

Tuesdays at Starbucks

When coffee tables listen



TONY FEGHALI

To the beautiful souls who have shared their
precious time with me.

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Introduction

Lebanon was in turmoil again. During these times, cafés became the go-to places for people to gather, discuss, and share laughs or frustrations. The Starbucks near my house was where I found myself most days, blending into the fabric of regulars.

There, memories of Mrs. Jundi, Istez Sayah, Sister Sheila, and other language and arts teachers came flooding back, rekindling the warmth and inspiration they had instilled in me during my teenage years. The itch to write came back. With it came the realization that it had therapeutic effects on me. (Along with shoe shining. Don't ask.)

Thank you, Tatiana; my first encounter. The one who helped me take my first step. Thank you all who came after "Tati the Yogi" and sat with me for a conversation. This human has a richer life because of you.

This book was not in my plans.

I resisted many suggestions to compile and publish it. It was the process that I enjoyed--the regularity of going to Starbucks, meeting new people, connecting with their souls, and the privilege of delving into their lives. My joy came from seeing the spark in their eyes as they spoke. From the happy or regretful smiles, from the gazes, as they looked through me and recalled their life stories, I gained my energy. The experience was endearing, respectful, and trusting. I looked forward to the surprises and twists and turns in their tales.

This book was not in my plans.

Still, my encounters leading to it brought me perspective. I learned to listen. Actively listen. I learned to write authentically and creatively. With every new person I met, I understood more deeply that we're all navigating our challenges, trying to figure things out, or simply surviving until the next sunrise.

Amid chaos, instability, and unpredictability, I enjoyed the regularity of publishing. Every Tuesday for a whole year and some, I made sure one blog post went online. Every Tuesday. Ah! The beauty of predictability and focus when in a storm. The reward of knowing one's anchor in an ever-shifting world.

Somehow, after many months of posting my last blog post, God and friends conspired to make it happen. The stories nudged me to do something. The collective human condition of forty-eight wonderful souls gently softened my coconut stance. The feeling of our shared connection as we spoke around a coffee table sweetly whispered in my ear to act.

Love waits until we're ready.

This book was not in my plans.

Love made it happen.

CHAPTER ONE

TATI, THE YOGI

DISCOVERING HER NORTH STAR.

She'd walk in, order her coffee, head to her usual seat, open her choice of the book of the week, and read away. Two to three hours later, she's still at it. Earbuds in. Sometimes not. She comes across as fresh, quiet, introverted, and a deep thinker.

I ask her with a grin: "So, what's your story?"

"I don't know where to begin. I always loved the ritual of getting my morning coffee as a routine, even when I had my full-time job. I've often come to this branch to do freelance work. I come here to check email messages and read. You know, it's getting out of the house routine."

I discovered that Tatiana is a researcher, a writer, a Yoga teacher, and a public health professional. My chat with her was about everything except public health.

ON READING

She reads self-development books. She's mainly into non-fiction. Her go-to and all-time favorite book is Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*. She finds it insightful, poetic, and meaningful. She bubbles up as she explains that this book is essential for everyone, even non-avid readers. Currently, she's into Yoga books — a lot. She suggests checking out *Inner Engineering*:

**WHEN YOU
TEACH YOGA,
YOU HAVE TO
BE CONSISTENT.
YOU HAVE
TO LIVE THE
PRACTICE. YOU
HAVE TO BE THE
PRACTICE.**

A Yogi's Guide to Joy and The Yamas & Niyamas: Exploring Yoga's Ethical Practice.

THE YOGA TEACHER

Yoga started with her ten years ago as a junior at the American University of Beirut. She took a course at random and got hooked. She kept at it when she traveled to do her Masters. It helped her get through the stress and physical anxiety.

"I like Yoga because, for me, it's a guide to living a good life, knowing your values, and living with integrity. I strive to live ethically and keep in shape. The physical and philosophical work in unison. One has to first begin and understand the principles before exercising the physical."

She believes that inspiring students is not through books alone and not by teaching only. Yoga helps to purify your body and the energy channels. It's trendy now. For her, people need to be aware that Yoga is more profound than many think. Yoga starts with the individual to be self-aware. Yoga helps you be mindful of your patterns. She subscribes to the principle of non-violence.

"When you teach Yoga, you have to be consistent. You have to live the practice. You have to be the practice."

HER STRUGGLES

She struggles with instability in her life. She seeks space to meditate and recharge for her students' sake. She yearns for consistency. Dissipating energy in all directions drains her. Recharging is essential to get to a point where she can share abundantly.

"Why can't we just respect each other? When you respect yourself, you're able to respect others. We lack compassion in this world. It's like people are always angry."

It starts with you. Be aware. Be aware of yourself. You can be blind to your mind and your patterns, or you can be mindful of it.

Dealing with materialism is another challenge she deals with. She explains that Lebanon associates your value with the bag and shoes you're wearing. For men, it is about the car you drive. Why should my value be associated with the bag I'm carrying? The pressure is not the same elsewhere. This is a battle for her unless you live in Beverly Hills or The Hamptons. Her parents did not raise her that way.

ON IDENTIFYING HER NORTH STAR

She believes that life is about learning. She's continuously examining herself. A bit too much, maybe. She's still on the journey of discovering her North Star. The one thing that she refers back to when everything else is shifting. Recently, a lot is changing for her.

"I was so attached to what was on my resume. My whole life was centered around academia. And achieving things.

And getting the highest score. And being on the honor roll every semester. I had fear in me. I had to always be good, or else I wasn't worthy." It's changed for her. Her relationship with things moved on as she let go of a lot. She studied public health because her dream was to help people struggling with malnutrition, poverty, and food insecurity. Then, she realized that her career did not allow her to get enough hands-on experience. She realized she doesn't have to have a particular title to be the person she wants to be. To do this or to do that.

“That’s my purpose now. To help people. Versus having something on my resume. I’m going through some sort of late adolescence. I was kind of always so focused and “teta-like.” I didn’t go out. I didn’t have much life outside work and academics. After graduate school, I started discovering more of myself. Now I’m 29. I love traveling solo, living the life that I was missing. I used to be a Monica, and now I’m a Pheobe. I totally let go. I’m more like “ouououou ...” It was never me.

She loves to write. She claims she’s a writer focusing on projects and goals that mean something to her. Since she’s living in a country and a context where things are so unpredictable, she learned to be resilient and flexible and live day by day.

Her generation is very different than her parents’. She had to learn that, and that’s OK. They were married at 25 and had a house, and they had ... (insert your own list here). She understands that people have their paths and timing. And that’s OK, too.

“My North Star? For me, it’s writing. Even more than Yoga. If I lose myself in one task, it’s writing. Even though there are things I’m passionate about, if there is one thing I remember doing since I was very young, it was always writing. I wanted to be a journalist. I was encouraged not to do that. It wasn’t practical. So, it’s always been there. I write about what I’m learning and share it with people.”

She knows that writing is for her, and it doesn’t matter where her words appear. It’s about writing and sharing with others. She feels swept away by the words when she reads someone else’s work. She always connected with them. While she doesn’t know where she’s going with it. Yet, she’s confident that writing is closest to being her North Star.

She loves wordsmithing so much that she feels a shift

when she completes writing something. She feels a change in energy and a big release. It’s like something has left you. And you still feel very energized somehow. I guess that is how you know you’re doing something you love.

AND IT’S A WRAP

I spent a good forty minutes chatting with Tati. She was so generous in sharing part of her experiences with me. I could tell that she was starting to peel those layers. It’s a tough call to decide what to share with other people. Her drive, for sure, is to help others by sharing lessons learned on the way.

We all have our stories. I wonder what’s yours.

CHAPTER TWO

LASER- FOCUSED RALPH

INVEST WITH HIM.

From where I was sitting, I saw this person immersed and taking notes on his iPad, highlighting in yellow and underlining. I've been eyeing the iPad for a while, deciding whether to get one. I ask: "Is this the 11" or 12.9?" He looks up, takes a second, and puts on the biggest smile. I recognized him. I can't remember the name, but the face, for sure. My recollection is positive. Emotions are always the last to forget. I said: "I taught you. Didn't I?"

"Yes. At AUB. Ralph Khattar. And I love it [the iPad]."

We hit it off and talked for a good hour. Listening to his story since I saw him last was such a pleasure. In summary, he is laser-focused on what he wants and where to go. He will become a safe and profitable investor.

WHAT HE DOES AND WHAT HE'S PASSIONATE ABOUT

"I found a passion for finance, the stock market, and investing at an early age. It happened that I went to AUB right

I'VE LEARNED
MUCH MORE
THAN I
THOUGHT I
WOULD.

after the 2008 market crash. I was very interested in why this happened, what triggered it, its impact, and how you avoid it.”

He’s determined to learn about, experience, and become an investor. He loves the end-goal and anything in between that gets him there. He reads about it regularly and vigorously. The investment interest takes him a lot of time, yet he enjoys and loves everything about it. He calls it his hobby.

“Who reads a 500-page book on the Big Debt Crisis in his spare time? Probably, no one has read this entire book!

Ray Dalio analyzed every worldwide debt crisis over the past 100 years.”

He speaks about it at a rate of 10 words per second and with such enthusiasm! Often, the problem of passion and work collide. Until they align as you strive for it, one has to work for a living. He’s also going through an MBA program at The Wharton School.

“Even though I’m not doing it [investing] full time as a career, I’m hoping one day I’ll practice it professionally.”

He considers investing to be his biggest hobby and loses the sense of time when practicing and pursuing it. He thinks the way you’re wired has a lot to do with what you’re passionate about. He sees the world with a finance lens. He used to carry stocks. Now, it’s bonds and currencies.

HOW HE BECAME A PARTNER TO WARREN’S (BUFFETT, THAT IS)

When he left his work at a hedge fund, he kept trading. He bought shares in Berkshire Hathaway and became a shareholder with Mr. Buffet, of whom he is a huge fan. Every year, the

company organizes a shareholder meeting. Ralph makes sure not to miss the three-day event where 40,000 of Warren’s closest friends converge.

“I was in the midst of a big consulting project and had deliverables. I still found time to drive from Chicago to Omaha for eight hours to attend the meeting. I’ll show you [he flips through pictures on his iPad]. Warren and Charlie sat for eight hours; people asked them questions, and they answered.”

He bought his way into that exclusive club where he gets to learn from and network with the best. Smart. Very smart!

HIS APPROACH TO INVESTING

He believes that the investment business can be learned by reading. For example, a great way to learn about investing is to read everything Warren Buffett has written. To watch every YouTube video he has ever appeared in.

But also, one of the most essential skills one needs as an investor is to understand businesses and develop the ability to distinguish between excellent, good, fair, and bad business. One way to develop that ability is to go work for one. There are lots of fascinating businesses being created. If you can be one of the early employees, you’ll learn a lot about how a business works. In his opinion, this would be the best experience one can get to be a fundamental investor, ultimately.

BUILDING UP HIS SKILL-SET

He continues to build his skill set by continuously reading and recently joining The Wharton School. Of the 800 graduate

students at the School, he was the only one who expressed a keen interest in accounting. He believes that accounting is the language of business and is the most important to master. After all, financial statements come from a company's accounting reports.

The one person who chose accounting.

"I was very fortunate to have been admitted to Wharton. He took advantage of the endless resources the School had to offer. He tested out of all the required introductory classes, allowing him to take many advanced courses in accounting, finance, law, and psychology."

"I've learned much more than I thought I would."

ON STUDYING IN LEBANON BEFORE THE US

"I recommend that Lebanese students stick to an undergrad in Lebanon."

He studied business and engineering for his undergrad at AUB. It would have been very hard for him to jump from a situation where he was close to family, ate his mom's food, spoke French at school, and had friends in a totally different place. A place with different weather, living alone, and on burgers and pizza. Going straight from a French system to an American one would have been more difficult.

"I think the ramp and the bridge that AUB provided me served my situation very well. It's a smooth transition from high school to the US. I recommend it."

I DUG UP MY EMAILS

I have this habit of keeping every shred of electronic data I can. In 1993, I lost everything and started all over again. Now, I back up and then back up the backup. I found a few exchanges

from Ralph as of Dec 12, 2011.

Hello, Dr. Feghali. I'm interested in taking INFO 250 next semester. Could you share with me the syllabus? Could you also do the same for INFO 220? Thank you. Best, Ralph.

Dear Ralph, Why don't you drop by to discuss both courses and your interests. Regards, Tony.

Thank you for your reply, Doctor. Do you have office hours today? Best, Ralph.

Ralph, I can see you between 2 and 3 pm. Let me know. Tony.

Perfect, I'll come to your office at 2. Thank you for your time. Best, Ralph.

He ended up taking the flagship Google Online Marketing course. Cordial, persistent, curious, and an astute shopper. Eight years later, he's still at it!

HOW DO YOU GET VALIDATED BEING A MOM?

CHAPTER THREE

ALL-IN CORINNE

MOTHERHOOD (EXTRA STRENGTH).

Her hazel, smiling eyes glittered as soon as she mentioned her daughter. Giselle, she's four, her only child.

"I'm almost 38. Some moments in life leave an impact, but nothing comes close to the change after becoming a mom. That's the moment that most affected me. So, yeah. She's my favorite topic."

Raising a child was more difficult than Corinne imagined. Especially the way she goes about it and how involved she gets. She started working right after college. Then, she decided to become a full-time mom as soon as she got pregnant and for the first three years of her daughter's life. She had the day care option. She still chose the traditional approach, maximizing mom's time with Giselle.

"To quit your job and focus solely on a baby. To be with the kid the whole time is beautiful but demanding. It's better and harder than I imagined. I'm not sure if I can do it again. Another 3 or 4 years? It would be a lot!"

"Could you have worked half-time?" I ask. Yes, but she's also unsure how focused she would have been on both tasks. Her daughter has filled up her life. There was no space for anyone else, she claims (with a giggle). I had to ask: "How does your

husband feel about that?” They both decided that one child was it.

WOMEN’S OPINION ON WOMEN, WORK, AND HOME

There is a judgment on women by women. A mom with a job looks at the one who stays home as lucky and privileged. A stay home mom also sees a mother who works as fortunate. Each one sees the other as leading a more fulfilling life.

Motherhood and work accomplishments serve to validate a woman. While at work, she would disconnect and focus on her job. When home, she starts a second shift. As a 24/7 stay-home mom, you do the same tasks repeatedly with little socializing. “How do you get validated being a mom?” she asks.

“So I felt that letting go of work to be a full-time mom would be more fulfilling, and it was. I also understand women who choose to keep a good focus on their careers and those who don’t have a choice. There is no one magic formula for being a good mother.”

A woman may destroy her career by leaving her work for 3–4 years, which is the case for Corinne. Or so she thought. She believes that different moms can do it differently, and it’s okay.

THE GUILT TRIP

She was stuck on feeling guilty for leaving her if anything happened to them (mama and Papa). At the same time, she wonders how happy Giselle could be if she had siblings. A same age cousin to Giselle creates fun and excellent dynamics for both kids.

She feels guilty because she wants to give her best. “Every parent

does. Not only moms,” she says. You don’t want to show them you cannot control your temper; at the same time, you want them to know that it’s ok to have one. You don’t want to be on your phone too much, either. Anything that goes wrong in your child’s life, you can find a way to feel responsible for it. She used to feel guilty when she went out to lunch or dinner or if she wasn’t the one putting her to bed. Now that her daughter is four and she’s back to work, the dynamic is changing.

THEORY-BASED CHILD REARING

Corinne is impacted by the method described in The Continuum Concept. The author lived with tribes. She saw how they raised their children more naturally than our modern approach. Slow detachment happens in the tribe between a mother and her child. When a child gets enough in the early years, he or she becomes ready to walk away, explore things, and be more independent. In Liedloff’s book, the mom carries the child around to explore and play. Gradually, through a natural progression, the child detaches from the parent.

Corinne believes that this approach would give Giselle a sense of security. She did not want her daughter to want more when Mom was unavailable. She believes that it’s a healthier approach.

AND ON SHE GOES

One day, she will have mixed feelings when Giselle becomes a teenager and starts distancing herself. Corinne feels that she will be ready to embrace it.

She is the type who goes all in. She contemplates that she should have taken time for herself, but things happened that way, and she doesn’t regret it. The professional break ended

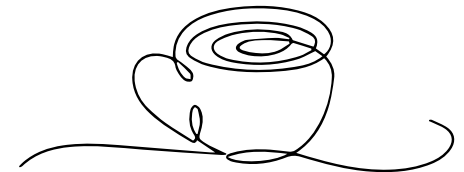
up steering her in a new direction. She's restarting in a much better place than where she left off.

"So that's it. I am trying to find the balance between how much I would do for my daughter without completely dismissing myself."

They chose to leave Qatar for their baby's sake and wanted to raise her despite the chaos in Lebanon. She wants her to be free and in a somewhat less traditional society. They lost friends in the process. The distance and not putting effort into keeping the relationships did not help.

"I forgot myself willingly. I decided to be just a mom for three years. Nothing else. Work, friends, family, everything was put aside. I was just a mom. I feel lucky that I got to do it."

"Who is Corinne? What am I known for? Hmm, I wonder. Since 2015, and obviously from our conversation, I'm a mom This is number 1. And now, I am a permaculturist. A Permie."



**EVERY PERSON
HAS A MISSION
IN LIFE AND
WILL BE GOOD
AT SOMETHING.
PARENTS AND
PEOPLE WILL
PULL YOU
TOWARDS
PLACES YOU
DON'T WANT TO
GO TO.**

CHAPTER FOUR

SOUL- SEARCHING ZIAD

AN ARCHITECT'S JOURNEY WITH WORK, NON-PROFIT, FAMILY, AND FAITH.

It took a few weeks before we started talking. Ziad would sit on one end, and I would be on the other. Whoever shows up earlier on a given morning takes dibs. I'm unsure how we started; I like where we are today. Some souls come in and embrace you. Some stay; some dwindle, leaving smiles behind.

AT SCHOOL AND UNI

Ziad's been through two schools (SSCC and NDJ) and one university (USEK) and wasn't a star student. He's eccentric, very selective, with a frail memory.

"I still remember my mother crying out of frustration as she attempted to help me study. Especially in memorization. I'm not good with names."

He excels at spatial geometry and would spend hours solving exercises. He ended up ace'ing his exams. Maybe it's in his genes, as his father was a math educator. As a kid artist, he loved

sketching and drawing, especially portraits of older people. Dictation was not his forte. He would strike a zero grade by the third line of any text. At uni, he would fail or get a perfect score on his architecture projects. You can say he has issues with authority and does not like to be judged. The education system did not understand and failed him. He excelled despite the system.

“Every person has a mission in life and will be good at something. Parents and people will pull you towards places you don’t want to go to.”

Sometimes, skipping class can teach you more than attending. He fondly remembers his university rector, Fr Joseph Moaness. When they would skip class, Fr. Joseph would show up and sit with them on the main stairs. He would talk and encourage them to use the time to get to know each other better and to build relationships. He inspired them to build mutual understanding and trust.

THE ARCHITECT AND THE BUSINESSMAN

Faculty of Musicology. School of music. Opera house.

He never worked for anyone. He currently runs a successful business designing and developing properties. Given the current situation in Lebanon, he’s venturing into a parallel operation in Europe.

“It’s never too late. Everything I’ve done so far gives me enough ammo to travel. I will be going back and forth for extended periods.”

PART OF HIM IS IN A NON-PROFIT

With family and friends, he launched an initiative that grew into a non-profit Min Albi (In Arabic: From my heart).

Among the many things they’ve done for the past two decades is securing food boxes for 100 families every month. They also go into run-down facilities and build happy spaces for kids and the elderly.

He believes that we are all born with God-given gifts, and we are responsible for using them. You can give time, money, or talent. “Part of me is there,” he says. For example, not everyone can spend time with or know how to care for the elderly or children. Still, one can contribute in other ways.

If there is something good you can do, you have to do it. Sometimes, a gentle word or a smile can make a big difference in someone’s life. They need to feel that they are as valuable as you. Even if you have no energy, sometimes spending 15 mins with someone can make a big difference.

FATHER AND FAITH

“A turning point in my life when my dad passed away abruptly. It’s been 10 years. The way I look at life has changed. Some people step away from their faith. I got closer.”

He feels his father with him in everything he does.

“He was my father and my friend,” he says. He was a loving, calm, joyful, friendly, and always smiling teacher. When Ziad gets in a tight place, he talks to him. He would intentionally do things that would make his father happy. “Hey! Is it to your liking?” he occasionally asks. His dad’s passing got him into a joyful journey of self-discovery.

He started questioning everything, including the meaning of life. There should be a next; otherwise, his faith is all for nothing. His pilgrimage to Our Lady of Medjugorje enriched his soul. He’s

taking lessons on Bible reading. He believes in the goodness of people and respecting them. He thinks all saints were continually searching for God. Saint Charbel and Padre Pio did not give up, despite their hard lives. The more he questioned, the more things got stirred up. He will not believe it just because they told him so. He struggles with free will, destiny, and God's plan.

“My earthly father was dedicated and would have done anything for his two sons. God tells me that He loves me even more. I love God.”

Since we carry God's love in us, we are responsible for spreading it. He looks away for a second, smiles, and promises to have all the remaining questions with him the day he meets his Creator.

FAMILY AND SETTLING DOWN

“Do you plan to form your own immediate family?” I ask. For him, the family is sacred and needs a lot of energy. He won't start his own until he is ready and finds the one: The mother of his children and his partner in life. And no, there is no right age to get married.

For now, his family is the extended one, including his mother, his brother's family, and others. He would do anything and everything for them.

This interesting coffee-sipping, book-reading character is a hard worker dedicated to his profession, to social good, to seeking God, the face of Jesus, and to enjoying the company of talented, intelligent, and beautiful women. Still waiting to see him with one. Rough Life!

His latest readings:

- How They Started: Global Brands Edition,
- Mère Teresa's Fraternité Universelle,

- Conversations with God,
- A Gentle Thunder: Hearing God Through the Storm,
- And the New Testament, of course.

**I MEAN, YOU
BARELY KNOW
YOURSELF AT
18.**

CHAPTER FIVE

DID YOU KNOW HOW TO PLAN YOUR LIFE AT 18?

**TINA: SHARP MIND. CAPABLE HANDS.
BIG HEART. CALIBRATED EARS :-)**

“What’s MY story? I’m too young to have a story,” she says. I know Tina. I’ve known her since she was a baby. I’m like an uncle to her.

It starts with...

WHEN THE FIELD OF STUDY IS NOT FOR YOU

After two years of biology, she jumped into nursing. Biology as a step to pre-med was not for her. She took the risk and changed, making all the difference. The routine of finishing morning classes and studying from 2 pm until 4 am was not her thing.

“One day after an exam, I started thinking, is it even worth it? I think 2 years later, the hype of becoming a doctor faded away.”

Her drive was, and still is, to help people. Being a physician was the obvious first choice. Reaching a doctor’s degree would

have taken too long. She did not like the environment of its blind, competitive side. She did not appreciate a spirit where you had to get the grades at any cost.

HER GUTSY DECISION

Tina was talking at a zillion words per minute on a corner table at Starbucks after a very tiring day. She radiated energy, positivity, and hope. Her smile and caring aura would lift any person up. It can lift an elephant! More like a baby elephant. Love her focus. Love her drive.

So, she went into the library after an exam, sat on a couch, fired up her laptop, and started looking for jobs that help people. She read about a neonatal nursing program. "I read it again and was like this is what I want to do." Five minutes later, she called and told her sister she was changing majors. And that was it. She contacted AUB and got her application started.

"I meant it, and I did it. I think it was an accumulation of things I hadn't thought about before. I was constantly stressed."

Being around doctors and in hospitals, she appreciated the much-needed value nurses provide. A nurse has constant contact with patients. Nurses stick around when other professionals rotate.

RESISTANCE FROM THE LEAST EXPECTED PEOPLE

Her grandma was against her decision. Nursing, for Téta, isn't a profession. In her world, nursing did not need a university degree. It took some time to explain how advanced nursing is nowadays. Teta is now on board.

Steadfast and a rock-of-a-father supported despite the

projected financial burden.

I believe her late mom is working her magic on everyone and everything to make it happen for her. Mom's traces of energy, work ethic, giggles, loud laughs, and humility. All from the heavens, for Tina.

Her outlook on life is healthy. Two more years of studying is not the end of the world. The job market is not going anywhere, and she'll eventually graduate. Too much pressure is put on her generation. Why should they finish college by the age of 21?

"How can they expect you to know what you want to do for the rest of your life at 18? I mean, you barely know yourself at 18."

She's not there yet but on a very happy journey. She loves it. Dorothy on the yellow brick road. She's excited to learn and has never skipped a class

SKILLS ACQUIRED ON THE WAY

The most important skill she learned so far is to listen and pay attention to others. She believes that nurses have to constantly listen to patients. Something critical may be revealed, and "it can just click, and pow; problem solved."

Tina says that she's an introvert. Nursing pushed her to make conversation and out of her comfort zone. It's a challenge she took and enjoys.

"I think to be able to chat with someone who's sick and at a low point in their life, lying in a hospital bed, and make their day a little better; I think it's amazing. It's great that you can do that with a simple conversation. Some patients are in the hospital for a day. Some are in there for months. If they can't feel comfortable, getting better becomes much more difficult."

One day, a professor addressed their class: "You're sitting with

a patient, especially the older ones, and they're telling their story starting in 1930. You have to sit and listen. They only want someone to talk to. Most often, you have several other patients to get to. Excuse yourself and tell them you'll be back to get the full story. No matter what, you come back. I don't care if the shift is over. I don't care if you have to go home. If you told your patient you were coming back, you go back. You will sit, and you will listen to the entire story."

I like that prof!

She feels that there's so much she needs to deal with: Attending and preparing for classes, clinical simulations, and constant evaluations. She's under pressure all week. She has to be on top of her game. Every single week.

REFUELING TINA

Volunteering as a Cub Scout leader is very rewarding. She gets energized when she feels first-hand what it's like to impact 8 to 12-year-old cub scouts. Change in them happens so quickly; it's incredible. Every time she meets with them, she gets refueled. It gets her excited to graduate and start working with kids.

She goes to the gym for high-intensity interval training. She started it to get healthier, and now she's hooked. Six times a week for 45 minutes. "It's amazing!" she says.

For fun, she goes out with friends and family. That's about all the time she has left. It's going out, hanging out, spending time with people. Sometimes, she crashes. The lazy Tina takes over one day a week. Binge Netflix, anyone?

NOW WHAT?

It's strict, but she likes it. There's no skipping class. They know every single one of them. No chewing gum. It's not professional. No feet on a table. It's not professional. Everything you do now is so significant for later. On the reward side, they're currently picking out stuff for their hospital rotations.

"You get to pick your stethoscope, navy blue scrubs, white shoes, and penlight. It's so exciting! We're even thrilled about buying medical scissors, which is ridiculous! It's like a child on Christmas getting a load of gifts in one shot!"

Tina's excitement stems from getting to the hospital, meeting with patients, and being able to put what she's learned into practice.

"It is a rigorous system. It isn't easy. People don't realize that. I feel nothing can hold me back. I love it so much. I enjoy it, and I'm so excited to start working."

The same way she walked in to talk with me, she dashed out to do something else. All in 30 mins. If a nurse is necessary, wouldn't you want one like her?

CHAPTER SIX

GUS: SON OF MARTHA

FROM BEIRUT TO JOHANNESBURG.

His hard, strong face does not invite you at first. You would think he's intentionally balancing his wife's wild and loud side. This South African coconut has the most hardened shell with the sweetest and most tender inside. The Beirut city boy is essentially a Lebanese strong-handed mountain man. A frowning straight shooter of minimal words. Smile and say hello (Marhaba مرحبا) to him, and the giant would turn into a warm Fondant au Chocolat with a broad, loving, all-giving smile.

