

Haboula

I had made up my mind about leaving years ago. I didn't feel a connection around me anymore. I didn't feel like I was home. I didn't feel like I belonged.

I sat outside a rundown tea shop in a makeshift bazaar off an alleyway in East Beirut that we had agreed to meet up at, just outside the city limits where there were sure to be fewer familiar faces, the haze of the hot weather was visible in the air as July rolled in from the Mediterranean, my hastily packed suitcase was tucked beneath the table. I made sure to drape my skirt around part of it in a feeble attempt to conceal my intentions.

Across the street sat a group of old men lazily smoking from their water pipes and playing a round of backgammon.

The sound of children laughing as they zoomed passed sounded in the air. They were kicking a soccer ball back and forth and getting in the way of veiled women as they walked down the street towards a nearby farmer's market.

The graffiti covered walls amidst the bullet holes stood as a lingering reminder of a war recently ended. I kept my eyes down and tried to make myself seem as small as possible, hoping the sound of my heart thumping wasn't audible to the amblers around me.

I was about to take a match to the bridges I had spent my entire life building. They would burn down to ash and I would be there standing at the other side watching all my family members on the distant shore. I wonder if I would be able to reach them again, after the dust had settled, if they would just turn their backs on me severing their ties.

I wanted to be like those girls I saw in the theater. I wanted to have a life filled with adventure and drama. I wanted to be like the actress, Nouhad Alamuddin, in the plays I would see with my grandmother, how she would be so in love with whoever it was that time: Ahmed, Fouad, Mahmoud, or Marwan. I wanted someone to look at me like they would look at her.

I also wanted to act. I wanted to be like Nouhad and Fairouz; to be center stage and feel the lights hitting my face, the thunderous applause in my ears, and to have attention on me for a change.

When I was alone in my bedroom, I would act out entire scenes I made up in my head, my stuffed animals serving as my audience. There were times when I would be too loud, and my father would come knocking on my door.

“Reem? *Ma meen am tihkeh?*”¹ he would ask and then, “*Shou? Masrah?*”² when I explained to him what I was doing. My parents always thought my dream to be a theater actress was a ridiculous one. “*Haboula*”³, my mother would say each time. They believed a woman being on a stage in front of so many people was inappropriate and that I should, instead, settle down to marriage, and give them grandkids.

At night I would stare out at the people in the streets from the balcony off my bedroom imagining how free they were, and how much like a bird in a cage I felt. My strict parents barely let me leave the house without their permission.

It didn’t matter to my parents that I was twenty-six. They would stick to the old ways. I was to be married off to a man of their choosing, from a good Lebanese family, one who would bring honor to my house first, even before love. That would come after.

Change happens on a day you least expect it. I knew there was something I liked about him the moment he walked into my father’s store.

I was sitting on a stool behind the counter one morning last September when he entered. He was an American man whose blonde hair was a striking contrast to the dark features of everyone else’s. The sun’s ray caught in his highlights. He was tall, dressed in nice pants and a vest. A messenger bag was slung over his shoulder. His blue eyes behind his glasses looked frantic.

“Um, excuse me? Uhh *3an ezni*”⁴ he said with his messy American accent.

I looked up from the Khalil Gibran biography I had been pretending to be reading. “*Badak Moose3ade?*” I said before seeing his lost expression. I laughed and offered, “Do you need help?”

“Why, yes, I do,” he replied and rubbed the back of his head looking slightly embarrassed. “I’m supposed to be starting my job at Achrafieh University today and I’m a bit lost.”

¹ “Reem? Who are you talking too?”

² ‘What? A play?’

³ Lebanese Arabic slang for “Idiot”

⁴ Excuse me in Arabic.

“Yeah the roads are confusing here,” I fumbled in accented English as I stood up and walked around the counter towards him. I was dressed in a long flowery skirt and a white long-sleeved shirt. I remember thanking God I hadn’t just rolled into the store in my sweatpants. He watched me as I pushed my long dark hair over my shoulder and held my finger up to point out the window.

“It’s up the road and to the right. Continue down that avenue and you’ll start to see students.”

