

A Thousand Cuts

By Sheree Joseph

The first cut is a sign. It hangs above the immigration queue at Beirut International Airport, the kohl black letters swaying in the humid air, mocking me.

'Non Libanais.'

'Not Lebanese.'

The other sign reads *'Libanais.'*

Divided already.

I am drawn to the sign that says 'Lebanese', the way youths back home are drawn to the viral toasty *sahlab* at the Gloria Jeans drive-thru in Greenacre. *Back home*, I catch myself, as if about to fall from a cliff. I join the 'Not Lebanese queue', the one that speaks in passports instead of blood, and stand there like a flop. My passport is my blood, but they can't see it, can't trace the blue lines of my veins, the garnet-red pulsing beneath. The world recognises only the blue booklet in my hand. I scan the queue looking for similar grandchildren from the diaspora, looking for obvious foreigners and try to tell them I'm not like them, but who would believe me? My blood is not a visa. It cannot be stamped.

The second cut comes when the immigration officer looks at my last name, then at my face, searching for the Lebanon in me. I want to tell him it's in the way I hold my breath when the plane lands, the hazy fog couched over the pastel coloured buildings, the loud

crack of car engines or fireworks or bombs, the plates and plates of food, the ash covered pavements not designed for walking. It's in the way my grandmother's tongue still curls my name into something round and ancient, how she wails when she hasn't seen me in a while, as if someone has wrenched her heart from its socket.

The officer questioned me for a long time. He asks about me visiting family. What are their contact details? I realise then that I don't have any of their contact details. I'm friends with some of them on Facebook and Instagram, I offer. I was relying on the gossip networks to notify and deliver me to them. He looks at me like I'm a white guy studying Arabic as part of his international security degree, before being carted directly to the CIA or even worse, ASIO. The stamp lands like a wound - one more cut in the shape of return.

Outside, the heat greets me like an old lover, not too dissimilar to the heat in Australia, but more oppressive: pollution, poison, pulsating with promise, familiar, reckless, suffocating. Diesel, jasmine, sea salt — the holy trinity of Beirut.

Taxi drivers swarm, calling out destinations I half remember, lobbing their questions at me, 'home? Home? Going home? Welcome home?!' each one sure they can take me where I need to go. But no one can take me home.

In Australia, I am the Lebanese girl.

In Lebanon, I am the Australian girl.

Everywhere I go, I am too much and not enough.

Each visit, I collect these cuts like souvenirs: a comment about my accent, a joke I don't understand, a cousin I barely recognise. I laugh, nod, translate myself again and again until I no longer know what language I'm thinking in.

But still, I come back. I always return. Because even a thousand cuts can't stop the body from remembering where it came from. The blood knows. My blood propels me forward, hoping to hit ground, the ancient earth it knows. The humidity wraps itself around my neck. I breathe in the city - its broken glass, its laughter, its mourning still hovering like dust - and whisper to no one, *Ana houn*. I am here. Even if I no longer know what that means.

Out rolls the red carpet from the triumphant taxi driver, the one who wins my attention, desperate to take advantage of me as the foreigner he suspects I am. The sheepish look of a woman who joined the *Non Libanais* queue. He wagers that I might not realise with the economic crisis that the fare should be \$20 USD and not \$100 USD. He makes a *labka*, welcoming me, offering me a cigarette, which I accept, making a pit stop for a coffee, asks if I'm hungry, drives to the best Sahyoun falafel (there are better ones now I later learn) and buys me a small falafel and pepsi (Bebsi). He will look after me and make sure I find my Airbnb. Even though I know this is all a gift, I feel comforted by the theatrics and I play along. I give him more money than I should. I don't care. I'm just stoked to be here.

The Airbnb is the top floor penthouse of a residential building that still shows signs of destruction from the port bomb. In Geitawi we are moments from Mar Mikhael, a stone's throw from the port. Signs of the port explosion's destruction are everywhere. Ghost buildings, hollowed out, haunted. Contradictions on every corner - perfume and petrol, devotion and despair, all tangled beneath electric wires that droop like tired veins.

