



A MEMOIR

**LOOKING
FOR
PALESTINE**

GROWING UP CONFUSED IN AN ARAB-AMERICAN FAMILY

NAJLA SAID

looking
for palestine

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in an arab-american family

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For my paren

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I am a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian woman, but I grew up as a Jew in New York City.

I began my life, however, as a WASP.

I was born in Boston to an Ivy League literature professor and his wife, baptized into the Episcopal Church at the age of one, and, at five, sent to an all-girls private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, one that boasts among its alumnae such perfectly formed and well-groomed American blue bloods as the legendary Jacqueline Onassis. It was at that point that I realized that something was seriously wrong—with me.

With my green seersucker tunic, its matching bloomers (worn underneath for gym and dance classes), the white Peter Pan collar of my blouse, and my wool kneesocks, I was every bit the Chapin schoolgirl. I was proud of my new green blazer with its fancy school emblem and my elegant shoes from France. But even the most elaborate uniform could not protect against my instant awareness of my differences. I was a dark-haired rat in a sea of blond perfection. I didn't live on the Upper East Side, where everyone else in my class seemed to live, but on the Upper West Side, or, rather, so far beyond the boundaries of what was then considered the Upper West Side as to be unacceptable to many. I did not have a canopy bed, an uncluttered bedroom, and a perfectly decorated living room the way my classmates did or like the homes I saw on TV. I had books piled high on shelves and tables, pipes, pens, Oriental rugs, painted walls, and strange houseguests. I was surrounded at home not only by some of the Western world's greatest scholars and writers—Noam Chomsky, Lillian Hellman, Norman Mailer, Jacques Derrida, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion—but by the *crème de la crème* of the Palestinian Resistance.

I know today there are probably lots of children of immigrants growing up similarly confused by the mixed messages of their lives, pertaining to everything from class to culture to standards of beauty. For me, though, growing up the daughter of a Lebanese mother and a prominent Palestinian thinker in New York City in the 1980s and '90s was confusing and unsettling. I constantly questioned everything about who I was and where I fit in the world, constantly judged my own worthiness and compared myself to others, and I struggled desperately to find a way to reconcile the beautiful, comforting, loving world of my home, culture, and family with the supposed “barbaric” and “backward” place and society others perceived it to be. I wondered why I was “an exception” to the rule of what both Arabs and Americans were “supposed” to be like, and why I was stuck in such an uneasy position.

After years of trying desperately to convince people that they didn't really understand me or the place my family came from, I stopped trying, especially since there was never anyone around to make me feel less alone in my assertions. I resigned myself to believing that everything people said about

my culture was true, because it was exhausting and futile to try to convince anyone otherwise. Strangely, though, I also held on tightly to what I knew to be accurate and real about my family and culture. My parents and extended family are entirely responsible for that. I spent years simultaneously pushing them away and drawing them close, until I found a place where I could exist together with them and completely apart from them. Letting go of the idea that I had to have one identity, one way to describe myself, one “real me” hasn’t left me any less confused about who I am, but it has certainly left me inspired, engaged, interested, complicated, and aware. And I’d rather be all of those things than just plain old “American,” or plain old “Arab.”



WITH THE EXCEPTION of my birth in Boston and a year-and-a-half-ish stint in Palo Alto, and then Southern California, I spent the first thirteen years of my life in an apartment building on Morningside Drive between West 119th and 120th streets. My father was a “teacher of English and Comparative Lit-er-a-ture at Columbia University.” I learned to pronounce that impressive-sounding title at the age of four, though I had no idea what it meant. When people asked me what my daddy’s job was, I’d wrangle my brain and articulators around the phrase with great effort and draw it out.

I did recognize the word “Columbia,” and I knew what that was (the park where we played after school and on weekends). I also knew that he did something in an office in that campus-park.

To very smart people who study a lot, Edward Said is the “father of postcolonial studies” or, as he told me once when he insisted I was wasting my college education by taking a course on postmodernism and I told him he didn’t even know what it was:

“Know what it is, Najla? I *invented it!!!*”

I still don’t know if he was joking or serious.

To others, he is the author of *Orientalism*, the book that everyone reads at some point in college, whether in history, politics, Buddhism, or literature class. He wrote it when I was four.

As he explained once, when I pressed him to put it into simple English: “The basic concept, is that . . . historically, through literature and art, the ‘East,’ as seen through a Western lens, becomes distorted and degraded so that anything ‘other’ than what we Westerners recognize as familiar is not just exotic, mysterious, and sensual but also inherently inferior.”

You know, like Aladdin.

It’s mainly because of my father that people now say “Asian American” instead of “Oriental.”

To *other* people, he is the symbol of Palestinian self-determination, a champion of human rights, equality, and social justice. A “humanist” who “spoke truth to power.”

And then still other people insist he was a terrorist, though anyone who knew him knows that’s a kind of like calling Gandhi a terrorist.

To me, he was my daddy, a dapper man in three-piece suits tailor-made in London. A cute old guy who yelled at me passionately in his weird sometimes British, sometimes American accent and then (five minutes later) forgot he had been upset; the one who brought me presents from all over the world, talked to me about *Jane Eyre*—my favorite book when I was twelve—and held me when I cried. He played tennis and squash, drove a Volvo, smoked a pipe, and collected pens. He was a professor. He was my father.

I always considered myself a “daddy’s girl,” and he would have agreed. Daddy and I were temperamental soul mates: artistic, dramatic, needy, sensitive, and completely inept at mundane tasks such as paying bills or even opening them. But as a child, I was in fact completely awed by and maybe even scared of Daddy. I have really strong memories of being petrified when the door of his study was closed and I would hear the furious click-clack-*ding* of his IBM typewriter. Maybe I sensed that he

was writing, as Nissim Rejwan in *The Jerusalem Post* put it, “an important book [that was] bound to usher in a new epoch in the world’s attitude toward Oriental studies and Oriental scholarship,” but all I knew was that, when he was in there, I was afraid. And when he emerged, there would be a moment of apprehension; I’d feel out his mood, and usually, if I was lucky, he’d shower me with love and praise in his uniquely expressive and melodic voice.