Gus (Ghassan) was born (in 1959) in Achrafieh, before the war. He grew up on an old street in a traditional neighborhood of Burj Abi Haidar between Mazraa and Mousaitbeh, specifically, in Hay elRoumi on Bachir Joumblatt Street.

I thought if it's in Beirut, then it's close enough. Not to Gus. Every street, every corner, and every tree had a meaning and is a landmark. For a child growing up in Beirut, a street over is like traveling to another world altogether.

THE BEIRUT HE KNEW

In the '60s and early '70s, Beirut still had orchards of prickly

WHAT DID
PEOPLE
CALL ME? ...
GHASSAN, SON
OF?

pear trees, pastures with pine trees, and enough space for mulberry trees for kids to climb on and eat its fruits. No buildings. Only houses, they had. Grandmother, grandfather, aunts, uncles, and neighbors were all around in homes connected by dirt roads. He remembers when they were building the first bridge. The famous Cola bridge. Houses are no more. Tall buildings won the war.

“I was 15 years old when the war started. We would return from school, play on the streets, then go home. If we were late, we got a spanking. You get used to the spanking. The whole neighborhood played together. Everyone knew everyone.”

SON OF MARTHA IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

It was loud at Starbucks that day. He leaned forward and riddled me: “What did people call me? ... Ghassan, son of?” I said: “What’s your father’s name?”

“Moussa. But no. They would say Ghassan, son of Martha. We were all called after our mothers. You never know in Beirut. When we were children, we did not understand. Later on, we got it.”

We both cracked a loud laugh.

He had fond memories of the times. If someone got engaged, everyone knew. If someone got sick, everyone knew. When he was 7 or 8, he would walk 500 meters up to St. Elias Church, where he started serving mass at age 9.

THE SAYEGH SIBLINGS

They would walk up to school at 6:30 in the morning and return at 4 pm. Gus would lead the six Sayegh children through a short dirt trail on their walk to school. He looked sideways and started remembering.

“We would cross a lot of prickly pear trees, then by the Korean Embassy. It was an impressive building. They looked different from us. We did that from Kindergarten through ninth grade. Wadih ElKhoury was our principal. He died 6 or 7 years ago.”

They were 3 boys and 3 girls. It was considered a small family. I experienced the longest pause of our conversation and felt the pain, but decided not to probe further.

“Now, we are 3 and 2. My brothers Elie and Georges. Elie was killed in South Africa, 2006. The price of being an immigrant,” he told me.

We used to throw stones at each other. Fought, then made up. They would get cut, go to the doctor, get sewn, and return with a note to mom to pay 2 liras. There was a lot of love. If you got into trouble with other kids, your whole neighborhood stuck with you, even if you were wrong. His best days were his childhood days.

DOWNTOWN BEIRUT AND STREET FOOD

Downtown (albalad البلد) for him was to the movies (Cinema Roxy, Empire, City Palace). Mostly Empire to watch Koyboy. Then he corrects himself pronouncing cowboy correctly. The adventure depleted his 1-Lebanese-Lira weekly allowance by 20 piastres down and 25 piasters back. To save, he would occasionally walk. The Mercedes 180 service taxi driver would know where to drop him off and still manage to fight with his stick shift.

“What did we eat? What did we eat?” he ponders.

A falafel sandwich from Frayha cost him 15 piasters, filling him up for the whole day. He sometimes went to a roastery between Debbas Square and Cinema Empire. He couldn’t finish a 10-piaster bag of roasted pumpkin seeds; if he did, he would

learn the hard way of eventual stomach problems. A bottle of Pepsi with a 5-piaster peanut-filled newspaper-wrapped cone was another treat. He can still hear the tall, traditionally dressed Sudanese shouting: “Fistok Sudanee. Sudanee. Fistok Sudanee.”

MORE FOOD

Every Thursday night, Friday, and Saturday, a seller would come from Tareek Jdeedeh to their neighborhood to sell rectangular sweets (sheaybyat شعبييات). This street food vendor would chant:

”شَعْبِيَّاتُنَا طَيِّبِينَ. طَازَة وَنَاعِمِينَ. الْقَطْعَةُ بَعَشْرَ قُرُوشٍ. وَالذَّرْزِيْنَةُ مِئْتَةٌ وَعِشْرِينَ.”

My attempt to translate goes: “Our sweets are fresh and soft. One piece for 10 piasters and the dozen for 120.” A little math lesson goes with it, too. No discount, as you might have calculated. Everyone’s paid. Everyone’s happy. That’s what counts. No?

Gus turned to his wife sitting on the other table and said: “He would drive a Peugeot station wagon every Thursday night and would sell at least two huge pans worth.” He continued to tell me that people used to eat and would not start before offering to the people next door.

You could tell if someone was paid that week. Gus’ father was a concrete contractor and got paid every other week. From Saturday until Sunday night, they would eat, drink, sleep, invite people, and eat again. Abou Gus (father of Gus) would drive the whole family in his Peugeot 304 up the Northern coast to Tripoli for another sweet “halawet el Jiben.” When bored going North, they would head South to Sidon for another sweet treat, “Sanioura.” On the way, they’d buy bananas from Damour, a

whole comb of bananas, and distribute them to the neighbors.

If you got one Lira a week, you had class. He did a lot, always put 10 piasters at church, and still had a balance left for his next Sunday.

SCHOOLING

Due to hard times, his family took him out of private education. He ended up studying in many schools around Beirut and its suburbs. He made friends. One is the current parish priest of “Mar Elias, Msaytbeh” Abouna Atos. Fouad Hakim, the son of Elvira. I visited him the other day. He’s a good man. We went to Ain Remmaneh together. No school would take him for a long time as he wasn’t the studious type. He ended up doing university studies at USJ in business. This set him up very well for South Africa.

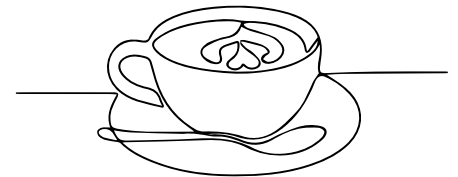
GETTING TO AND ENJOYING SOUTH AFRICA

On December 19, 1985, he took off by boat to South Africa through the port of Jounieh, Cyprus, Greece, Lisbon, and Johannesburg. He knew a distant person there. He was supposed to be gone for two weeks. His mom encouraged him to stay. It took him 4 years to return, then he left again and is still there. He married his lovely Eugénie on April 28, 1991, and has three children. He worked in construction project management in remote areas. He got his break when they needed a site engineer. His experience in construction with his dad did it.

UM (MOTHER OF) GHASSAN, AKA MARTHA AND NELSON MANDELA

Martha would occasionally visit the Sayeghs in South Africa for extended stays. The Lebanese mom raised a beautiful family in

Msaitbeh and fed Nelson Mandela's guards for months. She made Gus buy bigger pots. How could she not offer food to the neighbors? It would have been very un-Beiruti of her. One day, Nelson Mandela knocked on their door to thank them for the generosity they extended to his guards.



CHAPTER SEVEN

9 LESSONS FROM A 12-YEAR-OLD

**IF THERE'S
SOMETHING
I SHOULDN'T
SAY, I KEEP IT TO
MYSELF.**

SUBJECTS AT SCHOOL, FRIENDS, ACTIVITIES, AND WHEN SHE GROWS UP.

She's bubbly and so matter-of-factly. She knows what she wants, but not really. I asked: "Why did you want to do the interview with me?"

"I like talking about my life. This way, people would know what I like and what I know."

Instagram, Netflix, and WhatsApp. Yes. Facebook? Not quite. At school, she likes French, Arabic, and math because they're not dull. She understands and speaks two other languages. With me, she stuck to Lebanese. Spoken Lebanese is not classical Arabic (that's for another story altogether).

She insisted on talking. Her innocence and purity sent my way, to us adults, a reminder message of fundamental principles that we might have forgotten.

LYNN AND ARABIC

She likes Arabic grammar and parsing (اعراب). It's easy and

gets her good marks. Arabic comprehension? She has trouble with it.

“If you give me any sentence right now, I would know how to parse it. If you give me anything to read, it takes me months to finish.”

She does not understand the text: “I think I’m not good at Arabic vocabulary. That’s why. My friends and I don’t speak classical Arabic.”

She jumps into topics, speaking fast: “I have a big test coming up next Monday, and I’m studying a lot for it.” With a confident smile: “I’m sure I’ll do well.”

Lesson 1: Keeping a positive attitude gets you places.

MATHEMATICS

She loves math and is never bored studying it. Algebra is easy. Geometry is challenging and takes a lot of time to solve.

She considers herself a good student. Lynn would be the only one participating when the whole class is sleeping. “What do you like about math?” I ask.

“The teacher is amusing. She makes me laugh a lot. Math is not difficult. It feels amazing when you understand it immediately. And... the teacher is brilliant.”

I noticed a mischievous smile and probed further. Lynn likes her teacher, but she doesn’t explain well. Then, the teacher becomes not horrible: “If I focus more, I probably would be able to understand. She [teacher] talks way too fast.”

Lesson 2: Sometimes, the messenger and how she delivers are as crucial as the message.

When all fails for her, she asks her teacher again, and then she might revert to her father or older siblings.

Lesson 3: Ask for help. One more time. And one last time.

She has the persistence of a successful adult. At the same time, she’s still a 12-year-old who can spend time ranting about some incident she had in class.

Lesson 4: It’s okay to act our age.

FLOWERS? NO. NUTRITION? NOT REALLY. PHYSICS? YES.

She really hates science and English but loves physics. She’s learning nutrition (what’s good and what’s bad for you). She’s learning about flowers.

“What difference is it going to make in my life? That’s what I don’t understand. I don’t want to be a doctor.”

She understands everything in physics. The calculations are just like math. She likes how the teacher controls the class. Memorization is not her thing, and she’s not a big fan of history and geography. However, she reads, understands, and gets high marks in French.

Lesson 5: Find the “why” in what you do. It keeps you going.

LYNN’S SCHOOL ROUTINE

She does not like to wake up early (6:20, 10 minutes before the bus picks her up), but she likes everything else. She goes to bed at 9. She sleeps at 10.

What happens between 9 and 10 pm?

- If her parents aren’t home, she’s on her phone.
- If parents are home, she stares at the ceiling until she falls asleep. Sometimes, she reads or draws. Anything that distracts her.
- When parents are home, they don’t take away her phone.

She just doesn't use it.

"It's a little hard when I'm online, and my mom is too."

Lesson 6: No matter how old we get, we don't want to disappoint Mom.

ON READING AND MOVIES

She's currently reading an autobiography in French. "A book about a man who isn't good with women. I don't think that I'll finish it," she says. She doesn't like reading lots of books. She loves movies instead.

"Why do they make books if you could make movies?"

She's on Netflix and likes watching with her siblings. She watched Friends with her 16-year-old brother. She does not like horror but action movies, not those her dad watches. Lynn likes teenage FBI agents and films that make her cry. Currently on her list: The Loud House and Airplane Mode (A girl got into a car accident because of Instagram and stayed in a village with no phones.)

And then she jumps into, "I really like watching Rachel in Friends. She's hilarious. So is Joey. He's random and makes me laugh a lot."

"You wanted me to write a story about you. Why?"

So that people can know more about me. For example, I never lie. I won't lie to my friends, so no problems occur. I know what will happen if I do this. If I lie, I get in trouble, trouble with my friends.

"If there's something I shouldn't say, I keep it to myself."

Lesson 7: See the quote above.

WHEN SHE GROWS UP

She wants to become an actress because she likes to make people laugh. She would also love to become an interior designer. She

thinks she won't be good at it because geometry is challenging. She knows when something is isosceles, though. Everyone has their own taste, and she likes showing her taste. Her mother doesn't buy into her design ideas, her friends do. They ask her to pick clothes for them. She has a tall white wall in her room that she would like to fill with pictures of her friends and maybe posters of her favorite singers. When she was younger, she wanted to become an Arabic teacher. She still tries to teach her cousin. She doesn't think that's going to work out for her. She would be scared to give the wrong medication if she was a pharmacist. Maybe eventually, she'd like science and become a doctor?

Lesson 8: Consider your options.

- If you give her the option between going out with her friends and reading a book, she will go out with her friends.
- If it was between Instagram and an Arabic book, haha, Insta.
- Whether it is a French book or social media.

IN HER SPARE TIME

She is into street hip-hop and gymnastics. Football and basketball, too.

"I play with my friends at school, and when I shoot, it goes in without even touching the rim, swish."

Basketball will make her taller, as tall as an electric pole. Just like what happened to her brother. Did he grow taller because he played basketball? She's unsure, but maybe it will get more apparent as she learns more science.

She likes to get together with her friends at Starbucks and Pinkberry in the mall. Original pomegranate

with fruits and a lot of gummy bears, anyone?

Lesson 9: There's always enough room for comfort food!



CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE GAVE HIM 3 SILVER COINS

TO
RECONNECT
LEBANESE
AROUND THE
WORLD AND
MAKE THEM
LOVE LEBANON
EVEN MORE.

“NO GARLIC, NO ONIONS” BEHIND THE SCENES IN AUSTRALIA.

“Look, look!” The loudness from the dozens of people on the boat was suddenly interrupted. They look up to see a man waving the Lebanese flag across a bridge on the river in Melbourne. As they cruise closer, he shouts, “We love you, Anthony. Say hello to Lebanon. I miss Myeh w Myeh. سَلْمَلِي عَالْبَلَدِ الْجَلُو (My regards to the beautiful country).

No one knew who he was. The universe worked, and he actually missed the boat. The stars aligned so he could bring goosebumps and tears of joy to an already excited Australian-Lebanese crowd. That was his role.

Anthony has his.

CROSSING THE OCEANS FOR A BLIND DATE

Anthony knew only his name, Claude, as he was the one who had invited him to Australia. The NoGarlicNoOnions man would wonder about his host, who can’t be found anywhere on social media: “How old is he? Married? Kids?”

It was an actual blind date. Even Tinder would have given

more information!

At the airport, an older man raised his hand and yelled, “Hi Anthony. We’re waiting for you.” After about 24 hours from leaving Beirut, our rather tired traveler presumed it was Claude.

They stepped into the car to find two other men. Anthony, the kid among them, fired up his camera and started recording. It broke the ice. They joked a lot. You know, four boys in a car who are genuinely happy for something memorable that is about to unravel?

They drove straight to a dinner where 10 people were waiting for him. Lebanese food. Hold the garlic and the onions.

Who would do that?

They talked about Lebanon. What else. Wrapping up his first night in Melbourne after a prolonged dinner, Anthony looked at the white-haired, huge-smile, comfortable-with-himself, warm-hearted, sweet, 61-year-old, and

“Claude, you’re going to run with me these ten days. Be prepared.”

THE ROUTINE

He would get on the road by 7 am and return to his room by 10 pm. From 10 pm to 2 am, he would edit and post the video of the day. They did 130 stops in 20 days with 36 videos, including the best-of and more.

At home, his usual schedule is 5 am to 11 pm. Australia was different. Adrenaline kept him going with occasional power naps. On a flight from Melbourne to Sydney, Walid, who upgraded his seat to talk with him, ended up by a snoozing traveler. Walid made sure everyone knew what happened!

He couldn’t skip a beat as many were waiting to watch

his stories. Skipping one day would have also disrupted his rhythm and the rest of the trip. Most importantly, his videos made them smile. How can he let them down?

“I did not want to skip anyone. I wanted to give them all exposure and credit for what they are doing.”

Being the cameraman, producer, director, editor, and publisher put together, he couldn’t record everything. He missed intense emotional moments, talks he gave in gatherings, and conversations with radio hosts.

THE BEAUTIFUL AUSTRALIAN-LEBANESE PEOPLE

Anthony felt the love in the people he met. They were happy to see him. Some brought friends and family; others drove hours to be there.

“I felt so much love and respect; it was incredible. I felt it in them, and they felt it in me.”

He would go on and on about the people he met. Clearly, he was moved.

Some of what they said:

- “As soon as you left my store, it started filling up.”
- “I’ve been here for 20 years and did not know so many Lebanese.”
- “I did not want to connect with Lebanese. Thank you. Today, I made 15 new friends.”
- Referring to his videos: “See that home? This is my grandfather’s house. That falafel place? It used to be a chicken sandwich place.”

What happened in those 20 days in Australia was “way way way more,” as Anthony describes it. He met genuine Lebanese-Australians.

They kept their traditions, their accent, and their habits. They do everything possible to remain attached to their roots. They want to stay connected. They seek any reason to keep loving Lebanon.

You can make a Lebanese leave Lebanon, but you can’t take Lebanon out of a Lebanese.

They live in a dilemma. They are still seen as immigrants to Australia. Yet, when they visit Lebanon, they’re also seen as the Australians. They have it hard on both sides. The dual identity is challenging to live with. Still, they want and have to belong to both worlds.

“Maybewedon’tloveLebanonasmuchastheydo,” Anthonyponders.

It gives him personal satisfaction that his hard yet fun work is paying off somehow. Some returned to Lebanon after seeing his videos. Others are planning to do so. They love that he’s showing positive Lebanon.

“I’ve been doing what I do for several years. This time, I felt that everyone I met understands who I am, what I do, and most importantly, how much I love Lebanon and its people.”

They get it, and he likes that.

ANTHONY’S HOMEFRONT

On International Women’s Day, he spoke on Australian radio with one message: You cannot succeed if you don’t have the proper support. Nell, his partner, wife, and mother of his three beautiful children, goes beyond cheerleading into hard conversations, moving him forward towards becoming a better person.

You want someone whom you trust to raise your children properly. A person who can take care of the homefront when you’re away. Most

importantly, a spouse who would raise your kids to love you. The opposite or lack of support would simply hinder and kill creativity.

“So, if you ask me again, how come I could run and deliver over 20 days non-stop? It’s because I was at peace about what was happening at home. My mind was focused and positive. I was 300% creative.”

He avoids arguments and leaves it to God to deal with the rest. He believes that this is key to a lot of his success. They cherish respect. Simple things play a significant role: A good morning when they wake up and a good night before sleep. They share what’s happening and get thoughtful mutual feedback with little drama. During his trip, he Facetimed every day. They laughed, played, virtually kissed, and said kind words to each other.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, he’s shooting videos, enjoying plenty of interactions online, and, of course, spending time with family.

I HAVE A MISSION

Anthony’s role is

“to reconnect Lebanese around the world and make them love Lebanon even more.”

He lives it, works it, breathes it, and invests everything he has for his cause. A tsunami for Lebanon’s cause.

For him, Lebanon is not a touristic country. Other countries are better at tourism. Lebanon is an experience for the five senses. Lebanon hugs your whole being. The core of Lebanon is when you touch its soil, smell the air, and roam its villages, something moves in you. It’s not perfect; it just is.

His work shows how much he loves to support the good and hard-working ordinary person.

AS HE WRAPS UP HIS TRIP

After twenty days, during his last gathering, before heading back, a veiled woman approaches him, puts three silver coins in his hand, and says: “Thank you.” Her eyes, face, and warmth had so much to say. A whole lifetime of yearning and contentment. Yet, she was good with two words: Thank you. He was surprised, speechless, and did not know what to do. He thanked her and accepted.

Receiving with compassion, appreciation, and love is one step towards giving.

Anthony returned to Lebanon with many more gifts from Melbourne and Sydney. The most important one, however, was the feeling that he was home. He felt like a brother, a father, a son, a cousin, and a long-lost Lebanese friend to them. They walked with him, ate with him, talked with him, laughed with him, and cried with him.

And when he was about to leave, the flag-bearer surfaced again among the crowds in Victoria market. This time, he’s crying. Anthony took him aside and said: “Tell me.”

- “I don’t know,” he replied. “I feel that you represent Lebanon. Please sign the flag for me. I’ve been following you for the past 5 years. You have evolved. Now, you soothe the hearts of people.”
- “When was the last time you visited Lebanon?”
- “I was born in Australia and never been to Lebanon.”

Anthony challenged him to do his first visit this summer and promised to show him Lebanon in the best possible way. The

flag-bearer teared up again and said he could leave next week.

Anthony: “Hold your horses now!” It ended with loud laughs.

This story is about a dental surgeon with an artist’s eccentricity and a Boy Scout leader’s diligence. It’s about a good man who knows what he’s doing, doing the right thing at the right time for the right people and is supported by a solid woman. What else can he ask for?

**THEY ALL
GRADUATED.**

CHAPTER NINE

A CHILD OF TWO TEACHERS

A WRITER, A MARKETEEER, AND AN ASPIRING PHOTOGRAPHER.

She comes across as very serious with a leave-me-alone attitude.

“I get that a lot. I come here to focus. Laptop, coffee, and ideas. So maybe I give out this image. Same thing at the gym. I cherish my alone time.”

This social butterfly takes time to recharge at Starbucks.

MOTHERHOOD

She’s a proud mother of a one-year-old daughter. She pulled out her phone and showed me pictures.

“Selena. I like how it rings. Goddess of the Moon. I chose the name before knowing its meaning. Beautiful. This is one of her in a costume.”

At first, she felt it was the most challenging experience ever because it wasn’t planned. Now, she thanks God for her. It was a new and sudden change, as she was not mentally ready.

One day, having a sibling to Selena would be joyful as they don’t want her to be an only child. Nada grew up with two much older brothers; she’s 10 and 6 years their junior.

She grew up always seeking someone to play with. Two older brothers did not qualify as playmates. Having friends is different than having brothers and sisters. Especially a sister for a girl.

TEACHING IS IN THE FAMILY

Teaching is something she might like. If so, she would prefer teaching to an older student audience. At the university level, it would be perfect. Her personality isn't right for disciplining—sit, stand up, and go out.

“I come from a teaching family,” she tells me. Both her parents are still active in writing and teaching. Her mother was a high school French teacher, and her father was a history professor at the Lebanese University.

How did they meet, I wonder.

WORKING IN MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

She started at Université Saint-Joseph, dropped out after two months, stayed at home for a little longer, and then joined Notre Dame University to study marketing and advertising (2002–2006). She worked for three years after that in marketing and events management. The work environment, as well as the 9–5 regimen, was not her thing. Still searching, she decided to pursue graduate studies. A master of arts degree in media studies while working part-time introduced her to journalism and communication arts.

She converges towards her natural place.

She likes writing to complement her marketing and social media expertise.

Her graduate research addressed domestic violence in

Lebanon. More specifically, she researched social media's impact on domestic violence and how it contributed to social change. Her work got her to collect data from the field. She interviewed individuals and non-profits (ex: KAFA.) Social media created awareness, making it less of a taboo to speak out, both for victims and the society with the none-of-my-business attitude.

She reworked the material she did for her thesis, picked up the phone, and called the editor of AnNahar, a prominent Lebanese daily newspaper. He asked her to send the article. Twenty-four hours later, he loved it. She got published.

Swift and positive reinforcement for an aspiring writer. Nice!

And that's how she started writing about and for causes: domestic violence, eating disorders, and street art.

ON WRITING

She likes to write research-based articles. She loves the process of discovering and learning by investigating. She believes in sharing knowledge.

“Every writer likes to see his work published. In the end, you're writing to share whatever you've done. It doesn't necessarily have to be published; it could be shared. It's a nice feeling.”

Even though she prefers specific topics over others and that writing does not come easily, she enjoys it. In my conversation with Nada, she reflected on the techniques and tips that she uses when writing. Everyone has their own approach.

For what it's worth, here's a glimpse of how she does it:

- Read general articles and academic research
- Make a sheet with sources and related links

- Fact-find
- Outline as soon as possible and update as you research
- Write an impactful title and subtitle at the end
- Write directly on a word processor (MS Word)
- Use Grammarly for editing at the end
- When you can't look at your manuscript anymore, submit it and move on.

BOREDOM THE INSTIGATOR

As a child, she got bored a lot. So, she played teacher to imaginary students. She'd put them in class, distribute papers, and teach. At some point, Nada, the child, even gave out a warning to her mother. She once asked for a sister or a bicycle to kill boredom. She got a bike. As an adult, Nada worked on learning to be alone. Being by herself shifted from being bored and fearing loneliness to enjoying the alone time.

PEOPLE CHANGE

People who have known her seven years ago would say that she's a totally different person. For example, her father never expected that she would become a writer. She was the quintessential social butterfly, listening to music constantly and moving everyone to 'Let's go out. Let's party.' Her dad, the professor, was gladly surprised by how she turned out professionally.

"He's proud and probably likes that we have something in common. It makes him happy."

She changed her lifestyle in the last few years. She changed jobs, redefined her friendships, lost some, built new ones, and developed new relationships. She was very focused on self-

development and did not want a relationship. With time, she got more comfortable with her alone time. Then she met her husband. After the initial dynamics of dating, settling down with him made the alone time even more comfortable.

She believes their interdependence and mutual trust is a healthy thing. They have similar personalities and have little worlds they escape to when needed. He goes hiking alone sometimes. She understands. She does her own thing, and he understands.

GOING FORWARD

My short chit-chat with Nada at Starbucks pre-COVID-19 lockdown was a pleasant visit.

Going forward, she doesn't see herself with a big family. She's happy with writing but might switch to writing more opinions and creative pieces with less emphasis on academic research. She continues doing yoga, walking, hiking, and other sports. She will also pursue her photography classes as she enjoys taking pictures (more than 6000 photos on her phone). Ideally, she likes to merge visual art with her writing.

"What happened to those imaginary students of yours?" I asked.

"They all graduated."

CHAPTER TEN

HER EX LIVES NEXT DOOR

**IN REALITY,
LIFE TAKES
YOU IN MANY
DIFFERENT
DIRECTIONS.
BEAUTIFUL AND
UNEXPECTED.**

LIFE COACH, MOTHER, TV PERSONALITY, AND LOVES LIFE.

I had lost touch and only saw her on TV. A few weeks ago, we reconnected and met at Starbucks.

“We met when I was 18 when we both were in ‘Hair’ the musical. You played ‘Claude,’ and I was the pregnant woman who was always on hash.”

Tina’s career has been in the performing arts: singing, dancing, and acting. She continues to nurture those talents. She has made time to reinvent herself, becoming a life coach to help others. Raised in Saudi Arabia, her family moved to Lebanon when she was 16. With broken Arabic and no French language skills, she had a goal. To become a Broadway star.

“Young innocence. You think you have control over what’s going to happen,” she tells me. “In reality, life takes you in many different directions. Beautiful and unexpected.”

STARTING A FAMILY AND A CAREER

She fell in love and got married against her parents’ will. He wasn’t Lebanese. Foreigners divorce quickly, her parents thought.

They resisted but eventually accepted. He was 27, and she was 21. Foolishly in love, they married to be with each other. Five years later, they had their first child, Jazz, and Sky came 3 years later. Tina feels she missed out on living her twenties as her single friends did. She had married, worked, and lived a different lifestyle.

She was cast to play one of the main characters in a hit sitcom, *Three Girls* (ثلاث بنات). Over 300 episodes later, it came to an end.

Moving on, she leveraged her university degree to get into marketing. She worked at Empire Cinemas for the next 4 years and loved being close to the Hollywood vibe. Next came her adventure with the Beirut Marathon. Organizing the first two events was impactful, beautiful, and personally memorable.

THE LAST JOB BEFORE THE 2006 WAR

Post marathon, and on the first day of a new job, she realized her period was late. She stopped at a pharmacy, picked up a pregnancy test, and

“I’m like, oh my God! I just started a new job, and I’m pregnant!”

She felt bad not telling her new boss. Wearing an oversized coat and five months later at a client’s meeting, the same boss goes: “So, how far along are you?” She felt he was nice and understanding. Relief reigned as it’s finally out in the open.

Coat or no coat, eventually, it’s going to show.

She delivered her daughter in March 2006 and took her maternity leave. The war broke out that summer, and she never returned to that job. With a 3-year-old Jazz and a five month old baby, Sky, still breastfeeding, they left for New Zealand. Sometime later, they returned after things had calmed down.

