alteration of his voice, which is now louder**.** The only way to get out of it is by saying I don't know.

"You don't know or you don't want to know? Which one?" The tone is stern. "Well, I will tell you because that answer will bring us to the reason you're calling me today. They lived longer than us because, unlike all the dumb-ass ones who eat meat and are proud of their gouts, their allergies, their hernias and their hemorrhoids, Adam and

Eve ate fruits, vegetables and nuts. What do you think your cousins and all the people I heal eat now?"

"Fruit, vegetables and nuts."

"Oh, you are a smart one. Fruit, vegetables and nuts, that's what they eat. These are the three key ingredients. Steer away from them, and kiss your liver and kidneys goodbye. Now let's go back to the second brilliant thing you did when you had this cough."

I want to remind him I'm not calling about the cough, but I know better.

"What did you take for the cough?"

"Advil, just two pills. That's all.

"And it is not medicine. This is what you said. Advil is not medicine. If the '*ibn el sharmoot*' is not a medicine, then what is medicine? Now you, American, you do have a degree from somewhere; what kind of degree is it?" I am thinking about the heavy curse he uttered '*ibn el sharmout'* or 'the son of a whore', and how early in the morning, it rings clear in my ears, and I sense he's cursing at me, not at the drug.

"It's over-the-counter."

"Listen, '*khalee*,' if you want to act stupid, let's end this phone call." In his voice there is no patience now, lowering it a tad just to invoke his frustration. "I don't have time. Do you know how many people I am expecting today? Yes, I am a 'healer', not a doctor. I *heal* people who want to be healed, not get screwed up with medicine and poison. Doctor is for the dumb asses who visit them. Now, you had a little fever; instead of encouraging it to come out, you suffocate it, you push it down into your system, because what does Advil do but stomp the fever in its place? Now will it really stop it?

No. Ask your liver and stomach about the side effects and you will understand why we shouldn't kill a fever. You nurture it, you raise it and by doing so you discard all the junk that is stowed in your sticky-meat stomach. Did you hear me?"

"I do."

"Ah, that's good. Which bring us to my first question, how are your hemorrhoids?"

There is a long pause. Did I hear him well? What do my hemorrhoids got do with my stomach? I wonder.

"How are your hemorrhoids?"

"I don't have…"

"Are you lying to me?" Is there any meat eater who doesn't have hemorrhoids? How bad is your case?" Now he's shouting, and I swear I feel tears welling in my eyes. Unlike two beings locked in a civilized exchange, my uncle's voice is stuck on the same high decibels, unable to modulate his voice.

"They are bad sometimes," I say. My voice is low and repentant.

"Do they bleed?"

"Sometimes."

"That's it. That's all I want to hear. Why are you then denying that you are a gifted hemorrhoid hoarder? Like you and your family and most of the world. Don't you remember what they've done to your uncle two years ago? Did they listen to me? The doctor insisted. Now he's paying the price. Do you promise you won't be like him?"

"I promise," and somehow it feels like I'm signing my life away as I say it.

"Good." He pauses as if ruminating on my last words. "So now tell me what happened?" his tone menacingly sweet gives me a bit of hope.

"It started nine months ago," I manage to say. "I went to see the first doctor. I had then a little burning sensation. He said it was acidity. I'm prone to acidity. He gave me Nexium. But then the burning got worse, and my friend suggested another doctor she knows. The second one told me I have GERD. So he added…"

"Zantac. Most likely Zantac. Doctors are in love with that one. Nexium, GERD, Zantac, all beautiful words. Beautiful. Poetic, as a matter of fact. So, these doctors went to school to memorize medicine. The pharmaceutical company must be rejoicing. I want you to stop and tell me how many asses you've seen all together and what kind of other poisons they gave you."

"Well, there is Dr. Paul…"

"No, no names. How many asses did you see?"

I don't say a word. I feel it's another booby-trap and I need to get myself out of that lurking danger.

"They are New York city doctors."

"Doctors," he shouts. "You call them doctors. One more time, how many asses did you see? Just the count."

"Three."