My mother is the beautiful, kind woman who took care of me. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, and came from an enormous, loving, and prestigious family. She was the constant, steady presence in my childhood, and knew how to play, sew, draw, cook, clean, drive, bathe, and love my brother and me. Even my dad was kind of dysfunctional without her. In fact, their whole dynamic can be neatly summarized in the story of their wedding day:

On December 15, 1970, my father woke up in his apartment in New York, assessed the weather (an enormous blizzard was descending on the city), and said to my mother, who was living with him, I suppose: “Mariam! Let’s go to City Hall and get married.” They had, of course, discussed this plan before, but had not set a date or negotiated the specifics. Regardless, upon taking in the heavy swirls of snow, my father knew at once that today was the right day for their nuptials. He theorized that if they left early enough to avoid getting stuck in it, they would actually be able to take advantage of the inclement weather and get the whole wedding procedure done quickly and painlessly, without waiting in long lines or making too big a deal of it.

They arrived downtown, with a witness, by nine a.m. They noticed a large sign over the man-in-charge’s head emblazoned with the phrase “No Smoking.” This same man-in-charge was smoking an enormous cigar as he leisurely read the newspaper. Next to the “No Smoking” sign was another equally menacing one that said: “Women Who Want to Get Married Have to Be Wearing a Dress” (surely phrased more concisely; I tell the story the way I heard it from my mother). My parents walked in and told the cigar-smoking clerk their intention, and he, without lifting his eyes from the paper he was reading, casually extended the pointer finger of his free hand up toward the second of the two signs—the one about dresses.

My mother, you see, was wearing pants, because it was freezing.

My father “became impatient” (my mother’s words). You could practically see the steam coming out of his ears and the rage boiling in his stomach (my words; I wasn’t there but I have a pretty good idea that this is what happened). He took a deep breath, laughed condescendingly, and then pointed to the clerk that *he* was in fact *smoking* under a “No Smoking” sign, and that detail in itself did not give much value to the rule he was attempting to enforce. Unfortunately, my father’s tactic did not work. The clerk kept on reading and smoking. His tone growing more anxious by the second, my father persisted in his argument, asserting that they had come all the way down to City Hall from Columbia University on the subway! In a blizzard! The least this man could do was marry them! The clerk did not respond. My father then began to quote a famous literary text (let’s say John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* because my mom can’t remember exactly which, and it works), lecturing the clerk on how man makes rules and they come not from God but society and therefore can be broken. My mother nudged my father and said to him urgently but not too forcefully, as is her way, “Edward. Hold on. Hold on. I am going to the bathroom.” He looked at her as if she were crazy for announcing her intention in the middle of his speech, but nodded quickly, and then resumed his impassioned sermon on liberty.

My mother disappeared into the bathroom only to emerge five minutes later with her pants removed. Her turtleneck sweater was long enough to cover the upper part of her thighs, and so was the crocheted vest she wore, which her favorite aunt, Najla, had made for her. Since it was freezing, she had worn thick tights underneath her pants; she actually looked completely respectable without her trousers.

(When my mother tells the story, she gets very excited at this point, as she explains how she knew her plan would work despite the seemingly obvious fact that she was not *really* wearing a dress: “You see, these were the days of the *mini!*”)

Pleased with her grace and still chic practicality, my mother smiled at my father. Nimble, elegantly, she had solved what just moments before seemed an enormous problem. My mother then politely faced the clerk: “Okay, I am wearing a dress.”

My father stared at her, dumbfounded. The clerk finally looked up from his paper. He cast his glance slowly from my mother’s head down to her feet, which were housed in stylish beige suede snow boots (my mother loves shoes and takes great care to describe the shoes she was wearing in any story). He put out his cigar, and stood up.

My father’s mouth remained open. He was confused; he thought he was a genius. But the thing is so is my mom.



MY PARENTS MET in New York in 1967. My mother went there for an extended stay. My father was already a professor and had been in the United States for almost twenty years. They met like this (again, according to my mother):

“Your aunt Joyce [my dad’s sister] broke her leg. She had been my friend at university. I went to visit her in the hospital. When I walked into the room, your father was sitting in a chair, eating popcorn. He looked at me and said, ‘All right, Joyce, your friend is here. That means I can go,’ and he left.”

When I point out to my mother that this “story” of how they met is rather lacking in romantic detail, she says, “What? I thought he was rude. It is true.”

I’ve asked Joyce to clarify, more than once. But each time her story is slightly different from the last, and each time, without fail, I become fascinated by some tangential part of the story, such as the details of the fabulous dress her mother had the seamstress make for her when she hosted the alleged party at which my parents were brought together (or was it a double date she went on with them and a friend of my dad’s?).

When my brother and I were small, my mom, who already had a master’s in library science (and therefore would organize the books in my bedroom according to some version of the Dewey Decimal System, utterly confusing me), did not work, but stayed home with us full time. She took us to sports and dance classes, she sewed and knit and knew how to play games and do art projects with me. She took us to museums and parks and events and plays. She helped me with all my homework. She knew everything, it seemed.

My mother was also the most beautiful lady to walk the earth, and when my parents dressed up to go out at night, her glamour and perfection took my breath away. She was perfectly skinny, 115 pounds, I knew, and I was captivated by her beauty and elegance and thinness. She took care of every single practical concern in the household: she paid the bills, organized the budgets, and handled the bank accounts, major purchases, investments, and everything else my father couldn’t be bothered with. It worked out very nicely for him, since the mundane concerns of life seemed to cause him much anxiety. It wasn’t only that he *didn’t like* doing practical, real-life tasks, he basically *couldn’t* do them, they frustrated him so. It was always clear to me that my parents’ marriage was a partnership in the truest sense: Daddy was left to do his work, and Mommy was left to do everything else. Even when my mother went on to attend business school and pursue an executive career, when her day consisted mainly of reading books and playing with me, I knew very well that she could run the world if she wanted.

And then there was my brother. Wadie Edward Said, named, according to cultural custom, after our paternal grandfather, was three years older than I.

Our personalities were completely different: he was outrageously energetic, friendly, fearless, athletic, and always, always curious. I was quiet, shy, calm, and still. Wadie perpetually had a question that he *needed* answered, and would ask again and again until he got a response that quenched his curiosity, although there are questions that to this day remain unanswered.