ON WOMEN AND RIGHTS FOR HER FAMILY

After her first pregnancy, she found it to be cruel to get back to work after about 40 days. Tina felt that she missed out on motherhood the first time around and did not want the same the second time. She took a year off and then realized that even that was not for her. She’s big on supporting women’s issues in general and their full rights as Lebanese citizens.

MTV REOPENS AND CALLS FOR HER

When MTV reopened after its forced closure in 2009, they called and offered her to present a program. Returning to the cameras helped her rediscover her identity and strengthen her self-confidence. Still, the intelligent, capable, modest, and beautiful Tina kept her feet grounded. She knows that glitz is a myth. As she continued to build her social circle and group of friends, her marriage was being tested.

ONCE FOOLISHLY IN LOVE, THEY STARTED DRIFTING APART

Life’s new interests pulled them in different directions and put them on different paths.

“Since I did not live my 20s, I wanted to relive them in my 30s. I discovered Gemmayze bars for the first time. Our lifestyle as a couple was more into restaurants and dinners.”

She’s never smoked but likes the nightlife, the people, the rush. Their kids had grown a little. Mom was 38 when she decided that she wanted a fuller life.

I couldn’t help but ask further.

It wasn’t a selfish act, she insisted. She felt that she deserved

better. She felt that she needed to be appreciated more. She wanted to create a change, and only she could make it happen.

I wanted to ask what's his take on that, how hard did she try, and as if she read my mind,

"I tried over the years. Many times. I was finally convinced that I wanted to move on. The same way I jumped in, I jumped out."

She knew it was going to be difficult. She was convinced that the universe would receive her, and it did. Friends are significant players in her world.

AN AMICABLE DIVORCE

They are both very present for the children. The father isn't Lebanese, and he's still in the country. They're actually neighbors. That's big!

Who does that?

Parents who love their children do that. Practical, intelligent, and mature people do that.

During the week, they're at Mom's place. They go up to Dad's any time they wish. Same thing on the weekends. It's been 6 years, and it took time. They were and are there for their children. Mom and Dad have similar parenting styles and talk a lot with their children.

After the divorce, they dated other people. The children understood that "mom and dad got divorced; dad has a girlfriend; mom has a boyfriend." It becomes easier when Mom accepts that it's okay that Dad has a girlfriend and she's living with him. No hiding, no bitterness.

"I made it clear to my kids that they had their friends, their outings, and I had my life, too."

She believes that it's important for her children to know that she deserves to go out, to have friends, to have sex, and to be loved. "What would we be teaching our children otherwise? A divorcee at 35, and that's it for her?" Tina questions.

She knows their divorce impacted their children but to a lesser degree than otherwise.

"Children, no matter their age, will always hope that mom and dad will get back together. They cling and won't let go. You're working against natural tides."

Both parents were consistently present and openly communicated with the children to manage the transition. They still do.

MEET COACH TINA

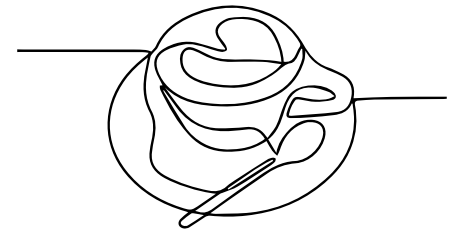
"Tina, you should get into something like this. Some sort of talk therapy," her friend told her. For a long time, she would not listen to the signs. She used her passion, education, and life experience to plan her next step. She wanted something new, refreshing, and fulfilling. She landed on life coaching.

TV has been perfect for her. She lives it, loves it, and is a natural at it. She feels her audience and enjoys the closeness with them. Life coaching is yet another channel to connect with and help people. She worked and studied hard to get her certification. Going through the program was a joy. Being part of a community of international standard coaches is the icing on the cake.

Having started in Lebanon and the region, she focused on relationship coaching. More with women who are going through a separation. Since she went through it alone, she does not want the same for others. She enjoys her coaching mission

and is most rewarded with the person who comes in having made the decision to change. Watching them take baby steps towards becoming better, happier people was like magic to her.

At 16, she wanted to become a Broadway star. Twinkling, dancing, sparkling blue, and an indivisible part of a beautiful constellation- the kind of star she is.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAN WITH FOUR FAMILIES

JORDANIAN, A SEMINARIAN, LOVES PEOPLE AND COFFEE, TOO.

What do you want to be when you grow up?” his father asked when he was in 5th grade.

HIS BIRTH FAMILY

His life as an adult has challenged him four times over. Born and raised in Amman, where life was not nearly as complicated as it is today. Everybody came from the same culture and spoke the same language. His values came from his family, his house, and his tribe. He grew up not thinking as an individual but as part of a collective. He grew up with an understanding between him and the collective. You submit to the family, and you meet its expectations. Ashraf’s family has a lineage of ministers, deputies, and military personnel. “What do I want to become when I grow up?” he thought.

“A judge, of course. I was very close to my grandfather. He always wanted a judge in the family.”

Becoming a judge was his grandfather’s goal, his family’s wish, but not his own. His money-tight, wealthy grandfather would pay for his eldest grandson’s education — in full and at a

**WE ARE HERE
FOR A
PURPOSE.**

private university. After all, the family patriarch was securing the family's dream.

He ended up finishing his studies in law and began practicing in Jordan. He was recommended to sit as a judge. However, five months prior, personal circumstances had changed drastically.

HIS SECOND FAMILY IN LEBANON

The eldest son went through a spiritual conversion and created a hurricane within his birth family. His drastic change of heart, redefining personal goals, and owning his dreams took him elsewhere. The major disagreements on religion with his parents and extended family — with no room for compromise — prompted him to flee. He left his old life for a new one.

From a loud and vibrant personal, professional, and social life, he moved to Lebanon. Now living alone, this packman became a lone wolf.

“My move to Lebanon effectively ended my career in law. Do I miss it? Of course. In the end, the spiritual experience was more important than my job, my life, or my future.”

In Beirut, he created another family, not by blood, not by kinship, and not through marriage. He became a seminarian, making a small circle of close friends his second family. These are the people he ate with, laughed with, prayed with, argued with, and confided in. He misses Lebanon, its people, and the unique places he holds in his heart: where he met his wife, studied, and the coffee shops where he socialized. His second family helped him belong.

HIS FATHER PASSED AWAY IN HIS ARMS

Currently living in the US, he goes back to the Middle East

about five times a year and always stops to visit with his family in Jordan. He regrets not having been around more often when his father was battling cancer. Still, Ashraf was able to spend time with him on his visits and was with his father on his deathbed. He prayed so hard for God to heal his dad.

He was praying for a miracle, yet accepted God's will.

Even though he wasn't awake at the end, Ashraf kept talking to him and sharing current stories of his life with him. Who knows? He may have been listening to him. In the end, Abou Ashraf said goodbye in his son's arms. It was very difficult, but healing,” Ashraf explains. He believes his dad wanted him, of all people, to be there by his side as he passed.

He took a sip of coffee and gazed through me. I could tell that he went somewhere else in his mind. A few moments later, he returned to our conversation. Looking at me, he said that we are all leaving this earth in the end. No exceptions. “What are we here for?” he asks.

“I don't believe that God created everything so that we step through life like machines. We are here for a purpose.”

We build our own lives with free will. God has respect for our will to the degree that we can't even comprehend. By making our own decisions, we bear the responsibility. God gives freedom to everyone and everything. Christ never imposed himself on anyone. He was He. It has been and still is up to us to believe, follow, or not.

HIS THIRD FAMILY — AMERICA

His first family is his birth family in Jordan. His second one is the family he created in Lebanon. His third family, however, was a total change.

“It’s my girlfriend’s family who later became my fiancée, then my wife, and the mother of my children. My third family is Emily’s family.”

He was introduced to her parents and her community when he came to America. He says he’s marrying not only her but also her culture, language, family, and way of thinking. He realized — the son of the son of his grandfather from Amman — that he was marrying a white Midwestern American girl. Go figure!

Reflecting back, he realized that Lebanon was good for them. It served a sweet spot. They were strangers in what was once a strange land to them.

“Culturally, we knew that Emily would never be 100% Jordanian, and I was never going to be 100% American. Lebanon allowed us to create our own culture within the culture.”

In Jordan, his wife Emily has to conform to a much more conservative environment — unlike in Lebanon, where she cannot walk on the street alone, take a taxi by herself, or even go to the corner market on her own. Bouncing between cultures kept them on their toes. After almost three years of being with her, he embarked on a family visit to the US. The openness of Lebanon cheated him as he thought that the US would be the same. He quickly discovered that Lebanon is not America.

“I was an Arab with broken English who would sometimes only realize 15 minutes later that they threw a joke into the conversation I just finished translating in my head.”

The cultural differences shocked him.

STORY 1: A DISCORDANT MELODY BECOMES HARMONY

When they lived in Lebanon and would take off to visit Jordan, Ashraf’s whole family, including the parents, brothers, sisters, and the entire tribe of nephews and nieces, would be waiting in the house for their arrival. The first time he flew to meet Emily’s parents, it was a far cry from the “usual” greetings he was accustomed to with his family. Ashraf and Emily arrived one week before Christmas. Emily’s sisters trickled in over the next few days, but even once everyone was together under one roof, each person went his or her own way.

“I was in disbelief. I mean, try to get to know me, at least. Come have a cup of coffee with us. Talk to us. Anything!”

For their family, this was normal. But to him, it was culturally peculiar.

Fast forward 10 years. Things have changed. People have changed. The nature of the relationship between his wife and her siblings changed, too. Once a loose association of individuals, they are more in accord now. They have a real relationship. They hang out together, catch up on FaceTime, and enjoy one another’s company.

STORY 2: DEALING WITH DEATH

Though personal family time in the US has improved for Ashraf, he still experiences shock by how certain topics are treated. In the Middle East, death is always serious, solemn, and a topic not to talk about until it happens. It’s different in Emily’s family. The daughters joke around at the Sunday dinner table and tell their father: “When you go, I will take the china cabinet,” or “When you die, do you

want a tomb or cremation?” He says to himself: “Yekhrebzou2ik!”

There’s no way I’d be able to translate Yekhrebzou2ik for you.
Ask an Arab. Good luck :)

For Ashraf, the casual conversation about death is ill-advised. He’s had to learn how Midwesterners think of life, time, money, and death. It took him time to understand and to feel that he belonged. He now feels that Emily’s mom and dad are like a father and a mother to him.

HIS LAST FAMILY WITH EMILY

Even though Ashraf and his wife live in the US, they have learned to create their own family culture as they are, in fact, a blended family of multiple cultures.

“In our family, we honor God, respect our family, and are proud of the country in which we live.”

Their two little boys are still learning about their family culture and its meaning. For the eldest son, his dad comes from another country. Dad is an immigrant, but he did not come on a boat. He came on an airplane. Haha!

Ashraf is happy to tell me that he has a wonderful relationship with his family in Jordan, stays in touch with his circle of close friends in Lebanon, spends a wonderful time with his American relatives, and is raising a beautiful family of his own with Emily.

“My life rule is to honor God, love my wife and family, respect my country, and be the best example for my children.”

He’s come a long way. A long way from Amman!

During the COVID-19 lockdown, like all families, they’re home. A month already, and they’re managing life, work, and running after the two boys.



**IF YOU'RE
GOING
THROUGH AN
ATTACK, LET IT
BE AND MOVE
ON.**

CHAPTER TWELVE

MUSIC BROUGHT HER BACK

AFTER THREE ATTEMPTS TO TAKE HER OWN LIFE.

She is multi-talented. Sports were big with her. She loves the outdoors and being in the scouting movement. Music plays a big part in her life. She uses the written word to express herself. The visual arts, however, are something else. It's the closest to her self-expression.

HER MOM, THE TEACHER, AND HER OTHER TEACHER

She loves teachers, especially the two who left an impact on her. Her mom is a retired one. She was the first nursery class teacher at St. Joseph's and kept at it for 30 years.

"She is the best teacher any child can have. I wanted to become a teacher, taking after my mom."

After finishing her first drawing in third grade, Miss Micheline, her art teacher, put her hand on her cheek and said: "You will grow up to become an artist."

And that was it. Yara didn't want to become anything else, thanks to her art teacher.

A little gesture, some attention, a lot of care, and a few words can significantly impact anyone's life, let alone a child.

THE SHUTTER SOUND HELPS HER CONNECT

At Notre Dame University, after one eye-opening elective, she graduated with a degree in photography and a minor in graphic design. Her relation with the still image goes way back. She grew up around cameras. Her mom took pictures of all the kids all the time. Her dad was a photographer and owned his own photo business.

"I have an issue with memory. I forget a lot. I constantly try to improve. It's like my brain selectively filters stuff," she tells me.

"Taking pictures helps me remember."

Yara is a very visual person. She does landscape, food, and street photography. Over time, she realized that something was still missing in her work — the presence of people. She realized that connecting with people fuels her drive. So, she started taking more pictures of people. Portraits. She enjoys the one-on-one connection with her subjects, getting to know the person, listening to them, and telling their story visually.

It's been lingering with her since 2016. She wanted to take portraits to tell stories but could not say when, why, or how. She intentionally did not plan it and decided to go with the flow. And then it started to take shape.

Project Revolt is a platform for dreamers — a collection of black and white portraits with a story behind every face. She's on her 30+ published stills and more than 50

unpublished ones. People are still coming to voice their dreams.

With every portrait, they're telling their dreams and making Yara's dream come true. Her vision brings people together around one theme and overarching spirit: happiness despite challenges.

"I believe when you have a dream and want it to happen, you will do whatever it takes. Gradually, it will. No matter how big or small."

When you ask someone about their one dream, and they think about it, then it's not there yet. They might come up with a project, but not a dream. A dream is always on your mind. You are either preparing for it or tirelessly working on it. This is how you know it's your dream.

Her dream is coming through on this project. She's getting to know beautiful people with tremendous stories. She's growing through them and getting to know herself better. Their stories are different than hers, yet with common grounds.

For example, she met a guy through this project. The first one who lost his eye in the revolution. Yara suffers from anxiety, hindering her from moving forward, and she blames everything on it. When she met Jad, she was inspired by him. He wakes up every morning and is passionate about his job. He knows it will be difficult, yet he stays positive and continues. He continues to work and keeps the revolution.

"So, you start thinking. The only thing that is stopping me from doing whatever it is it's me and not my anxiety. Put your shit aside, Yara. If you're going through an attack, let it be and move on."

Some of Project Revolt's dreams:

- My dream is to be able to Dream — Anthony.
- My dream is to throw 'perlimpinpin' magical powder on our nights to make them sweeter — Charbel.

- I dream of building a safe place for everyone to hang around, full of love and hope, where they can be who they truly are, free of judgment and society's labels — Farah.

OVERCOMING PERSONAL CHALLENGES

She was misdiagnosed with chronic depression at 18. She says that it was depression but not chronic. Her doctors put her on medication for six months. Two months into her treatment, she became suicidal and attempted it three times. Luckily, unsuccessfully. "I'm here. Now," she says.

She blames the pills for giving her weird ideas. Flashing back, she continues saying that she took her pills and flushed them down the toilet. Her mom had no idea. To this day, she still doesn't.

"She need not know.

She's going to know when this story's out!

Mom. Read this article."

I told Yara that we don't need to publish this. She said that she doesn't mind it anymore. She wants people to learn from her experience and maybe help someone.

She made life-death decisions on her own and in such conditions. Yara was lucky. Please don't attempt to be your own psychologist or psychiatrist.

She threw out the pills and went cold turkey. She went through withdrawal for a whole month, just like you see in the movies — sweating, shaking, heartbeat, nausea, and more. It was horrible for her. Nobody knew except her sister and her NLP trainer, as she had to tell him. The experience was life-changing, and it made her who she is today.

Her sister saved her.

She got back into music as it had been a crucial part of her life. She started playing piano at three and for 12 years until she "met" depression, and the keyboard was blocked.

A few years later, it was music that brought her back.

She started singing, and songs changed her life.

HER STRESS DID NOT COME OUT OF THIN AIR

Mom was teaching all the time. She would come home tired and have to attend to the household. That kept going from the age of eleven to nineteen.

Over one month, at the age of eighteen, she lost her childhood best friend, Mark, and her other friend, Melissa, a teacher, and she failed her high school official exams. That was enough to take her into depression.

Mark was like a brother to her. It was tough talking about him. Now it's easier because she knows that he's there. He's proven it. He still sends her signs, and she still talks with her angel.

SHE'S GRATEFUL

Yara is grateful and keeps herself busy. She is positive despite everything. She is thankful for becoming a strong woman. Going through what she went through could have made her a bitter person. It took a very long time, but now she wakes up in the morning happy and positive.

"It was a struggle. I did it. I'm grateful that I'm alive after three attempts of taking my own life. This is huge for me. I appreciate life."

FAITH IS HER NORTH STAR

She tells me apologetically: “I don’t know if you’re a religious person, but

“I don’t go to church. I don’t pray in church. I don’t believe in men of the cloth, except for one. They’ve failed me on every level.”

However, she has an extraordinary connection with St. Charbel. A powerful one. Whatever she asks from him, she gets an answer. No matter when, how, or where. “There are no rules with him,” she said. She holds on to this Saint and gives him everything. He’s done a lot for her. He’s her go-to in everything that is happening in her life. She doesn’t even know how to explain it.

This once queen of atheists has delivered her life to this Lebanese Saint. Her encounter with him at his tomb while praying was indescribable. She felt pushed to her knees; her body was aching throughout, tears down her cheeks until she was finally lifted up. And she was changed since.

AND LIFE GOES ON

Yara is a fighter, a rebel, a dreamer, a believer, and an optimist with the soul of an elephant — genuine, friendly, and believing in love.

Life is still difficult for her, yet she conquers her daily pains. She knows she’s not alone. She has music, her mother, her kid sister, and angels Mark and Saint Charbel.

CLOSING CREDITS (YOU KNOW, WHEN THE MOVIE’S OVER)

Scene 1: At 13, “Mom. I got my calling. I’m going to the convent. I want to become a nun,” she tells her mom. Mother,

as she’s slapping her silly: “Go to your room and study!”

Scene 2: Her mom promises her anything if she makes it to the honor list. She worked hard and did it. She asked to “die her hair red like her grandmother.”

Scene 3: She drives an hour to the mountains with two friends and unpacks the blankets, tent, inflatable mattress, utensils, and other stuff from her trunk; a half-hour later, a hot cup of tea in hand, she’s watching the most beautiful Lebanese sunset from 1500 meters.

During the COVID-19 lockdown,

- Expanding Project Revolt internationally and publishing articles
- Launched #exploringhomewithyara on @thepurplebohemian
- Planning future photography & film projects to launch after lockdown
- Developing her video editing skills
- <<She’s available for freelancing. Any takers?>>

**YOUNG
PEOPLE NEED
ATTENTION
AND ARE FULL
OF ENERGY.**

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONE SON OF MAGHDOSHEH

**LEFT TECHNOLOGY TO BECOME A
CHAMPION FOR YOUTH.**

THE COSTA'S

Osta became Costa after half his family moved to the US. His dad's cousins are the Costantine's (sometimes spelled Constantine). The Osta's are originally from Maghdousheh (مغدوشة) near Sidon, Lebanon.

I'm from Maghdousheh. My dad's dad is from Maghdousheh. Both my maternal grandparents are from Maghdousheh."

Ah! Have you been? Have you met its people? Have you tasted its grapes?

**TOLERANCE AND DIVERSITY IN THEIR
FABRIC**

His parents lived in Corniche ElMazraa (where Gus grew up) before moving to the Metn area. His mother grew up on Hamra Street in Ras Beirut in the building Ghassan Tueni bought at the time for the AnNahar newspaper. That section of the city was a mosaic of religiously diverse neighborhoods. Joe inherited the spirit of openness from his parents.

While growing up in a predominantly Christian area, he spent his first 17 years shuttling between Metn, where home and his Evangelical school were, and Ras Beirut, where dad was a pastor of his congregation. Spending time playing, doing activities, and reading the Bible with other neighborhood kids at church made him who he is today. Growing up, he had friends from different religious or socioeconomic backgrounds. Up to nine years old, he did not know who was Christian and who was Muslim. Ahmad and Charbel were just ‘names’ to him.

When he was 18, his parents moved back to Ras Beirut, which ended the Metn era for him. He feels very much a Ras Beirut and a Hamra native.

SEARCHING FOR MEANING, ALIGNING WITH GOD, AND FUTURE WIFE

He attended the Lebanese American University (in Ras Beirut, of course) for his bachelor’s in computer science. He worked there in the IT department for seven years and managed to obtain an MBA as well. During that time, he started dating his wife-to-be and kept on his quest to question his purpose in life.

“I thought about marriage and my readiness for it. I thought about God and what he wants from me.”

He wanted to win both.

As they were dating, they asked all the deep questions. Maybe earlier than they should have, he reflects.

I should have asked why he thinks that?

They agreed on the critical issues and ensured that each other’s deeper plans were aligned. He felt he would leave the business world

and focus on a mission to serve God and others. This will impact his income and make him make other sacrifices. On the other hand, her big plan was to go to the States and study healthcare management. After about a year of dating, she left. The long distance and 24 months apart were an excellent test of their growing relationship.

“God’s providence prevails,” he says. Her university in Philadelphia was 40 minutes away from his uncle’s family. Seeing her struggle with her roommate, they invited her to move into their extra bedroom. She did. The days with the Costas were good to Mira. In her turn, she catalyzed the Costa cousins to get to know each other even more.

During those two years, Mira and Joe saw each other as they traveled between the US and Lebanon. Three and half years later, in Aug 2016, after having met for the first time, they got married.

HIS MISSION

He thought hard and prayed a lot to find his calling. His heart got set on young people in their 20s. He wants to talk with them, invest in them, and encourage them.

“I want to serve young Arabs. Especially the ones in Lebanon.”

They took off to the US during their first year as husband and wife. Joe studied and raised funds for his ministry.

AND MIRA

She worked for a year as a business analyst in healthcare management. The employer was so satisfied with her work that they extended a work-from-home in Lebanon offer (way before COVID-19). She accepted.

Joe deeply believes that it was God's intervention whenever a door was difficult to open or close shut. He believes that God constantly points him in the direction of the mission for a more significant cause.

REMINISCING LIVING IN THE US

They came back in Sept 2017. Joe misses the States as he and Mira enjoyed living there. He explains the little details that make the difference: uninterrupted power, doing business online, attending concerts and festivals, and not having to run around to do official paperwork. They found a balance between American friends and culture and Arab and Lebanese friends who enjoyed what they enjoyed. That balance made it even more difficult to leave.

He loves to barbeque ribs (who doesn't), hang out with friends, watch the Super Bowl, and enjoy the American way, yet he still misses a good plate of hummus.

"My mission is to serve here [Lebanon]. So I think that made the US blues a little more tolerable."

JOE AND THE YOUTH

He's been working with youth since he was 17. At 32 now, he's fully immersed in it with more experience. Some blame young people for being on the sidelines and not taking initiative. Others think that adults contribute to marginalizing youth. We might tell them to "keep quiet as the adults are speaking" or suggest that "their ideas don't matter as much."

"Young people need attention and are full of energy. They will use it for other purposes if you don't

listen and channel their energy for the right things."

We shouldn't blame a teenager if he spends 14 hours straight on Fortnite if we don't help him fill that time with something worthwhile. Young people with unique ideas are future-looking yet lack maturity and experience. What they see and feel is genuine.

- You'll observe, learn, and discover if you listen to them. For example, a young person who PlayStations all day is also a poet. A person who snowboards, hikes, and does extreme sports can also enjoy a fantastic backgammon game. They have experience in areas in which adults can barely keep up with, if any. By listening, we learn.
- We need to invest in them. We help them grow, understand life, and find their purpose. They can make their worlds and ours a much better place.

Joe works with about 50 youths aged 18–28 every month. He conducts mentorship sessions, weekly meetings, dialogue forums, trivia nights, bible studies, and prayer groups.

THE MULTIFACETED JOE

Aside from enjoying a good rack of baby back ribs, he enjoys basketball and analyzing stats. He's a big fan of the Philadelphia 76ers. He also enjoys theater. Just like Tina, his dream was to act on Broadway. He can sing in tune but doesn't claim to have an angelic voice. He likes the stage. It's genuine, and plays live.

"I would love to act in plays. The ones that fit my values. Kinky boots won't work. Jesus Christ Superstar might. Drama, monologues, dialogues, I would love that."

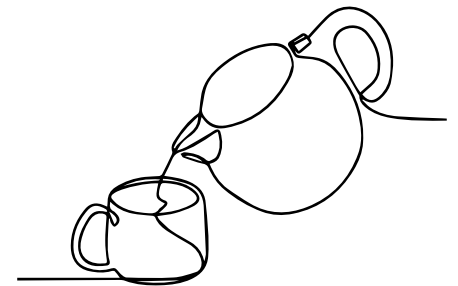
At 32, he's full of energy, focused, aligned with God and his

wife, serves youth, and helps them build a better future for all of us.

Way to go, Joe. Way to go.

During the COVID-19 lockdown,

- Spends time with ShiBiFeed producing videos and connecting with youth
- Conducts online regular youth meetings and one-on-one coaching
- Shoutout to Ziad, a Starbucks buddy of his, and Min Albi for helping them get food boxes to 145 families.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COOPERIDER AROUND THE WORLD

MOTORCYCLING TO EXPERIENCE LIFE ABUNDANTLY.

I had seen him with a dog a few times. He'd grab a coffee, take a table on the outside terrace overlooking Beirut, and read. What brings this European-looking biker to Lebanon? These days, and to this Starbucks in particular? What's his story? I was intrigued.

This was as good a time as any. I approached him. The 5-minute conversation became a 3-hour excursion, including coffee, Lebanese red wine, spaghetti bolognese, family, and friends. Ginger, our dog, and Cooper, his "co-existed" during :-)!

He's been fascinated with people who traveled, discovered new cultures, and saw raw nature at its best. The photos they shared shaped who he is today. Traveling is part of his *raison d'être*. He wants to see the world and its people, to experience Earth in its purity.

MOTORBIKING

In France, taking the motorcycling test within five years of taking the one for cars was convenient.

**BEING RICH
IS NEEDING
NOTHING.**

So, he did, without planning on buying one.

Little decisions can take our lives on a long, impactful, and unexpected trajectory.

When Julien's parents saw his motorcycling license, they told him, "We don't want to see you on one." His mom, who works at the local hospital, has seen her share of biker casualties. His dad is a traveler, hiker, and bicyclist, and at 60, he continues to motorcycle. Biking kept creeping into his life as he traveled with his dad on three-wheeled scooters to France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg, Amsterdam, and Corsica.

Time and bikes deepened the relationship with his father as they rode together for four consecutive years. He learned how to ride long distances on two wheels, appreciate risks and fatigue's impact, and understand his limits.

From a scooter at 22 to a BMW 1200 GS at 27. He never thought that his father would actually help him pick the bike up, and with 2000 euros in his name, his mom helped him take out a loan. She wanted to travel "with the boys" vicariously. Before having been in an accident, she traveled, took photographs, and created documentaries.

He takes it honestly, after his parents: travel, photography, and documentaries.

LESSONS FROM HIS SHARE OF ACCIDENTS

He got into a big accident after a trip to Corsica and Sardinia. Going too fast, his bike flipped several times and got a beating. He slid on the asphalt and lucked out. He learned that high speed can cause pain to the family he loves.

"We want to see our son have fun on his bike, but we do not want him to die because of his passion."

Smaller other slides taught him how to fall off and learn his limits. A 240-kg machine can become a weapon if not respected and used correctly.

"When I ride, I feel responsible for myself and everyone else."

