

*The
Arsonists'
City*

Hala Alyan



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The Wrong Ghosts

TONIGHT THE MAN will die. In some ways, the city already seems resigned to it, the Beirut dusk uncharacteristically flat, cloudy, a peculiar staleness rippling through the trees like wind. It's easy to costume the earth for grief, and tonight the birds perched upon the tangled electricity wires look like mourners in their black and white feathers, staring down at the concrete refugee camps without song.

There are orange trees in the courtyard, planted by the children the previous year; the NGO workers had wanted something bright and encouraged the youngest children to tie cheap ribbons to the branches, but they'd forgotten about the muddy season, and now the ribbons flap limply, streaked in dirt.

The man himself—Zakaria—knows it, or doesn't. He notices the queer feeling of the camps, the way his mother's makloubeh tastes perfectly fine but seems to be saltless, the meat stringier than usual. His sisters are gathered in the living room, cross-legged on the carpet, his mother's mother's carpet, the one that earned them a cuff on the ear back when they were children if they

dropped crumbs or spilled Coke on it. *You think my mama, Allah rest her soul, Allah take her and Allah keep her, hauled this on her back, her back, all the way from Jerusalem to Ramallah to Amman to this godforsaken armpit of the world so that her heathen grandchildren could spill soda on it?* His mother hates the camps, hates Beirut, all of Lebanon, hates their neighbors, the aunties with their tattling and boring lives, always reminding her children, *We used to have gardens in Palestine, trees that belonged to us.*

His sisters are watching an Egyptian soap opera, one of their favorites, the one where the ingénue is kept from her love interest by his wicked mother. The screen is cracked from where one of his sisters — they always disagree about which one — threw a curling iron at it years ago, and it slices the starlet's torso in two as she cries on a park bench.

"What's wrong with you today?" Zakaria's mother asks him.

"Nothing," he lies. "I'm just not hungry." The truth is he's distracted. Something is nagging at him as it does when he forgets a song, the wispiest tune tugging at him. He thinks of the house across the city, the one where his mother has worked as a housekeeper for twenty years, the one he spent countless afternoons playing in as a boy with the son of the owner, the courtyard they'd transform into a battlefield, an ocean of sharks, lava. Idris was his first friend, his closest friend.

Whenever Zakaria thinks of the house, he sees it at dawn, the hour his mother would arrive for her daily duties after taking two buses from the south and walking from the final bus stop through the West Beirut streets, ignoring the vendors selling cigarettes and that sweet candy that made his teethe ache, to reach the gate, always latched, always easily unlocked.

He loved playing with Idris, of course, but he also loved those first couple of hours when the house was still quiet with the sleeping family, when his mother would fill buckets with warm soapy water to toss across the veranda, take down clothes she'd hung to dry in the garden the day before, whispering to him, "Silent as a mouse." When he was alone in the courtyard, it became his; he was the ruler of this inexplicable, beautiful place, a house with four bedrooms, bathtub faucets the shape of swans' necks.

Tonight he feels the house beckoning him with an invisible hand, feels

greedy for those rooms, the silk-soft sheets that he'd slept in many times. But his best friend isn't speaking to him, their recent fight still raw as a burn, the insults they'd hurled at each other still echoing, each saying and not-saying the truth.

"You know what you did," Idris had finally said. "I trusted you. I've always trusted you."

Zakaria had fallen silent at that. He felt guilty and yet also unrepentant — how to apologize for the only truly good thing that'd ever happened to him? — which Idris had sniffed out like a dog. He'd called him a traitor.

"Not even a little plate?" his mother asks now, interrupting his thoughts.

"I'm just not hungry," Zakaria repeats. To stave off further questions, he tries to appear absorbed in the soap opera that his sisters, sprawled on the large sofa, are watching. The three girls are younger than him, all unmarried, with large noses and dark curly hair. They are branches of the same tree, rooted and yet always apart from him.