In 1987, we went on a family trip to L.A. for Memorial Day weekend. During an otherwise silent car ride from the airport to the hotel, my brother, who had been gazing quietly out the window, turned his attention to the back of my father's head and asked, matter-of-factly, "Daddy, what is Los Angeles?"

"Well, Wadie, it's a city, really. That's about it," was the succinct reply from the front.

"No, but I mean, what is it?"

"I told you, it's a city. "

"Yeah, but you know what I mean, what is it really?"

"What are you asking me? It's a city. What else can I tell you?"

"I know, but you know what I mean, what is it?"

This exchange continued along the same lines for a good thirty minutes, and probably ended only because we had to get out of the car. My father, who probably knew perfectly well what kind of metaphysical answer his fifteen-year-old son was looking for, seemed to take a sort of childish pleasure in seeing just how many times Wadie could ask the same question before giving up. He never, ever did.

There were other things Wadie was fascinated with over the years: Albania, Namibia, Cashmere (and then, inevitably, Kashmir), political mechanisms, law, criminal justice, and the historical realities of the Middle East. But he always had an equally balanced passion for the following: sports of all kinds, tennis in particular, heavy metal (only the real deal: Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath, Motörhead, Thin Lizzy, Judas Priest, and a smattering of others—Metallica before approximately 1986, AC/DC but only with the first lead singer), comic books (unlike most boys, he preferred *Conan the Barbarian* to *Captain America*), rap music (but only if it was old-school; the Jungle Brothers was as far into the future as he went), and just about any random line from any random movie or commercial or song that stuck with him. He could mimic any accent, create the funniest characters from the depths of his wild imagination, and keep all of us laughing for days. I had a face I reserved for him that simultaneously said "You're so weird" and "You are the funniest, most original person I have ever encountered, and I love it." Wadie inherited the wild and wonderful charm of my father, the strange peculiarities, and the relentless fascination with whatever struck his fancy, whether it was something utterly mundane ("Do you wanna know how to make your spit land in exactly the right place? I figured it out") or something quite serious (to my cousin who couldn't remember the name of a certain African country she'd heard of: "You must be thinking of Burkina Faso; it was previously called the Republic of Upper Volta, but they just changed it").

As far as I was concerned, Wadie was there to understand the things I could not, or did not, want to understand. He also seemed to me to be the more loved child. We had albums upon albums of photos of his birth and his infancy, but very few of mine. My mother would explain away my concern by saying: "Naji, by the time you were born, cameras weren't *in fashion* anymore." My mother is enamored of the phrase "in fashion," and though I now realize it's just a direct translation of the French "*à la mode*" and not a really strange attempt to make me feel better (how could the joy of my birth have really been eclipsed by a sudden drop in popularity of recreational camera usage?), it still drives me batty. But I was happy to defer to Wadie as the more important one, because I admired him so much. He made sense of the boring, the factual, and the serious for me, allowing me to keep a firm

footing in my youthful, protected fantasy world. I am not sure he had a choice in the matter; he was the older, and he was a boy. In my family, these were harsh realities he couldn't have escaped no matter how much he might have wanted to. He did not have the luxury, as I did, of hiding behind the shields of childish ignorance and female preciousness. But perhaps, in the end, this helped him avoid some of the identity issues I stumbled over later.



Because the first question people often ask when a person claims to be from Lebanon is “Are you Christian or Muslim?” and because the answer to that question, when asked about someone in my mom’s family, yields an unlikely and confusing answer, I ought to stop and explain a little more about Lebanon and my family’s place in it.

A tiny country on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, modern-day Lebanon was once, along with modern-day Syria and the countries we now know as Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, part of one large country that was known as Greater Syria. At the onset of World War I, the Ottomans held full control over this region. But when they and the other Axis powers lost the war, they were forced to give over control of the area to the victorious Allies. Britain and France divided the region up between themselves, and the area known as Syria became a French mandate. The French further divided this Syria, creating two smaller countries. The first, which they called Le Grand Liban, is present-day Lebanon. It included Mount Lebanon (where most of the religious minorities—Druzes, Christians, Shiites—lived) and the coastal region (where Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon are). The second of the two countries they created is modern-day Syria.

Since many of the Christians native to Mount Lebanon had been influenced by Western religious missionaries, they had preferred to remain allied with Europe rather than the Arab world, and so they welcomed the creation of their own, separate nation. Thence springs the commonly believed and perpetuated myth that Lebanese Christians are not Arabs. They are. An Arab is a person whose native language is Arabic.



THE MAIN THING to know is that my maternal great-grandfather, taken with the belief system that holds that God is accessible to us all and requires no intermediary, traded Greek Orthodox Christianity for the Quaker sect, and his descendants stuck with it. Though technically “Lebanese Christians,” my mother’s father and mother raised their children to be Quaker, and Arab nationalists—making them one of three Quaker families in the whole country, and a clear minority.

The French ruled Lebanon until 1943, and when they finally departed in 1946, they left a big old mess, with eighteen different recognized religious sects within the native population: Maronite Christians (who were Catholics), Sunni Muslims, and Shiites were the most well represented and held the most power, in descending order. Even Judaism was one of the recognized sects (Quaker was not).

Then, in 1948, the state of Israel was founded, and Lebanon, its neighbor to the north, was inundated with Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians were welcomed and given shelter in camps set up for them in Lebanon, but they never became citizens, because no one thought they were there to

stay. They had long been a people with a national identity of their own, and, it was assumed, they would eventually be guaranteed a safe return home.

By the time I was born, in 1974, nothing had changed, except the population. The Christians were still in power, the Palestinians were still living in camps, but the Shiite and Sunni communities had grown and wanted better representation in government. In a really, really, really simple way, this conflict was the basis for the civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, and turned Beirut into a dangerous, complicated, mad war zone, and shifted its reputation from being “the Paris of the Middle East” to “hell on earth.”

Having lived through the long, complicated, and confusing war (which ended with virtually *no* changes to the governmental structure), I am itching to describe the whole thing this way (courtesy of my friend Hind Shoufani):

One morning, everyone started fighting everyone. New parties mushroomed up overnight and fought each other. No one understood the clusterfuck, but decided to kill their neighbors too. Other countries made alliances that almost immediately were reversed. The war criminals of that era are still in power. No one can keep the facts straight, as nothing about the reasoning made any sense. The end.