“Ah there we go then. *Sorkran*”, he said, looking down at me and smiling.

I couldn’t help but smile back, “It’s *Shoukran*. And you’re welcome.”

He started out the door before hesitating and turning back towards me.

“That book”, he indicated towards the counter, “I have a copy of a much better one about his life. I’ll bring it for you tomorrow.” And with the ringing of the bell above the door, he left.

It would be like this almost every day from then on. He would stop by in the morning on his way to work and talk to me for a little while. I learned his name was Samuel Allsbrook and he was twenty-nine years old. He told me he was a graduate student with his degree in history coming to teach abroad as an adjunct. He was offered the opportunity to teach here for two semesters and had accepted. I also learned he liked reading Ray Bradbury and E.E Cummings and watching horror movies. While he wasn’t doing that, he played the guitar and went to baseball games with his brother and sister back home.

He was so easy to talk to. I told him my name was Reem Faraj and that I was an only child. I told him that I liked acting and going to plays with my grandmother and that I was bad at math and I loved to read. I told him I had never heard of E.E Cummings before.

I was completely taken by him. He was so foreign to me and yet we seemed to get along well together. I was hungry for more information about the life he had back in the United States. What were the people like? Were grocery stores really that big? Anyone can marry anybody, even of a different religion? It seemed like it existed on a different planet.

He was never bothered by my questioning. He had a whole slew of his own questions. Is it polite for me to shake a woman’s hand or not? Have you ever been to the Roman ruins in Beirut and what were they like? Why are there always watermelons floating in the fountains around the city? What’s *Knafeh*⁵? I

⁵ Sweet cheese dessert popular in the Levant.

answered them all as best as I could. I didn't understand what he saw in this place. Where he saw beauty and history and culture, I saw poverty and intolerance.

I quickly grew to like the way he looked at me when I was talking. I had his full attention. Nobody ever gave me that.

I told him one morning about how I dreamt of being a theater actress. I braced myself waiting for him to laugh it off but instead he nodded. Some of his friends worked at a theater in the city he was from. He offered to let me borrow some books about the subject from the university library. I remember grinning at him when he brought them in for me later that afternoon.

A week later, I gave him my number and we began to talk to each other in secret. I would quietly step outside onto the balcony off my bedroom to talk to him when I was sure my parents were asleep. Our conversations would carry on into the early hours when he would exclaim at the time and wished me good night. Telling me he'd see me again soon.

Eventually I dragged my reluctant best friend, Layal, into my improper and clandestine romance by having her cover for me so I could meet up with him during the day. She would shake her head as I did my makeup in her bathroom mirror.

There was one evening where she finally voiced her disapproval. I was painstakingly redrawing my eyeliner for the third time when she opened the bathroom door.

"You know he probably doesn't put this much effort into his appearance for you," she said, crossing her arms.

"And how would you know that?" I turned to face her. My makeup was still uneven.

"Because he's American. They don't care about anyone other than themselves," Layal said flatly.

I rolled my eyes and turned back towards my work. "You don't even know him and besides I'm not an idiot. I know what I'm doing."

She harrumphed. "You sure?"

"Yes!" My irritation was rising. "I'm sure."

Going out on our dates became something I could hardly wait for. Samuel would take me to the museums around the city or to small cafes. History was always something that interested me, so I grew to love listening to him talk even if it was about Beirut. Which I found dull.

One day, while we browsed the aisles of the university's library, he asked me what I wanted to do with my life, and I didn't know how to respond. We were by ourselves and the midafternoon sun colored the sky a dark orange. The sun beams spilling in streaks on the old carpet.

"I guess my parents would marry me off and I'll just be a stay at home mother," I replied flatly as I ran my hands down the book spines. "That's not what I asked," he countered and stopped walking. His face looked serious.

"I don't," I started to say, but he cut me off. "Reem, I asked what *you* wanted to do with *your* life. Not what your parents want you to do." I didn't meet his eyes even though I could feel them on me. "I don't know," I said, my voice small.

He closed the gap between us. "Reem," he said softly, and I felt a shock go down my spine. "What do you want to do," he asked again, lowering his face close to mine.