His other accident was someone else's mistake. The car got bashed, the bike was fixable, and he stayed in one piece again.

THE CORALIE FACTOR

Coralie, his girlfriend and business partner, is a biker herself. She understands where he is today and where he's going. She works in France and tries to meet him once a month on the road.

Being two decades his senior and with more experience in life brings a certain comfort level to the relationship. She encourages him to self-fulfill, to seek his dreams, and to be fully alive. He enjoys the discussions, support, and spending time with her. Being a self-made woman, she encourages him to go into his own business. She continually smiles, wears the most likable temperament, enjoys a nothing-is-impossible attitude, and loves and supports Julien.

BIKING AS A CULTURE

To him, biking is an instrument of freedom, a tool to experience cultures and live abundantly.

"I cannot live without my bike anymore."

He's glad he got it now and before starting his own family. Fathers restrain themselves from getting one for the risk it

potentially puts on their families. He feels it's easier when kids grow up with a bike at home.

His travels help him develop self-reliance, humility, and sound judgment of character. He learned about the sport and techniques of gauging parameters such as weather, road conditions, and other vehicles. He lost 5 kg since he took off from France. Motorcycling has given him a ticket to a new community.

“It doesn't matter your background. The minute you ride, people are happy to share the road with you.”

AROUND THE WORLD, STARTING IN LYON

On Oct 3, 2019, he started his adventure from Lyon, crossing to Northern Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania. He drove straight to catch up with Coralie, who was meeting him in Athens. Four days of torrential rain made him stop at a 5-star hotel in Tirana. He was so drenched and cold that his hands lost their color. They had to put him in a room for service personnel, yet he still had his steak for dinner.

He felt unwelcomed crossing Albania as he was asked to leave restaurants on three occasions. Until today, he doesn't know why. He rode and did not eat for 24 hours until he reached the Albanian-Greek border. It wasn't easy. On average, he rode 500 km/day. On a couple of occasions, he had to lift his 400 kg bike and cargo off the ground (Cooper not included).

Julien felt relieved (aah!) as sunshine and smiling faces welcomed him in Greece. Laura and Bertrand, a French couple he met, helped him out, and they later took a mountain climbing excursion together.

In Athens, he spent a week with Coralie sailing before her leaving and meeting him in Istanbul. On his way south to Calamata, he slid on a patch of olive oil. Mechanics fixed his bike overnight, did a complete checkup, and even tended to Cooper's bag. He needed to slow down after this little accident. So, he met with one of his social media followers, relaxed, and enjoyed the food.

On Dec 25, he met up with Coralie again in Istanbul. “When you leave Europe, you feel it,” he said. Coralie rented a car, put Cooper with her, and followed Julien as they drove through Turkey.

He wanted to come to Lebanon but was not advised to drive through Syria. He put himself on a cargo boat from southern Turkey to Tripoli. This one Frenchman was taken advantage of. Overpaid, slept on the boat's deck, and 12 hours later, the Lebanese coast magically appeared to him on Jan 16, 2020.

THE START OF HIS LEBANESE EXPERIENCE

Joelle, whom he met in Greece, invited him to stay with her parents to get him started. walaw?

“It's not easy to find something affordable, Cooper-friendly, motorbike safe, and affordable,” he says.

“In Lebanon, cats are queens, and dogs are dogs.”

People are afraid of them. The Lebanese are the encouraging kind. Despite their problems — the Internet, power, drinking water, traffic, mobile pricing, and cost of living — they are people with big hearts, overflowing generosity, kindness, and hospitality like no other. Everyone is welcoming, people smile, and they're

genuinely interested in you.

“Lebanon is an important destination for me. I plan to stay here for a few months and prepare for my next step.”

It’s an incredible country with an extraordinary social and religious mix. Things just work in some organized chaos, but they work. It’s a good lesson for everyone around the world.

Given what Lebanon is currently going through, I’m trying hard not to be cynical, yet a big part of me has been and is still a ‘Julien.’

HIS PHILOSOPHY TAKES HIM FORWARD

Leave a system that might not be for you. Be it country, language, work, or culture. People have immigrated for centuries. Continents have literally moved over thousands of years.

“I believe that we are born to move.”

Need as little as possible: a motorbike and a dog. As long as he keeps meeting people, evolving, and learning new things, he’s good. He’s establishing a digital service company to be able to work from anywhere, get paid, and stay on his mission. He wants to work just enough to keep his bike rolling, to have enough food and water for himself, some meat for Cooper, and a place to pitch his tent.

“Being rich is needing nothing.”

WHAT’S NEXT FOR COOPERIDER?

Update: he took off to France for a break right before the lockdown. He’s launched his company and enjoying time with Coralie in the French countryside. When everything subsides, he will come back to Lebanon.

Then, Japan, Iran, Mongolia, China, and India. Once there,

Alaska, the US, and South America. He’ll go as far as his bike will take him, after which he’ll hitchhike. He believes that he’ll find the place that will become home. Maybe Lebanon?

**I DID NOT
COLLAPSE NOR
FEEL STRESSED.
I AM AT PEACE.
GIVE US OUR
DAILY BREAD.**

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**PARISH
PRIEST. SCOUTS
CHAPLAIN.
TEACHER.**

**SERVANT LEADER. CAR ENTHUSIAST. DID
ANYONE SAY BAYERN MUNICH?**

Abouna (Fr.) Tony is a brand name kneaded with love over five decades. He brings out the good in you. A master listener. Generous with his time and resources. A youth dynamo, team player, and team builder. Obedient to his church, a servant leader, and an inspiration by example. He's very liberal on many issues, yet he does not compromise on Jesus and his teachings. Abouna is a natural leader who is anchored to Jesus.

We sat towards the entrance of Starbucks on a corner table. My back to the wall and him facing me, letting nothing distract him, he started talking.

I've had many discussions with him. This one conversation made me understand him a little better. Let me explain.

ABOUNA TONY, THE PARISH PRIEST

He assumed the responsibilities of St. Elie's parish (Ain Aar, Lebanon) in 2001 and continues to date. He serves 350 households by visiting his parishioners and celebrating Mass, baptisms, and marriages. He gives the last rites to people on their deathbeds, visits with the sick, and fundraises for the less fortunate. Some couples come from outside the parish to get married at this 250-year-old church.

"I think they like the simplicity, humility, youthfulness, family spirit, and culture."

It took time, consistency, and effort from Abouna and the parishioners to develop the church spirit that everyone enjoys today. For First Communion and baptisms, Abouna Tony explains the spirituality behind the sacraments and their importance to the child. This sometimes timid gentleman becomes a loud critic of worldly show-offs during such events. It's similar to when he's on the podium delivering his sermon.

I call it "showtime!" As if he fills up with knowledge and spirit, awaiting the right time to deliver.

He prepares well, uses personal examples, and simplifies concepts related to the Scriptures. He frequently pushes his parishioners to uncomfortable places, showing the black and the white, the true and the false. There are no compromises on fundamentals, yet flexible on methods.

He works hard to keep people close to their faith. The ones who are challenging to get through get him tired. "Sometimes, I wonder when will I get through to them?" Then he reaches up to the "What would Jesus do?" approach, gets recharged, and continues to serve. His close

relationship with his community brings him to their dinner table

"I enjoy simple food the most. I like simplicity."

PERE TONY, THE TEACHER

He teaches Christian Education at Saint Joseph School and is the guidance counselor to high schoolers. He tells me that the source of a troubled student is sometimes his family. Students manifest pain by being troublesome, starting fights, or being too funny all the time. He tries to help every time and is always welcoming to his students. He loves them unconditionally. He hopes they can bring these manifestations of love home and to their communities.

He sees that Christian values are eroding in Lebanese families, and he works hard to help parents sustain those values. The father may have to work abroad, and the mother is left to raise the children. Or both parents work hard, and they still cannot keep up. The family is shaken when the father's or mother's focus turns selfish. When they only focus on materialistic needs or wants, they lose focus. Financial challenges strain the relationship between parents. A family that keeps faith can weather the storms.

Being close to too many cases can get tiring. It takes a tremendous effort, work, and presence.

"I say to him [Jesus]... I'm limited in time, place, and personal gifts. You gave me this big mission, and I'm trying to help as much as I can. I count on you to help me fulfill Your mission."

AIGLE, THE CHAPLAIN IN "SCOUTS DU LIBAN"

Saint Joseph's group has about 600 members: Boy Scouts, Girl

Scouts, younger, and older. He serves as chaplain [aumonier in French] by providing spiritual guidance. He believes his role is to be a companion without imposing his views on young leaders. Given his packed schedule, he intervenes when asked and tries his best to serve. He loves to go out to the wilderness and camp with them when asked. He feels at his best with the scouts.

He especially likes it when they call him by his scout's nickname, eagle [aigle in French]. Scouts tease him as they sing "Pizza Pepperoni. El3ab Bouna Tony."

He believes in keeping God close in all his conversations, especially the ones around a campfire. When you give Him room, the message becomes His. The advice becomes more honest and caring.

FAITH AND WORLDLY POLITICS

He takes issue with how polarized the Lebanese are over religion, especially inter-Christian splits. He expects more of them. They should know better how to practice politics with faith. For example, at church, no person is more important than another. All humans are equal in the eyes of God. Abouna is not fond of reserved seating at church. He appeals to young Christians of Lebanon to be Christians before their allegiance to any political party. Their relationship with Jesus and the purity of his teachings will undoubtedly inject new life into society, including being members of political parties. God will teach us to listen and build bridges between communities to make peace.

"Becoming real Christians takes continuous effort to put Jesus first. How can you be one without reading the Bible, praying, attending Mass, and practicing your faith?"

We have to be modest to question our actions. Saint Paul said: "I

no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Our whole life is a challenge to practice the teachings of Jesus, of selflessness in our daily lives, and to give room for His spirit. We should let the fire of Jesus work in us.

OUR DAILY BREAD

"These are turbulent times for everyone," he says, including himself. He has his worldly concerns, like all of us. Given the economic crash in Lebanon, he stands to lose the little life savings he has.

"I did not collapse nor feel stressed. I am at peace. Give us our daily bread."

He knows that his situation is easier than that of parents responsible for their family.

He pauses.

I felt the weight of his parishioners' struggles on his shoulders.

People come to him for help with food, medicine, and shelter. He reaches out to other people who can help. Silently and with anonymity, community members play their role to keep the spirit going.

ABOUNA RECHARGES

"It must be draining. How do you recharge?" I ask. Smiling: "By the way, I operate on 220 volts!" he replies.

I recharge by praying, reading the Bible, and reflecting on it. In the morning, I pray, celebrate Mass, and do the same in the evening. During the day, I always prepare something related to the Scriptures. I pray the rosary. I read. "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." (Psalm 119:105).

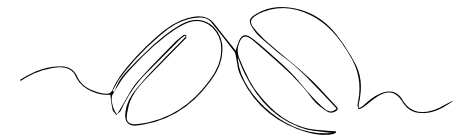
**TONY MUST BE A FUN PERSON TO BE
AROUND. NO?**

His serious side has an equivalent light-hearted, fun side, and he's so easy to be around. He loves spending time with friends, visiting or camping with them, relaxing, grabbing a beer or a glass of wine, or enjoying a simple meal.

When a power nap gets the best of him after dinner, mention cars or anything mechanical (especially the German-made), and he'll wake up.

Want to tease him? Challenge his favorite German football team.

Are you a cyclist? I bet you can't beat his record (Kornet Chehwan — Sannine) in three hours.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZYARA SHEDS LIGHT ON LIFE'S HEROES

**I AM HUNGRY
TO RECONNECT
TO THE SOURCE
OF HUMANITY.
I'M AN EMPATH!**

LIGHTKEEPER MURIEL AND ALL-LOVING DENISE DO THEIR MAGIC.

Two people serve one meaningful purpose. Denise, Muriel, and their Zyara [visit in Arabic]. They get invited to other people's lives and get entrusted with their stories to document and share. Their story-telling invites hope and waken inspiration. The most profound way to understand Zyara is to get to know Denise, Muriel, and the magic they produce.

We sat outside. When I asked about their story, Denise jumped in and flashed back to her childhood. She took me to the beautiful Beirut neighborhood of Corniche ElMazraa, to the house that defined her.

Aside from Gus and Joe, she's the third person to take me there. Is this a coincidence, or there's something magical about that Beirut neighborhood?

THE HOUSE WAS HOME TO MANY SOULS

It was a small all-inviting house continuously full and

generous. If only the walls could speak. No more. Soon after Denise's two brothers and sister got married and moved on, and their live-in aunt passed away, the house became a little too empty for her and her parents. In 2002, the front door squeaked as the closed it shut and moved to the Northern suburbs of Beirut to join the brothers in their new building. They held on to it for 10 years before they decided that they have to let it go. Today, the house is a deserted empty lot except for the random vegetation growing in it.

For about 50 years, that house buzzed. It had a simple structure. One big living room in the middle as you walk in from the front door and then two bedrooms: one to the left and one straight ahead. The kitchen was to the right. A cute garden, with a shading guava tree and a jasmine bush, hugged the structure. Between the outside gate and the main door under the tree, was a small pond with pet fish, centered by a water fountain, bringing freshness to Beirut's summer heat.

Did the children overfeed the fish? How did the guava smell? The jasmine?

Many people used to come to their place: relatives, friends, neighbors, and the occasional passer-by. She remembers her mom waking up at 5 am to wash clothes, cook, and prepare dad's Tupperware lunch box. By 6 am, knocks on the door would start as neighbors walk in for a visit [Lebanese call it Sobhieh]. Kids would be scrambling for breakfast, a turn to the bathroom, and getting dressed for school, work, or university. Out of the two bedrooms, the six children had to share one. Most often, they had other people sleeping over. She remembers once having 11 people, whom she did not know, overnighting at their place. During the war, their home was a stop-over for people from East Beirut traveling through the airport.

Houses like Denise's made the neighborhood what it was—a mix of people from all religions and denominations. People who grew up together as one.

“What was really nice is that during all feasts, we used to bake sweets for the whole neighborhood. Overnight.”

Denise's mom used to “volunteer” her daughters to go and help Souad and Zbeideh, two sisters from the neighborhood who lived off selling jasmine necklaces and orange blossom water. Souad was the first person Muriel and Denise documented in the Zyara series.

ZYARA WAS BORN

Her upbringing developed in her an intense curiosity. She would people watch and play guess: This guy is on his second date, this one works as an accountant, and is not happy, and this couple looks like their breaking up. She suggested to Muriel to start documenting people's stories. Denise did the talking, and Muriel did the filming, lighting, imagery, and approach. After their first story of Souad in 2014, Zyara was created and season 5 just launched.

Since then, the Zyara makers traveled all over Europe and met with prominent artists who encouraged them to keep producing. Zyara, the project, circled internationally scooping over 45 awards. The vibes of their heroes and their stories kept all kinds of support coming their way.

DENISE JUST DOES THE TALKING

Talk she does, and so much more. In the beginning, it was a curiosity that got her started as she's interested in people. She would wonder as to what did you play with, as a kid? What are your

dreams? Your favorite food? When did you first fall in love? What makes you feel the most or makes you cry? What are your regrets and dreams? What are you afraid of, and what have you learned? When you share your experience with her and your eyes start to glitter, she feels with you. That would be the beginning of yet another Zyara.

“I am hungry to reconnect to the source of humanity. I’m an empath!”

Muriel tells me that Denise feels with people even before talking to them. She has a gift of helping people break their protective shields and live with her a moment of pure connection and truth. She’s a no-limits all-loving person.

Denise believes that every minute should be lived fully. We need to let down all barriers and reconnect. Time to sit together, whether conversing or in silence, is vital.

“This is very rare today. People are carrying too much. They are too separated by their individuality.”

COMPLEMENTARY CHARACTERS FOR ZYARA

When Denise’s growing up was in a tribe, Muriel’s was different. When Denise is grounded with people, Muriel’s head is somewhere in the sky dreaming. When traveling, Denise would have found someone to talk to about life, and Muriel would be sitting in a warm corner in a cafe, sipping her coffee and planning the future. Muriel likes the mute mode, Denise is a great listener. You would think that Denise is a small-talker. NOT. You would think that Muriel only dreams. NOT.

Denise does the first step, plans the Muriel trap, and then retreats and watches her execute. They balance each other, and it serves Zyara well. After an interview, Denise is drained. She keeps a relationship of respect and love with that person

but rarely goes back that deep with them. Muriel, on the other hand, is the one who stays in touch and supports when she can.

Denise takes people’s stories all the way in, as part of them live in her forever. Muriel uses her emotional shield to externalize situations and help.

THE ZYARA SPIRIT

The visits [Zyara] are trusted. People they visit feel safe with them. They feel loved, accepted, and supported. Their message will be portrayed honestly. The power of Zyara is in its spiritual values of being non-judgemental and loving. The Zyara lens is humane.

Every time Muriel and Denise do a Zyara, they leave changed. The story of the heroin addict who has done a lot in his life, or the person who has passed through very dark times, or that someone who was a sex addict, or another who has lost a child, or the one who was raped severely for so many years; all those stories change you.

“It’s not that you’re sharing a conversation. You’re exchanging souls. You’re exchanging a part of you and they a part of them. Which remains with you forever.”

When they meet these people again, they feel that they’re meeting a part of them. They become family. All this in one day: One hour of interview, then another hour of shoots around the home, then they take them out to lunch and chat. Two hours of work and the rest is getting to know the person even more through talking, laughing, and crying.

There feel a sacredness around their Zyara’s.

All-loving Denise enchants the heroes of Zyara. Muriel stands as the lightkeeper. So, what’s the lightkeeper’s story? Where is she from and what drives her to do this?

Zyara—by Home of Cine-Jam—is an award-winning Lebanese documentary series in its 5th season. Expect 12 new stories of resilience.



**THIS IS MY
MISSION IN LIFE.
KEEPING THE
INNER LIGHT
ON!**

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“NO” IS NOT AN ANSWER

LIGHT-KEEPER, CINEMATOGRAPHER, REBEL.

Last week, I started my journey with the Zyara team. We continue here.

She’s a person of extremes. She did not like school and had a problem with figures of authority, be it work-related, political, or religious. She can’t be an employee. She enjoyed cheating at school for the fun of it — copied from students and allowed students to copy from her. An outlaw. During the war and when everyone was hiding in shelters and complaining, she traveled in her parallel world with her headset on — less drama and more dreams. Shelter time was free time to dream.

MURIEL GROWING UP

With her mom and on the way to explore the university, they walked between two buildings: one with well-dressed students, the future lawyers, and the other full of graffiti, with torn jeans, red-colored hair, and loud students. Guess which one she picked?

Her original plan to study translation or law ended her behind the camera. She fell in love with light and decided to become a

cinematographer.

One day, her mom approached her about being unable to continue paying for her education. In what she calls her parallel universe, she kept going to classes until she got the pink slip! Snapping out from her dreamy life, she went straight to financial services and talked to the lovely and helpful Ms. Carmel.

She mentions her with fondness and admiration. This woman played an impactful role in Muriel's career. Little acts of deliberate attention can make a huge difference in someone's life.

She worked with her on a full scholarship and got it. The university had one condition: to pay it forward. "Sure," she answered, "And I also know who it's for."

Her kid brother was following in a couple of years :-)

WORK

Passionate about her country. Even though she was given several opportunities to leave and blossom elsewhere, she chose to make it in Lebanon. She wanted to work as a Director of Photography (DOP). Muriel was told it's not a woman's job; there are no female cinematographers in the Arab world, and there are too few globally. The camera is too heavy, and she can't carry it. She took the job of Assistant Director for a couple of years and then asked to be closer to the camera. She worked with the technicians hauling equipment. She ended up carrying little as the guys wouldn't let her — sometimes, they carried her and the equipment together. Since DOPs were primarily foreigners, her role turned into a translator gaffer.

From the beginning, she loved what she did. She worked straight until her 30s with no vacation. She never felt that it was work. She'd

be on a film shoot every other week when in uni. She cranked 40 of them in a row. She got the opportunity to shoot her first 35 mm and won the best cinematography prize. She had a goal to have her first feature film at 30; she celebrated her birthday on the set of that film.

You promise something to yourself, and it will happen. A hard worker and an overachiever. An emotional blow takes her down for 5 minutes, after which she rebounds and moves on.

SUPERPOWER

"I wish I could speak all languages. I wish I could download them all into my brain! That's why I chose audio-visual art: it is universal."

THE LIGHT-KEEPER

She works with both, from the light into her lens to the light in people's hearts. Sunshine is gorgeous, but the light within us is much more beautiful. She will do whatever it takes to help people maintain their inner light. She may lead by example, sit and talk to them, inspire them, or push them to believe in themselves.

"This is my mission in life. Keeping the inner light on!"

She can seamlessly help people when they're going through challenges. She started by observing her parents and learning her first big life lessons from them.

FREE WILL

She even believes that she picked her parents and the country she's living in. She believes that if someone got paralyzed in a car accident and stayed alive, what he does with the rest of his life is his choice. Does he allow the accident to awaken his spirit or break it?

“Nobody is a victim. You always have a choice to change. Always.”

Denise jumps in: ‘Except for children.’

As an adult, if something happened to you, it happened. What about the present? The future? How can you change your mindset to change the outcome? You can either choose to live as a victim for the rest of your life or not. It’s your free will.

What saddens her the most is when she sees people giving up. For her, everything is possible.

CHILDREN, PARENTING, AND FEMINISM

They have a weak spot for children. Denise believes that parents must be emotionally ready before bringing children to this world. Muriel goes to the extreme of making it compulsory for the parents to go through therapy before bringing a child into this world.

Why did you bring the child?

Muriel believes that when you bring a child to this earth, you must take care of them, guide them to bloom, and discover what makes them happy.

“When is it right for a woman to move on and do what she wants to do?” I ask. She always has the right. We all do. The man can be an excellent caregiver, but our society has given him this rigid role. Fathers should have their rights just like mothers. Divide the load equally. The problem is that the emotional weight goes to the woman, and the financial burden goes to the man. Very rarely do you find the right balance between the two roles. Very few fathers know how to be fathers.

Feminism today is being screamed out, like seeing someone escaping a cage after a long confinement.

The reaction is understandable, and it’s probably the least to be expected after centuries of injustice.

For Muriel, it’s all about human rights. To empower the woman, you have to empower and educate the man and the woman. A man has to understand his insecurities about having the woman as an equal human being, as much as the woman should be at peace with her insecurities and fears.

We live in a patriarchal society, and there are contexts where man is given power beyond reason. Religious laws are biased against women. To balance, you raise boys to become men who are allowed to cry, ask for help, and communicate, like you need to raise girls to become women who dream, believe, and achieve. You cannot strengthen the woman and step on the man. Men should be reminded that there is a feminine side to them. They need female energy, just like a woman needs male energy. We all have both energies within us, and we choose to feed one over the other.

Muriel wishes to see this type of empowerment, which she calls feminism.

THE ZYARA FACTOR

Since Zyara’s launch, her passion has shifted from light to art that serves humanity. She evolved from cinematographer to light-keeper. Muriel and Denise both play the role of light-keeper and love-giver.

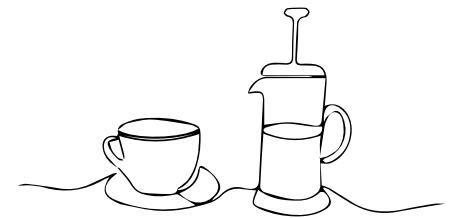
Denise was listening to Muriel getting into the heavy conversation, and she started tearing up. I looked at her and slightly tilted my head with that inquisitive grin. She giggled and said: “I am a bundle of intense emotions. A lot”

Zyara refined Muriel. It made her even more humane. They will keep Zyara going as long as they can. The Zyara makers want to leave an artistic and poetic legacy, honoring the people they visit through their stories. Zyara is their way of loving the world. The people they visit feel safe with Zyara's non-judgemental and loving values.

“Zyara is a piece of me and a piece of her, and the wonderful team that supports us: Bashar, Elsy, Rachelle, Liliane, Rosanna, Khalil, and Elie.”

Home of Cine-Jam is an association for Humanitarian Arts. It aims to inspire and induce social and emotional healing through authentic short films or series.

Zyara is the first creation of Home of Cine-Jam. An award-winning documentary series that paints poetic portraits of people. Through 5-minute episodes, Zyara engraves parts of its subjects' souls, some of their stories, and their emotions.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MY NAME IS JOSIANE. I LIKE THE ORANGE GUMMY BEARS

**SISTER, DAUGHTER, TEACHER,
FULBRIGHT RECIPIENT, WORK-IN-
PROGRESS.**

Starbucks was empty. We took one out of the only three tables available due to social distancing. A meter apart across from a coffee table, masks on/off, we visited for a good hour and a half.

JOSIANE IN COVID LAND

She likes to have a lot on her plate, does not miss any opportunity, and takes the challenge to balance everything. With the current uncertainty, life just got even more exciting. Since her co-worker at the non-profit got promoted, she's enjoying double the work pressure. As a Fulbright recipient, she waits for official updates. She doesn't want to start her graduate studies online. It's an experience she wants to live. When would she leave her job? What would the next 4 months look like? If she's supposed to start on Aug 24 and

**THERE NEEDS
TO BE A SHIFT IN
THE NARRATIVE
AS TO HOW
DEVELOPMENT
IS DONE.**

has to be there two weeks prior, she must leave by Aug 10. Wait a minute; what if she needs to go through self-isolation for two weeks? Alright, she needs to land in the US by July 24.

Worst case scenario? First semester in Lebanon. With the seven-hour time difference, things will be very challenging. The worst of the worst-case scenarios (being Lebanese, you simulate the apocalyptic scenarios, too) would postpone or even cancel the whole thing. She pauses: “No... They already sent me all official documentation.”

SHE WASN'T READY FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP

Yet she knew that she was Fulbright material.

She had the application open in her browser. Blank. For three years. The first time she started looking at it was when she was still at the Lebanese University after moving from the Lebanese American University due to financial reasons. Studying biology as pre-med was not her thing.

She always thought, “If you’re not happy, travel abroad.” That’s what some of her high school friends did. Then she decided she wouldn’t leave just because she was unhappy.

“I will leave for something meaningful. So, I kept delaying it. Fulbright scholars are super-smart, super accomplished, devoted, and self-confident. I was none of those.”

Nervous giggle. I asked: “Is it any different now?”

“I think I had a lot of different experiences that helped me understand who I am. I still don’t think I’m the most accomplished, but I’m proud of everything I’ve done.”

LOST IN CAREER CHOICES

You are told to find your discipline, study it, find that stable job, and retire. Josiane was with the rest of us in the herd, but she could not find that one thing. Biology was not it; neither was medicine. She taught for two years. Her beautiful experience was emotionally and physically draining. She has the utmost respect for teachers, but she wants to be someone other than the teacher who taught the dad and the son and his son.

ON TEACHING

A poster at her uni got her to teach English as a foreign language to a French school north of Beirut. With Teach for Lebanon, she taught for two years. She still remembers her first day when her students probably thought she was from Mars since they did not understand a word of what she was saying. All nine sections of one class had no clue. She experimented by changing the accent and slowing down. No matter what she did, they weren’t performing. She thought she was the problem.

Not really. Those grade 2-5 students (ages 8-12) liked her.

Of the 316 students, only 16 had parents who knew some English. Parents pushed French on their children because it had a higher coefficient on the report card, and math and science are taught in French.

So, she started an English program for parents. Every Tuesday for four and a half months, 40 moms would show up to study English. 22 of them graduated. They loved it, and Josiane, too.

When the moms started learning, it picked up at home, and that helped change the culture. Students started getting interested in the English language. Josiane would suggest the movie of

the week. She felt that she achieved something when parents and students were writing movie summaries and reading independently.

During the parents' graduation, Marie, who knew very little coming into the class, gave the speech in perfect English.