As the war progressed throughout the '70s and '80s, the Syrians, Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans all got involved. Groups multiplied and alliances shifted constantly. Many of the Christians blamed the Palestinians for everything, especially when the Israelis invaded in 1982 in order to obliterate the PLO, which had set up its headquarters in the very neighborhood in which my grandparents lived. And when the city was divided into “West Beirut” (for Muslims and Palestinians) and “East Beirut” (for Christians), my family members refused to leave their West Beirut home to live in the East with the other Christians; they refused to hate Palestinians, Muslims, and whomever else they were supposed to hate, and they steadfastly held on to their belief that all of us are just human. At the time, it was a beyond courageous and admirable thing to do; to hold their convictions despite the danger it put them in.

When I was starting to put together the facts about the civil war in my teenage years, I really wanted my family members to be on one side or another so that everything would make sense. I just wanted them to be one of the Christian families that spoke French and followed a certain party logic. I needed to put them in a box, so I could figure out who I was, but then I was told they'd never do that because they didn't hate Palestinians. I found this detail annoying.



AND MEANWHILE, I also knew that I was Palestinian.



MY FATHER was born in Jerusalem in 1935 to a wealthy Palestinian businessman and his much younger, half-Lebanese, half-Palestinian wife. My paternal *jiddo* (Arabic for “grandfather”), Wadie Ibrahim Said, had come to live in America in 1911, when he was about sixteen years old. He had left his family in Palestine and traveled to the States alone, so as to avoid conscription in the Ottoman army. He stayed in America ten years or so, and became a U.S. citizen. He then returned to Palestine at the request of his mother, and remained there until the creation of the state of Israel, at which point

he permanently moved his family to Cairo, where they had another home. (The family was in Cairo when war broke out in Palestine in 1947, and were unable to return when it became Israel, in 1948.) Finally, at the end of his life, he and my grandmother moved to Lebanon, where he died, in 1971. Jiddo Wadie, born into a Protestant family, was baptized into the Anglican Church and attended British schools in Palestine. When he went to America, he became an Episcopalian (which is the same thing as Anglican, really; it's the American version), and so my father and his four sisters were born with American passports, baptized Episcopalian, and raised in Jerusalem and Cairo. Most of them received their college and advanced degrees in the United States. My father actually came to America at fourteen, to attend a prestigious boarding school in Massachusetts, after he had been summarily discharged from the authoritarian British school he went to in Cairo for some apparently irredeemable mischief.

My dad's mom, my *teta* (Arabic for "grandmother") Hilda, was born in Nazareth, Palestine, in 1914. Her father, my great-grandfather Shukri, was, like his future son-in-law Wadie, born a Protestant, and he too had come to America as a young man. He had initially left Palestine for the U.S. in order to pursue a promising business lead, but he somehow ended up in Waco, Texas, where he chose another path altogether: he was ordained a minister in the Baptist Church. So, to reiterate: Shukri Moussa, my Palestinian great-grandfather, who hailed from Nazareth, Palestine, the childhood home of Jesus Christ himself, came to the United States of America to become a minister in a Christian church. He then returned to Nazareth, Palestine (again, the childhood home of Jesus Christ) and established the first Baptist church in Nazareth. Thus, Teta Hilda was brought up in Palestine as an evangelical Christian. She too attended American schools, but left university early in order to marry my grandfather when she was nineteen and he was forty.

Whether it was my parents' intention or not, I was ultimately raised as a Quaker should be. Both of them were secular humanists; they constantly pressed upon my brother and me that all people are the same, and encouraged us to look inside our own selves to figure out what might be the right thing to do in any situation. They never associated themselves or this behavior with any group or religious sect, though. They just lived their lives that way.

When my brother was three years old and I was nine months, we were baptized into the Episcopal Church together. I only recently wondered why we had been baptized at all. My cousin was planning her wedding to a Catholic man, and they were having trouble finding someone to marry them, given their religious differences. My cousin said something about it being all the more complicated because she had not been baptized. I asked her why she hadn't been, and my mom piped in: "Quakers don't baptize."

"Really? Then why were we baptized?"

"Because your grandmother insisted."

"What?"

"Your father's mother, your Teta Hilda. She insisted. I agreed so she wouldn't get upset. It was only water on your head, so I didn't mind. It wasn't something *traumatic*, so I didn't get in an argument about it. Neither your father nor I cared about it."

My mother's disdain for all aspects of organized religion has never been kept a secret from me or from anyone she meets. It is obviously partly because she is Lebanese, and saw her country and its neighbors devastated by religious strife, but I was still disappointed to learn the real, rather ordinary facts behind a part of my identity that I had romanticized.

As a little girl, I had desperately wanted my parents to believe in *something, anything*, the way "other people" seemed to, but every time I tried to latch on to a part of my identity, my parents would take it away from me. They always had to make sure that I knew I wasn't *only* Palestinian, or *only* Lebanese, or *only* American. My parents were always *themselves*, whether it was in the context of

political parties (“We vote Independent,” they’d both insist when I asked whether they were Democrats or Republicans), countries (“We are Arab. Not one *Lebanese* and one *Palestinian*”), or even neighborhoods (“We live in Morningside Heights, which is not *really* the Upper West Side, Najla . . . No, it’s not really Harlem either . . .”), so I suppose I had somehow always taken comfort knowing I was baptized into a specific church, that I “officially” belonged to at least one group in society. Now my mother’s story had taken that away too.

My parents further confused me by constantly asserting their Arab-ness, which at the time and in the place I was growing up seemed to be the one thing they ought to be keeping quiet about. My father was always proudly telling everyone he was both Palestinian *and* Arab. I didn’t understand why he had to complicate things; his religion was Christian, his expertise not in the field of politics or history; he didn’t *have* to make a big deal of it. He was a British/American-educated professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He was a literary critic, a philosopher, a teacher, a classical musician, and a thinker. And what he thought about mostly were the books and works of art of “white” people. He had also left the Middle East at the age of fourteen, never to return as anything more than a visitor, so his childhood memories of Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon, where he had spent most of his time, were of idyllic places where Arab Muslims, Arab Christians, and yes, Arab Jews, lived in a “melting pot” much like the New York City in which I was raised.