I looked up at him, but before I could say anything, his lips were on mine. I reached up to wrap my arms around him. I wanted to hold onto the moment for fear I would wake up and be back in my bedroom with my mother calling to me from behind my locked door, "Haboula! Haboula!"

That very night I sat down with my parents for dinner in our tiny kitchen and was about to spill everything to them. The truth burned inside of my veins and I wanted to finally get it out. I wanted to tell them I loved an American man and I wanted to be with him. I wanted to tell them I couldn't keep living in my bedroom and working at the corner store for the rest of my life until they arranged for me to be wed.

They cut me off before I could begin, my mother looking excited about something. "We found someone we'd like you to meet!" She said positively beaming at me, "His name is Nabil from *Beit*⁶ Khasabeh." "He's a good man, a little older than we'd like since he's thirty-three, but from a good family", my father chimed in. He looked pleased, the wrinkles on his dark face folding as he smiled.

"Mom, I don't want to get married to some thirty-year-old!" I cried out and leaped to my feet.

⁶ "House." You refer to someone's last name as house in Arabic.

“What do you mean?” my mom looked faint, “You have to get married!”

“But I,” I started.

“*Khalas!*”⁷, my father said loudly, “You have to get married. He’s a good man, at least give him a chance. Who do you think will take care of you when we’re gone?”

I knew the air of finality my father usually put on situations like this. There was no argument to be had. This was something I was born to do. Who was I to break out of tradition?

That night, after my parents had gone to bed, I called Samuel up in near hysterics and told him what had happened. “They’re going to push me to get married to some other man!” I whispered trying to keep my voice down.

He was quiet for a few moments before he spoke again. “Come with me when I go back to America.”

I opened my mouth to say something but closed it again, stunned.

“Reem, I love you. Come back with me. I can give you the life you’ve always wanted,” he pleaded with me. I could hear his breathing through the phone, he sounded so worried.

“Sam, I love you too. But I can’t leave my family just so I could date you in another country.”

“Marry me then. Be my wife. Reem, I can’t just leave without you!” he exclaimed into the phone. I recall sitting there in silence staring off into the distance as my mind started racing a million miles a second.

“Reem?” Sam asked after the silence had gone on for too long.

“Yes,” I said finally, and it was settled.

Over the course of the next several weeks we would plan our escape. We got married in secret in a small church a few towns over. I went to the embassy to get my paperwork done. I recall being handed back my new passport that said “Reem Allsbrook” on it and felt my pulse quicken. For the first time in my life, I was hopeful about the future.

But as soon as I went home and saw my parents, who were getting on in age, my heart stopped soaring and came crashing down to earth. I was going to devastate them. Would they still talk to me

⁷ Enough!

after the dust had settled? I wish I had that kind of relationship with my mother. I wish I could tell her how I felt without that mocking remark of hers. “Haboula! Haboula!”

The day before I was to leave, I arrived at my best friend Layal’s house to tell her what I was about to do. She was a short plump woman with large curly black hair that she often wore piled in a messy bun. Today she had a red ribbon tied around her head and the long strands lay draped over her left shoulder. It matched her red sun dress. She was bouncing a baby boy on her hip while another boy cried out to his mom that his sister took something from him. Layal’s house was always so loud.

“*Ya ahla w sahla*⁸!” Layal said coming in to kiss my cheek. “*Tfadaleh*⁹!” she ushered me into her living room. “Walid is working at the construction site all day today so guess who has the tv all to herself!” I laughed as I sat down. She set her son down inside a bassinet and stepped into the kitchen. She reappeared a moment later with a tray of coffee and sliced fruit that she placed on the small table in front of me.

“Layal”, I started to say.

Something about my face must have told her. “You’re going to go with him aren’t you,” she sighed.

“Layal, I love him”, I said my voice breaking

“Reem, listen to yourself! You’ve only known him for eight months! You only like him because you’re fantasizing about having freedom from your parents!” she said looking at me with such a worried expression I was afraid she would stand up and phone my parents right then and there.

“That’s not true,” I countered, “Me loving him has nothing to do with how I feel about my parents. I want to be with him.”