"Say three asses."

"Three asses."

"Good, you will call them, Ass #1, Ass #2 and Ass #3 when you refer to them. What did Ass #1 give you?"

"Nexium."

"Ass #2?"

"Zantac."

"Go on."

"Well the last one…"

"No, that is not his name."

"Ass #3 gave me Naprosyn. He said I have a peptic ulcer."

"And who is the one who told you about cancer? Your sister said someone told you, you have a cancer."

"That was a specialist. His name is…" I have no clue why I'm even attempting to give him names.

"That's what they call themselves now. Specialists? And how much did this one cost you? I hear in NYC they charge 300 to 600 an hour. How much did you pay this Grand Ass? You must be ashamed to go to them, to let yourself go for eight or nine months without calling me. Where were you this summer? You didn't visit. Is it too hard to leave New York City restaurants behind? You're still single. Aren't you? Have you ever thought that maybe marriage will force you to eat with someone at a table in your own house? What's wrong with marriage? Look at your cousins, they all married and happy. It's time to go back home. Don't you think?"

I want to remind him he's divorced and has married Joy, an English woman, who is twenty-five years younger than he. But again, I don't dare broach that subject. "I didn't think I wanted to bother…" I reply.

"Think! Do you think? Does your mom or dad think when they eat crap? The three Asses poisoned you, and the burning sensation along with the acid reflux and the fissures are all part of the side effects. Your stomach linings are riddled with bullets. It's like someone shooting at you from the inside. Do you know there is such a thing as side effects? Did any of the 'Asses' even attempt to tell you about them? Nexium punctures holes in your stomach, so does Naprosyn and the hemorrhoids are now bigger because you are straining to go to the bathroom since all the three medicines combined create constipation."

And he goes on with the side effects and my family, and for the specialist, he decides that if he ever visits the states, he, Uncle Jacob, will pay a special visit just to burn his tongue, because no one who has half a brain, tells a sick person that he *might* have cancer.

"When I was on the radio two months ago, what did I say about doctors?"

The radio show is where he is invited weekly to lecture. Facing a bevy of "bureaucratic bloated doctors" as he likes to call them, he inveighs against a world strewn with addictive poisons and horrible diets. When one of the hosts asked him to describe his family's diet, for "they must follow the same one you're advocating," Uncle Jacob, sensing a trap, responded by saying that his family is like a farm of piglets and hyenas. First, he attacked my mom (who usually sits with her friends listening to the show), and then went on a rampage against his other sister who lives in Melbourne. "She is another piglet and suffers from all sorts of diseases, and she thinks she's thin." Then he went after one of his brothers, the one who lives not far from him. "Suffice it to say he has a dog that is fed pounds of lean meat taken from the same batch he cooks his own food,"

my uncle said. "Now you know why he is a hyena. As for you, (talking to the host), just by looking at your eyes, I know how badly your liver and kidneys are damaged. You need to stop drinking alcohol." It was a show in the making, garnering so many viewers and earning my uncle more acolytes than ever.

"They are paid, those doctors! They are sick and moldy. So, going back to our discussion," his voice drops to a whisper, "you are a smart person, you know what doctors are about—money! What is the word we have for doctor here? 'Hakeem' and 'Hakeem' means a sage. They are not sages. We all know that. Now, either you do what I tell you to do or you never call me again. I tried to heal your mom, but your mom is stubborn. A month ago, I had a visit from Elsie, you know Elsie, your mom's cousin…"

I have no words to say at this point. I hold the phone to my ear and go to the window. Outside the schoolyard is empty. Across from me, in the square of a window, a mother is holding a baby in her arm. I always see her in the morning. She moved in a year ago. In the early rising light, her face, the face of a passionate mother, with large protruding eyes that lent them a kind of devotion, was rather prepossessing. How much I longed to be in her hands, a child again, with no worry, no symptoms, and no pain to rock my day. I listen to my uncle's voice again recounting all his feats and healings. He brags in a matter-of-fact way, and there is no sympathy in his voice, no wavering—those are the usual attributes of a doctor. For him, 'Do it or Die', that is his motto. But the way he goes on a tangent attacking the family (his sisters, of all people) unearths a visceral conviction that I bury within myself, something rotten, ineluctable, the way I live, the way I eat, the way my parents are, the way I was born into a family of meat eaters. I

binge on food, I visit doctors, I have sex with or without condoms, I refuse to marry, I refuse to eat well, and all the messes I've got myself into are of my own doing and come to haunt me at this point when he is finally on the verge of administering some sort of a treatment; at least that's what I am hoping for.