AT MY NURSERY SCHOOL, a progressive one for the children of professors and students at Columbia University, there were plenty of international boys and girls with names that were more unheard-of than my own. One quiet Asian girl in my class was named Ai, which was meant to be pronounced like the letter (“I”), or the organ with which a person sees the world (“eye”), but according to me, the name she was given was “spelled wrong” and “not a real name, probably because her parents aren’t from America.”

I vaguely knew that my parents weren’t really from America either, but I didn’t feel in any way different from the kids around me. Unlike Ai’s parents, who struggled to communicate with the teachers, mine spoke perfect English. It didn’t seem odd to me to have parents who spoke a second language—for the most part, every one of the kids who lived in my neighborhood had at least one parent from another country and/or one parent who was a professor. Maybe what seemed so odd to me about Ai’s family was that they were so foreign, and from only one country. The Woods, our closest friends in the building, were English and Mexican. Michael, the dad, was from England, and had glasses and cardigans and books and a study, just as my dad did. They both taught English and they were great friends. Elena, his wife, was from Mexico. She and my mom were good friends too, and though they both had dark complexions and jet-black hair, they both spoke an English that clearly had been taught to them by British people (they’d say “this bloody thing” and “perhaps” and “jography”). Michael and Elena had three children: Gaby, who was the same age as Wadie; Patrick, who was the same age as me; and little Tony, who was smaller than all of us. The Smits, who lived across the hall from us and also had children who were our age, had a glamorous blond American mother who ran the marathon every year, and a dad who was Dutch and taught history at Columbia. They too were a family much like ours—American, but somehow slightly removed from being fully so. Even our family friends who were “only” American, like the Rosenthals, the Coles, and the Stades, fit perfectly into our world. They might not have been born speaking French, Spanish, or Arabic at home, but I always somehow knew that if they felt like it, they probably could; they, like all of us, were part of the Columbia world, and we were all different, but mostly the same.

But my one “real American” friend, Catherine, seemed as foreign as Ai. Catherine was the only

girl in my building whose dad, Jack, wasn't a professor at Columbia. He was the super, and they lived in the basement. He didn't have a study like my dad and Michael Wood did. He had a "shop" with tools and fun stuff that we were sometimes allowed to play with. Catherine's mother, Carol, was an artist, which I thought was the most magnificent thing in the world. She would always embark on projects with us; we once built an entire mini town, partly in the shop with Jack and partly in the apartment with Carol. I vividly remember watching in awe as Carol painstakingly and precisely painted each of the stones on our "church" in a shade of gray, and then outlined their edges with a darker shade, creating what looked to me like a three-dimensional image. I had never seen anyone do that.

Unlike mine, Catherine's parents never said "the Americans" when they talked about Americans, and they only spoke one language. Catherine's grandmother lived in New Jersey and didn't have to take a plane to visit. Catherine and her parents listened to country music instead of Beethoven, and they didn't seem to wear a lot of itchy wool things. They ate their salad from a separate bowl and got their dressing from a bottle, and they had better snacks in their house than we did in ours. "Real Americans" like Catherine's family were what was completely foreign to me.

Catherine and I used to play that I was Jack LaLanne's daughter, our building was my mansion, our bikes were my horses, and she was my assistant-friend. That was my favorite game. Jack LaLanne seemed like the richest, most famous guy ever, since he was always on TV. He might as well have been the king of America. So, naturally, I wanted to be his little princess. I was sure that, like everyone on TV, Jack LaLanne lived in California, where the sun always shone. I was also sure that he had a wife, who, like everyone in California, had yellow hair and red lips and blue eye shadow, and that he had a gorgeous, perfect, blond daughter, who was me.

Of course, I thought my real, brunette mother was beautiful and perfect, but in a different way. And anyway, on TV and in my books, and according to my many Barbies, the most beautiful people and the princesses were always blond. Real people, boring people, and evil people were brunettes. Blondes were not real people; they were fantasy people, TV people.



My first visit to Lebanon, I was just three weeks old. My second was the following summer, 1975. My brother and I apparently had a wonderful, magical time, while the adults' enjoyment was tainted by the political violence that was brewing. Skirmishes and gunfights had begun around the country in April, and though they were still few and far between, most people knew that something bigger and more dangerous was on the horizon. Certainly no one knew that a fifteen-and-a-half-year civil war was about to rip the country to pieces, but everyone who was old enough to understand it could feel the tension in the air. On a sunny day in early September, Jiddo Emile, my mother's father, drove us to the airport. The streets were eerily quiet. He looked at my parents and said softly, "I think it is good you're leaving now. I have a bad feeling about what is going to happen here." By the time we reached Brussels a few hours later, the Beirut airport had closed; no one was allowed in or out of the country. We didn't go to Beirut the following summer; it wasn't safe. We returned again in January of 1977.

In June of 1978, we set off for what was to be my fifth trip to Lebanon, but we never actually got there. The fighting had gotten so bad by the time we reached London that we ended up staying in the UK for two extra weeks. I had a marvelous time playing at the home of our friends from New York, the Rosenthals, who were living there for a while, and I ran around the garden of my aunt Rosemary's house in Brighton, England, with a smile on my face and a skip in my step. I didn't know we were stranded. I thought Brighton was where we had planned to be.

The memories I have of traveling to and from Lebanon in my first eight years are, for the most part, a big, jumbled collection of delightful images. I adored "Beirut," as the whole country was known to me, and I adored the days we spent there. Remarkably, though the war and I basically came into the world at the same time, and though its presence did make itself known in ways I most certainly did register, it was never part of my primary experience of the country. Perhaps I was too young to understand, and thus too young to be scared. To me, Beirut was love and grandparents.

On the way, we would usually stop in Paris or London, where Wadie's and my main pastime seemed to be getting as much chocolate into our mouths in one day as was humanly possible. There was *pain au chocolat* and Nutella in the morning, *chocolat chaud*, *crème glacée au chocolat*, and just plain old bars of *chocolat* too (I don't know that I was fully aware that these all existed in America as well, as we were never really allowed to have them at home). We would also often visit my aunt Rosemary and her husband, Tony, and I would marvel at my aunt's British-accented speech and perfect manners, and become anxious at her insistence on quizzing Wadie and me on kings named Charles and James and James and Charles. I let Wadie answer for both of us. We were barely old enough to read, but Wadie seemed to have been born with a sophisticated understanding of the whole world and how it fit together that I lacked.