He must fall asleep at some point. One second, he is watching the woman on the television, and then he is with the woman, telling her he can't marry her, he's marrying Mazna. He'll never hear her response; he is shaken awake, and this is the last dream he will ever have. The television is off now and his sisters are huddled on the sofa, their faces alarmed and pale. His mother is leaning over him, blocking his view. He meets her eyes and sees panic.

"What have you done?" she murmurs.

He tries to sit up, but she keeps her palms on his shoulders. "What?" He shakes her off. "Mama, what —" She finally steps back, revealing what is behind her.

Zakaria understands. It's been three years, and yet everything falls into place in an instant — the night he and his friends manned the checkpoint in Beirut, the Maronites they stopped, the man who later died. He and Idris and the others, they'd hurt that young man for no reason other than that people were hurting people. The civil war had left the country riven — Shi'ite, Sunni, Maronite, Druze. Now they've found Zakaria. Not as an act of war, but one of love, of revenge. The tallest man is unfamiliar yet recognizable, the same comically thick eyebrows as his dead brother, his hair spiked with too much gel.

"Come, brother," the tallest one says, his voice almost languid.

"I told these men they have the wrong house. That you don't know them." The man holds up his hand, and his mother falls silent. These men aren't dressed like soldiers, but they are strangers and they are taking her son.

"Auntie, trust me, we've knocked on every door in this camp." His voice is surprisingly polite, earnest, and for some reason this strikes Zakaria with the first real needle of fear. The tall man fixes him with a steady gaze. "Brother, best for you to come now."

"Come? It's after ten. Come where? My son has work tomorrow. Zakaria, what are they saying?"

The man doesn't speak, simply holds out his hand as though helping a child who's fallen at the playground. Zakaria moves like a puppet, tipping forward until his fingers touch the other man's, letting himself be pulled up, gently, firmly, until they are standing a hairsbreadth away from each other, so close that, if this were a movie, and they were different men in a different city, they might have kissed. But instead, the tall man speaks in a low voice meant only for Zakaria.

"Say goodbye to your mother. Say goodbye to your sisters."

Zakaria waits for more fear, but there is a surprising absence. He understands. They will kill him in front of his mother, his sisters, or they will kill him away from them. This is the choice he has. It is the only choice he will ever have again.

It's not that Zakaria is particularly brave. But a few years ago, when those Phalangist men pointed their guns at the bus and killed thirty Palestinians and the country *fell into the hell it deserves*, as his mother says, he understood that his life had changed. The war made him understand his place in this country. He is a good man, or believes he is — most of the time. He has done only three terrible things in his life.

The first was the summer he'd spent stealing things from other inhabitants of the camps — a wristwatch and a pair of eyeglasses and other items that had no value and were thus priceless to their owners, things they'd clung to since arriving from Palestine. He was thirteen at the time, and angry; he had just read Marx and was certain that his people, the clear proletarians of the city, were chaining themselves to their possessions, that everything the world had

robbed them of should be regarded with distaste, that they should not feel gratitude for what little they'd managed to keep. He'd kept his loot in a cookie tin under his bed. Then, toward the end of the summer, he took the box to the beach. One by one, he removed each item, gripped it in his fist, swam out into the cold and dirty water as far as his legs would allow, and let the object sink to its death. When the box was empty, he lay on the sand, panting, his muscles twitching with exhaustion.

The second terrible thing had happened this summer. This time he'd taken something — someone — from his best friend. A person he loved.

He's not all that familiar with love. If asked whether he loves his family, his three sisters and mother, he'd say yes. But there would be something rehearsed in that answer. He loves them because he ought to, and Zakaria is at heart an obedient man. (This is why he is following the men out of the house; this is why he walks deferentially to his death.) Love is what fills tables and waters gardens. It is Darwinian.

But this isn't how he loves Mazna. It isn't compliant; it's disruptive as a shark. He loves her hair. Her lips. He loves the way she says the word for tomato, *bindura* — “ba-na-du-ra” — and the way she is tired of Damascus. He loves the one time he made her cry, one hand clenched in the other as her eyes filled. He loves the way she sulked the day she forgot her sunglasses. He loves that she wants to be an actress, to fill screens with her pretty, heart-shaped face. He'd spent twenty-five years in the camps, where the most ambitious people you came across were the likes of Abu Zaref, who wanted to open his own barbershop near the American University, so meeting someone so resolute and unembarrassed by her hunger — *Did you know Vivien Leigh started off as an extra?* she'd asked him the second night they met — was narcotic. He wants to write scripts for her. He wants to learn how to use movie cameras.