"…You understand why I'm terribly sad. She's my sister, I want her to live, not die." He pauses then with a stern voice says, "Whatever I say to you now must be done without any delay, and no modification whatsoever."

I say yes, of course, and wait.

"For the first twelve days, you will only eat lettuce, Romaine lettuce, the green part, and red apples. The kind we eat in *this* country. All day long. Whenever you are hungry. Never drink unless you're thirsty. Lettuce is all water and alkaline. You stop eating your last meal at five or six in the evening, and you will go to bed by eight or nine at the latest. Do you understand what I said?"

"Yes, uncle. But what if I'm hungry."

"What if you're hungry? Well, then shut your mouth. That's it. Or eat more apples."

"Yes, uncle."

"Good. You will call me in twelve days to modify your diet. The burning sensation will be gone by then."

He hangs up the phone.

I stand there as if bewitched. I can barely move. 1 hour of bitching: 1 minute of healing. Nothing makes sense, neither the apples nor the lettuce. What do I hold onto? I hear some kids in the playground of the little school, so early in the morning. Their

screams feel like a barrier of time, a reminder of how youth has become unreachable. I look around me. The apartment looks so small, I feel trapped. I want to go out, but I'm not able to move. It has haunted me at times, this feeling, since childhood, since watching *Waiting for Godot*, at school with my mother sitting next to me. I remember the bantering back and forth and nothing on stage, no décor, no action, no music, and young as I was, I got fidgety, sensing that my mom had tricked me to come by calling the show a play. My sister was on stage, but even she disappeared under a thick cake of white paint and a moustache. I remember feeling dizzy and my feet getting numb, but I couldn't dare to move lest I disturbed the parents sitting next to us. For the first time ever, I felt I was stuck, and fear overwhelmed me, and after a long struggle, I leaned over my mom and asked, "Will he ever show up, this guy?" She hugged me and said, "He's like your father, undependable. A ghost." For her, the play was the ultimate portrait of bad husbands. A ghost indeed, that's what I've been chasing for a while now, and nothing at this point, I imagine, will help me get out of this hell.

I call Zeena. No answer. I reach Yasmina. "Lettuce and apples, that's what he said." I tell her about the whole thing. She laughs. "I couldn't say a word to him," I whine. "I couldn't defend myself."

"Only Zeena can do that," she replies. "You're not Zeena. No one is like her. "

"I was going to but…"

"Why didn't you, then? Tell me. Why didn't you say something? Why can't we say something? Anything? No one knows. This is how it goes. But one point is clear, you must abide by his rules. He's the only one who can heal you." I hang up the phone and sit for a while. I look around at my little pad, one little bedroom with one window

peeping at a tarnished brick wall, a small kitchen with a quaint old gas stove and a tile sink, and in the back, a little bedroom overlooking a private kindergarten where children's voices always manage to dilute the roar of Sullivan Street. It always feels good knowing that I own it, and by extension the Washington Square Park, a walking distance, and the local night life, which I certainly have made use of. I think of school, of students, of the two-month leave. I want to feel uplifted, but it all comes sluggish, as if my life here in this apartment, in this city, has been one long stretch in the wrong direction. And it is taking one stubborn disease to turn things around, redress the deceptive turn, so to speak.

I shake myself out of my reverie. I decide to go out. I walk to the supermarket and go in. Pyramids of red apples stare at me. I try to figure out which red ones resemble the apples from childhood. Did he give any prognosis or treatment? If he did, it is all jumbled with notions of the family, brothers, mother, aunt, and myself, and something about apples and lettuce, marriage and restaurants, pigs and hyenas, a witch's brew that could both heal and damage.