In the building, the stairwell smells of thyme and dust. When I climb it I feel ghosts waiting on each landing: women in house dresses with wet hair before the curlers, men with radios glued to their ears, children who never left, children who forever remain children. Every afternoon the power cuts. I move through the shadow without complaint. I light a candle. Someone else in the apartment below me curses the government 'killoun ya3ne killoun!' - no specificity, just all of them, so nothing has to change. The generator coughs, and Beirut exhales again. At night the city glows from within, as if lit by its own wounds. Bars spill onto sidewalks; music leaks from cars; the sea shimmers just enough to make you believe it's healing. I walk until the humidity softens my bones. The air tastes like longing.

A man selling *laimounada*, crushed lemon juice, water, sugar and orange blossom and mint, calls out, 'Where are you from, habibti?'

I answer the only way I can: 'It's complicated. From here and from somewhere else!'

He nods, as if everyone here understands that sentence. Maybe they do. Some people still say, 'welcome home'.

Later, on the balcony, I sip arak alone. The city hums below, restless and half-drunk. I think of all the women who came before me, who couldn't do this, liberated and alone. Their small rituals, their scolded prayers, and how this place keeps its memory in little things: the sound of a stove kettle, the way a hand waves, the way neighbours know your story before you tell it. This country never forgets who leaves. Maybe that's why it cuts so deep when we return.

I don't get to know my neighbours right away but their presence is felt immediately. An older woman in her 50s, Bernadette, comes down the first day when I have trouble with the lock. She peeks out almost like a bird, eyes scanning me like a security guard. A neighbour across the street saw me struggling to get in and called her. Everyone sees everything, and looks out for each other. It's like that meme: American security (high-tech cameras), British security (a camera), and Lebanese security - Taytas at the balcony, squinting like detectives, perusing the street.

Bernadette lives with her mother, Zarife, who hasn't left their small two-bedroom apartment since the port bomb. One day before leaving, Bernadette emerges and says she's going to get some manouche. Do I want to come? I follow her down a street that crosses an abandoned train track and into a small Christian neighbourhood. A nondescript shop sells manouche for 50 cents each. 'This is the best one in all of Beirut' Bernadette says. 'Owned by Christians.' she adds knowingly. I know not to interrogate that line of thought further. We pass a group of men and boys. They start talking to me, and by the end, one has asked for my number to set me up with his recently divorced brother in his 40s.

Back at the apartment, Bernadette invites me in to eat with them and drink coffee. Hundreds of plastic bags, belongings, and rubbish are stacked behind Zarife on the balcony and inside the apartment, leaving only one path through. Zarife sits in her usual spot, watching people walk by, making passing commentary, small asides about everyone. While the coffee boils, froths and sputters in the *rakwe*, gurgling like a hot spring, they tell us about that man and his wife, how the wife became their enemy. One day, when the water was switched off, they relied on their reserves. Bernadette, in deep sleep, didn't hear the knocks from the woman requesting water. After that, the woman stopped speaking to them. They've lived in the same building for thirty years. Zarife pulls out a packet of cigarettes.

'Budeek shrubbe cigarro?' I laugh at the literal translation. *Do you want to drink a cigarette?*

'These are from Germany.'

I pull one out. Thick, dark brown with a faint leopard print.

'It's like we're in Germany,' she chuckles.

The coffee comes out. Zarife lets it sit before pouring it into three small porcelain cups. She notices Mimi, a stray kitten hiding under a car. We call out to her.

'Soon she'll come out, she's shy.'

'Are you sleepy, Mimi?'

'She's strong, Mimi.'

Another cat appears. Is that not Mimi? No, that's the sister of her mother. Even the cats follow the complex extended family genealogy tracking. Even the cats know who their extended family is.