His mother is still prattling on about the time, her voice steady enough but her fingers, curled into fists, trembling, a tell (some primordial part of her brain must have been expecting her son to be taken). “Come *where?*”

“Mama.” Zakaria's voice is convincing to his own ears. “These men are customers from the bakery. I promised our friend here that I'd help him with something.” He turns to the tall man. “Ready?”

“When you are, brother.”

"No," his mother whispers. Then, louder, "No! It is nearly eleven. You're not going anywhere with these men."

"Mama," he rasps. His throat is dry. His mind spins. "I'll be back soon. Yes?" He turns to the tall man, silently pleading. "Twenty, thirty minutes."

He nods. "An hour, tops." He gestures toward the door. Zakaria passes his mother, smells her familiar odor of fried onions and baby powder. He wants to kiss her temple, wants to tell his sisters to send a letter to Damascus. He passes his father's large framed photograph, the older man's eyes — frozen, forever, at forty-three — dark and wry as he watches his son walk out of the room.



The third terrible thing Zakaria had done happened soon after the war began in Lebanon. Idris had two close friends at his private school, Majed and Tarek, and the four boys had grown up together. Tarek's older brother Ali was a sergeant in the army, and even before the war, he'd known how to hold a rifle. Now, all over the country, men were getting involved. There was no longer one army; there were several, depending on which God you worshipped.

There was a checkpoint near the Green Line — the line that split the city into two, east and west, Christian and Muslim — and one night Ali told them they could join him. They were excited, pretending to be real officers. A car of university students — a young man and two women — pulled up.

Zakaria hates the memory of it. He can't explain how it happened, only that it felt like a game, the men egging one another on, forcing the man out of the car.

"I could make this Maronite trash do ballet for me if I wanted," Zakaria remembers Ali saying. The women had started to cry at some point; he'd felt nauseated. He knew they'd made a mistake.

It all happened quickly after that. The young man spat at them, shouted to be let go, and Ali rammed the butt of his rifle against his face. He did it over and over, the women screaming for him to stop. The boy staggered into the back of the car afterward; one of the women got behind the wheel and sobbed as she drove them off. He'd ended up dying from a brain injury. His family had money, and money bought information; it made finding the men

at the checkpoint a matter of asking the right questions. They'd come for Ali a month later.



They walk Zakaria to the edge of the camp, near the plot of meadow flowers the NGO workers had planted last year. They're all dead now, the stems brown and chalky. Zakaria thought the men would turn at the white gate, walk him to the city outside the camps. But no, they stop at the flowers, everyone looking to the taller man, waiting for him to speak. The man says nothing, simply pulls a knife from his pocket and looks at it closely.

"This was my brother's." His voice breaks.

Zakaria feels his knees buckle. The fear that surges in him is so full, so lushly animate, it's almost sensual, nudging up the hair on his arms. "This is slaughter," he croaks. "What you're doing. It's slaughter."

The man nods, almost kindly. "Yes, brother. Slaughter. Your men did it to mine. My men did it to others."

"I don't know your brother," Zakaria whispers. He remembers how the boy had cupped his broken nose, whimpering.

"This knife," the man continues, "it was on him when he died. But he never pulled it out. You bastards never gave him a chance. His face was mangled. Even my mother couldn't recognize him in the hospital." He began to move toward Zakaria. "But I have my God. I will leave your face alone."

"Please." Zakaria feels lightheaded. He remembers blood everywhere, Ali yelling at the women. "I had nothing to do with that, I swear."

"We'll find the other men as well," the man says caressingly, almost to himself. He looks around the camp as though one of them might appear. "After."