With no will of my own I choose the apples. I still hear his voice, "like the ones from your childhood." Near one of the large refrigerators, a chill takes hold of me. I stand helpless again expecting an onslaught. I want to speed up, but my hands are busy searching for the healing lettuce. And now, as I'm shivering, the notion comes haunting me: something in me is rotten to the bone. Apples and lettuce in my hand, I walk to the cashier.

I pay and go outside. A honey locust tree with yellow leaves stands naked above two benches. I sit for a minute. I then lift the two bags and walk back to the apartment.

I feel like I'm holding a heavy weight, and that I've been holding it for a long time, and like a prisoner who is shackled, my long one-way journey into the cell has already started.

First I gag, then I retch and rush to the bathroom. The liquid is dark green, a mixture of toxicity and apples and lettuce. As if I am vomiting his words. I lie in bed for an hour, hunger is overwhelming and I curse the hour I called him.

On the second day, I am in the grip of a nagging hunger, and a slight headache. I curse him, but I persist, only to prove him wrong.

On the fourth day, I wake up a bit less hungry. I have more energy, but my headaches are getting worse. I go on with my diet. At five, I stop eating. At seven, I sleep. I wake up in the night, a bit hungry. I force myself to go to sleep.

On the sixth day, a sense of reductionism fills me with despair, that my life is and will never be the same. My nights blend into the mornings, and since I've shunned most of my friends, took off from school, I've become a waif in my own apartment, straying between meals from the bed to the sofa, from the supermarket to the park, and then back to the apartment. No phones, no meetings, I am totally in the throes of my uncle's spell, which seems at this point to eclipse all of what I am. The simple task of eating apples and lettuce has fogged my mind. For me, it has become a no-win ultimatum: either I heal alone or live with sickness and misery around people.

I want to call my uncle, to talk to him, not about the diet, but about my life, here in the States, my world, how it is special, but then I know on whom the comparison will fall, either on his son or someone else's son. And I will only hear about the greatness of others.

Sometimes between two meals of apple and lettuce, Naomi calls. She's one of the few friends I've shared my story and diet with.

"Meet me at the restaurant. We'll eat then walk to the theater. I have two tickets to the La MaMa." I tell her I'd rather meet at the theater.

As I stand changing my shirt before the mirror, I feel buoyed. I'm aware that something is different. True the symptoms persist, but the intensity has lessened. But then I notice the thinning of my cheeks, almost as if they've been sucked in. The little white hair near the sideburns, and my eyebrows look thick. Did this happen in the last few days or months? Buttoning down my shirt, I shrug everything off as illusory, that once I'm out of this pickle, I'll go back to my own self. We never know ourselves too well, that's for sure, and because we don't, we embrace all kinds of opinions some people have of us.

I walk that night from Sullivan Street to the park. The air had a sweet smell of wet twigs emerging from the little patch of snows still clinging in some recessed corners of the trees and benches. It is a soft walk and it feels nature is welcoming me back. Little buds on the trees, green and rufous, tinge the air with an indistinct hope—as if this body of mine, like an old friend, has come to meet me, walking side by my side on our way out to meet other friends.

She screams. Instantly. "Oh, my God, what has he done to you?" I try to say something, but no words come to me. "Oh, my god, you've lost weight. You're skinny. Not even ten days. Oh, what will I tell Larry? Larry is her husband, my best friends, who travels for big building projects he conceives himself.

"I'm okay," I tell her. "I'm okay." But detecting the distress in her voice, I wonder if I've missed something when I watched myself in the mirror.

"He's a quack," Naomi tells me. "Your uncle is a quack. Apple and lettuce? Who can survive on lettuce and apples? You must go back to eating healthy. I can't see you this way." She stops and hugs me. "If Larry sees you, he'll be upset. Does your uncle know he's a quack?"

That's one epithet my mom would never have thought of. To describe her brother is one thing, but to demean him is out of the question.