Zarife hobbles into the living room with her cane, gesturing for me to follow. She points to framed photos on the wall, listing family members and where they are: a son in London, a daughter in France, her brother-in-law, her late husband, herself as a young woman.

'Wow *dashek ektir helwa!* How beautiful you are here,' I say in broken village diaspora Arabic, the 'a' curling up. I used to feel self-conscious about it in Beirut, until someone explained that our village dialect has more traces of Aramaic, words which are no longer spoken and some which have been lost forever. Speaking it keeps the ancient alive.

'*Sa7i7!* I know,' she replies.

We sit and turn the cups over to read the grounds. We wait. Zarife flips her cup, brings the cigarette to her mouth, frowns deeply.

'Hooooo... yiiiiii.'

'What does it say?'

'No good, no good.'

Bernadette takes the cup. A dark brown patch has formed near the edge, a kaleidoscope of brown and beige lines. The dark patch looks like a demonic skull face, distorted with two eyes and a downturned mouth. Impossible, yet it stares back.

‘There are two people, a boy and girl. *Mabarrif*. You want to speak to them together?’
‘And this isn’t good?’

‘I don’t know. Man, woman, no good... do you know anyone brown, with a face like this?’

‘Uhhh, *mabarrif*. I don’t know... what’s this demon face though?’

‘Ohhh, not good, not good. I don’t know if it’s a man or a woman. Look, eyes no good, lips... you are up, he down.’

‘*Yiiiiii*.’

‘You want to remove... you, you want to remove.’

‘And that?’ I point to a figure cloaked in cloth.

‘That’s *la Adra*, the Virgin Mary... *ente budeek rouh ende, mabarrif*. Maybe you went already to see her or you’re going to see her.’

‘Yes! I saw her in Marseille,’ I say. I had climbed to La Bonne Mère statue that stood guard over the entire city and prayed for everyone I loved, asking to be guided out of the rut I was in. Single, childless and unemployed. The Holy Trinity of Flops.

‘Ahh, you went... here all the white is good... here it says you’re going to see someone tall, white, someone good, who will help you. It will be good.’

‘Ooh, look, here it shows a *jabal*! Mountain’ she added, in case I didn’t know.

‘I am going to the mountains! That’s where my family is.’

‘Yes, I know. I can see it in the cup.’ Sure enough, the outline of a mountain appears.

‘Ooh, here is a serpent... *hadde*, this is not good, *meshe* strong.’

‘Like the *shaytan*? The devil?’

‘Yes! *Hayde*, no good. *Hekke*, strong, white, no good. *Fi* eyes, the eyes on you, maybe eyes good, maybe eye not good.’

‘Ehhh, but *Rouh al mountain, jabel*, big big mountain, very good. After four days, *fi shi* something very good for you. Look at the four in Arabic, hone. Your heart hayk very good, inside and outside, *enjaad, hadde maffee shee* in the house, *mafee shee* the eyes, no good the eye.’

‘And *fi maghroume*? Is there me falling in love?’

‘*Mafee magroume mabee bayan*. No falling in love, it doesn’t show. Maybe this guy you speak to on the phone, is he tall? This guy you loved? Maybe him? *Inshallah!*’ I think of the 6’4 French-Lebanese guy who has been terrorising me via Whatsapp messages and disappearing for days at a time. Unless the Virgin Mary performs a miracle, I doubt it’s him.

‘Where is Mimi?’ Zarife calls in the background.

‘Good things are coming for you,’ Bernadette says. ‘You have a good heart. I see it in your face.’

I clutch the cup and zoom in on the devil’s face with my phone.

The fourth cut is the hand that whips past and grabs my ass from a motorcycle at 3am in the night. Followed by the sound of multiple engines as an entire gang of them circle me threateningly, only scared away by a man screaming at them in broken Arabic and German. It's not their fault though, I think. It's my fault. I shouldn't be walking at 3am in this neighbourhood. My ass was the sacrificial victim of my own poor decisions.