The men circle Zakaria, and he understands that they are blocking him from the view of any neighbors who might walk by. They are allowing him to die near his home; they won't make his mother search the hospitals for him. He is grateful; his mind is still understanding that gratitude when the tall man rushes toward him, and Zakaria feels something cold and gasping in his stomach. He registers moisture before pain. A week ago, he was drinking tea with Mazna and Idris in the garden; she'd gone off sugar and they were teasing her.

He looks down and sees the blood as the knife is pulled out, then plunged in, then pulled out, then plunged in for a third and final time. He sinks to the earth.

Minutes go by. The men leave; he can hear their footsteps. Someone cries out a name. His name. It slices the night, his mother's voice, the air suddenly alive with bird wings and footfalls, his name, his name, it is the last thing he knows of the world.

The main feature of exile is a double conscience, a double exposure of different times and spaces, a constant bifurcation.

— *Svetlana Boym*, *The Future of Nostalgia*

How alive the city is, how alive, how alive, how alive.

— *Alfred Kazin*, *Journals*



Part

I





Park Slope Wives

THE PHONE RINGS as Ava and Nate are just finishing having sex. The frequency has been whittled down to two, three times a month since Zina's birth. Ava has come first, as is their tradition, on her belly, the vibrator between her legs, her mind furiously churning out fantasies — the Nigerian instructor at spin class, their boyish mailman — as Nate pets her and makes encouraging sounds. *Get it. That's it, baby.* Then there's the customary flipping over, Nate's face buried in Ava's neck as he shudders and groans. Then silence for six, seven seconds, during which they think of different things, before Nate pulls out slowly and takes off the condom, which looks like a collapsed jellyfish, and Ava gets up to pee. Which is when her cell begins to ring.

“Mama,” Nate announces, reading the screen. His limbs are long, but recently he's started carrying a slight gut. Nate holds the phone out questioningly. “She's trying to FaceTime.”

Ava has a three-second internal debate — if she picks Mazna, she risks getting a urinary tract infection; if she picks the bathroom, she risks upsetting Mazna. She picks her mother.

"Toss it," Ava says. She catches the phone neatly. A photograph of her mother grins at her. Ava slips on her nightgown and clears her throat. She pats her bangs down. Holding the phone out in front of her, she presses the green button. "Mama?"

The video quality is sharp. Her mother is sitting in their kitchen in California. She's wearing her silky dressing robe and there's a bowl of tangerines in front of her. The phone is far enough away — tired of close-ups of their parents' noses and chins during FaceTime calls, her brother, Mimi, had ordered them a cell stand — that Ava can make out her father rustling around in the refrigerator. He's seemed a little quieter lately. He went to Beirut a couple of months ago, after her grandfather had died. It was a sore subject in the family; nobody else had been able to go to the funeral except Naj, though Ava privately thought her little sister's presence shouldn't count — she already lived there.

"Ava, we have news."

Ava sighs. Her mother was a thespian in her youth and her voice still commands. Speaking in English, Mazna dwindles a little, her musical accent whispery over the years. But speaking in Arabic, Mazna is a woman accustomed to being listened to.

"What is it?"

"Hi, Avey." Her father's head briefly emerges above the fridge door.

"Some *big* news," her mother clarifies. "Another one of your father's reckless, impulsive plans. I wish you children didn't have to be involved."

"Of course you'd say that, Mazna. If I said the sky was blue, you'd disagree."

"Idris, this isn't a sky-is-blue matter and you know it."

"*Mama*. Can someone explain what's going on?"

"I'm getting to it," Mazna says, wounded. "You children are all so impatient. Last week, I called Mimi, and, I swear to God, I barely got to hello before he rushed in with excuses to go, telling me that studio time was expensive."

Ava exhales. There is only one way through and it involves walking directly into the whirlwind that is her mother's way of talking. *Zwarib*, the Arabic word for it — alleyways and dead ends in speech, syntactical circles before getting to the point. Linguistic terrorism, Naj says.

"So he's going ahead with recording? Mimi?"

“Yes, yes, he said it’s worth trying to have a new album on hand for some festival in the fall.”

“Huh.” A realization dawns on Ava; her body starts to bristle. “I know that’s really costly. He’d told me he couldn’t afford it.”

