

al Oum

Mother

A creative nonfiction essay by Rafqa Touma

<i>Sitti Salma</i>	My Great Grandmother
<i>Tayta Laura</i>	My Grandmother Sitti Salma's daughter-in-law
<i>Joseph</i>	My Great Grandfather Sitti Salma's husband
<i>Jodou George</i>	My Grandfather Sitti Salma's son
<i>Niha</i>	Family village

NOTE: names are pseudonyms for anonymity

Memory is a fickle thing. The sequence of events drawn from the past by a person in the present can often be unclear. Curious minds, however, work to fill in the gaps. People question and infer and conclude, imagination shading with memory to create a linear narrative true within the mind but only partly in reality. Years later, when one returns to those memories, determining what is real from fabrication can prove difficult.

I can describe to you the looming grace of a cedar tree. The feeling in the pit of your stomach, of awe and insignificance, that surges as you gaze up from beneath branches at sprayed leaves. But I've never seen one in real life.

In my mind sits an image of my Sitti Salma, who – although I can describe as a daughter in Lebanon, a wife and a mother, an immigrant, a widow, an Australian – I've never really known. From photographs in albums and dialogue between aunties, I have grasped a character and a setting, a person and a life that I can see but I am unable to fit together. It is here that the fabric of all I know of my Sitti, the stories of familial myth I have listened to, mingle with the autonomous imagination, and I begin to fill in the gaps.



Just ahead, the girl could see her father leading a herd of goats through mountains and streams. Together, they ran, tens of hooves pounding into soil still damp from last night's rain, a flurry of grey coats blurring into one. Her feet pounded, too, ground loosening beneath her step as she tried to catch up with all that was onward.

I try not to lose sight of her bobbing head as she runs, running after her to see if I can keep up with her dreams, running after her to see if she can.

Salma thought of her aunt, who would spend hours before dawn preparing food for her family to eat. She would dip calloused hands into warm water and dampen the edges of a vine leaf with the pads of her fingers. Salma would watch as her aunt rolled rice filling with thumb and forefinger into the leaf until it formed a long piece of *warra-aneb*. It was Salma's job to take each *warra-aneb* and pile them from the bottom of a very large pot. She could feel the strain of her arms under the pot, even when it wasn't there.

“*Tihbani*,” Salma said out loud. *Strained*.

“*Eh, tihbani*,” she could imagine her aunt responding, nodding as another *warra-aneb* is wet, stuffed and folded. All her life, Salma had seen this sentiment lived, in her cousins, her Tayta, her mother who died straining. *Tihbani*. The word made her sick.

A loose breeze stirred her village's trees, brushing leaves over dried dirt walkways and carrying with it the sweet aroma of hay. The valley was empty of people and Salma's mind had begun to filter through impertinent thoughts. Of her fatigue at the journey so far, her growing annoyance at the lack of return for her efforts. She could hear her father's words, urging her through the valleys, a breath of warning at her back. *We spoke to Joseph. We made him a promise.*

Salma knew what her father had promised to Joseph, the cousin double her in age and inclination towards indifference. The cedars seemed to be pointing her home.

Salma did not know “running.” She knew *mou-tha-bara*: pushing, working, persevering. So as she bound through village after village, only steps behind her father, she learnt. She'd never been so sure she was running in her life than in these moments. And after realising that running reaped no returns, she became sure she would never run again.



I sit cross-legged on a worn green armchair, tilted towards the hum of the electric heater.

“Don’t get too close, *Rafa*, you’ll get sick once you are away from the heat again.”

Tayta pushes the heater away from my chair, reaching over to pull the crumpled blanket in my lap over my feet. I kick the blanket back off. The coolness of her house aches, the flow of air constant and cold this close to the hallway.

My gaze drifts. Shelving spans across the wall, holding Jodou George’s encyclopedia set and Tayta Laura’s photo frames. Next to school photos of my aunties and a little gold clock is a portrait of an old woman with frizzy white hair and loose skin hanging limply from her neck. From behind thick glasses, eyes challenge the camera.

“Tayta, who’s that?”

“You don’t remember Sitti Salma?” Mum looks up from her book, and Tayta smiles.

Sitti Salma was the eldest of six sisters and five brothers. She grew up in Niha, a small mountain-side village in the north of Lebanon. She didn’t go to school. Instead, she learnt from a young age to both take care of a family and maintain the land.

Mum, Tayta, my aunties and great aunties continue to tell me stories of my Sitti. These stories sometimes end on a cliffhanger. Whether that’s due to a disagreement over the sequence of events, or simply a lapse in memory, I’m unsure.

I am thirteen, at the dining table with Tayta, Mum and my aunties. I have picked up another *sambousek*, placing it beside the *fatoush* on my plate. I listen to my aunties talk as Tayta pours black coffee from a cloudy silver pot into small cups. The smell is bitter.

“How is it possible to make a pot of coffee so strong?” I wrinkle my nose in dramatic display of distaste towards the drink in question.