That same night, I decided to go out on my own to a bar and order a cocktail. In one of the busiest, liveliest bars of Mar Mikhael, the bouncer, after flirting with me, personally escorts me to the best seat in the house: front and centre, wedged between wealthy older divorced gentlemen. At the time, I thought it was because I was pretty and charming, but after a month in Lebanon, I understand: women who sit alone at the bar are mostly sex workers. The cost of living crisis is on steroids here, where the economy has all but been destroyed. My silk mini dress, breasts bursting out of my bra, and brazen aloneness fit the criteria perfectly.

The bar is tiny and compact; you can't turn without brushing someone. To my left, a gentleman smokes a cigar; to my right, a Santa Claus-looking Lebanese doppelganger. I speak to one, then another, and another. Drinks mysteriously appear in front of me. I pay nothing. I don't know who I owe, if anyone. Everything is a mystery.

We're packed like flopping, salty sardines, sweat dripping from our faces. Dark wood panels, low-hanging lights, fancy bartenders and waiters. People huddle around tables, occasionally standing on chairs to dance. The music pulses: Lebanese and Arabic remixes, punctuated by the occasional English pop song. Miley Cyrus crooning about

not buying her own flowers. A cacophony of cries surrounds me, like a surround sound system.

An older married man to my right leans over and hands me a napkin fashioned into a rose. The bartender produces another rose, made of toilet paper, and hands it to me, belly laughing.

‘Mine is better, *schimmy schimmy*, smell it,’ he gestures. It smells like he sprayed it with Rexona pink deodorant. And he did.

The man chomping his cigar says, ‘oh, he thinks he’s won your heart with the paper rose. Tell him *tiburnee, tiburnee teezak*.’

Tiburnee in Arabic means *bury me first, may I die before you die*, because I can’t stand to live without you. He means: bury your ass before you bury me. The bartender grabs a mysteriously placed baton and waves it mock-threateningly. ‘This is not the only weapon I’ll wield tonight,’ he winks at me. I’ve lost track of the cuts.

Another waiter walks past. Cute, I already clocked him. I asked one of my newly made gentleman friends if he’s single. The man to my right lifts the waiter’s arm: a tattoo of Palestine on his underarm, a Kalashnikov on his forearm. I decided to call him Mr PLO.

‘*Shu?*’ Mr PLO says, indifferent to me.

‘She said you’re the cutest guy here and wants to know if you’re single.’

Mr PLO looks distressed.

‘*Lat ya 3ame*, I’m married, my wife is here. *Lek*, don’t embarrass me.’

Later, he sneaks me his number anyway.

Cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut.

I leave the chaos of Beirut and swap it for the bustle of Batroun, but it's not long before I'm kidnapped by a tuk tuk driver named *Esteban* or Steve. I'm staying in Kfar Abida, south of Batroun. After discovering Abu Ali Beach, a hidden public cove with the warmest and calmest water, one of the best swims of my life. I feel at peace here. I decided to walk into town. Half an hour later, I realised I needed a ride back. I hailed a bright yellow tuk tuk, and that's how I met Steve.

He's thrilled to meet me. He talks rapidly in Arabic, claiming his English isn't very good. Somehow, he asks if he can be my personal tuk tuk driver. I say yes, cautiously. He gives me his WhatsApp and promises to pick me up later for dinner, although I hadn't asked him to. He gets overly excited, insisting he'll take me all around Batroun for a 'tour.' 'No, no,' I tell him. 'I know Batroun already.' But he isn't listening.

That evening, he arrives. Instead of taking me to the bar I requested - *Pierre and Friends* - he drives in the opposite direction, insisting on that 'tour' of the town. He explains that he also has to stop by his office on the way. Office? What office? It sounds strange, and my skin begins to prickle. Something tells me I've mistranslated, or misread the situation entirely.