“I don’t understand why he’s still recording,” her father chimes in, his voice muffled. “He should focus on the restaurant.”

“How many times have I told you not to say that in front of him? It’ll wreck his confidence!” Mazna smacks the counter.

“Is Mimi here now? Is Ava hiding him in her cupboard?”

Ava says, ignoring them, “Yup, there’s no way he could afford the studio time unless someone’s helping him.”

“How would I know about recording-studio costs?” her mother says, alert now. She switches to English, a strategy long recognized by her children as calculating. “What am I, a banker?”

“Like, really costly,” Ava continues. “I’m pretty sure his salary from Olive wouldn’t even begin to cover it.”

“Mazna, what have you done,” her father says. “The boy needs to stand on his own two feet. He’s thirty-five!”

Her mother glares at Ava. “What am I, an accountant?”

“Unless Harper chips in,” Ava says, almost enjoying herself now. “But we both know how much Mimi hates asking her for money. That poor girl is still living in that bungalow because Mimi can’t afford a higher mortgage.”

“Poor girl? What poor girl? Poor Mimi. She is a *millionaire*. She’s making your brother live like that, and in sin. Just marry, I told her last time.” Here they both pause, remembering different versions of a family friend’s wedding in California two years ago, an altercation between Mazna and a slightly buzzed Harper. *You’re almost thirty-five*, Mazna said as Ava had watched in horror. *Your body has two, maybe three eggs left*. Harper, Texas-bred, polite, smiled, shrugged, and said in her aw-shucks sort of way, *Well, Mrs. Nasr, I guess I’m gonna have to let them scramble, then*, leading the table in laughter, but Ava recognized Harper’s defeat in saying the one thing that would deflate Mazna like a balloon.

“Mama, if Mimi wanted it, he could *own* the damn restaurant by now,” Ava says.

“That’s what I keep telling him,” Idris says.

"You leave your brother alone, Ava." Mazna's voice sharpens. "It's not easy being an artist. He's doing the best he can."

"I buy all his music," she says defensively, stung.

"Well, you don't know what it's like, do you? To do gig after gig? You have to face failure every single day. It's like going to war."

Hyperbolic, but Ava knows she has hit a nerve; her mother mentions her failed acting career rarely and only when she's commenting on her children's lives. "Fine, Mama! But if it's not Harper paying for the studio and it's not the salary from Olive, that really leaves only one option."

"Ava, we called to tell you important news, not gossip-gossip."

In the background, her father is shaking his head, but he doesn't say anything. He's nervous, she realizes. This plan of his must be big.

"Okay, Mama, okay. What's the news?"

"Well . . ." Mazna says primly, then glances back toward Idris. "Why don't *you* share?" Her father says something low that Ava can't make out. "Of course you don't want to," Mazna snaps. "You know it's a terrible idea."

Idris, holding a plate with a pickle and a sandwich, joins Mazna at the counter. She turns her attention back to Ava. "You know the house in Beirut?" she asks.

"Yeah?"

"We're selling it," Mazna says flatly.

"Wait . . . what?" Ava's head swims. This happens so often in conversations with her mother. She is still absorbing the earlier point — her mother had given Mimi money! Again! Ava hadn't even gotten an allowance when she was a kid! — so her brain lags like a record skipping. The image of the Beirut house — large, given to swampy heat in the summers, mosaic tiles in the garden, the walls of the bedroom she shared with Naj speckled with black mosquito blood — rises in her mind. There had been a period of her life, after the civil war ended and before she moved east for college, when they went to the house almost every summer, spending June to August in Beirut, driving into Damascus to see her mother's family for a week. She is relieved by the interruption of her father's voice.

"Well, when you say it like that! Where's the context?"

"What context? That's the news."

"I don't understand. What do you mean, selling the house?" There is a pause. Her father eats a pickle. "Baba?"

Her father finally looks up. "Baba, the house is sitting empty."

"Naj lives in Beirut," Ava says nonsensically. "And Aunt Sara! Does she know about this?"