Just before we go in, she asks if I am up to it. "I mean you must be hungry. You need to eat." She holds my hand and keeps rubbing them.

"Naomi," I finally tell her affronted, "I'm fine. I'm the one who is healthy. Do you know what lettuce does to you? It's alkaline…" I go on for a while, then, "For god's sake, look at you."

I sound like him, but I can't stop myself.

"Of course, you're not hungry. It's like you've undergone a bad liposuction. Just on apples and lettuce." She looks at me with her warm, moist eyes.

"Lebanese apples," I tell her, attempting a joke. "No need to worry about me."

"I'm worried, I'm worried. Look at you, you're not yourself. How long will this go on?" She keeps hugging me.

"Let's go in," I firmly tell her.

Standing before the snack stand, she insists on buying food for me.

"I can't eat that stuff," I tell her. "It'll kill me. It'll kill you too." She buys herself a glass of wine and sips it slowly. "This," she tells me as she lifts her glass of

wine, "is no good, I know, but you can have a little sandwich. They have cheese sandwiches."

"Naomi, I'm not hungry." And the truth is I'm not. I feel light, as if everything about me, inside and out, is made of air, as if I have reached some sort of food nirvana. And I can't describe this feeling to others. Naomi keeps sipping her wine and holding it low, worried I'd envy her drink.

"Hopefully you'll enjoy the show. The director is the main dancer. He wants to collaborate with me. This is his second show. But you know, like all shows, it's either hit or miss." Naomi is a classical pianist by training and has championed the modern classics, her repertoire replete with Britten, Schoenberg, and the emerging young New York composers.

"The *New York Times* has written favorable reviews for his first show. But then it's the *New York Times,"* she says. "Any schmuck gets something good in there."

As we walk to the theater, Naomi puts her arms in mine, and it feels as if she's leading a blind friend. I want to wiggle free but I don't. We go inside. Passing by a wall with a little mirror, I sneak a peek at myself. It's so quick, but I swear I see the shadow of my uncle, like a penumbra, shrouding me. I am the one who looks like the man from Biafra. How long would I go on this diet? What if this lull of pain is only temporary? As we sit, Naomi puts her hand on mine and tells me, "You'll be fine. Just a little bit of food. That's all."

The main dancer, with loose underwear and a ripped white band that goes obliquely around his torso, runs and kneels on stage. With a striking thatch of orange hair and a white skin, he looks like a large orange peel. We're seated second to the front

row near the aisle, and it's hard to miss the details. There's something in his hand he keeps twirling. It makes a rattling noise. Suddenly, he does a dancer shtick, jumping and twirling. For a moment, I think he's going to lose his underwear. Naomi looks at me, and we start to giggle. This goes on for a while. At one point, he takes a straw chair, turns it around and straddles it. He keeps twirling the little noisy gadget in his hand.

A few minutes later, six female dancers, all scantily clad, appear on stage; two of them are quite plump to be dancers (my uncle would've showered them with unkind words). The lights are dimmed; with a few Moroccan tapestry and Aladdin lamps hanging from the ceiling, the room is suggestive of a harem, so that when the dancers enter, holding straw chairs, they come close and sit in a V-formation around the sultan. One of them offers him a sword which he rejects. He leers at each one of them, and one by one, out of their hands materialize the same gadgets.

The sultan is not interested in war. He peers at them, and this time, a ménage of movements and sounds ensue: the clucking, the flexing and twirling of their bodies, and so on. Whatever he does, his harem follows suit. As this goes on, Naomi leans over and whispers, "Look, watch carefully, peek in, the underwear is smudged, it's dirty." As he tilts from one side to the other, I glimpse his full package, and I literally pinch myself to stop laughing.

Naomi leans towards me and says, "Sorry, it's one of those shows, I knew it." This doesn't help as we keep looking at his fly.

"Is he supposed to be a eunuch or the sultan?"

"He has a nice package, he can't be the eunuch," Naomi tells me. I lose it.