‘I don’t need the tour,’ I repeat, sitting on the tip of my seat, half hovering. ‘I’ve seen it all before.’

He snaps back: ‘Look, *la Adra*! Look, the Virgin Mary, by the port and the boats.’

I know. I know *la Adra*. I know Mary. I am from here but not from here. That’s when I remember the coffee cup reading - of Mary and the demon - and when Steve turns back toward me, his dark, beady eyes penetrate me, almost licking his lips. Something is wrong. He drives up a hill, to his mysterious ‘office.’

It’s a derelict barbershop. A strange, hollow space perched on a slope. He opens the roller doors and says, ‘Come on in, I’ll just grab a drink for you, some snacks.’

I don’t really hear him, and I’m confused but I do need the bathroom, so, overriding my instincts, I walk in. The place is stark and glossy: white walls, black basins, large framed posters of vintage films. I wash my hands with shampoo. When I emerge, Steve has produced a bottle of whisky, lemonade, chips, and nuts. He’s set them neatly on a small black table, in front of a black leather couch, and he’s looking straight at me. His gaze lingers, hungry. For the first time, I feel afraid.

‘Should we close this?’ he says, moving quickly toward the roller door.

‘No!’ I scream.

‘*Shu?*’

‘No, no, no, no, no!’ I yell in English, stumbling back. He stands there, unmoving, like a statue.

‘LAT! LAT, LAT, LAT, LAT!’ I try in Arabic, like an incantation, like stroking prayer beads in desperation. My ancestors are screaming at me to get the hell out of there.

‘Listen, I just want to have a drink before your dinner. What’s the big deal, girl? I’m trying to be nice, do a service. What’s wrong with you?’

‘What’s wrong with me?! What the hell is wrong with you?’ I shout, the words collapsing between English and Arabic, the meaning lost.

‘Just calm down, sit down and have one drink with me.’ he said, unmoved.

I feel trapped in that glossy, airless room, the smell of shaving cream and cut hair suffocating me. My plea to leave goes ignored. So I sit, defeated. I grab the drink, pretending to sip. Then Steve makes his grand offer.

‘You should be with me.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘We should be together.’

‘Oh no. No, thank you.’

‘Why not? I’m divorced, only forty-three.’ (He looks closer to sixty.) ‘I have two kids, a boy, twenty-four, and one twenty-one. I’d make a good husband for you. You need a husband. You can’t go running around bars like this, alone. A girl, too good looking.’

‘No, no, no. I have a boyfriend,’ I lie, forcing it through my teeth. I cannot lie. But I must summon the Nadine Labaki in me, deliver this performance, because I know no other way out.

‘Boyfriend? Shu? Who? Where is he? Why isn’t he here? He just lets you go alone like this?’ he slaps his hand on his thigh.

‘Yes, he’s in Paris. His name’s Alex. He’s twenty-four. Half French, half Lebanese. I love him.’

It’s the only way I can lie, by not lying. There really is a man like that. I really do love him. I’m meant to meet him after months apart, but in a few weeks, he’ll reveal a new girlfriend, and that’s why we won’t meet as planned. But on this day, our long-distance humiliationship hasn’t yet dissolved, and so the lie stands firm, tall, the way the cedars stand at the top of Bcharre, snaking above the villages my family are from: Bane and Kfarsghab. That’s where I should have been, instead of trapped in this soulless barber purgatory with a long-limbed man and dark beady eyes. The coffee grounds had warned me. My ancestors screamed at me. But I didn’t listen.

‘He’s too young for you. He won’t be serious with you. He’s the same age as my son. Trust me, I know,’ Steve says, and like a prophet, he’s not wrong.

‘I don’t want to be with you,’ I say bluntly. ‘Now take me to *Pierre and Friends*. I want Pierre!’

Reluctantly, he agrees, and I am relieved. My first instinct is to run, but I can’t outrun the yellow Tuk Tuk, zipping along like the bee it resembles. So I volunteer as this man’s hostage.