“Your Sitti taught me,” Tayta responds, not lifting her eyes, the pot pouring from high in the air now.

“She must’ve liked it strong, then, because my nose hairs are starting to shrivel up.”

Mum rolls her eyes and laughs. “You’re not wrong, Sitti liked everything strong. *She* was strong. One time, she spat at a Bishop”

I cough on my *sambousek*.

“Yes, she was twelve,” Mum says, the small coffee cup in her hands. “He tried to make the family pay more for the Baptism than they had to.”

They go on to talk of my Sitti, but the conversation veers to her marriage. How she held it off for as long as she could, finding excuses to follow her father through Lebanon as he sold his goats, in search for a boy she could marry in place of her cousin Joseph. Her younger brother James loved her so much, they tell me, that he would follow her every morning. Worried about his sister venturing alone, I assume. Salma would avoid him at all costs. She needed to find a potential suitor, and she was running out of time. My aunties’ smiles strain. They are searching for humour in the story, but the memory is tainted.

“Joseph?” I ask. “Isn’t that her cousin?”

“Distant cousin –”

I remember someone mentioning he had been a big gambler. “And wasn’t he really mean?”

“He was –” Mum paused. “She put it off for very long –”

“But she married him?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

All the stories they have told me about Salma’s life in Lebanon play over in my head, a cacophony of voices giving way to only parts of sentences, snippets of memories. One cuts through, articulated clearly:

She has committed only one crime and that was an involuntary one; she was born a woman, and, for that, she is ceaselessly punished.¹



The kitchen, through the morning dew on its window, was suffused with a winnowing blue light. Through its glare, I watch as she leant against her dining table, back turned to the dark, her focus on shaping the *maamoul* in her hands. Hearing through the walls her mother-in-law stir, she got up from her chair. The day had begun.

That morning, Salma held the old woman up by her arms. She rinsed, dried and dressed her. She led her back inside the living room, sat her in an armchair. She returned to the pot on the stove.

“Salma! *Hadi!*” *Quiet!*

Blind, the old woman’s fingers fumbled along her rosary beads in search of her place. The Bishop had visited Niha a few years prior. He gifted each family a set of beads from the tomb of

¹ A Carter, *The Sadeian Woman & The Ideology of Pornography*, 2nd ed., London, Little Brown Book Group, 2006.

Saint Charbel. Salma's hand travelled to the nape of her neck, where she felt her own hanging coolly against her skin.

Later, Salma swung with a stone scythe at stalks of wheat in the field behind her house. A fly landed on her lip and she flicked it away, the callus lining her fingers rubbing against the tool's grip. The sun's weight bore down on her shoulders now, merciless, and she dropped her scythe.

As a young girl, Salma had both nimble hands and broad enough shoulders to carry heavy loads. This bode well in her adulthood, when full responsibility for the family land and vineyards was hers. Some in the village wondered about her and her husband, why he left for another country, why he hadn't returned for Salma. She hadn't seen or heard from her husband in eleven years.

She bent over and picked her scythe back up again.

Her husband, Joseph, was in Australia, driving a taxi too small for his frame, gambling away any money made. Untrusting of his wife alone in Lebanon, Joseph never wrote to her. His brother, still in Lebanon, became the intermediary tasked with delivering funds from Joseph to Salma and the family. However, this brother routinely took a percentage for himself, or would say nothing had been delivered at all.

The amount Joseph would send was less than significant to begin with, leaving Salma with nothing.

When her brother-in-law became sick and bedridden, he confessed of his thievery. He asked Salma for forgiveness.

She remained silent. She left him in his room. She did not see him again until his funeral.



“How long did you live on Mount Street?” I ask my mum. We are in the car on our way to Tayta’s house.

“We moved there when I was ten. But when my Dad first came to Australia he boarded in a shared migrant home in Redfern.”

“Where did Sitti Salma and Joseph go when he moved from Redfern?”

“My grandparents always lived with my parents.”

“Even Joseph?”

“He was awful, but what do you do?”

“Was Sitti happy?”

“They never spoke.”

I try to imagine a married couple, separated for eleven years by a great expanse of sea. Finally, being together again. Then, never speaking. I try to picture the household, sharp and cold. How it must have felt for my Mum, her sisters, Tayta. For Jodou and Sitti.

“Your Jodou, my Dad, he was adored by everyone. You should’ve seen his funeral, there were over a thousand people there. I’d never seen anything like it. And it wasn’t just family and friends. It was journalists and scholars, the migrants he helped, politicians.” Mum pauses. “But Joseph’s memory of him was just one of indifference.”

“After my Dad died, Joseph would complain about how his hard-earned money was wasted on sending his son to an American school.”

Mum's eyes don't leave the road.

"The bastard wasted the money himself."

I am quiet, in awe of the Grandfather I will never meet, and confused at the Great Grandfather I will never understand.

"Why did you guys put up with him?"