"I think he's using his dick in the choreography," she tells me. Now I'm curious to know if there is any choreographic connection between the twirling, the clucking, and the movement of his dick. "What the heck is in their hands?" I ask Naomi, but this time my whisper comes loud and we are hushed down.

"Oh, my god," Naomi says, "it's the opening night and I bet his parents and friends are in the audience."

Suddenly out of nowhere, another male dancer appears. This one is dressed in black and the evil motif resonates through the music. Both the sultan and the evil intruder clash with one another, dancing and twirling. Swords suddenly appear. After a few suggestive clashes, the intruder is crushed and the order is restored. The sultan brings his chair to the middle of the floor and flashes a large smile.

Now the dancers start circling around, in what looks like a dance of victory, throwing the gadgets on the side. This goes on for a while. At one point, one of the girls disappears and returns with a box. She starts hurling what looks like old cassette tapes to the dancers and her naked prince, who suddenly stands up. First, he catches one tape, walks around the stage, unthreads and throws it away, only to catch another one. All of them start doing the same routine, for at least eight minutes. Now the stage is filled with threads and the dancers beams with happiness as they seem all connected to one another, holding each other and coming close unto him. An orgiastic climax of touch and feel die down in a welter of threads of tapes strewn all over the floor. The audience is silent. Naomi and I are holding hands, breathing hard, trying to avert a disaster.

Then, suddenly, they all gather at one end of the stage, and he on the other. One by one, each dancer rushes, and with a *pas jeté* throws herself at him. The two plump

dancers stand by themselves downstage. I know they'll be also running towards him. I want to alert Naomi, but I'm unable to look at her for fear of losing it. So, I watch, partly curious, partly apprehensive, and then it happens: the first one goes, then the next, and like seals, they crash into the flow of his arms, their feet splayed, their face contorted as if in pain, their breasts showing, and for each throw and catch, I swear I see his dick move from one side to the other. And the *four rire,* as the French call it, happens on the spot.

My laughter is so loud, it infects Naomi. People hush and stare us down. I am the first one to leave the theatre, and Naomi, five minutes later, shows up. We walk to the subway, laughing and hugging each other. At one point, she says to me, "Sorry again, it's one of those, you know. The problem is what to tell the sultan tomorrow when he calls me." She hugs me again, "Promise you'll start to eat. I can't see you this way, this is not you," and disappears into the subway.

I walk back feeling happy. The sultan and his harem are content; tonight, he will sleep with one of his concubines. The order is restored. I laugh again, I laugh hard, and my laughter this time comes out of desperation—laughing at myself, at my fears, at my sickness and at the fact that the diet, like a magic lamp, is somehow working. If it fully works—this diet of hell—how would I pay my uncle and with what? Presents, money—he'll throw away. Just a tacit look of admiration with one word, one good word, that will do, but the notion that I must constantly rig one up every time I see or call him makes me sick to the bones.

I walk the streets touching my face, my arms, my waist, wondering how much emaciation I'll endure before it all stops. I pass a protective wall of a construction site filled with posters. One of them stops me in my place. I've always admired it: workers

sitting next to one another on a large beam having lunch on top of the World Trade Center. Undisturbed and disdainful of the world beneath them, they eat and don't even look at the hellish bottom where everyone else resides. This is where my uncle dwells, I tell myself, on top of that building. As I keep looking at the poster, I have this vision of the skyscraper turning into a giant tree and my uncle, proud of his prowess, proud of his climbing skills, is pruning it. I want to climb the tree and I start to do so, but the closer I come to him, the more I become enraged. In a way, I know my rage is deceptive. If I have fallen back on him, my uncle, my enemy, it is only out of self-contempt or deep loneliness, and perhaps he's right, I need someone to sit at a table next to me, eat and converse with me. It *is* a choice and it seems at this moment it would be my only and last choice before I heal. Walking back to my apartment, it feels I'm going back in time, with every footstep forward, two steps backward. And this, my life as it is, and the person I am, will never be recaptured. Eighteen years I've lived apart from my family, opened my arms to the world, and suddenly, out of sickness and a phone call, out of the cuds of insults and affronts, the little boy is regurgitated.

VITA

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