As I step toward the tuk tuk, he turns and says, ‘Can I kiss you?’

‘No!’ I scream.

‘Okay, okay, okay, sheesh,’ he says, as if I’m overreacting.

We drive in silence, past a checkpoint where soldiers sneer at him, saying he doesn’t deserve such a beautiful passenger. He gets mad; they wave their guns at him and blow me kisses. I tell them I’m a kidnapped hostage and ask if they can take me into custody. They laugh and wave us through.

I turn back and mouth, ‘I’m not joking.’

We finally make it to *Pierre and Friends*. I love Pierre. I love friends. I jump out before the tuk tuk stops, almost kissing the ground, heart racing, and walk fast toward the entrance. I don’t look back. I don’t pay him.

The guard eyes me, then glances behind me, and that’s when I see Steve has followed me, his hand sliding onto the small of my back like we’re lovers. I bat his hand away. I turn to the guard, my eyes pleading, *don’t let him in*. But eye-language isn’t universal. He waves us both through.

As we descend the steps, I hiss, ‘Get away from me. Why are you still here?’

‘I need to eat too,’ Steve says calmly, as if that’s reason enough. ‘They know me here. They’re expecting me. You may as well have dinner with me.’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘You’re alone. I’m alone. We may as well.’

‘No, Steve!’

But the manager does know him, and before I can protest, we’re seated at the best table in the bar — sea view, white wine chilling in a bucket. Around us, waiters assume we’re a married couple in the middle of an epic fight. I start laughing like a maniac at the situation I have found myself in. People are staring at me, loved up couples and groups of friends obsessed with each other. I look up, half tears in my eyes from laughing, and I see through the blur, a tall man with light auburn hair and honey-brown eyes, arms strong and tanned from the sun. His face is kind. He looks at me once, twice, and then every time he passes, his eyes find mine. It’s obvious what’s happening.

I try to light a cigarette, but my lighter sputters out, only releasing gas. He rushes toward me, lighter in hand, like I’m Monica Bellucci in *Malèna*, the sad, beautiful woman surrounded by men desperate to offer flame. But tonight, there’s only one lighter, and it’s his. Steve slams his hands on the table, breaking the spell.

‘Ak! You, boy! Bring us fattoush! Fried fish! Fries! And the cheese spring rolls, you know the ones.’ I know he’s referring to the spring rolls that have that specific white Lebanese cheese in them, that you can’t really get anywhere else and that never taste the same. I know everything and nothing all at once. The waiter smiles politely and nods, as if Arabic is hard for him too. There is something so simple about this waiter, like a stunning, walking, vacant vessel.

I tell Steve to leave me alone, but he ignores me. Eventually, I get up and go in search of Pierre. There is no Pierre, but there is the manager. I explain everything - the yellow tuk

tuk, the following, the way he won't go away. The manager frowns, says he doesn't need that much detail.

'I'm just painting the scene for you'

'Why did you go with him at all?'

'I didn't have a choice,' I say, though I know how it sounds.

He nods slowly. 'Listen, I know him. He's strange, yes, but harmless. You're not in danger. We'll keep an eye on you. If you want us to tell him to leave, we will.'

I thank him and return to the table, slightly defeated. I would have to rescue myself. The food has arrived, a small, merciful banquet of salvation. I realise I am famished and eat greedily: the fattoush sharp with pomegranate molasses, the crisp fried golden brown bread, the tomatoes bursting with juice, cucumber cool against my tongue, the crisp and mush combo of the chips, and those crack-like cheese rolls.

The bar sits right on the water, the waves lapping from just behind. Once, you could jump straight into the sea from your table, but some incident must have forced a change; because now you have to go through the side path to the makeshift beach. The first time I came here, I'd eaten fattoush and hand-cut fries fried in olive oil, then rolled straight into the sea, head tilted back to the sun, terrified and exhilarated by the waves that both scared and saved me. Now, the same waves glow under the bar lights, serene and sinful at once.