"I asked my Dad the same thing. I don't think I ever had a conversation with Joseph. His presence was more a toll on my Mum and Dad, and Sitti Salma. But you know my Dad would say, *we are not turning away my father because he's a burden, he's family.*"

I will never understand how people like Joseph share the same blood with the most compassionate people I know.



The sun was beginning to rise over Niha. Through narrow archways and into the shaded *aboul* spilt dawn's soft wash of light. The ground was beginning to warm. Salma could see, through the curved opening in the sandstone wall, her olive grove. The trees were tall and lush, drooping branches littered with thin leaves. They grew in rows adjacent to the *aboul*. Save the goats being herded in the distance, the grove stood unusually still. Salma lowered her baskets onto the ledge. Where were her cousins who had agreed to meet her here? Salma's gaze drifted across the grove once more. The world came to a lull. She could hear no sounds now but her own breathing. What month was it? August? Today was the day of harvest.

Salma ran through the *aboul* and into the grove, and where she should have seen women at each row of trees, there was no one. She drew the nearest branch down towards her, and did not find a cluster of olives ready to be picked. The branch bore nothing but light green leaves. *But today is the day of the harvest.* Her hands let go and she found herself at the next tree, again seeing only leaves. Salma ran through the grove, back up to the *aboul*.

The sun was rising now, and a muggy heat blurred the morning into a haze of no sky, no trees, just blue spilling into brown spilling into green. Salma had nowhere to go. Oblivious to the sounds of the waking morning, all she could hear were the claims of her husband's brother to him ten years prior. *Why are you still here, Joseph? Look at what Australia has done for us! My brother is there getting an education now, Joseph. Go, join him.*

Then she heard her own voice, pleading desperately to her husband. *Why would you leave? The ones that have left are the ones who have nothing – Joseph, we have more than most!*

But Joseph did not listen. What he did not know was that his brother feared the new grove in Joseph's name would threaten his own acquisition of Niha's land. He succeeded in convincing her husband to move to Australia, which left Salma to maintain the land alone for eleven years. She turned back to face the grove once more, taking in each barren branch. Now, he had succeeded in taking ownership of her land for himself.

Briefly, memories hit, and she was truly a wife again, abandoned. A girl stuck in an aging body that had brought her only pain. Memories of her son Bernard dying. But also memories of her son George returning from the American School of Beirut, able to read and write and speak and move people with his words. No. It was a body that had given her a family. One that had served her in the fields. And it would find her making a new home in a new country one day.

I followed behind as Salma ran, this time alone. She did not stop until she reached the top of a mountain. Her gaze settled upon houses overgrown by deep green trees below. Each village seemed to spill out of and around a church, arching terracotta roofs repeated infinitely. From

where we stood, the villages became reflections of themselves, their shapes flattened, shadows elongated, remaining familiar but becoming unknown.

As Salma turned to follow the worn path down, I saw her falter. A moment of doubt. The path seemed far narrower now, as though it had joined the world of mirrored villages. Salma looked up from the path, past me, head turned to the trees, and stepped. Before her, the bushes were an indistinguishable sea of green.



My aunties explained to me that the brother falsified paperwork, placing Joseph and Salma's land in his name. Salma, as a woman, was exempt from legal ownership of the land. She was also illiterate. There was no chance of her challenging her brother-in-law. So, on her own terms, after working and saving, she brought herself and her children to Australia and Joseph did nothing.

“Not many people know about the brother, Raf.”

“Why?”

“It's just not spoken about.”

People and situations that do not slot neatly into the flow of memory's desired narrative can be quickly and easily edited out, turning what makes memory comforting into what also makes it deceitful. Memory is different to the aspirational chronology that it pretends to be. It is the fragmentary, the non-linear. It is flashbacks, anecdotes, illusions. Select moments frozen, while others are glad to melt away.



I imagine Sitti sitting at the head of the dining table in Tayta's kitchen. Pouring black coffee for the women who sit with her, smiling easily. I can see them in conversation, my aunts, great aunts, Tayta and Mum. I strain to hear what they say, my own thoughts fading out into the muted cacophony of voices that tilt with the roll of an *r*, the breathiness of an *h*.

It is impossible to write true stories as *true*. Memory provides its raw material of truthful events. So too, though, does it allow for personal interference, for interpretation, imagination. I've grown up with these stories of a stubborn girl, a strong woman, a betrayal. A noble wife, a mother of all mothers, an abandoned home. Stories of why my Great Sitti Salma left the only home she knew, and of the new one she found. And each time another person sits down at my Tayta's dining room table, the web of stories grow. They exist, too, within every written testimony that bears our family name. They lay cultivated in her home, in its blackened stove. We hear these stories passed through generations of women. Through Lebanon to Australia, and all the cliffs and fog lines in between, like a myth that rings with both what can be remembered and what is real.

Salma is standing beside me now, laughter of women loud from inside. She waits for me to step across the threshold, with her. Together, we walk through the door – Salma once more, and myself for the first time.