"Well." Idris shifts in his chair. "Legally, the deed goes to the son's family."

Ava and her mother groan. "Oh-ho, your father," Mazna says, kissing her teeth. "The modern feminist."

"I didn't write the law," he counters.

"Sara's going to kill you," Ava warns him.

"Forget Sara," Mazna says. "I told your father — this isn't just your house, Idris! It's Ava's and Mimi's and Naj's. I mean, Naj has made Beirut her home. Where do you expect her to live once she's done gallivanting around like a bachelor? It's not proper —"

"Wait a second," Ava interrupts, sensing a *zwarib* about her sister's feckless lifestyle. Her head is spinning. "Don't *you* hate Beirut? You're the one that's always saying there's no need to visit." Her mother's reluctance to sell is confusing; for years one of her favorite lines has been *That country can go underwater for all I care*. It wasn't just an expression; she meant literally underwater.

"It *is* needless," her mother says defensively. "But that doesn't mean we should sell the last family house that belongs to us. I don't make huge decisions on my own. I don't just clap my hands, click my heels, house is gone!"

Because it's not your house, Ava retorts silently. Of course her mother would want to do something for years and back off as soon as Idris wanted to do it as well. Maybe her father was right.

"That house has become a mausoleum," Idris says, pronouncing the word "moo-za-leem." "Just poor Merry cleaning those rooms over and over again. You didn't see it the way I did this last trip. Neither of you." There's indictment in his tone. "The life has been taken out of it."

"Baba," Ava says, trying to gentle her voice. Idris is impulsive and sentimental by turns, a dangerous combination. "Maybe you just need to take some time. After Jiddo —"

"God rest his soul," Mazna says with rare solemnity. The other two repeat the words.

"Yes, rest his soul. After Jiddo, you must be shaken up. But there's no rush. I'm sure Naj could even find tenants for it."

"This is why I said to call Ava." Mazna beams at her. Despite herself, Ava straightens. "She's logical. She knows how to think."

"I think," Idris says thoughtfully, like he's picking a letter on a game show, "I'm still going to sell the house."

"God grant me fortitude," her mother mutters. Idris takes a bite of his sandwich, and they all fall into silence. "This is a terrible idea," she announces to nobody in particular.

"Do you want some?" Idris holds the sandwich out.

"Do you need all that mayonnaise? You're supposed to be watching your cholesterol."

"Can a man," her father says, "not get fat in peace? Even in his own house?"

"How do your patients take you seriously?" Her mother sounds spiteful. "You always have doughnut jelly on your collar."

Ava ducks her head to smile. Her father is barely taller than her and in recent years has sprouted an impressive spare tire.

"Avey!" Idris says suddenly. "I didn't tell you my other idea for this summer."

"You're selling the California house," she jokes, but her mother is too busy looking glumly into space to hear.

"I want to throw a memorial."

Ava frowns. "For Jiddo?" she asks carefully. It's been months.

"Yes, a ceremony to honor him. We can show old videos and give speeches, and the neighbors can all come by."

"The neighbors will think you're crazy," Mazna tells him. "There was already an *azzza*. Nobody does memorials over there."

"We'll be trendsetters," he says, "and anyway, none of you were there the first time around." Finally — a direct accusation. "Only Naj."

"Naj lives there," Ava reminds him, though she still feels guilty.

"Be that as it may. We couldn't all make it," her father says archly.

"We had gallbladder surgery and were on bedrest," Mazna counters.

"We were cleared to travel."

"We didn't feel well enough!"

"Okay!" Ava interrupts. She peeks back in the bedroom. Nate has gotten

dressed. The sight of him is confusing. It feels like he's the one hundreds of miles away; that's how consuming her parents can be. "Why don't I call you both tonight?"

"Wait, wait." Her mother stands. "Let's leave your father to his sandwich. I need some fresh air."

Ava sighs. This is code for more gossip. She obediently waves back at her father. "We'll talk more later, Baba."

"Nothing left to talk about," he says cheerily.

Mazna takes the phone and Ava sees a jumble of images — her mother's knee, the yellow couch. At the screen door, her mother slows — it always gets stuck — then she's outside. She sets the phone down, and all Ava can see is the blue, endless sky.