Once in Beirut, we would eat even more chocolate. Wadie would lead me expertly through the streets of Beirut, and clutching his hand, I would maneuver my little body around army tanks, trying not to touch them because they were so hot from the sun they burned my skin. It never occurred to me to wonder why there were tanks in the street, I just knew that I didn't like to touch them.

We'd marvel at our favorite supermarket in the Hamra Street area of Ras Beirut, where we lived. Smith's was stocked from floor to ceiling with every type of food from everywhere in the world; not only did they have Frosted Flakes from America, they also had Frosties from England. Wadie and I knew they were the same but would still try to trick my mom into buying us one box of each. We'd then compare the boxes and make fun of the way they had to change the name of the cereal so the British kids could "understand" it.

We would go to Jiddo Emile's house in Brummana, in the mountains above Beirut, where my mother had spent much of her childhood. There were pine logs on the ceiling in the main room and there was Salimee, the cook, who scared me with her blindness, deafness, and deformed fingers. I never went into the kitchen because of her. I would wait for her to poke her head out and tell us to come eat. I don't remember ever seeing more than her head and torso, in fact, but that was more than enough of her. Salimee was, I later found out, my grandfather Emile's cousin. She had contracted typhus as a child, which left her disabled and, later, uneducated and unmarried. My grandfather wanted to help, so he hired her to cook for the family. It was a very nice thing to do, though it didn't make her less scary to me.

In Brummana we would play in the trees and sometimes in the mud. We would help light bonfire made out of pine needles, and we'd sit outside on wicker stools when we ate our dinner. We would play with our many, many cousins, all of whom seemed to be older than I was, and with Tony and Rita, who lived in a tiny, one-room house off the side of our own. Their father worked for my grandfather, and although they lived in that tiny room with their parents, the grounds were as much theirs as they were ours. I thought they were part of our family. In so many ways, they were.

When we were down in Beirut we would go to the Golf Club every day to eat hamburgers, French fries, and ice cream bars, practice our swimming strokes and complicated dives, and run around with my three first cousins on my dad's side: Saree, Ussama, and Karim. I thought that that's how families were supposed to be: big and boundless and all-encompassing. I thought that once two people got married, their separate families would become one big one, everyone would live on the same street, and all the kids would be friends and cousins. The Makdisi boys have always felt more to me like three extra, loving, taunting, wonderful big brothers than cousins who lived five thousand miles away. It seemed like wherever I went in Lebanon, all my grandparents and all my cousins, aunts, and uncles were there too. It was fantastic.

In the summer of 1979, when I was five years old, we went to Spain before Lebanon. Since I was five, I had no idea that our trip to Toledo, Seville, Córdoba, Granada, Torremolinos, and Málaga was a trip through Andalusia. Had I been fifteen, I might have rolled my eyes and complained about the stupidity and weird exclusivity of "seeing only the *Arab* part of Spain," but since I wasn't fifteen, I had a tremendous time.

We flew from Málaga to Beirut. It was our first time there since Teta Wadad, my mother's mother, had died. I worried that Mommy would be sad. I held her hand. I was so happy to see Jiddo Emile and to be back in my favorite place. I loved to sit with him at the dining room table every morning and watch him peel a hard-boiled egg and then mash it into his *labne*, strained yogurt, with *za'atar* and *zeit*, thyme and olive oil. I'd eat my Frosties and ask him questions about the chickens on the roof of the building next door. We lived in a modern building on a modern street, but for some reason there was an old house across the street with chickens and lambs and pigeons on the roof. I was enchanted by this bizarre view into the home of our neighbors, who seemed to live in a storybook. I

loved that Beirut seemed so much like New York most of the time, but that every so often I would notice something magical about the place, like farm animals on roofs, or houses with big gates and enormous trees right next to a hotel or a supermarket. Everyone in Beirut had a balcony off each room (Teta Hilda called them “verandas”). I wished we had one in New York. We had only fire escapes, and the only people who ever used them, according to Nick, our elevator man, were robbers.



WE WENT TO THE GOLF CLUB a lot that summer. My aunt Grace, who was young and cool and wore a gold anklet on her teeny tanned ankle, would sometimes pick Wadie and me up in her little Volkswagen Bug and drive us down the Corniche to the Golf Club. I would stare up at the palm trees that lined the Mediterranean as she drove through the mad traffic, and I’d try to memorize the words to the songs on the radio. I wondered why the lady who sang that one song I kept hearing (“I will survive!”) was so mad at her boyfriend (I had somehow been able to figure out that she wasn’t hoping to survive a fire or cancer), but I didn’t want to ask Grace. I made up my own story as we sped along, would act it out later, in the bathtub, using the *douche téléphone* as my mic.

There was no beach at the Golf Club, just a big pool and lots of places to lounge around. There was a snack bar that had good ice cream and even better French fries. There must have been a golf course somewhere, but I never saw it. No one I knew played golf anyway. Wadie would play with Karim, Ussama, Saree, and their friends, and I would play by myself. Every so often one of my cousins would play with me for a minute, but mostly they just teased me. “*Naji Baji, pudding and pie, kissed the boys and made them cry,*” they would whine again and again, mockingly. But I liked the attention. I was the only girl, and the littlest one, and I was thrilled to be noticed.

One afternoon we heard shooting in the distance. The lifeguards blew their whistles and told our parents to take us into the changing rooms; the fighting was very close. I have no recollection of being afraid or even knowing why we had to go hide in the changing rooms. I thought we were taking a break from the pool; I knew you weren’t supposed to swim if you’d just eaten. When the danger passed, we returned to the pool and splashed around for the rest of the day. Saree dove down into the pool and came up with bullets. We made a pile of them on the side of the pool, next to the filter thing. When it was time to go, I gathered up my towel and went back to the ladies’ changing room with Mommy and Grace. Mommy and I showered together, and then dressed side by side in front of the locker we shared. It took me about three minutes to change back to my T-shirt, shorts, and clogs. Mommy combed and fixed my hair quickly, and when I complained that my barrettes didn’t match, Mommy said, “It’s okay, it’s *the fashion* to wear two different barrettes,” to shut me up.