Marie reminded Josiane of her mom.

D A D

Her dad struggled with cancer for four years and passed away when she was 12. He worked abroad, and she did not feel he was around until later. She remembers bits and pieces with few vivid memories and hazy ones.

At six years old, he would ask her to teach him English. "Where should I go next? Iraq or Nigeria?" he would ask. She remembers him sick in his last two years. After one of his surgeries, he had to relearn how to walk again, and he'd spend quite a bit of time lying down. The little girl would climb into bed with him and watch movies. Zoro. Every day, for months. She has it memorized and cannot see it ever again.

Mom told Josiane and her younger sister that their father was sick. Josiane did not feel that he was going to die until he did. She remembers dreaming of him passing the day before. She leaped from watching movies in bed to him being gone. At one point, reality hit, and that little girl realized that she had lost her father.

"It was an interesting time!" she says sarcastically. Interesting was the word she used. Maybe it's too convoluted of emotion for her to describe plainly.

She's 25 now, double the age of the little girl who lost her father. Time does not really heal; it helps you manage better.

The first couple of years were difficult. She had gotten used to him.

Shewantedtoblamesomeoneforwhathappened,so sheblamedhermom.

You first decide that this person is gone. Then, you decide to keep him with you in whichever way you choose. You talk to him. You bring back the little happier memories. Movies. Putting chiclets in Pepsi. Acting silly. The laughs. FunTime pizza on Sundays with the whole family. Watergate Park for an all-day outing. Arguing with mom about suntanning his stitches.

They turned her childhood pizza place into a poker establishment :-(!

A N D T H E E X T E N D E D F A M I L Y

During her father's illness and after, the relationship with her paternal side of the family was not the best. New revelations popped up when she started putting the little pieces of the puzzle together.

The pieces she found helped shape her.

Her paternal grandmother passed away with little mending. She still loves her grandfather, whom she accidentally sees in the village. Nine of her dad's cousins are not in her life. People are who they are by what they hear and see. You can't change everything about everyone. You choose your own family. Pick friends who will become like family as the ones by blood. She believes in carefully picking her battles. Some things are better resolved by holding your peace.

G E T T I N G T O T H E F U L B R I G H T

She loves getting things done with little to no budget. It was time. She started looking for something related to projects and

creativity. After deliberate research, she found what fits her best and what she would love — development, the people side of development. She landed a program she found at Syracuse University.

Fulbright might be her ticket to it. Let the games begin!

She got everything together for the application. She still waited until the day before the deadline to write her essay — in a coffee house in Jbeil.

A month later, she was called for an interview. She was super nervous during the 15 minutes; her voice cracked when she spoke of herself but got confident when talking about other people and projects she did. She told them that all she wanted was to apply. She wanted to click that submit button, and now she's content. To continue the process, and while working as an executive assistant, she would study for the TOEFL and GRE exams on her lunch breaks.

She received her nomination by email while having lunch with friends. Yay!

ON ISSUES

She is resilient on long-term, bigger-than-herself goals and impatient with getting things done. She executes well. She executes fast. She is patient with people. The more she talks to them, the more hope she sees.

“They tell us that you cannot change nor save the world. Well. Maybe we can't, but we can always try.”

She wants to support people to have better lives. Lebanon will always be a better place if people fight for its ideals.

“What we're striving for is something so big and beautiful.”

Josiane will get her graduate degree in development and come back to Lebanon or the region. She wants to play a central role between international agencies and the ground level.

“There needs to be a shift in the narrative as to how development is done.”

Bring all players around the table and let them find a shared space to operate, especially people who disagree with you. The middle brings about sustainable change. In the Lebanese case, invite the politicians to the table, make them part of the discussion, and hold them accountable.

Everyone has a racist uncle. You disagree with him, yet you get where he's coming from and love him. It's the same with countrymen. It could be your neighbor, your friend, your teacher. You want to show them that you care for them. There's so much healing that needed to occur and never happened. If you're going to go forward, that healing has to happen. Include everyone. Otherwise, they'd return and turn the table again in a few decades.

SHE'S READY

Josiane will soon be on her way to start yet another page. She's more experienced, less stubborn, and has an immense inner peace.

“I am a much better person than 4 years ago. I still have a long way to go. I'm a work-in-progress!”

Everyone has their own challenges. She had hers. They lost everything. She's almost totally open about everything that happened to her. It's better to talk about things as she hopes someone will learn from her experience. She still has a lot to define. In the meantime, her one constant is that she likes the orange gummy bears.

This 8-year-old girl has come a long way since watching Zoro with her ailing father. She's destined to serve people. She will be the change.

And the mom? What about the mom?



THE MOM WITH NO NAME

THROUGH THE EYES OF HER DAUGHTER.

She raised two exceptional daughters. I got to know one of them. The one traveling to Syracuse University for graduate school is the one who likes the orange gummy bears. A couple of weeks ago, when I met with Josiane, she would go on and on about her mom. She told me she's the strongest and most resilient woman she's ever known and her number one life teacher. For some reason, she never mentioned her by name, and I did not ask.

HER LOVE FOR EDUCATION

She never got to high school. By ninth grade, she was out. Effectively, her education was disrupted from the sixth grade due to war and other factors. She remembers that she quit schooling when she started learning English. In Lebanon, it's usually by sixth grade.

She made sure her daughters loved learning. She read to them and story-told. And then, she would listen to her three-year-old Josiane as she recounted the story. Picture book after picture book.

She created a fun learning environment for them. Homemade flour, cornstarch, and salt for play dough went a long way. Along with other household stuff, including pots and pans, she fired

NO QUOTE.

up their imagination and turned them into inquisitive little rascals.

BY HER HUSBAND

She never worked until she had to when cancer took her husband away. Whatever savings they had, she spent on his healthcare — on the four-year battle they lost (2004–2008). She also sold everything she had, properties and jewelry, to take care of him. She managed with the bit of money she had and never let her daughters feel it. Yet, she still was upfront and told the eight-year-old and the four-year-old that their father was sick.

When her very young, sad, and confused daughter blamed her for her father's death, she kept quiet. She kept loving. The wife, the mother, and the caretaker still give it all in everything she does.

A TYPICAL DAY THAT WENT ON FOR YEARS

When she had every reason to stay in bed, she pushed through, one task at a time, one day at a time.

- 6:30 am — Their wake-up call was with gentle and slow kisses. Prepared breakfast and their lunch boxes. Saw them off to school.
- 8:00 am — When the dad was at the hospital in Beirut, she left to stay with him. Since she did not have a car, she would take one service taxi, then a bus, then another service taxi. Each-way. No matter the weather.
- 2:00 pm — Having spent all morning by his bedside, she would leave again (service taxi, bus, service taxi) to get home.
- 3:00 pm — Girls come back from school. She would eat

lunch with them, ask about their day, and help them with their homework.

- 4:00 pm — Leaves again to stay with her ailing husband.
- 8:00 pm — Leaves the hospital. Gets home. Takes a shower. Sleeps, to do it all over again the following day.

The aunt, who lived in the same building, covered for her sister when she couldn't be in two places at the same time. She did everything so that her children would not feel that they were losing both parents.

LIFE CONTINUES

The inlaws did not treat her as they should have. Yet, she never spoke ill of anyone. They are still family to her daughters. Her support group was tiny. When her husband passed, she had to devise a means to make a living. With no formal education, she decided to pool whatever money she had left and opened a store with her sister. With three weeks to Christmas, she had to figure out how to source merchandise, price, display, and work the financials. Having been a stay-at-home mom all her life, this was a different planet altogether for her.

SHE WORRIES

Mothers worry. It's in their job description. As a wife, she worried about her husband, including taking his medication on time. When she couldn't be at home, she gave her daughter the responsibility to remind him. Even now, as adults, she still worries about her daughters coming and going, especially since Josiane got molested.

She worries about them not eating or not eating correctly altogether. When on a three-month internship in Europe, she would call her daughter crying and ask whether she had

been eating. They ended up creating a proof of food Whatsapp group for their mom with pictures of their daily dishes.

Fake news got busted :-)

IT TOOK HER TIME TO LIVE AGAIN

She is calmer and more resilient than ever as she relearns how to live life again. The daughters, who are 21 and 25, switched roles with her and are pushing her to come back to happy.

She's getting back. No grey and black clothing. She's joking so much that it's getting on Josiane's nerves.

I think there's something equivalent to dad jokes but by moms.

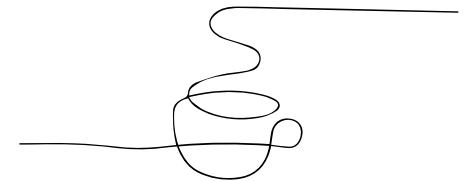
She's doing things for herself, even shopping! Cooking is an enjoyment again. Her dream was to become an interior designer or a chef.

Maybe it's a good time to take it seriously, Mom!

Camping on the same social media network as her daughters, she started an Instagram account. They're not happy. She's even going out to eat. When before, nourishment was to be enjoyed at home. She's enjoying walks with her children.

It took time for her daughters to understand her. Sometimes, it takes an adult to understand an adult. An adult daughter to understand her mother.

The daughters want to know more. When asked, she looks sideways and says nothing. She's the quiet type, and she still hasn't told them everything. Maybe some things are better left untold.



CHAPTER TWENTY

HELENE SOUTHERN GIRL

IN PRISON, SHE WAS MAMA; FOR KARAM, THE WHOLE WORLD.

On a hot summer day in 1952 in the Libaa South East Saida village, a four-year-old girl would leave home barefoot, as she always was, to visit with her grandmother. Walking through the woods and orchards for two hours to the next village, she would depend on the water springs for reference. Reaching the cemeteries on the foothill of Kfarfalous, she would yell for her grandmother. Knowing that no one would hear her, her voice kept her company.

The next morning, her father would show up on a donkey and ask about her whereabouts. Picking a fresh willow-like branch, he would whip her little butt, put her on the animal, and walk back. She reached home exhausted to be welcomed by her mother, who would scold her and give her another fresh whipping before going to bed.

She loved her childhood.

“Today, children are ill-behaved because they didn’t get a spanking every now and then.”

She’s the eldest among two girls and one boy; she is 72 now, and this story starts 65 years ago.

She was born when the current Republic of Lebanon turned 5.

**KARAM
TREATED ME
LIKE A QUEEN.
ALL MY LIFE.
UNTIL THE DAY
HE DIED.**

AN EARTHQUAKE WELCOMES THEM TO BEIRUT

Sometime in 1955, her dad found a job in Beirut and relocated. The apartment they took was in the Armenian neighborhood of Burj Hammoud. On March 16, 1956, at 9:32 pm, an earthquake hit southern Lebanon with repercussions in Beirut and further north. They must have run out of the house for safety. Eight-year-old Helene remembers clinging to her four-year-old brother's hand and looking for her mother, who was carrying her baby sister.

The panic drove people towards the town square to try and find their loved ones. For two days, they stayed on the streets; she would see people eating and ask them for food. Everyone helped. The church priest would make regular announcements to try to reunite families. Neither the kids nor their mom understood Armenian. On the third day, she walked with her brother to where their house was, in the crumbled neighborhood, and waited. When she eventually found her mother, they all cried. A wall had fallen on the dad; he was taken to the hospital and did not know where he was. He surfaced later.

Every time she drives in Burj Hammoud, she poses and gets a lump in her throat. The neighborhood is no more. It's a highway now. Helene's father got another apartment a few hundred meters north in the Dora area.

LIVING IN AND AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Helene would take her brother and watch Egyptian movies in Cinema Arax when they first moved to Beirut. She remembers

kicking the rodents with her little feet as she watched. On good days, she'd venture beyond Cinema Arax to Cinema Rivoli for better conditions. Going to downtown Beirut was a straight shot by tramway. It was 5 piastres standing for kids and 10 for a seated trip. Her 5 piasters were hollowed and in a chain around her neck.

100 piasters = 1 Lira.

She still hid behind big men to try and save on the fare. She'd sometimes get cheese, mortadella, and other grocery items for her mom from Bab Idriss. On the way down, she'd hang on to the horse carriage.

Yes. Horse carriages and tramways coexisted in Beirut in the late 1950s.

At 10 years old, she would demonstrate with other adults on the streets of Beirut. They had Hanna El Haddad in custody. They chanted:

“ما مِنْهَا وَمَا مِنْكُمْ غَيْرَ تَرْجَعُ أَبُو الْحَيْنِ”

SHE TURNED HEADS ON MAR MAROUN STREET

She studied at a school run by Catholic nuns about a 5-minute walk from her house. An honor student straight through. At 13, she started tutoring Arabic, French, English, and Christian education at a school nearby.

When she turned 14, she raised her heels, groomed her lengthy hair, and looked gorgeous.

“Really. I used to turn heads.”

In the old days, if a boy liked your daughter, he would walk to your door and address your father: “I saw your daughter in so and so place, and I like her.” They would invite

the young man in and check his intentions and family. Sometimes, marriage happens, and sometimes not.

“Every Sunday after church, 4–5 follow me home. If I tell you that I used to cause traffic jams in Dora by simply walking, you’d think I’m exaggerating. I’m not!”

Giggles! Long hair, well dressed, high heels, eyeliner, earrings, and colored shoes. How couldn’t she cause excitement in Dora?

“Now, I’m old, I can’t anymore.”

TO THE VILLAGE FOR A FUNERAL

The earthquake destroyed some southern villages. Libaa was no exception. Her uncle died, and his family was living in a tent on their property. A funeral was to be held, and family members traveled from Beirut south. Since very few owned cars, taxis were the best means of transportation. Helene’s mom hailed a taxi to Saida. A brand new one they got.

Before heading east from the coast, they stopped in Saida to get coffee and other food for the people attending the funeral.

Unlike today, services were not outsourced. People served in their homes.

Helene and her brother sat in the back while the driver stayed in the car. He kept staring at her through the rearview mirror. This eight-year-old child felt disturbed.

HER MOM’S COUSIN ELOPED

And went to the village to celebrate. Taxis again. As many as possible. Helene had turned 16. She saw the car with the tall, good-looking, green-eyed taxi driver.

“You know, I started noticing :-)”

She looked at her 24-year-old single aunt and said: “Let’s go with this one.” She did not remember him. He knew exactly who she was. Her aunt sat by the driver; she sat by the window. Karam, the driver, kept stealing glimpses of her.

At the wedding, Helene was the center of the party. She danced and Dabke’ed (traditional Lebanese dance)! All drivers left except for Karam. By midnight, Helene’s father told him that he should go. He slept in his car. He stayed for the wedding the next day and took them back to Beirut.

On the way, he inquired with Helene’s father about buying land there in their village. They decided to check things out the following Sunday. Helene had mid-year exams and was studying. For two weeks, Karam would pick her father up and go to scout out more land. Helene continued to study.

She laughed and giggled, telling this part of her story. I felt her coming even more alive. The memories brought back that intimate feeling of youth and playfulness that only she can relive. I saw that other brighter twinkle in her eyes.

He told her dad that he liked all the lots, but he had one specific request in mind. He wants Helene. “Why didn’t you say so earlier?” the father asked. Karam was shy. The father would ask his daughter.

It turned out that he decided to marry her the day her mom went down to buy coffee for the funeral. He would watch her at the start of every school year to get a glimpse of his future bride. He was 20, and she was 7. He decided to wait.

HOW DID IT END?

The dad came and told Helene. The aunt went ballistic as she was the one who wanted him. Helene told her dad to refer Karam to her aunt. “He wants you. I can’t tell him to take Souad!” the father said.

He told Karam that Helene wants to continue her studies, and she’s not thinking of marriage right now. Karam insisted on talking to her.

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you want me?”

“I am young and still at school.”

“I will wait for you.”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“There is a problem then.”

“You want me to leave school and marry a chauffeur?”

Ouch!

He kept quiet.

HELENE AND KARAM

He eventually sold his car, opened a spare parts store, and did well. She had many advances after that, including a millionaire from Venezuela. She applied to become a flight attendant with Middle East Airlines. The director was so impressed that he offered her to run the VIP lounge. None of that passed with the family. Helene’s grandfather liked Karam. She argued with him but ended with a strong recommendation to make the union. Grandpa gave her 10,000 Liras [in 1963]. 1,200 Liras went to order the bedroom that is still in service. The wedding cost around 1,000 Liras, and so much money was left over.

“Karam treated me like a queen. All my life. Until the day he died.”

Time flew. They had four children and 12 grandchildren. She loved and respected him. He supported her at all times. When he got sick, she would spend the whole month with him at the hospital, not to leave except with him. Nine months they spent in and out of hospitals. He passed away 18 years ago. She continued alone.

MAMA AND THE PRISONER STORIES

After Karam’s passing, Helene’s health caught up with her. Stress did, too. One day, her friend from Family Care came over and asked her to come along and see what their non-profit was doing with incarcerated people. She ended up volunteering for 7 years.

She conducted workshops for them to create artisanal products. She organized the first exhibition of the kind of prison products. She sold it for them, and they sometimes got three times the price they asked for.

One man’s hard work on a cover for the Holy Kuran with intricate beads brought him what is worth a fortune. Another prisoner worked hard and saved enough money to buy a tuk-tuk he used when he got out. Others used their sales to buy heating fuel for their families and books for their daughters. She helped domestic workers, Mohamad, the Iraqi, the 27 Bangladeshis, and the helper whose fiancée came from Sweden to pick her up. Helene liaised between embassies and the Lebanese authorities.

Her twice-a-week visits that started in her early 50s changed her life yet another time. She saw things from another angle, learned about people, and gained more confidence to deal with life. In the prison system, everyone called her Mama.

Helping people in trouble helped her.

T O D A Y

Helene is keeping busy with her 12 grandchildren. She visits with her extended family in North Carolina every other year. She has written stories about the people she met in the prison system.

“I’d like to publish a book one day.”

This mother of the mother with no name, who is the mother of the girl who likes the orange gummy bears, is still as beautiful as when she ran barefoot from Libaa to Kfarfalous.

She had a tall black coffee and said, “ Is this considered small?”



CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

HER SMILING EYES TOLD IT ALL

**EVERYONE
SHOULD LIVE
THEIR LIFE AND
ENJOY EVERY
PHASE OF IT.**

ARCHITECT, YOUTH COACH, AND LIGHT DESIGNER IN THE MAKING.

Even in war, good things happen. Elise very rarely visited her hometown of Becharre. In July 2006, her parents fled Beirut to their village in North Lebanon for the remainder of that summer. Being there was safer and farther from the Israeli-Hezbollah war.

“I had seen him 15 days before we actually met. He made me nervous. I decided to meet him.”

She was 16 and a half. A bunch of giggly girls walked out of the supermarket near the village square with about three dozen lollypops. Ready to go camping, they bump into another group of teenagers. A common friend introduces him to Elise. Coke-flavored lollypop. “You took mine!” she told him, turned around and left. A few minutes later, he returned with two handfuls of Coke-flavored Chupa-Chups. They talked for about 15 minutes. That summer, she saw him every day.

Her eyes glittered, danced, and smiled as she continued. Love

radiated from her. 14 years later, as if it just happened.

They talked, played basketball, MSN'ed, and so much more together. Today, with a beautiful 3-year-old daughter, the story continues.

HER SCHOOL YEARS

She attended the Jesuit school of Notre Dame de Jamhour, where she went through a system that integrated sports and extracurricular activities with learning. She worked hard and learned to manage her time. She did not like the predominant snobbish standards and practices in that culture. It was against her grain to adhere, making her a nobody in some situations. The feeling of not entirely fitting in lasted throughout her school years. The classmates with whom she kept in contact were the ones who escaped that culture.

COLLEGE AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Elise graduated eight years ago from the Lebanese American University with a degree in architecture. Although her professional experience is challenging, she prefers it over college life. Her formative years at LAU equipped and helped her overcome the emotional baggage she had collected at school. When she would forget names and dates (minor details of important events, you know), as a little girl in college, she learned to memorize. When a history lesson would go something like: "There was a king who started a war sometime somewhere, and then his son took over," it got a little more specific in college.

She started working in a firm the summer she graduated. Four years later, she left to work in the family business with her brother, the civil engineer, and with her father's coaching. Another four

years into that business, her brother leaves for France to pursue his graduate studies. She's reinvented the business with her father.

"It's more challenging being a freelancer. I have to find clients and generate new ideas. It's tough, and I love it. I don't see myself working in a company again, even with the risk of no work for a while."

She's comfortable with the challenge. Confident, gutsy, creative, and entrepreneurial.

She has been taking online courses to explore new fields and acquire new knowledge. Her latest is interior and product design. Her training in architecture equipped her to build the spaces. Interior design focuses her on the internal spaces and furnishings. She's fascinated with lighting and wants to pursue a more specialized light design path, including the fixtures.

Lighting changes everything in a space. Day or night.

Let there be light. Genesis 1:3.

SAMER AND ELISE

A lot happened between giving her the Coke-flavoured Chupa Chups and raising their three-year-old. It took off quickly as they started dating 15 days after they spoke. Their honeymoon phase lasted about three years.

Elise grew up in a Christian family. Initially, she would go along with her parents' practices out of habit until she experienced God at 19. She decided to spend nine months in a program where same-age girls live, eat, pray, and share life experiences together. One of the rules is to abstain from exclusive relationships while on the mission. The intention is to help the girl focus with an undivided heart.

"When I did this conversion, I was happy with

Samer, but I also wanted that experience. It took me 2 weeks to plan on how to tell him. When I did..."

"Oh! Wow! I didn't know girls like this still existed." He decided to wait when she thought he would break up with her.

Clever, all-loving man. Who in his right mind would compete with God?

They talked once a week and saw him by accident a few times. Her routine was a tough one. She would work on her projects and pull all-nighters when the other girls would wake up for the 6 am breakfast and prayers. Not having slept, she'd join in and continue her university routine. It was a tough but one of the best years of her life. It was so difficult that she opted not to renew her mission.

Guess who's been waiting for God to hand over?

In preparation, Samer had picked up the pace of phone calls with Elise towards the end of her mission. They've been together since. Married for 6 years. In between? Trials, tribulations, and a few breakups.

God wanted to make sure, I guess.

"I was in a phase where I was worried about being stuck with him. I was a kid. What if I don't actually love him? What if he's not the one?"

COMPROMISE IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

No matter how much freedom Samer gave her, she still felt a little stuck. She wanted to do a Master's and work abroad, but she never did. He never discouraged her, and she did not want to leave the good things she had. Sometimes, commitment holds you back from doing everything you want to accomplish.

"Everyone should live their life and enjoy every phase of it."

SHE NEVER LEFT THE MISSION

She left the all-girls household but stayed in the mission. She kept her faith and introduced Samer to the community. She still volunteers, joins prayers once or twice a week and serves with the youth group (girls 9–12 grade). She does not advise young girls to do what she did with her relationship. She says that she was fortunate. It's not always that the first boy you meet will be the one. The one who respects you and lives your values. So many things can change as you grow up.

She sees girls who are growing up in unhealthy environments where more parents are getting divorced than before, sometimes putting the children in the middle of their quarrels. She also deals with a lot of bullied girls. On the other hand, she witnesses girls living life to the fullest.

"Sometimes I'm so tired and ready to give up until they give me hope and show me life as it should be."

Some of today's teenagers are so alive, clear in what they want, dedicated to service, committed, and entirely focused. Home plays a significant role. Well-rooted core values are central to weathering the storms that will test their character.

LIVING FORWARD

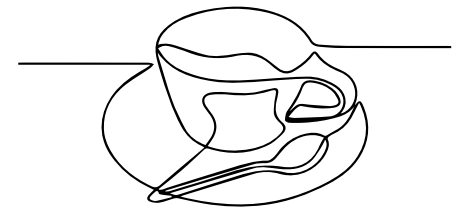
She believes that her life just got started. They're both young and have plenty to accomplish, separately and together. They're open to new opportunities.

Maybe that Master's degree can be planned somehow.

Eventually, Samer joined the community and has been dedicated to service. It isn't easy — very demanding. It's like having a side mission on top of your full-time job, company, and life in general.

Elise sees her mission as refreshing, rewarding, and providing a safe environment for her family in the long run.

Samer, on the other hand, has shown wisdom, humility, faith, and love. God handed her over to him. He made sure that He stayed at their dinner table that night and every night.



**I FEEL THAT WE
CAN REVERSE
THE DAMAGE.**

PREMACULTURE: ONE WAY TO HELP MOTHER EARTH HEAL HERSELF

After dedicating all her time to raising her daughter, it was time for Corinne to focus more on pursuing her professional dream.

MOTHER EARTH

Her passion lies in permaculture, a design system that mimics the patterns in nature to create diverse and balanced productive ecosystems. She was a biology teacher with a love for the environment and everything related to plants and ecology that started in Horsh Ehden. When her daughter started school, Corinne worked on environmental projects with Jibal, a non-profit on environmental projects.

Agriculture can damage the environment, and permaculture flips the situation.

She only left her daughter after four years of raising her 24/7 to attend a two-week training in Jordan with

Geoff Lawton, a renowned permaculture consultant.

Before permaculture, she felt that we humans are harming nature and our future is dark.

“Which is one of the reasons I didn’t want children at all to begin with. It’s because I felt that what is this world we are bringing them into? They’re coming to witness the apocalypse.”

Her experience in this course was more of a conversion than a training. Her pessimism on how we are treating Mother Earth changed when she started working in permaculture. The beauty of it all is that there’s no secret. Our ancestors practiced gentleness with the Earth. They were not passive or neutral toward the environment. They were not afraid of working with nature. She believes that we can become part of the solution. We can capture carbon, increase biodiversity, produce food, and provide people with food safety. We can do all this by simply adopting simple, proven design strategies. It’s beautiful and inspiring.

“I feel that we can reverse the damage.”

But we need science, technology, and traditional methods to do precisely that. There’s a lot to learn from native people all over the globe, from how they designed and placed their homes to how they managed fire. All of us are paying the price for dismissing the information that has been tested for thousands of years because it’s ancient. Going back and scientifically understanding and embracing what they did is beautiful and magical.

This approach creates a mother Earth and lets nature do what it does best. Let us work with her, allowing her to repair herself. We humans will ultimately gain. Corinne advocates our gardening and planting whenever and wherever we get a chance. This

activity brings us back to our humanity, allows us to share, spend more time with nature, become more communal, get our hands muddy, and contribute to our food safety.

“Being in a community is what we used to have that we lost touch with. We are becoming isolated individuals behind our screens. Permaculture combines so many good things. It makes sense to me.”

WILD, MOTHERLY, AND FIERCE

She grew up as a typical middle child with extended rebellious teenage years. She came to terms with her wild side and her identity as a woman when she hit her thirties.

“I don’t know how to describe it, but when I was younger, I always thought I had masculine traits. How I sat, how I spoke, and the things I liked. I used to feel like they were masculine traits.”

For example, as a young woman, her drive and internal fire to be free felt masculine. She now understands that feeling strong, angry, and passionate about things and her inner fire to have her freedom as a priority is actually very feminine.

The fact that a woman is very intense and in touch with her emotions is powerful. Along with reason, emotions are a compass that you should listen to. She is tender, gentle, nurturing, and caring. At the same time, she is fierce in defending her children and what she believes in.

“There’s this power and how you protect your child’s freedom, independence, growth, and individuality. I like it.”

SHE WAS LEARNING FROM HER OLDER SISTER

Watching her older sister, Corinne learned a lot. She realizes how fast her sister learned about life and sees the wisdom she's acquired in life. She became more open, accepting, and less judgmental before Corinne did.

“I used to have clear definitions of right and wrong, irrespective of emotions, feelings, situations, and the environment. I was strict about it.”

Then you grow up and learn that life is mostly grey. You cannot be judgmental because we are a product of where we are born, how we are raised, what we have been subjected to, and how people look and talk to us.