"Mama?"

"One second." Her mother reappears holding the phone too close to her, so only half her face is visible. "Can you believe your father? He's going to give me a stroke. I tried talking to him last night."

"What did he say?"

Mazna snorts. She gives a devastating pause. "He said one of his stupid hearts told him to sell."

"Mama, no." Ava chews the inside of her cheek to keep from joining in her mother's laughter, which feels like a betrayal of her father.

"Mama, yes. He said during his last surgery, he was holding one, and after he spoke to it, the thing apparently spoke back. Told him he had to sell his father's house! What a liar your father is."

Ava coughs to cover her laughter. "But Mama, you know that's part of his . . . his ritual. It's part of what makes him so good." At her father's hospital in Blythe, California, the nurses call him *the heart whisperer*. He is the only surgeon who bows his head and speaks to the hearts that have been pulled from splintered chests. Once, when Ava was a child, she'd asked him what he said. *I ask them to be good to their new humans*, he'd responded, a perfectly Idrisian answer.

"I don't know, Ava," Mazna says. "As far as I'm concerned, you speak to hearts, that makes you an interesting surgeon. The hearts speak back, that makes you a little loosey-goosey upstairs." Her mother ducks her head offscreen; a feather of smoke floats by.

"You're smoking!"

"Oh, for God's—"

"Mama! We talked about this. Does Baba know? I'm telling Baba." This is the family's default mode: tattling.

Her mother rapidly dives through the stages of negotiation, diplomacy, guilt, sweetness, and, finally, insult. "Ava, it's one cigarette. It's been a stressful week. Your father eats Kit Kats for breakfast — does anyone say anything to him? He's getting to be the size of a buffalo. Listen, I know you're a darling to care, I do. But do you think you're in a position to say anything? Don't you remember all those drugs you did at Harvard?"

Ava shuts her eyes briefly. "It was pot, Mama. I smoked pot. Like four times." Nate appears in the doorway. He has his *THE NATIONAL* shirt on. He mimes swinging a bat. Rayan's Little League practice. "Shit. Mama, I really do have to go. Thanks for the call. I'm sorry about Baba."

Her mother grunts. "We need to get there around June fourth. So find tickets for that weekend and let us know what flights you're on. The lawyer said it'll take a while to sort out the paperwork. They lost the original deed during the war."

"Wait, what? Why would we need tickets? What are you talking about?"

"Well." Another long exhale. "That's why we called, isn't it. Your names, all you children, are on the deed of the house. Your father can't sell without you there."

"Without us," Ava echoes faintly. Nate waves at her. *What?* he mouths.

"Yes, in Beirut. You all need to come to Beirut. I suppose we can do this memorial thing too, so Idris can stop complaining about the funeral. I'd had *surgery*, for God's sake. Anyway. The trip shouldn't take more than four, five weeks. Bring the children. Maybe we can make a holiday out of your father's godforsaken mission."



Ava hates the playdates of Park Slope — the organic unsalted almonds and white wine laid out for the mothers, the kindly barbs of *Oh, but of course you have to run to work*, to which Ava just smiles, never saying just how much she

actually does *have to* work, that their modest one-floor apartment in a prewar brownstone, while partly paid for with Nate's family money, Upper East Side money, still has a crippling mortgage, and the children's school eats up nearly half her paycheck.

Several days have passed since her mother's phone call, and Ava's mood has lifted with each one. But even so, she is distracted with thoughts of her mother. She knows she needs to tell Nate. The problem is that to speak with Nate would be to splinter the fragile peace that has descended on their apartment in the past few weeks, after the marital logjam of nearly a decade together — their tiny discontents, Ava's long search for a professor position, disagreements about daycares and backsplash tiles and bank statements — had broken, Ava finally giving in to the oldest wifely impulse in the world: she snooped. And she found freckled cleavage. In an e-mail thread in Nate's Gmail account, a woman named Emily signed seemingly innocuous e-mails — *Loved the cake today. Meeting made me want to fall asleep* — with a series of *x*'s and *o*'s. In one e-mail, she'd included a selfie — copper hair, pale eyes, freckles all over. The cleavage underneath a black blazer, the camera obviously angled to capture as much of it as possible, was what had sent Ava over the edge.