I rolled my bathing suit up into my towel as she had taught me, and I put the little bundle into my new bag from Spain. It was red and made of cloth, and there was an ice cream cone embroidered on the front of it. I loved having my own bag. Within about ten minutes, I had gone into and come out of the changing room. I didn’t understand why it always took everyone else what seemed like two hours.

I walked in circles around the area in front of the changing rooms, singing to myself. I clambered up and down the huge stone stairway that led to the pool area. And then I slipped and fell down the stairs, somehow twisting my right thumb, banging it against the heavy stone, and ultimately landing with all my weight on top of it.

When we arrived back home, Teta Hilda took one look at my purple, swollen thumb and insisted it was broken, which led my mother and me to the American University hospital, five blocks away. We were walking in the emergency entrance when a car stopped in front of us. The door opened and a young man and woman came out of the back with an older woman between them. Each of the young people held on to one side of the older woman’s body as they guided her toward the hospital door, and

the man held a blood-soaked cloth to the side of her head. She was wailing and he was trying to console her. My eyes widened and Mommy clutched me closer. I could tell from her reaction that this was a really bad thing that I probably shouldn't see. When I asked my mother what had happened to the woman, she said, "I don't know exactly, but I know she will be okay, Naji. She got hit in the head somehow. Don't worry. They will fix her." I knew enough to know that a gun or bomb was involved, that she hadn't just bumped into a cabinet. Even after my mother turned my body away from the sight of her, I twisted my head around to stare fixedly at the woman as she was guided to the elevator, still shrieking, now invoking God. I remember feeling mostly sad for her son and daughter. They were grown-ups but they looked very scared.



That fall I returned to New York, and to a world that could not have been more different. I was starting kindergarten at the Chapin School for girls, on East End Avenue, between 84th and 85th streets.

Because my father was a professor, and because almost everyone in my mom's family was an educator as well, it was important to my parents that my brother and I receive the best education possible. In the 1970s, when I started school, the public schools in the neighborhood where we lived were not up to my parents' standards. In addition, Teta Wadad had been the headmistress of an all-girls school in Beirut for forty years. My mom attended her mother's school, Aliah (which was the first and only secular, national school in the country), and had a wonderful experience there, so she thought I might have a similar one if I attended an all-girls private school in New York. And so I was sent to Chapin.

Chapin is on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, just two blocks away from an equally prestigious girls' school, Brearley, to which I had not been admitted, probably because I had failed to say a single word during my admissions interview. To me, the only discernible difference between the two schools was the color of their uniforms (blue for Brearley, green or yellow for Chapin). But owing partly to the schools' distinct reputations ("intellectual girls" went to Brearley, "society girls" to Chapin) there were more girls in my Columbia community who went to Brearley. And since both were across town (too far to walk), I would carpool with the Brearley girls from my neighborhood.

It didn't take me long to see all the ways in which I was different from my Chapin classmates, who seemed to live very close together. Not only did I live very far away from them, but their homes were much fancier.

In first grade, when most of us started riding school buses, we were divided further by neighborhood. There were two "official" Chapin buses, and a separate one for "the West Siders." The "official" buses were great big green chartered buses, one for "Uptown" (which I think still went only as far north as 96th Street), and one for "Downtown" (which got to about 62nd Street). Early social connections were formed around where you lived and, consequently, which bus you were on. Every morning and afternoon, the two grand green coaches would be parked in front of school, and young Chapin girls in green and yellow pinafores would clamber out of and into their enormous and, to me, elegant doors. There didn't even seem to be anyone actually driving these buses, and I was certain that if they were not driven by robots, their mysterious, hidden drivers were jolly old white-uniformed men who looked like Sam the butcher on *The Brady Bunch*.

The school bus that I was on, however—the "West Side Bus"—was not big and fancy and did not even belong to Chapin like the others did; it was owned and operated by a private company. It was

small, dirty, and yellow.

New York was a very different city when I was growing up from what it is now. In general, families with money lived on the Upper East Side, or they aspired to. There were wealthy families in other parts of the city too, of course, but class lines were much more strictly recognized and kept. The city was not all gentrified; there was a lot of crime. Parts of downtown Manhattan were lovely, but parts were still very dangerous, and the same was true of the Upper West Side. Parents who raised their kids downtown were generally in the arts, and the ones who raised their kids on the Upper West Side were generally more liberal, more intellectual, and more Jewish. Most of my East Side friends' parents had gone to Ivy League schools and were very successful at what they did, but what they did usually involved Wall Street firms and large corporations. There were few pockets of the city that were completely safe, but even though a kid could get robbed on the Upper East Side just as easily as anywhere else, for the most part it was the safe place to raise your kids, if you could afford to live there.

Across Central Park (a den of crooks and drug addicts and thieves if you went to the wrong part at the wrong time and without a grown-up) was the Upper West Side, which had many more run-down sections then. At its highest end, the Upper West Side turned into Harlem, a place that was still almost entirely African American. Everything about the city was more segregated at the time, and for the most part, we all stayed where we lived and felt we belonged.

Between the Upper West Side and Harlem, there is a little neighborhood that spans about fifteen blocks north to south (from 110th Street to 125th Street), and maybe four blocks east to west. This neighborhood is where Columbia University sits, and it is where I grew up.

It was clear to me that none of the kids in my building were allowed to walk farther uptown than our street—120th—without a grown-up (not that the grown-ups ever went that far uptown, either) and that the kids who did live a block or two farther up mostly went to public school and their parents weren't affiliated with Columbia. I didn't need to be well versed in social stratification to figure out that among families I lived near, mine was one of the "fancier" ones, but among the ones at my school, mine was one of the shabbier ones. It was all pretty well laid out for me by geography.

I began to keep a running list in my head of everything about me that seemed even the slightest bit different from others at school. Some of my classmates had one parent who spoke another language, but I was pretty sure I was the only one who had two. If one of my friends asked an innocent question like "What street do you live on?" I would recoil in shame. I lived on "Morningside Drive." My address didn't sound at all like anyone else's; there was neither a specific street number on which my building sat (for example, 65th) nor an avenue location for it (Park, Madison, Second, Third, and so on) that any of my friends had ever heard of. I loved my building and my neighborhood friends but I didn't understand why none of them were at my school. Was I being sent to Chapin as a punishment? I didn't understand why I was put into a place where I might not really belong. I loved reading and learning and didn't so much mind being there during the day, but I became consumed with cataloging only what was different about me. Slowly I began to think of little else, day in and day out. It became a compulsion: Why do Ashley and Katie have the same headband and I don't? Why does everyone have a dog or a cat and I have chameleons? Why doesn't anyone know what hummus is? Why do I have Arabic bread? Why is my brother's name weird? Why is *my* name weird? I started to dread going to school. I felt like a complete freak.