LEBANON'S RECENT CRISIS

In addition to her work with Jibal.org, Corinne works on permaculture design projects with people she finds inspiring. She is part of an international permaculture design group called The Kaki Crew. She's recently connected to like-minded people in Lebanon to create a Regenerative Network — a community of organizations, specialists, and activists in regenerative agriculture collaborating to address Lebanon's ecological and livelihood emergency. One of her goals is to create awareness and offer support to change how food is grown and how to protect the environment in Lebanon.



A PERSONAL TRAINER

AND THE LESSONS SHE PACKS.

She wanted to charge her device and asked me if she could use the plugbymychair. This is how I got to know Mary-Joy one day at Starbucks.

Petite, pleasant, strong-willed, and full of energy. The youngest of three sisters who decided to have an identical tattoo on their chests' right side. Forever sisters. Per sempre Sorelle it says. She likes what it means, what it stands for, and the beauty of its calligraphy.

THE PERSONAL TRAINER

Her alarm goes off at 5 am. By six, she'd already started with her first client. She can wrap up by 6 or 10 pm, depending on the day. Lunch hour is a luxury. Snacks in between training sessions are the norm for Mary-Joy. She tries to relax during her breaks while commuting between one client location and another.

Having a continually changing schedule is a blessing but occasionally stressful. Her job requires that she stay focused, positive, and energetic at all times. When she starts a session with a client, she forgets about everything outside the moment.

**A PEACEFUL
LIFESTYLE
IS HARD TO
ATTAIN.**

Her work is a helpful distractor when dealing with something that upset her earlier.

She's grown her network through word of mouth. While predominantly ladies refer other women to her, she has about 10% of men who need assistance keeping healthy or getting in shape. Occasionally, she carves individualized programs for couples.

LESSONS SHE PACKS

For 8 years, she's been a personal trainer working with more than 100 individuals who train for their looks, health, and work. She feels good, making a little difference in someone's life.

"People are so different," she tells me. She learned a lot from them. This is what I got.

Lesson 1: You learn by genuinely listening to others

She learned about herself and who she wants to become from the people she trains in their homes. Seeing their perspective, listening to them, and learning from their experiences, she would carve her own.

Lesson 2: People regret decisions

While it may seem that people have it made, sometimes you feel that deep down, what they have is not what they wanted, and where they are is not where they want to be. You learn that people live with regrets.

Lesson 3: Different cultures enrich your life

She was introduced to different perspectives on life through the people she met from other cultures. They worry less and know how to be happy with the simplest things. It's not something they said; instead, it's something she feels around them. It's nice.

Lesson 4: A peaceful lifestyle is hard to attain

Through her many conversations with her clients who, for some, become friends, she observed that it's not easy leading a peaceful life and growing into what you want to become. It doesn't matter who you are; you're still seeking a hard-working man, a mother with children, a working mother, or both. Whether you're stuck in monotony, craving a routine, or whatever, you're still seeking.

Lesson 5: Women, men, and stress

People are stressed. Sometimes, they're complicated. Some want to change and can change but do not know how to. Mary-Joy admires the women who have full-time jobs, come home to family obligations, and still dedicate time to their workouts. Women exercise and always find the energy to chit-chat to change their mood. Men, on the other hand, work out quietly. They're on a mission to train and often are distracted by work-related problems they're solving in their heads.

Lesson 6: Everyone needs a break

Indeed. Sometimes, sitting alone and recharging is essential. By being too busy all the time, we tend to lose insight into what we really want. We get influenced by the people we are always in touch with. We can drown in our routines. So, taking a break every now and then is so important. If you can afford a vacation, that would be best.

Lesson 7: Money does not necessarily make a happy life

No matter how financially comfortable one can be, you still have to work the other parts of your life. Most people go through this. Money is not the most important thing.

Lesson 8: Education refines character

Education is most important and does not have to be earning a degree somewhere. Reading plays a significant role in that. From the people she helps train, she can tell who are the ones who give education the necessary nurturing. It makes a difference.

Lesson 9: Problems have solutions

Mary-Joy learned to seek solutions to problems and not dwell on the same old problem. When faced with a dilemma, she comes up with alternatives, evaluates them, and acts on one or several. There's always a way to solve problems.

Did anyone say Prof. Kfoury?

DID ANYONE SAY PROF. KFOURY?

Having studied economics in high school, the natural progression was to study business in college. That did not work out. She met dance instructors who studied physical education. She researched and found several variations to that major. Mary-Joy decided that this was what she wanted to do.

Once she changed her major, she knew she was on the right path. GPA skyrocketed. She got excited to wake up in the morning and be productive and proactive.

Today, she wants to pursue a master's degree and a PhD in sports science or exercise physiology. She has a plan for it. She'll apply to the US, Canada, and Europe. However, something is pulling her towards Australia. Tuition? This is going to be a challenge. Being the positive person that she is, something will work out.

"I don't believe we are born to stay in the same place. It's nice to live every phase of one's life in a different place. Why not? If you can!"

She wants to teach at the university level.

So, I addressed her as Prof. Kfoury.

She laughed as she heard it for the first time. I repeated: "Prof. Kfoury?"

"Ha! I never thought about it that way! <pause> Nice."

As if it was ringing in her head. I think she saw it. Sometimes it's all you need. To see it, and it begins to happen.

FOR FUN

"I love camping. This year hasn't been our year since most of my friends left the country."

She would go camping on weekends to blow off steam. Every time in a different area of Lebanon — hammocks, light music, an overnigher, and the works. Sunset bars in the Lebanese mountains are the latest thing to do.

"If I don't exercise, my day won't be the same. It's part of my character. 5K run. One hour of exercise. Gymnastics is about working my body and mind. Running gets the endorphins pumping. Weight training keeps my body in shape for my other fun exercise. With music, it works best."

Even though 5 of the eight friends she hangs out with are gone, her best friend is married and still lives in Lebanon. Marriage is not her priority right now, but it's nice to meet the person who is right for her.

"And who is Mr. Right?" I ask.

"Someone I get along with more often than I need to tolerate. Someone I enjoy spending time with and who has drive. Proactive socially. Creative at work. Open to the world. Treats people well. Loves to learn. Someone who supports you in becoming a better person."

Guys? :-)

WHEN EVERYTHING IS FALLING AROUND YOU

EDUCATION IS A WINNING LIFELINE.

On a hot summer day in a village in Northern Lebanon, Fouad packed his suitcase and kissed his mother and siblings goodbye. His father was waiting in the taxi to take them to the airport.

This one-hour ride took four. In 1983, Lebanon was still in the middle of civil strife. The journey had you cross several checkpoints: the Lebanese Army, right-wing militias, leftists, and others in between. At 18, Fouad was leaving everything he knew behind. He had his passport, I-20 documentation as a prospective student in the US, and all the courage he could muster for the new life.

He was leaving at a time when communication with home was impossible. Roads were blocked, phones barely operated, no postal service, and no internet or cell phones. At the airport, Fouad stood by his suitcase. After giving him the longest hug, his father stared into his eyes and...

I WANT TO
CONVEY HOPE,
EVEN TO ONE
CHILD.

“You will hear more killings, stories, and bad news. I might die; maybe your mom, too. Whatever happens, don’t let anything distract you from your goal. Nothing. Get the highest degree education can give you. If you don’t, don’t come back.”

**EIGHT YEARS BACK (1976-1982; 10-15
YEARS OF AGE)**

In a hurry, Fouad’s family had to pack and flee their home in the village to Tripoli’s neighboring city. The war made them refugees in their own country. This period was pivotal in shaping him. He grew up with very little. He grew up happy.

His father secured a loaned apartment for his family of seven children, the eldest son being 12. A few months later, when the landlord wanted his property back, the father and the boys roamed the city to secure another shelter. After days of searching, the proud son spotted an old, deserted house in a narrow alley of a poor, seedy neighborhood. They carried the little they owned, moved in, and made the rundown place a livable house. It became home for 5 years. With no windows, they got a roll of nylon, cut to pieces to measure, and pinned them to the wooden frames.

The made-shift windows cut down on winter winds, did not break during the occasional shelling on the neighborhood, and did not shatter from the pressure car bombings would exert. Spare nylon was always available.

The 7-meter high ceiling made it impossible to heat during the cold winters. While keeping many clothes on, one fire pit in the middle kept family members slightly warmer. The shower was in the corner of the kitchen. To take one, everyone left the kitchen. You heated water on the

burner, mixed it with water in a bucket, and used a can to wash it up.

The boys were in charge of the drinking water. They created their own trolley from ball bearings they found in the neighborhood. They would roll the loud things in Tripoli’s narrow streets to reach the water source, fill the containers, and haul the water back home.

There was no piping in that house. His duties included emptying the dirty water buckets from underneath the makeshift kitchen sink and the washing basin.

Your shoes did not retire when they got torn. You went to the cobbler to change half or full soles once, twice, or three times. You fixed them. You taped them. You nailed them. They retired when your feet outgrew them. The shoe cobbler was your best friend. You visited him frequently. Not the expensive one on Tripoli’s Tal; rather, the one in that narrow alley in the old Souk behind the Grand Mansouri mosque. The one who got to know Fouad and his brother by name.

Fouad perfected his periodic visits to humanitarian organizations.

For example, he knew when to stand in line to pick up his family’s care package at the Red Cross: Flour, rice, oil, canned food, bed sheets, blankets, etc.

Once his main task was secured, he did the same for other families for a delivery fee. The ball-bearing trolley did wonders in Tripoli’s narrow streets, including delivering butane canisters and installing them for his clients.

It was a difficult environment. The boys had to keep a watch over the family, especially the four girls and mama. A gang had their questionable car spare parts operation right by the house’s entrance.

On Sundays, his father would take the family for a long walk through the streets to later cross the orchards to reach Tripoli’s

port — the Meena. They would all stand right where the Mediterranean waves crashed, looking southwest to eye their village 30 km away. For five years, they yearned for the day when they'd go back home again.

“We would say we are from there. This is our land. Over there is our legacy and our orchards. We would keep looking, dreaming, hoping until sunset.” He told me that the best thing that can happen to a refugee is to go home.

Fouad didn't know any different. How can you miss something you did not know? If anything, this forced experience developed in him grit and persistence. It shaped his character. He realizes now that he had very little. He thought how he lived was the norm. And yet, he was happy as his parents loved them all. Love was the force to continue.

Sitting in one of the fanciest Starbucks in Beirut, I asked Fouad: “Thank you for accepting to talk about your childhood, but why now?”

A PICTURE TRIGGERED OLD MEMORIES

A picture of refugee kids carrying buckets of water triggered old memories for him. He felt them and very much related to them. He gets exposed to and involved with refugee issues in his current professional position. They analyze on a macro level: trends, statistics, and more.

Being a refugee has broken so many people. It takes so much to overcome it, let alone rise above and self-fulfill as a human being. It is tough, if not impossible, to do it alone.

“These are people beyond statistics. I know because I was one of them. Each one is an individual, a human being. The pain lies in their daily details.”

Fouad was lucky. He had a loving family who pushed him to develop himself. He was saved. Education saved him.

“I want to convey hope, even to one child.”

He agreed to tell this part of his life, hoping that someone who feels helpless can get the strength to keep going. Learn. Learn in a school, in a tent, in a makeshift classroom. It doesn't matter where. Learn. Education is your lifeline to escape your condition. Once you acquire knowledge, no one can take it away from you. You will have a better life for yourself and the people around you.

Maybe one of the 70 million displaced in the world can get the message. Perhaps teachers, trainers, or social workers would tell his story to their students.

A LIFELINE AND HOME VALUES

An incremental positive change started happening after 1982. However, the major leap came when Fouad received a scholarship from the Hariri Foundation to study in the US. It turned out that this was the lifeline that changed his life and the lives of everyone around him. Education saved him. He worked hard for it. His father, who never went to school, pushed him and all his siblings to get an education. They all went to college. For his father, education was the most important to acquire. A rigorous education, especially in these times when some are taking shortcuts, is essential. Being a social media influencer and collecting likes without education will fade. The things that can be obtained quickly can also be lost swiftly. The sustainable and rewarding approach is to build knowledge gradually. Even if your education does not make you a superstar, it can definitely contribute to an honorable, dignified, and happy life.

Education without values is incomplete. His father and mother taught them the values they,

needed to navigate life: Truth, empathy, honesty trust, and learning. He took a pause as if the years were rewinding.

“My father was entrusted with the financials of all village activities, committees, municipality functions, and donations. Toufic was the name to trust and depend on. I inherited this legacy. I inherited his name. I continue to work hard to honor him.”

HIS DAYDREAM TELLS IT ALL

He sometimes fantasizes by asking himself what he would do if someone entrusted him with \$1 million to dispense of at his discretion.

“Being a graduate of the public school system, I would contribute the funds to upgrade the curriculum. That’s it. Nothing else.” This incremental push would make a massive leap for children who can only afford public school. Spend money on education to save the next generation and to save Lebanon. Education will give the neediest a big leap forward.

Since his parents never went to school, it would have taken 5 generations of an incremental build-up to get to a point where one child would become a university professor or a director at the UN. The support he received from the Hariri Foundation sped up the process to see its fruition within 10 years.

Sometimes, it takes one person to lift up a whole community. Imagine supporting thousands of capable, promising, and curious young minds.

ABOUT THIS 10-YEAR-OLD REFUGEE

Having been displaced, living on very little, hugged with love and values, and extended a priceless lifeline for his education, Fouad has been propelled to serve, support, and inspire thousands of people to date.

He tries to be honest, patient, generous, loyal, and, most importantly, honor his father’s legacy.

Still, reading and have a million dollars to spare? I promise he can tell you exactly where to put it to save some community. Seriously!

SHE KNOWS SHE WAS SAVED FOR A REASON

AND SHE IS STILL LOOKING FOR IT.

This was probably the third or fourth time I saw her come in, pick up her drink, and walk out. Always loud. She is always colorful by what she wears and by the color of her hair. I've witnessed black, red, silver, long, short, and a lot in between. And that's only in about 3 months.

The woman of extremes walks in one day with another gentleman. They sit at the following table, and she strikes up a conversation. Within 60 seconds, she asked: "You must have walked the Camino (de Santiago). Haven't you?"

"Yes!" I got all excited. We talked and became friends.

THE HIKER

Gino walked the Camino, wrote a book about it, and has never stopped hiking since. In Lebanon, she's active with The Lebanon Mountain Trail, Born2hike, Lebanon Outdoor Adventure, and the Lebanese Adventure Trails. The outdoors is home to her. She loves smelling nature, observing the wildlife, taking selfies,

**THERE ARE NO
GUARANTEES IN
LIFE.**

and standing still in minus 6 Celcius weather to listen to the snowflakes crush under hikers' boots.

29 YEARS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND COUNTING

Right after her wedding in Beirut, she took off to South Africa with her husband Gus (Son of Martha). She made a wonderful life there: 3 kids, 2 nannies, 3 dogs, one gardener, a mansion, 24-hour camera protection, electric fences, delicious coffee, and yes, a husband. While she's grateful for her life, today, she'd rather have a 100 m2 apartment that she can lock and leave for yet another world adventure.

After 29 years, she has had it all in South Africa. Yet, her heart beats for Lebanon. Her heart is with the Lebanese. She belongs in Lebanon. She belongs to Lebanon. She just turned 50 and feels the need to be home. This Armenian-Syrian-Lebanese-South African woman has no blood ties to Lebanon. Yet, she simply loves its people, their energy, inner soul, and purity.

Her family is her number one priority after being true to her Creator, so she struggles to be in person between Johannesburg and Beirut. Once we're over COVID, she will spend at least a 3-month summer in Johannesburg and then the summer in Beirut.

By the side of this wild and crazy woman, as she calls herself, is a husband who understands and supports her in every way imaginable. She is fire. He is Earth.

"He's always been super mature. I haven't. Even until now."

THE 50-YEAR-OLD CHILD WHO CONSUMES LIFE

"Can I be honest, Tony? I will never be mature. I have a child in me that wants to do everything."

She has survived multiple sclerosis. The very acute kind that hit all her internal organs as they started to shut down. She had 6 months to live. She dropped to 45 kilos and couldn't even brush her teeth anymore. She had given up on fighting for her life. Gino came to Lebanon to die. Saint Charbel saved her.

Gino started publishing her story on Medium to learn more about her survival. It's worth following.

She promised herself that she will live beautifully until she dies. It means no negative energy, keeping busy, and enjoying life fully.

"There are no guarantees in life."

SHE BELIEVES

God is with us in everything, and He gives us signs.

"We, humans, are stubborn. We think that we know everything. Excuse my language. We know f*** nothing about life."

We learn every day until our last breath.

Her clarity of thought, faith, and matter-of-fact attitude provoked me to dig further. "Do you believe that it's planned for you? Your life?" I asked.

She believes that the day God created us, and we came out of the womb, it is written on our forehead the day we leave this earth. In between, there's room for free will, and He always

sends us signs. She developed powerful antennas to read His signs. She believes that Jesus is God. He is the Savior. He is her Savior.

“I don’t know God. I know Jesus.”

She does not know whether she deserves to stay alive or not; she doesn’t even know why Jesus cured her through St. Charbel. Why did He send her to him? Why did He give her a second chance?

“Maybe he didn’t want me up there because I’m so naughty. Not yet, at least. He wants me here to finish my mission.”

There’s something in her that has to manifest itself. She feels she still has something to do and doesn’t know what it is. She tirelessly serves when she can while seeking to find her mission.

She believes once we leave this earth, another life will start. We become floating souls. We go to our beautiful lives. Until then, she is squeezing every single drop of life out of her life.

ON THE ROAD TO SUPPORT YOUTH

She takes advantage of every opportunity to share her life testimony by showing up on podcasts, radio, and TV programs, visiting high school and university students, and giving public speeches. She does this in Lebanon and all over the world. Being a natural at them, she enjoys those encounters. Words flow from her: uncensored, unprepared, impactful, and raw.

She talked for a good while about the lessons she wanted to pass on to youth. I took the liberty to summarize below:

- You are here for a visit. Make it worthwhile.
- Don’t take anything personally.
- If there’s something you don’t like, let it go. Forget and move on.

- Do not hurt people.
- Forgive. Forgive. Forgive.
- Do not regret anything.
- If you need to, get pissed off. Jesus did.
- Don’t judge.
- Respect.
- Love with all your heart and expect nothing in return.
- Say, “I love you!”

UNEARTHLY COMPANIONS

She talks to her companions all the time. We chatted at Starbucks on the 36th anniversary of her father’s passing. She knows that her father has been with her every single day since. He is her guardian angel and periodically sends her signs. She feels his intensity on her hikes. She did on the Camino de Santiago, the Lebanon Mountain Trail, and the Kazbek mountain at 5054-meter elevation. She talks to her dad, Jesus, and Saint Charbel.

THE LAST CHAPTER

One day, the period of roaming the earth would end for Gino. She will settle in one place. She will have a little cottage somewhere in the mountains of Lebanon where people will seek her for companionship and knowledge.

Food and wine will be aplenty! Do you see that open living space? And that massive wall with all sorts of picture frames? The ones that tell her road stories and world excursions? Do you feel the love she exchanged with the people on the paths she crossed?

And that picture of her big happy family with her unborn

grandchildren?

And Gus...he's somewhere on that wall, a tiny picture but holding it all.

Do you hear the giggles of her grandchildren playing in the mud in their Kermit green rubber boots? And grandma... She's got her blue boots and bright yellow hat, laughing and giving the little ones a hard time.

Until then, she had many young people to walk and talk with, many mountaintops to climb, and endless love to spread.



**THE YOUTH
ARE THE
CORNERSTONE
OF SOCIETY.
THEY ARE THE
PRESENT.**

IF YOU HAVE TO LEAVE, GO

BUT GO WITH A MISSION.

I read his material, watched his videos, and saw him on TV, but this was the first time I sat with him and had a one-on-one conversation. Jihad has an unpretentious wealth of knowledge and is humble yet very opinionated about who the youth are and what they should be doing.

“The youth are the cornerstone of society. They are the present.”

According to him, they are the living present. They are responsible for building their world and making the world of the older and younger a better one. The problem is that the older generation needs to give them space to grow and take charge. They are not part of the decision-making process, yet they are the untapped potential — typical dilemma

The actual resistance is them, through them, and by them. The youth has the historical chance to go down in history as the heroes of the updated version of our Lebanese republic. The older generation is already biased and used to a certain unacceptable level of corruption. They lived to co-exist with anomalies. New blood wanted. New spirit desired.

**YOUR NAME, YOUR FAMILY, YOUR COUNTRY
— ALL ONE**

You carry your name, your family name, and your nation with you. You can try and escape from one or all of them — for a while, but not forever. All three make up your identity. In business terms, as he'd like to frame it, your brand identity.

Youth today have been dealt with a weak hand. They are surrounded by opposing forces and energies. The Lebanese brand name is deteriorating. Extreme pressures are being exerted on its three historically-strong sectors: health, education, and banking. Hospitality is no better. However, since they're smart, they will dig back into the positive legacy that Lebanon is historically known for and build on it.

A healthy Lebanon would bring personal value to every Lebanese. It is to everyone's advantage to bring value to the image of Lebanon. Everyone's behavior today affects their current conditions and the status of the generations to come. We have an interest, even if we are outside, to keep building a positive image.

How do they break out of this loop? How can they inherit their fathers' and mothers' problems and still rise above?

YOUTH IS INVITED TO ACT

If you're 18–30, then you're young, according to Jihad. Then, he extends the bracket to 40 years of age. It applies to you, too, if you're young at heart :-). Youth is a state of mind.

It does not matter where you live. Each one has a role: Whether you are in Lebanon or elsewhere on earth, you have a part. The in-people can collaborate with the ex-pats for that diamond of a formula that will

bring Lebanon to its newer, more productive, hopeful, and fresh state.

How can the youth in the diaspora connect and work with those in Lebanon: South America, North America, Europe, Africa, and the GCC?

So, if that applies to you, don't sit idle and hope things change themselves. "What are you doing about it?" he asks. Here are three suggested channels of action:

- The digital knowledge economy
- The future of education
- Cooperative lobbying

THE DIGITAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The quickest return on investment and the fastest route to recovery are through the digital knowledge economy. Heavy industry and agriculture will need longer to implement and are heavier on capital investment due to machinery, transportation, equipment, and materials. The knowledge economy is faster; talent is either available or quicker to round up, requiring more attainable investments. Investing in the knowledge economy can boost job creation, increase local transparency through e-government, reduce corruption, and raise highly needed funds.

A possible and reasonable scenario is technically serving outside markets. Another is directly supporting Lebanese or pseudo-Lebanese companies abroad through focused technical teams in Lebanon.

Jihad mentioned several other scenarios that are potentially sustainable.

"For example, to date, Lebanon still has a surplus in the balance of payment with services."

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

Build on Lebanon's excellent education system. Move it to the 21st century. Allow youth to work together in and around education. The connections and classroom blended learning can happen between youth worldwide. Let people get to know other cultures by taking virtual classes together. One day, your classmate in that virtual classroom will be in a position of power or influence. That connection will help you, Lebanon, and their country. Push for technology learning early on. Teaching coding is an excellent and effective method to build a prosperous future.

COOPERATIVE LOBBYING

In Lebanon, and since October 2019, young men and women have been on the frontlines of the revolution. Their compatriots in other cities around the world carried the same flag and chanted the same hymns. This can continue on political, cultural, developmental, and economic levels. Lobbying together is fundamental to influencing decisions in world capitals.

Culturally, youth can impact and create a new code of ethics — a fresh and transparent way of doing business. The young generation abroad can help free the youth who are taken hostage in Lebanon. It is much better to have Lebanese abroad influence the new Lebanon than any other foreign power, no matter how well-intentioned they are.

I tried to get Jihad to get a little personal and tell me what drives him to do what he does. The closest he got to being personal is telling me he's been a victim of the old mindset.

“Lebanon, as it is today, is not my dream country. I don't want the generation after me to lose

its dreams as well. I have and will do something.”

He deals with youth, and he feels their pain. He was affected and touched. He is trying to help them and help himself in the process.

AND THE ONES WHO LEAVE?

If you must leave, go, but continue the collaborative work on the other side. Continue the projects and strengthen the links. People in Lebanon rely on people abroad. Youth connected to youth is a winning formula. Each one is an ambassador to Lebanon. People will love or hate Lebanon because of how we conduct ourselves abroad. Everyone abroad has a big responsibility. Each person is the image of his or her country.

He is not against people traveling. It actually diversifies the Lebanese portfolio of people around the world. It can be used as wealth.

I'm bidding my sister goodbye. I tell her to pick up knowledge and experience and come back with it to develop Lebanon. It's good to work outside. Lobby outside. Come back with your know-how to help us develop here.

If today you are kicked out of Lebanon, don't get mad. Get even. Become more influential and find ways to support. No matter how little. Keep supporting. If you must build a family abroad, still teach your children about their homeland.

The man is a ball of fire, means well, loves Lebanon, and wants to do something about it. The man is on a mission. My talk with him was focused on that mission. Very little, he said about his personal life.

THE MAN WHO LIVES ON CENTER CROSS

HIS JOURNEY FROM LEBANON TO NORTH CAROLINA.

I called him to North Carolina. We chatted for over an hour. It's a long way from our Starbucks conversations 4+ years ago in London. The foggy city got us together, time made us grow fonder, and the distance became insignificant with technology.

“I'm living my face-it stage.”

This is how he started. He is facing his weaknesses, failures, shortcomings, and challenges. His self-critique helps him address emotions, relationships, and character traits to move forward. You analyze to make peace with yourself and with the situation in which you're in. Whatever it is, you fix it or manage to live with it.

LEBANON FOLLOWS HIM

He is born Lebanese, and he can't change that. It comes with unique DNA, built-in characteristics, and spices of life that give him the Lebanese flavor he cannot escape. He takes what he

HERE AND
TODAY, I AM
MAKING PEACE
WITH MANY
THINGS IN LIFE.

is and builds on it by utilizing the positives and managing the negatives. By reflecting back, he learned.

“Here and today, I am making peace with many things in life.”

He used to solve issues by being on the offensive. Today, he lives peacefully amid the noise that circles him in his startup, family, and world. This lockdown made him sit at home and think about who he is, what he wants to do, and where he should go. This face-it period screams at him to find the kind of change he wants to do in life, what he wants to become. His faith keeps him anchored and at peace through small and big things in everyday life.

THE BLESSINGS OF BEING IN LOCKDOWN

This forced lockdown has been a blessing to Samer. It pulled him out of the daily roller coaster into a state of thinking. It's been an opportunity for everyone to evaluate how they conduct business and live their lives. This forced calmness affected systems and individuals. It's been a perfect time for personal reflection.

This period has forced us to communicate through screens, reconsider being in an office, and the need for a car or a varied wardrobe. He's gotten away with switching shorts and t-shirts for days. This period will define how humanity will live for the next 100 years. Science and technology will undoubtedly play an even more significant role going forward.

LIFE #1: LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

He studied acting and directing and went straight to work. When he started, he only wanted to be an actor. He then discovered more, presented programs, did voice-overs, wrote, produced,

and directed. He's done a lot in his first 20-year career: 100s of episodes of the Arabic version of Family Feud, dozens of special Ramadan programs, more than 25 episodes in mini-series, 4 feature movies, and more. Acting has been good for him.

When asked to come up with a slogan for MTV-Lebanon when they went up on satellite and actually weren't first, he wrote:

بَلُونُ السَّمَا نِحْنَا. وَصَارَ الْفَضَا إِنَّا.
تَتَوَصَّلُ عَلَى الْكَوْنِ. وَتَيَصِيرُ هُوِّي هَوْنِ.
مَا طَلَعْنَا عَالِقَمَرًا. صَارَ الْقَمَرُ عِنَّا.