She hadn't seen the rage coming. If anyone had asked her a year ago how she'd respond to finding slightly incriminating e-mails in Nate's mailbox, her best guess would've been with weepiness, self-hatred. Late-night recriminations. *What about our life? What have I done wrong?* Instead, she gave his laptop to the first homeless person she found in Prospect Park, a disgruntled Black man eating pumpkin seeds, who'd whistled and said, *Lady, this some sort of setup?* but eventually took it.

Nate was stunned.

"You realize, don't you," he'd said, panting, "that now some fucking *bum* has our family albums? Projects I worked on for years? Goddamn it, Ava, he has nude photos of *you*."

"I don't care," she said, and she didn't. She was high on not caring, on the sheer irresponsibility of what she'd done; she was intoxicated with the way Nate looked at her for weeks after, a combination of fear and marvel; for the first time in her life she'd been neither responsible nor predictable, as crazy as a plot twist in a movie. She called him an asshole and a liar; she ended fights by

kissing him unexpectedly, then bursting into tears. Entire days went by when she spoke to him only through Rayan (*Honey, can you ask your father . . .*), even when they were in the same room.

She was, for three weeks, her mother.

Of course, that level of caprice and rage is exhausting, and eventually Ava burned out. One evening when they were having the same argument for the fiftieth time, Nate telling her she had to stop this, that he'd made a mistake, that he was sorry and he loved her, she decided, abruptly, to forgive him.

It was a relief. She'd used up all her anger and self-pity; she was like a bonfire out of wood. She sank back into his arms wordlessly.



The woman was an administrator at Sprout, the lifestyle-advertising firm Nate was a senior consultant at — she was *nothing*, he said, *a nobody*, just an office flirtation.

“Oh, I’m *so sure* he didn’t fuck her. What an exquisite load of bullshit,” her sister had said over the phone, her voice clipped and sarcastic. Ava regretted for the millionth time having told her. In a dark moment after the e-mail, she’d tried to call a friend, but, getting her voicemail, Ava had grown desperate. She wanted to call Mimi; she’d wanted to call Mimi ever since she’d found those e-mails. But she couldn’t. Ava had fallen even more in love with Nate after they’d first visited California and Nate and Mimi had spent hours playing old Xbox games, their laughter tinkling throughout her childhood home. She still has a photo of them from that trip — Nate’s arm loosely around Mimi’s shoulder, the two men’s smiles easy and open — tacked up at her desk at work. She knows that if Mimi ever found out about freckled cleavage, that smile would disappear for good.

And so, sobbing on her bedroom floor, Ava called Naj, even though it was four in the morning in Beirut. But she’d immediately wished she hadn’t. Naj had the memory of an elephant. She didn’t forget and she didn’t let you forget either.



Their marriage went limp with relief after those weeks passed. Nate took her to Atlantic City for their anniversary in March, an ironic honeymoon suite with champagne and rose petals. The months clicked by and now it's May and the truth is Ava likes all this; she likes their apartment, likes the Guatemalan lady — Cindy — who comes on Tuesday mornings, the thrilling scent of lemon polish and Windex that greets her after work on those days. As much as she complains about Brooklyn, it's partly because she can't believe it belongs to her, the same way she can't believe that Rayan and Zina belong to her; it's like she accidentally picked up the wrong life at the supermarket.

But her mother's call threatens to upend things. The summer has already been planned — a trip to the Finches' estate in Cape Cod, the children already enrolled in day camps — but also Nate has never quite relaxed into her parents. He is always too stiff around her father and too informal around her mother. Nate hoards his vacation days like Halloween candy, looks forward to Cape Cod all year. And she'd been looking forward to it as well after all those fights, a stretch of relaxing, endless days, the whole family lazy and tan.

It might be wrong, but more than wanting to be vindicated, Ava just wants to go back to how things were.