When I finish eating, I head to the bathroom, just to get away again. The handsome, simple waiter stops me. 'Is that your husband?' he asks in Arabic.

'*Lat!* No. He's my... kidnapper.' He doesn't understand the word, but somehow he understands me. I mime rescue, and he nods solemnly.

'When I finish my shift, I'll take you home,' he says, in broken English.

Back on the dancefloor, a group of Italian women celebrating a fiftieth birthday pulled me in. I dance with them, grateful, laughing, alive. And then Steve appears, trying to join in, dancing like Elaine from Seinfeld, spasmodic feet flares. The women recoil.

'No, Steve! I want to dance alone.' but it's clear my alone includes a cabal of middle aged women.

He pouts. "Ugh. Enough with you! Can't make you happy!" And storms off.

At the bar, trembling, I ordered a drink. The owner's nephew is young, only 21, with big curls that spill over a cherubic face. He sees the distress in me and offers me a cigarette. I tell him what's been happening. His face drains. Before I can finish, Steve reappears, raging. He grabs the young waiter by the collar, shaking him. 'She's with me! She's mine! Don't you have respect for your elders?'

The boy freezes. I lose it. I push Steve away and scream at him to leave me the hell alone. He has no right to go near that guy. I am not with him. I am not his. I belong to no one.

Finally, the owner - the infamous Pierre - intervenes. Steve has finally gone too far - by harassing a man. 'Enough,' he says. 'You pay, and you leave.' I now understand why Pierre has so many friends. I love Pierre.

Steve glares, pays, and disappears into the night. I am finally free. At the bar, I wait for the first waiter, the tall, simple man, the one from Bernadette's prophecy, to finish his shift, my nerves jangling like keys. Another older man sits beside me, leering. His nose juts out like a shark fin.

'That man was crazy,' he says. 'Totally crazy. You okay?'

'I'm fine.' I say, coldly now finally aware of how every stranger is a knife.

'Where you stay?'

'Excuse me?'

'Your room. Where you sleep?'

I stand, face twisting in disgust, and stumble backward, straight into the arms of my rescuer, helmets in hand.

'Go?' he smiles.

I nod, too relieved to speak. He walks me up the stairs. I'm shaking, babbling, half laughing, half crying. He reaches for my hand and places it over my heart. He simulates the action of breathing. Then says the only word he knows in English: 'home.'

But first, he wants to take me somewhere. Legs over the bike, I hold onto his waist, and this time he moves one hand to his heart. The ancient city of Batroun glows in the distance, the sea to my left. I feel peace at last. We ride through the quiet streets until we reach the port — the same place with the fishing boats and the statue of *La Adra*, the Virgin Mary. I laugh because this time I am happy to go along on a tour, a side quest. He drives all the way to the edge of the pier. We stop and sit at the edge, feet dangling over the water, him in big white sneakers, me in the one pair of sandals I travel with. He holds my hand and we say nothing, because we really can't communicate much. When we stand up to leave, he kisses me lightly, and it feels gentle, brief, redemptive, and asking for nothing more.

As we pass the statue again, I point to her, then to him. He shakes his head: 'Muslim.'

I smile and understand that unlike Steve, who had his crucifix dangling from the tuk tuk's mirror like a charm, this is why I am safe now. I mistook Steve as familiar, as someone who might be like family, like the people I know. But faith and safety are not the same thing. I mistook familiarity for belonging, symbols for truth. But I was wrong. This whole country isn't my playground, my canvas, or even my home. Only parts of it recognise me. Only the mountains, the olive trees, the donkeys and bread ovens, the homemade tomato *rib* sauce stirred over the woodfire - only that is my home. The entirety of this slice of a country is a thousand cuts, carved over a thousand years. And yet, I bleed onto its pavement, rescuing myself, one luminous wound at a time.