His first life helped him build confidence in his capabilities. He could reinvent himself from actor to producer and director, from being in front of the camera to behind it. Production helped him see how he could put something together and deliver it. His gained experience, practical toolkit, and courage gave him confidence and inner peace to push forward and outward from his industry. He tripped, fell, was humbled, and learned what it felt like. He had been through fame and public life, yet he left his comfort zone and used what he learned to embark on another adventure.

LIFE #2: GOT A LIGHT?

He left his actor's ego behind to embark on the unknown. He was confident he could build something new with all the skillsets he acquired behind the camera. His entrepreneurial journey has been a more challenging roller coaster than he expected.

He developed an intelligent lighter—slighter to help people manage their smoking habits. He moved from media to health tech.

From actor, presenter, writer, director, and producer

to a startup founder, Samer still has to wear many hats, including being a husband and dad. He still doesn't believe his life is more complicated than anyone else's.

"I chose this life out of free will. Some people live their lives happily on one track. I decided to consume several."

MORE ON THE ROLLER COASTER

When I asked Samer about his leap and main challenge today, he said, "I have brought on myself a 3-dimensional same-time challenge. I changed my profession, started a family, and changed my country of residence."

The tone of our conversation changed a little. I could hear it getting more personal.

He moved from where everybody knew him to be an unknown in a vast continent. He moved from a place he knew to a new culture he was discovering. He's relearning everything, including getting a new driver's license. It's polishing his character further as he's facing it. Learning and living in a new culture is a blessing; he feels lucky to have this chance. It's making him stronger.

He moved to a place that provides safety and an opportunity to build security for himself and his family. Given what Lebanon is currently going through, the move's timing was good. He carries his Lebanese DNA with him. More like the Zahle one :-). While many people are used to walking on solid ground, he thinks that Lebanese are used to living on shifting earth, quicksand, and fluidity. Anything more predictable is good and, most likely, easy.

For example, in the US, the power never gets cut off.

Until one day, it did. Jeanine and Samer looked at each

other with probably a mental flashback to Lebanon. It turned out that it was due to a storm. The power company sent a message apologizing, explaining what would happen, where the team was fixing the problem, and it would take 15 mins. In 15 minutes, they received a message saying it would take 5 more minutes. In 5, the power got back. They sent a message closing the incident. It was a wow experience for the ElGharibs.

He boasts about the Lebanese as having the entrepreneurial DNA for thousands of years. At the time, they [ancient Lebanese] looked back and saw the desert behind them and the water on their shores. So, they figured out how to build ships and sail. They invented symbols, rules, and codes — the alphabet- to communicate with other people. They taught them to the people they did business with. Things just got a little easier.

Today, it's time for this one Lebanese to do as his ancestors did: travel, learn other cultures, and maybe teach them a thing or two.

HIS NEW HOME

When his family joined him in the US, they loaded the UHaul: dad, mom, and the three children and drove to their new home. As they rolled into the Cul-de-Sac, Samer heard a faint: "Hi Sam. Hi Sam." Then he saw people walking from their front yard and waving at them. He rolled down the windows, got a flashback, and continued jokingly:

"Finally, someone knows that I'm famous. I bet they are watching reruns of my programs. Bruce Willis? Move over."

When they parked, the neighborhood was waiting to welcome them. They expressed that they were here to support the newcomers and let them know if they could

help with anything. The emotions were overwhelming.

On August 4, when the whole world heard about the Beirut explosion, the neighborhood sent them a huge bouquet of flowers in place of hugs. They included handwritten cards and gifts for everyone in the family. They gave Jeanine and Samer a massage gift certificate and told them they'd care for the kids while Mom and Dad relaxed.

This one neighborhood in North Carolina felt traumatized by the news and could only imagine what this young family living next door could be going through.

Samer couldn't talk anymore. He teared up. I had MTV-Lebanon on mute in my living room while talking with him. It was September 4 at 6:07 pm, one month after the explosion. They were covering how Lebanon came to a standstill. Vehicles stopped and stood for a minute of silence to pay respect to the dead, wounded, and missing. People on the streets, Red Cross, firemen, MTV staff, and crew. Everyone stood still. I got a big lump in my throat.

He then collected himself and told me they drove into their new home at "961 2 Center Cross." All the right signs: 961 for Lebanon. 2 for his second home. In the center of the cross for the safety and security of his family.

"When Americans love you, you become family."

MOVING ON

He spoke with pain, rage, and determination, telling me that the current people in power in Lebanon are done with. Their time is up. At the same time, people from all over contacted him to show support. His social media channels, email, and phone were flooded. People showed love, compassion, and

support. "Tell us about your family. Are you guys okay?"

He had one answer:

"The whole of Lebanon is my family, and they're not okay."

He felt that his whole family had been hurt. The one who died on the street is family. The one who died in front of a hospital is family. The older man who quietly sat on a chair waiting and then died is family. These people are not strangers. They're family.

For Samer, Lebanon is his birthplace, and he wants it protected. He thinks Lebanon is still a startup even after 100 years of its birth. It has a serious chance of becoming the best country in the world. The Lebanese are good people. They're warm and peaceful people. The new Lebanon needs to put these kinds of personalities in leadership positions.

"Today, I live completely in the US. My mind and heart are in the US. My work is here."

He is happy with the move. It's a challenge taken like a true adventurer and the ultimate entrepreneur.

He decided to face life head-on. He follows his ancestors in mind, body, and soul. For him and the likes of him, I say: "Y'all come back now, you hear?"

EVERYONE DESERVES A HOME

BALI, CAPETOWN, SAN FRANCISCO, ..., BEIRUT.

I met her once on April 13, 2011, for a project. Social media suggested her posts as of a year or so ago. A mutual friend got us back together. We met at 7 a.m. at Starbucks in downtown Beirut on a beautiful Saturday morning. Dressed for a workout, she stepped out of a cab. Her big smile walked towards me, and “Good morning,” she said.

After a 10-year career in the corporate world and before turning 35, she decided to return home. March 4, it was. She returned during interesting times: The Thawra (revolution), the Lebanese economic meltdown, the COVID lockdown, the Beirut apocalyptic blast, and other family challenges. She was listening. The universe told her that she was exactly where she should be at this time.

She came back. Home. To her room.

Her ten-year adventure brought her plenty: success, life lessons, beautiful encounters, and travels. Most importantly, she learned to manage separation and embrace loneliness. This Lebanese woman from a middle-class family of modestly-educated parents

LOVE IMPACTS
YOUR BRAIN,
YOUR GUT,
YOUR BODY,
YOUR MIND,
AND YOUR
HEART. LOVE IS
POWERFUL.

left home at 25 with something to prove. It took her 10 years to say:

“I am enough.”

She has nothing to prove to anyone or to herself. Life’s a journey. Just when you think you are healed, something new happens. You start over. The climb gets steep, yet it can be enjoyable. Sweet and sour. Difficult and easy. Work and play. She embraces all.

SEPARATION

Being away taught her to manage the separation she had endured when she was little. A scar that she still lives with. Leaving home over 10 years ago was like ripping a bandaid off an unhealed wound. She felt it was the harshest thing she’s ever done to herself.

As for the reason behind why she feels that way, I will leave that for another story.

She would worry about how to keep in touch with those she loves. Will they remember the little things? Will they forget? Will her friendships be disrupted due to distance? Will she change? What will happen to that little corner coffee place she used to go to? Will people evolve the way she would? Will things stay the same? Something inside your gut aches when you separate from the people you love and the places you know. To cope, she would do small things to remember and feel connected. Recreating the smell of coffee in the mornings wherever she is in the world became a homey habit.

WITH THE PARENTS AGAIN

It’s been six months since she returned home with her parents. She doesn’t need to see them every day or have breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. Coming back, for

Jo, doesn’t mean reverting to her old childhood habits.

Being home provides her with security and safety. It’s an immense feeling that you’re in a safe space. To be well or not, to be working or not, to sleep, to play, it doesn’t matter. It’s a judgment-free, welcoming, and genuinely unconditional space. A space you would experience the deepest when you separate. A space that behaves like the people who inhabit it.

“And it makes me think. Would I be able to build a home like this one? With unconditional love?”

She knows her parents gifted her with such ease and humanity, this undervalued treasure. Jo wishes unconditional love to everyone. Love impacts your brain, your gut, your body, your mind, and your heart. Love is powerful.

“I know the power of love. I’ve been loved judgment-free and unconditionally. When you’re loved, you have nothing to prove. You are enough on your own. No makeup.”

All the credit goes to her parents and their two strong traits: they accept and evolve. They are humble and aware of what they know and what they don’t. Today’s version of them is far better than the one 20 years ago, 10 years ago, and 5 years ago.

“It’s like they are completely different people, as individuals and as a couple.”

What was subject to an argument is now hugged with acceptance. The parent-child relationship has evolved to occasional role-switching. What used to be accusatory now is inquisitive. Evolving minimizes disputes to reduce apologies for the sake of harmony. The parenting she knows asks what’s suitable for my children before what’s right for me, even

if it feels uneasy. What's right for the other is good for all.

HER BEDROOM

Her bedroom evolved and has been decorated multiple times over the years. She's a minimalist with a few shoes, bags, clothes, one bed, the spinning carousel that gets her to dream, a globe, and countless books. She sorts her books and redecorates her room for a potential visit from her niece or maybe when she has a child of her own. She wants all children to grow up in a book-abundant environment.

Her unique bond with books goes back to her childhood; she fondly remembers the teacher who instigated her reading. She still keeps the children's books and the more philosophical ones. Reading and writing are constants in her life. During the 1988 period of foreign occupation, she spent time alone or with her sister reading, playing the piano, and working out.

When she has to be in a city that doesn't resemble her, she immerses herself in a book to self-develop and nurture her identity.

BALI, CAPETOWN, AND SAN FRANCISCO

The three cities that dance with her soul shaped her personality.

Bali, the ease and joy of living. The place to connect with nature. Its humble, kind, and generous people make the place. A cradle of meditation and yoga. The epicenter of the four-hands-dance massage. The island is the right kind of dreamy to her taste and has been a God-sent vacation from the corporate world.

I'm curious about the four-hands-massage. Aren't you?

In Capetown, nature meshes with the urban city. It gives you the feeling of being on vacation, even when working. Despite the challenges

of security, water issues, power, discrimination, and alienation, she still has a soft spot for the country. She appreciates the anthropological diversity, the great food, and the best pink gin on the globe.

San Francisco speaks her language and has her traits to accept others regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. She's been there many times, and the city never ceases to amaze her. She loves art and learns something new by merely walking its streets.

"Even the wind brings something to me. It resembles me a lot."

Her giggle was uncontrollable when talking about the city.

PARTNER IN LIFE

She draws her fulfillment from within. Dreams, projects, and aspirations are not the source of her completion. It's the same when settling with a partner, the uncommon kind, with whom she will build a sustainable and value-based partnership. A partnership is based on affection, acceptance, respect, trust, deeds, and love. The unconditional kind. The one she grew up with.

Our conversation took some long pauses. Not the uncomfortable kind. The dreamy-dig-deeper-to-find-the-naked-feeling-the-best-word kind.

WHAT DO YOU TELL PEOPLE MOVING BACK HOME?

- Cultivate compassion towards your parents. Take time to step back and think about why they are doing what they're doing. It's probably driven by love. Accordingly, decide what you have to do.
- If you're inclined to pick an argument and say no all the

time, listen instead. Explain why you're doing what you're doing, and do it anyway. They will understand. They love you.

- Talk to someone who has lost a parent. You will realize the value of spending time with your parents as an adult. Seize the moment. Every moment.
- Every day, choose to do one thing for them. Watch the news or their favorite TV series, and have one meal or coffee in the afternoon with them.
- Don't hold them responsible for all the ills the world has passed on to your generation or you personally. It's unfair, especially at the family level. Putting things in context, every parent did his or her best.

From her childhood bedroom, she left and roamed the world for ten years to return to the same place. In the meantime, she's happily tidying up the room again, spinning her dream carousel, and eyeing her next adventure on the 3D globe sitting by her books.

"Do you need a ride home," I asked as we departed. "No thanks. I'd like to walk up to Achrafieh, sit in this one cafe on the way, and journal."

JO'S ADDITIONAL SNIPPETS DURING OUR CONVERSATION

- Listen to the universe. It's easy. Plot the bad incidents in your life. Someone is trying to tell you something. In the future, steer away.
- When people say "take care," she says, "take care [of your heart]."
- There's a difference between being lonely and being alone. Be alone. Manage the state of being lonely. Do something.

Move, read, see friends, or people-watch.

- If you have a story, tell it. If you can inspire one person in this world, do it.
- Remember yourself as a child. Make sure she's still there.

TALK TO YASMINA

PASSIONATE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH.

She's bubbly, sharp, energetic, and self-aware. She knows what she knows and knows what she doesn't know. Mental health is her thing. Coffee is not. Yet, she indulged me with a chat around a coffee table and got straight to it.

"Talking is good," she says. Talking is therapeutic. You can talk about the decisions you're about to make, your challenges, and the changes in your life. You can talk about big decisions such as which university to attend, whether to travel abroad or stay at home, and whether to be influenced by family and friends. In her culture, people are more family-oriented and don't think of themselves first. The tribe has an influence. Your own image is based on how people view you. It's especially true when you're young and don't know yourself.

She's dedicating time and effort to get to know herself better. At 20, and with one year to graduate with a degree in psychology, she wants to self-discover to put herself first. "Who is Yasmina?" she asks.

"I'm different like everyone else is different. People expect us to be the same, behave the same, and conform."

Her biggest challenge today is to decide what's next after graduation. She's leaving her home country

TALKING IS GOOD.

for a graduate school that secures her a good job later.

“Unfortunately, my expectation of getting a graduate degree and returning home for a career is not the most prudent anymore.”

Yasmina says that she has so much to learn. She tells me more about her options, pauses, and says: “I’m still very young. I’m still 20. How am I supposed to know. Right?” while smiling and asking for reassurance.

MENTAL HEALTH IS HER PASSION

Psychology is her way of getting there. She’s intrigued by human nature and wants to understand people. It’s okay not to be okay. We need to talk to someone about our feelings. Seeking mental health help is essential. Sometimes, you need someone outside your family and friends to talk to.

Let’s say you’re stressed and need to complain. People either tell you that life is tough and to get it together, look at how less fortunate others are, or give you advice.

“I don’t need you to tell me about life nor how to feel. Don’t give me advice. I just need you to listen. Just let me let off some steam.”

For the people feeling guilty about the Beirut explosion, everyone was impacted. If you haven’t been physically affected, you probably got emotional scars. We need to speak about it. It’s expected to be upset, sad, and angry. It’s good to feel grateful, but it’s also important to vent it out. It will fester and surface later if you don’t address it now.

She’s encouraged to pursue such a career. She has a gift for understanding people and enjoys observing their behavior alone and with each other. She’s easy to talk to. She likes that what she wants to do has a higher purpose and enjoys doing it.

“I love to raise awareness about mental health and

to actually help people. I want to be on the ground. One day, I will, when I’m professionally qualified!”

EVOLVING YASMINA

Are you comfortable with yourself today? With calm and confidence: “Yes.” The “yes” that does not need to be justified nor proven to anyone.

She’s come a long way since her school years. In two years at uni, she’s conquered a lot. Her grades weren’t good at school, and she used to put herself down, even when people around would always encourage her. She was her worst critic. Then, she forfeited going to Canada and decided to study something she liked at Notre Dame University in Lebanon. NDU turned out to have a friendly environment and a manageable community size. She feels close to other students and faculty and is comfortable that no one cares what you wear or which bag you carry. As importantly, she’s blossomed into an A-student, acquiring scholarships along the way.

At school and with 12 students in the class, she used to shake when presenting. Today, she zooms through a 45-minute presentation until they kick her off the stage. Her decision to do her undergraduate studies in Lebanon was the best for her. She is closer to her parents and siblings and develops in a safe environment. She was shy and now is more confident

A HIGHLY SENSITIVE PERSON

In her research, she discovered she’s a ‘highly sensitive’ person — her nervous system is sensitive to sensory stimulations. Smaller things are amplified. Smells are stronger. Tastes are more potent. Feelings are more acute. Sounds are deeply felt. Sleep is highly needed.

She used to think that something was wrong with her until she found this YouTube community. She hasn't felt alone since. There are people like her, and it's not wrong to feel that way. When you know other people like you, you feel better. She learned to work things to her advantage.

SHE PUSHES FORWARD

Put yourself as a priority. Work on your weaknesses. Accept things you can't change and live with them. Use your weaknesses to your advantage if you can. Know what is wrong and work on it. Become your better self and keep at it. It does not end here. As you grow up, you need to constantly feel that you're getting better. If you don't think you're progressing, you're not growing.

YAS.ME.TIME

She feels happier and healthier. She has challenges like any other person and works on fixing or managing problems. Sometimes, staying busy distracts from important matters such as spending time with ourselves, meditating, doing sports, listening to music, or just being still.

"I love being alone. I need my "Me Time." Yasmina time. My Yas.Me.Time."

Being alone for Yasmina is relaxing. She knows where she is today, and she is happy with that. Starting early to take care of ourselves should be a priority. How can you face life's challenges if you're not mentally well? She explains not to confuse yes.me.time with selfishness. She can care for others much better when she's taken care of herself. Concentrating on her studies, sports, music, and time alone will only

give her the energy to dedicate time to family, friends, and scouts.

CHAPTER THIRTY

FROM A CORPORATE DESK TO HER CHILDREN'S

MORE TIME WITH THE FAMILY.

She raised one daughter in an apartment on the west side of the Lebanese Green Line. During the civil strife, leftist militias did as much action in their building as they did in the neighborhood. She was a rebel and an activist, yet she still managed to be the conservative mother she was supposed to play.

Maybe she missed her calling. She wanted to become a doctor. One early morning at the age of 14, sitting with her mother on the balcony, she saw a man wobbling down the street with his hands on his chest. He collapsed. She ran out of the apartment, hopped three stairs at a time, and reached him in seconds. Having seen the knife stuck out of his chest, she ran back, brought loads of ice cubes, wrapped them in a cloth, and cooled off the blade and the wound. Neighbors called for medics, the police praised her, and the man was saved. Reading articles in the “Tabib” [Doctor] magazine probably saved this one man’s life. The girl who wanted

**I HAVE THREE.
IF YOU ASK ME
WHETHER I'D
HAVE ANOTHER
ONE, I WOULD.**

to become a doctor ended up a school teacher. Until the day she retired, she taught physical education in many schools, always in her sports outfit, the whistle, and the hijab, way before it was a trend.

She was 16 when she fell in love with the 20-year-old boy and only got married 10 years later. She was a tough woman and very active during the war. She would do civil defense, blood donations, and more.

The young girl who grew up in the '60s sipping coffee with her mother on their Beirut apartment's balcony married and gave birth to Lama. This little girl became a professional and a mother of three.

Lama shared with me, around a coffee table, reflections from her life. Mama had a significant impact on Lama.

GROWING UP

She was raised in a conservative and protective Beirut household. She was sent to Collège du Carmel Saint Joseph for schooling. She did school activities. Going out socially with her friends was not encouraged. No clubbing. Late at night, BK was a challenge to pull off.

People started approaching her parents to ask for her hand in marriage as early as her junior year in college. It was expected that you would get married as soon as you graduated from university. For five years, people pursued her. "We saw your daughter. We want to visit you for a cup of coffee," they would say. She would cry. The last thing she wanted was to get married at the time. All her friends were out at the movies. She perfected her methods of acting scary, silly, and obnoxious to turn all suitors away.

She wanted to live, have fun, work a little, and meet people on her terms. Attending the American University of Beirut was

a life-changing experience. She did some studying between her extracurriculars: photography club, university life, and the yearbook committee, to name a few. She met people and changed a lot. Her best friends are still the ones she met at AUB. The ones she would spend most of her time laughing and having fun with when her parents thought she was at the library.

Today, she's funny, loud, full of life, and very comfortable in her skin. She makes fun of herself and sometimes of the people close to her. Lama doesn't drink, yet she's on a natural high, full of energy, dedication, and a genuine love for people. She's become a successful professional with empathy and mature leadership skills.

THE HOME SHE DID NOT WANT

She used to hate the floor below the apartment she grew up in. During the war, thieves, fighters, and shady characters slept there. The apartment had been abandoned for 30 years. She met Toufic and got engaged. While preparing to get married, they looked for a place to make their home.

Coming down from her place, Toufic pointed and "Lama. This is an empty apartment. Let's check it out." She started crying and refused to set foot in there. She had heard that people were killed there. He convinced her to take a look at the all-broken-down, graffiti-filled, dirty, abandoned, and lifeless apartment. She cried in the middle of the place. At 25, she was torn between becoming independent, having her own life, and staying close to her parents.

Toufic told her, "You're an only daughter; your parents will need you one day." They ended up buying it and turning old scary memories

into a warm, fun-filled home with laughing walls. Her dad, the engineer, was instrumental in making it happen. From their savings, they built it wall by wall, cabinet by cabinet, fixtures, paint, and kitchen.

This apartment was sought after by many people in the neighborhood. Toufic found the original owner and made sure to seal a deal.

“In the beginning, I didn’t want it. God’s wisdom works in mysterious ways.”

Today, her dad spends most of his time with them. His commute is one floor down. His daughter and her family are his oxygen.

THE FAMILY SHE’S RAISING

“My mom passed away four years ago, and everything changed since.”

Life got more demanding with three children and a father to care for. When her mother would take care of all the cooking for years, now it’s Lama’s turn to feed everybody. She loves the ‘everybody’ concept. Growing up as an only child, she wanted children. Lots of them. She’s living a mother’s life and a child’s life with many siblings. Toufic would catch her playing and screaming her lungs out while jumping on the bed with her children.

Her ever-supporting mother fought lung cancer until the last minute. In turn, Lama was no less a hero to her mother, father, Toufic, and kids. She stayed at her mom’s side until her last breath while doing her best to take care of everyone else and still fulfill her work obligations. She had promised herself to keep her mom laughing until the last day of her life. And she did. She clowned around for her, carried her, hugged her, walked, and danced with her. They knew the inevitable was coming, but none explicitly addressed it.

Lama and Toufic raised a beautiful family of two boys and one girl. It did not come easy, as she had two agonizing miscarriages in the process.

She laughs and tells me that her spreadsheet experience and deep research got her a girl at the end.

“I have three. If you ask me whether I’d have another one, I would.*”

* footnote in 6-point font: Conditions apply.

AND THE BREAK SHE NEEDS

Lama feels she deserves some rest time as she’s been through a lot in the past 10 years. She resigned from work and spent more time with her children, father, and husband. It will be an adjustment after 18 years of an 8–5 corporate schedule. She will miss her colleagues, the friendships, the camaraderie, and the occasional outings with them.

Maybe not the outings. I’m sure she can squeeze a few in her schedule for them.

She wants to use this time to find meaning in a new professional adventure. She wants to finish her CFA certification, which she put on hold when her mom got sick.

In the meantime, the family is a top priority. She wants to give time to her children. Play with them hide and seek, jump on beds, and shoot football in the neighborhood with her kids and all the other kids entrusted to her.

She wants to walk on her dad while he’s listening to his music, looking at her picture, and talking to his late wife. She wants to absorb those moments between her father and Toufic — the son he never had. She wants to coordinate the boys’ sleepovers at their grandfather’s. She wants to plan more family outings.

While Lama tells me that she's seeking me-time, in reality, she wants to make it up to her children and Toufic for the time she was entirely dedicated to her ailing mother. The me-time will follow.

This lockdown has been a blessing. She's been happy, and the family has been happy, too. Today, she plans outings and helps her children with their online learning. She's content, and she doesn't care about being rich. She just wants peace of mind. One car at home is plenty, the one she shares with Toufic.

She's sad for Lebanon. She's sad for Beirut. The country is not the same. It will change, but it will not happen overnight. We only live once. She doesn't want her kids to go through this again. She's lived what she calls the fake peace. She wants the real one. Her dream home is a little house with a small garden.

MOM WOULD BE PROUD

The people who love us don't leave us. They send us support in many ways. When her mom was a young girl, she used to round up her friends in the neighborhood to sweep the streets clean. Lama is working with the local scouts to distribute aid to over 50 families. And she's a good cook now!

Um-Lama (mother of Lama) has done so much good in her life that her deeds still give back. For example, Ammo Abou Othman, the khodarji (the neighborhood's little store owner), would call on Lama with his signature "Qu'est ce qu'il y a?" to help her with her groceries. He'd put aside 5 kgs of his special pickling cucumbers for her. When the proper harvest of grains reaches his store, he makes the right assortments of lentils, fava beans, burghul, and the like to stock her pantry. Ammo Abou Othman, who took grocery lists from her mom, is now continuing his mission.

"After my mom died, he would say: 'Where are you? You disappeared. Take this. This is so and so for this season. Now, you need to buy this.' He's great. You can't find him anywhere in the whole of Lebanon. I love people. I love Beirut."

**YOUR VIBE
ATTRACTS YOUR
TRIBE. WE'VE
ALL CHANGED.
SOME PEOPLE
CHANGE MUCH
FASTER THAN
OTHERS. THE
NEW GAME
IS BEING
DESIGNED.**

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

MAN WITH THE GAS MASK

SHOWS HIS FACE AND OPENS HIS HEART.

He has the serenity of knowing where he stands. Tall. Down to his core. With Lebanon. And its people. Deeply rooted. All loving. Playful. Insanely humane.

How did this introverted insurance professional become one of the Lebanese Thawra's frontline revolutionaries?

After visiting with him for three hours over one cup of coffee (I didn't want to interrupt for a refill), I understood him a little better.

He's rough on the outside, thoughtful, foul-mouthed, fit, gutsy, a man's man, and what you see is what you get.

"WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?"

He tells me what he knows. He knows that he loves Lebanon and the Lebanese. He loves Beirut. He loves the blown-up neighborhood of Gemmayze. He loves his village and the cedars of Lebanon. He's genuine, selfless, and gives from his heart.

Just as he supports his family and works as a professional, he wants to serve Lebanon and its people. It pains him to see the Lebanese mistreated, and he does everything in his means to help

and be there.

The clarity of where home is for him and not leaving home is his driving force. He understands other people, but for him, immigrating is not on the table. He doesn't question how happy or not he'd be if he left. He decided to make home a better place for himself, his family, and everyone else.

Skeptics think that he has a hidden agenda. Whether they agree with him, others are fascinated by this man's resilience, energy, and resolve. And for the rest, his big heart drives them.

DOUBTS CREEP IN

His spirits get tested. When he's exhausted, frustrated, and down, he asks himself why he continues doing what he does.

"I am not religious, but I pray. I believe in love. I have a fire inside. I cannot explain it."

What he does is not in character. He's doing everything he's not. He says that he's an introvert. He'd rather be hiking for three days in the wilderness with Doby, his dog. So many times, he wanted to escape it all. Go back to being a kid, fleeing to his tent at night, lighting up the flashlight, and being.

The next day, he finds himself drawn to the frontlines in downtown Beirut against the police in power.

The occasional boosters send the doubts away. When grabbing a bite, people would stop at his table: "Take care of yourself. Be careful. Please continue."

WE ARE SHAPED BY OUR EXPERIENCES

In 1981, he was one year old. In his mother's arms, he sees

her tears as she stands on the sidewalk watching the procession and casket of Bachir, the assassinated president-elect. She still reminds him of what he told her: "Don't cry. I'll make it right."

When he was only seven, a battle broke out in their neighborhood when the family was sleeping. 13 fighters died in their building. He and his two younger siblings, aged 6 and 4, hid in the bathroom with their father. It was gruesome, with RPGs, machine guns, and knife fights. He saw everything: bodies and body parts, which he had to pick and put in plastic bags. His dad still tells him he shouldn't have seen what he saw.