Because I was the first one on my small school bus to be picked up every morning—because I lived farthest away—I woke in the darkness of the early dawn and rode alone on the bus with Frank the driver, who called me "Snots-a-lot." Many English speakers have trouble with the "j" and "l" right next to each other in my name's spelling, and will add an extra syllable, making my name "Nadj-uh-luh." (Italians add this syllable too, but I don't mind it because it sounds like they're speaking Italian.)

Frank was one of many people who thought my name was pronounced “Nadj-uh-luh” and, unfortunately, he decided that “Nadj-uh-luh” rhymed with “Snots-a-lot.” Thus, the first of what were to be many derogatory nicknames for me was born. Being with Frank, alone, on that bus, every single morning, all the way from 119th Street to 101st Street (where the next girl got on), I was overcome with loneliness and isolation. My school and the girls who attended it seemed to exist in a different world: a world that woke under the light and warmth of the sun, a world where families sat at the breakfast table together and ate eggs and toast and played with their golden retriever.

My heart ached with envy as I dressed in the cold dark and thought of my classmates, still sleeping peacefully in their canopied beds for another hour or so. From my bedroom window, I could see across Morningside Park to the East Side, and I could watch the sun rise over the other half of the city, where I knew they all lived. Daddy made me a Thomas’ English muffin with butter and jam, and gave me a glass of orange juice, and for those few minutes, I always felt safe and happy. But as the clock hands inched closer to seven a.m., a lump would grow in my throat. Fear and loneliness rose from my toes into the pit of my stomach. The thought of being torn away from my parents was unimaginable.

Yet I gathered from the grown-ups around me that I was supposed to be happy. It felt like they were trying to convince me with their eager looks and optimistic waves that Frank was driving me from prison to Candy Land, and I should be grateful and thankful that I was allowed to go. My thoughts began to multiply and grow in horror: What if something happened, and I was stuck at school? What if they divided up the city as they had done in Beirut and I wasn’t allowed back to my side? I would be alone forever with people who looked different from me, who didn’t hug me, and Mommy and Daddy would be gone.

And then I found out, upon inviting them over to play, that some of my friends were not *allowed* to come to my house unless my parents could guarantee that we would be picked up from school by one of them and taken safely to the door of my apartment in a car or a taxi. That’s how egregious they found our Harlem-bordering neighborhood. Likewise, if one of the parents of said friend could not physically come to my house after the playdate in a car or a taxi to pick up their daughter, a playdate *chez moi* was completely out of the question. Babysitters were not allowed to substitute for parents on these occasions. Of course, my mother thought it was all ridiculous, and she scoffed at the offensive restrictions, while I sank into myself, feeling ashamed for even thinking that my house was worth coming over to.

I quickly figured out, based on who invited me to her house, and how friendly her parents were to mine, whom I could risk inviting over, and the number stayed small and exclusive for the entire nine years I attended Chapin. My parents found the whole situation laughable and stupid, and told me that the parents of the girls who weren’t allowed at my house were snobs, and I shouldn’t want anything to do with them anyway. When I was ten, my father overheard my friend ask me on the phone if I could find some tumbleweed in my neighborhood for our prairie diorama, and he roared with laughter for a good hour. How was she supposed to know there wasn’t any tumbleweed on Morningside Drive? She’d never been to my house!



That I was from the wrong side of the *global* tracks as well became clearer as the '80s began to unfold, and “Beirut” became synonymous with “war.”

As a little Chapin girl in the early 1980s, it was *Lebanese* that I never wanted to be. The “Palestinian” thing never made sense. It was this funny word that my dad would use to describe himself, and I didn’t even know it referred to a place. It could have been a dietary practice, a blood type, or a disease. My mother never described herself as a Palestinian, so I did not know that because Daddy was one, I was one too. Frankly, it seemed that as long as I wasn’t from behind the Iron Curtain, where it was ice-cold, and where people waited in line for food and spoke like robots, I wasn’t a threat. There were also very few Jewish girls in my school, and certainly no Israelis, so my lack of “Arab pride” was not completely unfounded.

And then I gradually came to learn what an Arab was and, consequently, spent a good portion of the rest of my childhood avoiding the fact that I might actually be one. It was 1979 when I began school, and the attacks of September 11 were twenty-two years away, but the words “Arab” and “Muslim” were already synonymous with “crazy, violent terrorists.” Palestinians had already hijacked planes and killed Israeli athletes at the Olympics, and Lebanon was on the front page of the paper every day, engulfed in flames and fire. I was both too young to understand and hadn’t been schooled in the intricacies of the Lebanese Civil War, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and the historic context of things, so when my friends made passing comments about Beirut being the most awful, dangerous place on earth, when they asserted that the Lebanese were all violent, machine-gun-wielding lunatics (“except for your family, Najla. But you’re really American anyway”), and that Muslims were “weird angry” people, I couldn’t really counter them with anything but a silent, sad nod.

And was I really Arab? I didn’t understand how I could be. My father, the English professor, spoke Arabic sometimes with my mom and had family in Lebanon but sounded and seemed perfectly American to me. In addition, we were, as I have explained, Christian—Episcopal Baptist Presbyterian Quakers. Many of the girls I went to school with were Episcopalians, and I clung joyfully to the fact that I was a baptized Episcopalian, and dropped that piece of precious information into whatever conversation I could. For a sensitive young girl acutely aware of her differences, this one tiny similarity meant an enormous amount. So I didn’t go to the church on the Upper East Side that all my friends went to (or any church for that matter). The mere fact that *I could have gone there* was enough to save me from total rejection.

“Are you Jewish or Christian?” became the question of the month at school.

“Christian,” I’d say with relief. I felt terribly sad for the Jewish girls, who were in the minority,

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