“Reem,” she reached across the table to grab my head, “I beg you please don’t do this. I promise you your parents will understand if you just talk to them.”

“They won’t understand! They already told me how they want me to get married to Nabil Khasabeh! They won’t listen to me, Layal, they don’t even like the idea of me getting into acting. I can’t even leave the house without their permission! You know that!” I felt like I was out of breath. This was

⁸ Welcome!

⁹ Come in!

my best friend that I had known since I was a child and I was telling her how I wanted to leave her behind.

“Yes, they will!” Layal said, raising her voice so loud that her son started to whimper. “You’re being ridiculous!”

“You don’t know them like I do!” I exploded. An explosion that tore the lovely field of our many years of friendship. It ripped up the earth between us, leaving deep trenches in its wake. She couldn’t understand what it was like. She never wanted to do anything other than get married. She was perfectly content marrying Walid when their families both decided it was for the best. She couldn’t understand what it was like loving someone who was not like one of us. A foreigner.

“What about your parents? Your grandmother? Your cousins?” Layal’s anger made her voice quiver, “You would abandon them?! You would shame your parents in front of everyone! And for some American too! Haboula!”

“Layal...”, I said and began to cry, “I love him. I can’t be without him. I can’t marry Nabil. I don’t want this life.”

“Fine,” Layal said, her lips settled into a thin line. I saw that warm familiar light she always had leave her eyes like an invisible wall closing me off.

“But when, and not if Reem, when you realize the mistake you made, I won’t be here to come back too. I can’t be friends with you if you’re so quickly willing to leave us all behind for some *3ajnabi*¹⁰.”

I looked at my best friend, her dark features the same color as mine. She was like the sister I never had. “Layal, *enti min dem demi*¹¹, how could you say this to me?”

“No, Reem, how could you do this to me?” She kept her voice even. Her two other children were standing in the doorway watching us.

We both stood there in silence before I stood up, walked out of the door, and left. I didn’t think I’d ever see her again.

That night I packed my bags and said good night to my parents for the last time. I remember standing there in the hallway, long after they closed the door to their bedroom, just staring after them. I

¹⁰ “Foreigner” sometimes used derogatorily.

¹¹ “You are the blood of my blood” phrase you say to a close friend

knew it would be a lost cause to try and tell them about Samuel. I silently said a prayer that they would, at the very least, be okay.

The very next morning, I woke up before the sun began to rise and made my way over to the teashop we agreed would be the rendezvous point. Even though it was barely six am, the heat was already insufferable. I wondered if America would be this hot too. He told me he lived in a place called "Connecticut" in a part of the country called, "New England." I hoped they still had palm trees.

"Reem?" I heard a voice call out and there he was. He was dressed more casually than normal in cargo shorts and a t-shirt with some words on it that were too faded to make out. He had with him his two large suitcases. He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose as he regarded me.

I had chosen to wear a soft pink dress that went all the way down to my ankles. It had medium length sleeves and was very flowy. I had seen the actress Fairouz wear a similar one in a play I saw with my grandmother a few years back. It seemed fitting like I was in a play and this was the final act.

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head and standing up, "I was lost in my own thoughts for a moment."

"Are you still sure you want to do this?" He asked, his voice sounded a bit uneasy.

I took his hand in mine and could feel him relax a bit, "Yes I am," I smiled up at him. I tried to keep the nervousness out of my face but seeing the concern in his eyes I could tell I was failing. Of course, I was nervous, this was the scariest thing I had ever done in my life. I was defying my family and my culture, but I was so sure that this was right. I squeezed his hand.

"Shall we then?" He smiled at me and led me out of the teashop into the street outside where a taxi stood waiting.

My heart began to thump again in my chest. I was really doing this. I was really leaving. Freedom was coming, and I could almost taste it. We walked over to the taxi and placed our suitcases into the trunk. The driver looked at us through the rearview mirror with a bored expression. He had Wael Kfoury playing on his radio.

"Ready?" Samuel said to me as we settled in. "Ready" I replied. The taxi pulled off into the traffic and I could hear my mother's voice echoing in my mind. "Haboula! Haboula!"