As a teenager in the mid-'90s, he had a room at his grandparents' house in the Gemmayze neighborhood. Aunts, uncles, and other extended family lived around. He'd escape and spend time with the boys in Achrafieh. Avoiding snipers, he'd walk home in the afternoon behind barricades created with stacked shipping containers.

In the blast of Aug 4, 2020, he rushed to check on his aunts and uncles in Gemmayze. Running between the rubble, he was able to pull them out — injured but alive. This blast got to his core. It literally hit home.

And yet, he steers away from war and is driven by love.

"I'M AFRAID TO FORGET"

He goes down to Beirut every other day, to the neighborhood that was most affected by the blast. He spends a few hours checking with people, asking if they're alright, and trying to do what he can with what he has. For him, he wants to forget the blast but not the neighborhood. Not how it was, at least. Sometimes, it feels like visiting someone's grave to talk to them or checking on an old friend recovering in the hospital.

BETWEEN THE FRONTLINE AND THE FAMILY

We have a small family with a beautiful 10-year-old girl with whom he does tons of activities. His wife is supportive despite the disagreements. He feels guilt towards her when he spends long periods protesting and attending to what he believes is a common good. He's appreciative of her putting up with his schedule and living with the uncertainty of engaging in confrontations. She compromises and still provides a home source of stability and security. She would want nothing to do with street engagements if it were up to her.

I wonder what's her story?

He knows she has a point, but his passion for the cause is too polarizing. They occasionally clash. Who doesn't? At least they disagree over something worth disputing over. They argue, make up, and love each other. It pisses him off when he knows that she's right.

Lately, he had time to pick up bread on the way home :-). He loves his family and loves Lebanon, Beirut, and Gemayze.

GAME OVER

He plays fair, even though his opponents, the military fighting the protestors, are not. In several of their confrontations, they had military personnel at a disadvantage. He could have caused bodily injuries to some. He chose not to. He thought...

"He's probably like me, returning to his family that evening."

He's sure that the people in power are done with as sure as his name is Roy. They cannot adapt to the new world. They're not even able to enjoy the loot they've stolen throughout the years. They're simply not welcome among their citizens and are still after power and fame. They're fighting to keep the power and

becoming infamous as they chase fame.

Maybe it's to their advantage to return the money? Hello?

"People stood in line to take pictures with them. Now, they're not going in public anymore. We stripped them of that privilege. It's impactful."

THE NEW GAME

He believes that ordinary citizens with the appropriate credentials should be in charge. Bring the economists to plan the economy and the environmentalists to impact policy. Current politicians should take a break. Move aside and let the new generation work. They've made big mistakes. It's not a secret that they've all been in on it to some degree.

The revolution will build on its spirit and form its own structure. The new vibe will reign.

"Your vibe attracts your tribe. We've all changed. Some people change much faster than others. The new game is being designed."

SIMPLE PLEASURES

He wants to lead a simple life and live one day at a time. Why not wake up at 5 am and get on his dream treadmill for a few hours while watching the news on his big-screen TV? At 7 am, he wants to take his dog for a walk and then jump in the shower to move to his home office — the minimalist kind, with one iMac. When work is done, he'll go down to his office/apartment's street level and grab a drink with his friends at the pub. On weekends, off to the Cedars with the family and Doby. For extra income, he will Airbnb his three cabins in the Cedars. The apartment will have a very high ceiling,

one futon on the parquet floor, and one shelf to replace a closet with 5 black T-shirts, 3 Nike shoes, and a couple of blue jeans.

“This is how dull I want my life to be. And all, in Gemmayzeh.”

Live and let live. He wants it all in Lebanon, among his family and friends. In the country of his dreams. Is it too much to ask?

He wants to work in an environment where the banks do not confiscate your money. A place where a blast doesn't demolish decades of hard work. A place where you can take someone to court and get a fair trial. For his family, he wants clean air to breathe, drinking water from the faucet, trash well disposed of, and visual pollution diminished to zero.

Ah yes. The occasional trips. There's nothing wrong with discovering Tibet or attending a seminar in London. That's good, too.

The revolution has done plenty but has yet to reach its goals. They have identified what they do not want. They still need to identify and push for what they collectively want.

One day, he will reflect back on these days with bittersweet memories. He will remember and tell his grandkids how they stood up to the bullies and how the new Lebanon was born. Like a true grandfather, he'll spice up his stories. He'll tell tales of how he kept the spirit going until the winds of change picked up the old and cleared the way for the new. Grandma would have her own untold stories, yet she is as proud, reliable, and resilient as the hero in this story.

Doby's great, great granddog would be walking with Jeddo Roy as he promenades on a cold December morning under the cedar trees.

A tribute to all the Roys who stand for justice, fairness, service, and love. To the ones in Lebanon and the ones

who are changing the face of the world. There's nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.

It's time.

**I LIKE TO GIVE
MEANING TO
THINGS THAT
HAPPEN IN MY
LIFE .**

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

CAN WE POLITELY DISAGREE?

PROFESSOR, THOUGHT LEADER, STORYTELLER.

I sat with Yusuf at the Starbucks on the Corniche by the American University of Beirut. A walk away from his office at the Olayan School of Business. He would frequently refer to his father in our talk, who passed away a couple of weeks prior. From his mentions and non-verbal cues, I could tell he loved and admired him.

Like most who leave our lives, we wish for another chat, one more walk, or just a phone call. I felt his father present with us lucky father, lucky son.

THE WRITER

I follow him on Facebook and LinkedIn as his posts are well-researched and engaging. His clean and clear style brings forward strong and opinionated points. He's occasionally advised to steer away from politics, as staying neutral is safer. He chooses otherwise. His writings ruffled feathers among his friends; he

may have lost some. The current Lebanese situation is especially sensitive in his inter-married extended family.

He will take a stand and politely disagree with you if he needs to; you will know it.

“You have to write what you think. You have to say your word. You live only once.”

While he writes for others, he also does it for himself. From his social encounters, he derives themes and writes about them to convince another person or group of his point of view. With his pulse on the local community, he argues his point. Writing helps him clarify his thoughts, vent, and get it out there.

For example, he regularly writes about the impact of so-called Lebanese leaders on society today, in the past, and in the future. He wants to reach one person, several people, or an organized group by continuously addressing this topic. Hopefully, someone would listen and realize that there’s another truth out there. Knowingly or not, they might realize that they may have sold themselves. What would it take people to regain their decision, dignity, and self-governance?

He’s a gentleman of a writer who uses the power of words to educate and carve words for his own therapy. While he thinks he must make a difference somewhere, he still strives for a significant impact.

It’s also in the immediate family. His 20-something children read some of his posts. Sometimes, they even discuss them.

CONSTANTLY READING HIS TRIGGER EVENTS

He is big on events and their triggers. He watches for them in and around his life and asks: “What can I learn from this?” In the leadership literature that he teaches, trigger

events usually help you grow. An accident, a problem with a boss, an argument with someone, and family arguments, if channeled correctly, would help you move forward and grow.

During condolences, Yusuf’s family talked, reminisced, and honored his father, Munir, and the impact he had on people. His cousin spoke about her son, who works for one of the big four audit firms in Saudi Arabia. One day, Munir invited the once-teenager to his office, sat him in his chair behind the big desk, and told him, “If you study and work hard, you can be somebody.” This event was an impactful trigger in the young boy’s life.

When Yusuf got engaged, his wife-to-be was still in college. As traditionally might have happened, the groom’s family was expected to ask the girl to quit school and build a home. When the family went to ask for the girl for their son in marriage, Munir had one condition — that the young woman finish her studies and graduate. Until today, Yusuf reflects on that trigger. He was a young man to be married to a young woman still in college, and how his father treated the situation. Today, Yusuf and his spouse nurture their family with the same spirit.

“I like to give meaning to things that happen in my life.”

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

A couple of months before he passed, Munir gave Yusuf big worry beads — the ones you put on display. He told him it was a gift from Fuad Saba, a renowned and respected man in the Middle East’s financial auditing profession.

Rewind to 1952 when Munir was 21. He joined the SABA firm as an entry-level bookkeeper. He climbed the ranks to be offered a partnership in 1967, which he amicably turned down. A few years

later, he got certified as a chartered accountant. The protestant Fuad Saba was like a father to Yusuf's father. He was his trigger-maker.

Yusuf's family is as Beirut as it gets. His father's family lived near Sadat Street, and his mother's family lived on Sidani Street. Yusuf's grandfather was not educated. It was customary to ask boys to leave school as teenagers to work — learn a trade, and make a living. Munir was taken out of school at age 10.

The American University of Beirut was across the street. For an uneducated family that did not appreciate education, sending anyone to university was outside the books. Also, very few Muslims attended during the 1920s and '30s. In that context, the little boy refused what his father had asked. Instead, he enlisted at the Mteini & Saikali vocational night school while working during the day. Later, he was able to secure a job with SABA — a pivotal trigger in his life. Fuad Saba had taken Munir under his wings.

When Munir studied for his chartered accountant certificate, he traveled to England. His friend George Matta would be waiting for him at the airport.

Yusuf wanted to mention many people who crossed his father's life. He intentionally wanted to show the power of collective support — irrespective of religious or confessional lines, the receiver's openness, and its powerful impact on everyone.

ON ROLE MODELS

Our society needs solid role models. If you want to go to public life today, can you pick a role model to follow? In one of his online courses on leadership, he found it difficult for students to find role models.

Can a particular person be a role model for one aspect of my

life and someone else for another aspect? Can I be a role model for somebody in his professional life, but I'm not in his sports aspirations? Nelson Mandela was a hero and a role model for building a nation. However, there was so much to be desired in his family life. Mandela can be a statesman role model for public service, persistence, clarity of purpose, and patience.

Prof. Yusuf invites us to create our role models from the best out there.

Sometimes people say:

"I blame my parents for raising me a good person. Someone like me cannot make it in a place like Lebanon."

While he believes this should not be true, he also knows that the lack of good role models in politics and business created the end justifies the means attitude. This is especially true with those who grew up in Lebanon in the last 30 years (1990 —). The environment they witnessed was predominantly corrupt.

On a personal level, Yusuf could have made a long career at his father's firm, but he opted for academics. He's more into being in the classroom, teaching, researching, advancing knowledge, and serving the community than going full-time in an environment that would drain all his energy.

THE FUTURE OF THE 100-YEAR-OLD NATION

"We are an interesting national experiment," he says. In the life of a nation, 100 years are formative. But for a human being, it's several lifetimes.

The external pressures on Lebanon since its inception as a state have been too high. The continuous fluctuations and external

disruptions to the system are not typical for a state of its size, internal mix, and geographical location. In typical situations, Lebanon should have had a more coherent society. Organically, the Lebanese should have gotten closer to each other due to technology and other factors.

“There could be an inflection point as the young generation gets exposed through digital channels.”

Yusuf is optimistic. This factional state can become a beautiful multicolored tapestry like the Bekaa Valley on a Spring day.

He suggests no matter the political winds or ideologies, the new Lebanon can benefit most when it learns from other experiences. And then create its own approach to developing the new republic. Even the best practices elsewhere, if adopted as is, may get you zero traction or a rebellion. It has to come from within to last. Homegrown and locally nurtured while seeing what others did is the best route to success and sustainability.

THE LITTLE BIG PROJECT

Besides his regular duties at the Olayan School of Business and recent enjoyment of high-tech blended learning, he wants to craft stories. Yusuf takes inspiration from his late father, the master storyteller who inspired, solved problems, and educated through lively story-telling. In his turn, he wants to write stories about ordinary people who grew up in Beirut.

The first one would be his father’s story.

We said goodbye. He headed back to campus. I walked to my car thinking... This one professor took a break from work to talk with me about his life and aspirations. Instead, his reflections were about his grandfather, father, and children. He sees his life as one ring of a chain

in this 100-year-old republic. A solid and impactful one, he hopes.

ARE YOU KIND TO YOURSELF?

IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR METABOLISM.

She wasn't sure what to talk about, and I didn't know what to expect from our conversation. Once she warmed up, the words rolled out from within — logical, emotional, clear, and intense.

THE LITTLE GIRL AMONG GROWN-UPS

She would be the little girl who would seek the company of people who are older than her. She didn't know why, but the conversation with them was more interesting. She enjoyed time alone to reflect, write, and listen to music when not in talks.

The middle girl among two boys in a traditional family had to be strong and prove herself. She made a mark at home and in life. Sometimes, roles in families play musical chairs. One day, a boy who causes trouble may play the peacemaker brother between his siblings or parents. Other times, the stubborn daughter assumes a parent's role. Her schooling, reflections, and family experiences were no different and got her to mature early. It shaped who she is — a fighter, full of emotions, who blows up as quickly as she calms down.

“I'm a person who's fascinated with human behavior.”

WHEN YOU
PUT FAITH AND
INTENTION,
MIRACLES
HAPPEN.

Magdalena is a deep thinker, driven by learning, forgives, refuses that people accept being the victim in any relationship, and embraces life's challenges. When faced with pain, we have a choice. We can self-destruct or act to live fully. Faith supports her living abundantly.

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE HOSPITAL

After graduating from a parochial school, she enrolled at the American University of Beirut. She always loved math, the sciences, and philosophy and wondered why she picked nutrition as a major. The first two years could have been more exciting, yet she studied through. Her fascination with human behavior kept nagging at her. So, she tried a psychology course and ended up with a minor degree to complement her nutrition and dietetics. This was when everything started to make sense. Her passion and gift of sitting with people, listening, and giving advice may happen around food.

She designed a senior project that required nutrition and psychology — emotional eating. Her first internship was at Hotel Dieu de France as a clinical dietitian. Then, she lectured at three other local universities on emotional eating to pharmacy, psychology, and nutrition students.

IT STARTED WITH KITCHEN PLANS

At 22, she gets a call to help a gentleman with an idea for a new venture. He was searching for a consultant and a business partner. She remembers him showing up with kitchen plans. The young, independent woman thought she was too young to be a consultant and definitely did not want to start a new venture. Her goals were set on a graduate degree in counseling and nutrition in

the US as a prelude to opening her own clinic.

True to her spirit and how much she likes a good challenge, she went for it. She started her clinic, built a kitchen, and picked a name for the business. Yes, she also married the business partner. She started with him at 22 and got married at 25. At 38, they're raising a beautiful family; she's working on herself, professionally and personally. On the way, she's acquired new certifications and an executive MBA.

MAGDALENA'S LITTLE BIG PEARLS OF WISDOM

On a personal level, she wants to dedicate more time to herself.

This is where she got on a roll and shared her life experiences and the lessons she picked up with me. As she shared them with me, she also reminded herself and recited to keep them close to her heart and mind.

- Happiness only exists in the now.
- Be at peace with your past.
- You cannot live in the anxiety of the future.
- Give. Keep just enough for yourself to keep giving.
- Take care of yourself. Love yourself. It will boost your self-esteem.
- Get comfortable with yourself; you will stop seeking approval, feel more complete, have fewer struggles, and get sick less often.
- Working hard to achieve is normal.
- The key to your life is in your hands. You are the creator of your reality.
- Luck and coincidence do not exist.

- If you're passionate about your work, it won't be work.

MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT

She believes that when they work together, you'll be in a better spot. At an early age, she had three physical conditions that she had to take regular medications. When she became aware, and her mind got involved, it stopped. She healed herself.

Your vibrations do a lot. Miracles do happen. You can make and invite them to happen. When you have faith in yourself and submit, it happens. She learned the meaning of surrender from one lecture.

As a teenager, a priest came to their school and gave his life testimonial. That lecture deeply impacted her when she was a rebel against everything, including religion and its systems. It was one of her life trigger events. Being a control freak by nature, she started to learn to surrender to her faith.

“When you put faith and intention, miracles happen.”

Spirituality and science are very intertwined. They are married with intensity. She learned that when focused intention meets faith, energies will flow in that direction to your advantage. When you put your heart in, it has already happened.

When we think that God is somewhere else in the heavens, He's actually inside every one of us. He is with us, guiding our lives if we let Him. When you love yourself, you love God. Unconditional love for God, who's within us, is the only way to invite love into our lives.

“THERE'S A LIGHTER SIDE OF ME”

She grew up as a serious person who protected her reputation by being a perfectionist. It got her to be harsh on herself and

eventually exhausted.

“When you talk to yourself, be gentle.”

She wants to visit her other true self — the extrovert and the people person. “Two drinks and you'll see another person.”

It's time for Magdalena to give work what work needs, just enough. It's time for her to experience more Mediterranean sunsets. Freedom on horseback, as she used to. Listen more often to music that takes her to another dimension. Find the people who love a good conversation over a glass of Pinot Noir or two.

I hear her other self surfacing — relaxed, live-and-let-live, and laughing until it hurt. :-)

Little wisdom for your body: 90% of a diet is mental. Be aware of what you say, what you think, and how you feel. It even affects your metabolism.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

RADIO GOT THE VIDEO STAR

SOPHISTICATED MAN. SOLID VALUES. ONE RULE.

The 13-year-old boy would spend all his savings buying 33 and 45-rpm records. As a kid, he loved radio and Western music.

At 16, with a voice that hadn't matured yet, he presented a program in French on the once-top radio station — Magic 102 FM.

At 22, he presented his first TV program upon Télé Liban's Alfred Barakat's invitation. With no director and one camera operator, he polished it into a magazine program to include documentaries, social issues, and political views. He had to figure out the basics, including when to open his eyes, how wide, what to wear, and how to look at the camera. The TV young man carved a niche audience of Lebanese francophones and moved up his program from the 11 pm time slot to primetime.

"BIG" IS THE NAME OF HIS GAME

After Tele Liban, he went to MTV and hosted a talk show for about 5 years. He wanted big names that rang loudly.

It was Walid Jumblatt, Mouna AlSolh, and Johnny Abdo in Lebanon. They helped to further establish his name as a

I DREAM BIG.
SEE BIG. THINK
BIG.

serious player in that space. One was a political figure; the other represented Lebanon's historical era. The third was a key figure in intelligence. Outside Lebanon, AlAmir Talal Bin Abdelaziz, Jihan AlSadat, and Omar AlSharif sprang him into the Arab region.

Perseverance was key. He had his eyes on an interview with the late Shah of Iran's wife when neither MTV nor Ricardo Karam was a big name.

It went something like this. The first communication was an international fax sent from MTV's CEO's office. And another one. Then another one. With refusals, of course. He would wait until the Farsi New Year and send another well-carved letter. He ensured that she (or her people) knew he was not going anywhere. A year and a half later, he struck an audience with her. Things picked up rather quickly.

Some of the people he interviewed were Tom Barrack, Bill Gates, Carlos Ghosn, Nicolas Hayek, and Paul Orfalae.

Ricardo had the guts to create a new concept for the region. He saw what people needed before they knew it — inspiring success stories. They wanted to hear good news, see bright faces, and experience uplifting emotions. Having been at MTV during that period was a timely ground to experiment. The working relationship between MTV and Ricardo made the adventure and the challenges a little more fun. He often lacked the budget to travel and cover the stories. He eventually managed to convince the Central Bank's Governor to support his endeavor.

When he moved to Future TV, he started producing his own shows; during this period, he interviewed icons such as Luciano Pavarotti and the Dalai Lama. Eventually, he started his own company. Since then, he has worked with many stations and networks: Abu

Dhabi TV, Arabia, BBC, FutureTV, MBC, MTV, LBC, and Skynews.

"I dream big. See big. Think big."

To culminate all his previous work experiences, in 2009, Ricardo took his journey and storytelling to the next level by launching Takreem. This foundation honors Arab accomplishments and the unsung heroes of the region. Ricardo, the curator of knowledge, developed Takreem to include conferences, forums, roundtables, and workshops through its brainchild, TAK minds.

Despite the COVID crisis, the Lebanese economic and political situation, and the Aug 4 Beirut blast, Ricardo is preparing for a fresh wave of uplifting projects.

HIS SECRET RECIPE?

He loves people and is honest with them. He loves to connect, talk, and, most importantly, listen to them. He strives to make people around him happy.

"I love. I love. I love to see happy people."

He enjoys an innate interest in people's stories and good conversation. Amine Maalouf forgot that he was sitting with an interviewer. It felt like a conversation with a friend.

"I created a certain brand for myself. They may not like it, but at least they respect it."

You can always tell that it's Ricardo.

He masters four languages: Arabic, French, English, and body language. His formal Arabic is rich in vocabulary. His solid, deep, staccato, velvety voice gives the listener a sense of class. His lingo is properly well-enunciated, with sharp Arabic pronunciation. His conversations weave words that can be consumed

in all Arab countries, no matter the dialect. He's created his own lingua franca—the Ricardo signature. It also crosses into rich English and impeccable French.

As for looks, he's always well-dressed and elegant, even when he's scruffy.

He cherishes integrity and honesty. He realizes how others might see him as different from what he truly is. Then again, what you think of him is none of his business. In his accomplishments and failures, he is true to his life and his work. He succeeded despite all the challenges that came his way. He had to do it alone. His professional solo trip strengthened his core.

"I'm a dreamer who makes his dreams come true. I'm focused. Been very focused. All my life."

When life puts him down, faith keeps him anchored. He's unwavering in his values and uses them to stay true to himself during turbulent times.

LESSONS LEARNED

Ricardo has met many accomplished individuals in his 25+ years of meeting people and traveling the world. Some of the lessons he learned:

- You cannot buy happiness with money.
- Some of the wealthiest people are the most lonely.
- Sometimes, financial success comes at the expense of something else.
- Pain fuels the desire for life.
- A healthy family is the most significant accomplishment in life.

- All people are the same.
- Learn from others' mistakes.

On journalism

- Freedom of speech is beautiful but should never steep to get filthy.
- Logic is more powerful than insulting words.
- Respect the position no matter your opinion of the person filling it.
- Respecting the position that represents your nation is self-respect.
- Fame does not last forever.

SOCIAL MEDIA WILL FULFILL HIS MISSION

Ricardo interviewed kings, presidents, and CEOs and brought their stories to our living rooms. Today, he wants to reach out to more people and communicate more intimately and frequently with them. Social media is helping him reach us in a new way. Today, he's reaching out to a younger generation through the channels they consume most. His presence on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube is getting him closer to them.

Do what's good for your future and your country. Sit and talk to each other. Do not divide Lebanon any further. He wants to open community channels for the Lebanese to keep talking to each other and get to know each other better. He wishes for everyone to experience the values of empathy, compassion, and tolerance as he did as a student at the American University of Beirut.

FAMILY AND COUNTRY

The South American-born Lebanese Ricardo loves his Arab culture. He'd rather skip glamorous parties to spend time with his wife and three children: Talal, Nadim, and Sharif. He'd rather do things that bring him happiness: a glass of wine with his wife, socializing with friends and playing a tennis game. He loves and serves Lebanon and its people from his heart. In these times of predominantly mud-slinging, Ricardo strives to keep it civil to portray the culture that his nation enjoys.

I am an excellent listener in my interviews. During his, I interrupted quite often. He would graciously pick up where we left off.

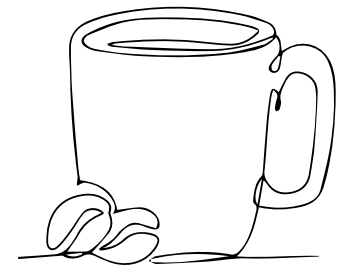
I have always been intrigued by Ricardo. I'm one step closer to understanding where he comes from.

A self-made man with focus. He wishes that he had serious mentors when he was starting out. Today, he dedicates time and effort to making a little difference in others' lives. He's genuine, generous, and loves people.

If you're wondering whether he is always like that — the way you see him in his videos? Yes.

He's a TV star who came from radio and the one embracing new social channels.

Sophisticated man. Solid values. Love.



WHEN TESTED, GO BACK TO YOUR ROOTS

33 YEARS TOGETHER FOR ETHICAL JOURNALISM.

First cup of coffee with them. They were gracious and generous. “How long have you been together?”

33 years last September. Télé Liban was their second home. They met, got engaged, married, and had two children while working at the TV station. Their work dictated their family engagements and social life. When everyone was in shelters, they were on duty. No weekend, no vacation. They witnessed peak political and armed upheavals and Lebanon’s golden age of media and journalism. After Tele Liban, Nehmat and Christian served the profession in many institutions such as ANB, MTV, SBS-Australia, Radio Canada International, and Radio Orient-Paris.

JOURNALISM AS THEY KNEW IT

As journalists, they met many people and witnessed firsthand the industry’s technological and financial fluctuations. Unfortunately, they see a decline in moral, ethical, and

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political standards. People in charge today don't have the same fabric as the statesmen they knew. The lowering of standards is real in Lebanon and everywhere else.

Responsible journalism is becoming rare. As professionals, they treat 'the word' with such respect and care as it influences situations and people. They evaluated every expression they wrote: Impact, accuracy, and truthfulness. Their political or ideological beliefs do not matter in the newsroom. What matters is conveying facts from all angles. A media professional serves the truth. The whole truth.

They serve everyone with unbiased and professionalism. Being a media professional is a vocation for them. When their job is to give facts, they do just that. They delivered the news with "poker faces." There are no hints of any emotions, facial insinuations, provocations, or altering. Their job was to report and provide the news, and they did not believe it was their position to tell us how to think.

BIASED NEWS

Unfortunately, absolute objective news does not exist. Media has become an industry with machines subjected to supply and demand market forces. Even in the US, the truth can be relative as the media is in open war. CNN, CNBC, and Fox News. Whose truth do you subscribe to? What an awkward position to be in!

Bias exists. When money dictates, you have to compromise. Successful institutions keep a framework for legitimacy and credibility. For example, if you can't state everyone's opinion, then cancel that piece. If you have to only portray one point of view because you're paid more from that source, then you're much better off canceling news altogether.

Money is essential to stay standing, but so is integrity. If you were to compromise, do it with limits. We should reconcile progress with the integrity of the profession. Journalists should be given the space to be objective. We used to study thousands of words to add to our vocabulary. Today, they google: quick and efficient. But are they reading any books to stay cultured? It is also true that today, anyone can publish on the internet. How responsible are people?

Reconciling progress and the fundamentals of journalism are vital for any individual or institution. Eventually, the disruption in the past 20+ years will subside. Traditional journalism will adapt, amateurs will learn, and the industry will prevail.

INTRODUCING THE NEWS A LA LIBANAISE

In Lebanon, it is the standard that all stations put their political introductions before reporting the news.

It should not exist. Period. Why should I tell you how to think about what I'm about to tell you? It's the epitome of brainwashing and bias. As if I'm telling you: "Don't think. I'll think on your behalf."

When Christian was tasked to run the news section at Tele Liban, and the political tension was at its peak, he pulled a hack against what was assumed. He went back to the roots — to basic journalism principles. He gave all competing parties equal air time, and he respected the viewers to think for themselves. That's it.

Consequently, Télé Liban jumped back to second place in the local scene in just three months, which proved that viewers appreciate honesty and objectivity. The introduction to the news was a resume and not an analysis.

TO ALL JOURNALISTS OUT THERE

Nehmat is so proud of the students she mentored over the years and still does. She glowed as she named some of them. The teacher in her sprung up. She tells the newcomers that there is something special in every single one of them. Despite the pressures and the industry's constraints, they always have room to maneuver intelligently and with integrity.

- Set high standards, stick to them, and in the long run, you will succeed.
- Stick to your values and nurture self-respect.
- Be ethical with your colleagues, and be happy for their success.
- Everyone gets a turn (to that special coverage, private assignment, or trip)
- Have integrity and protect it with everything you've got.
- When tested, return to your roots, values, and principles.
- In journalism, being a gentleman or a lady pays off.
- Develop a solid personality. It makes a big difference.
- Winning without dignity is not winning.

In my conversation with Nehmat and Christian, they were both totally engaged. Occasionally, they would gently cut into each other, not to refute what was being said; instead, to complement the other's thoughts with more facts. All done with such enthusiasm, sweetness, and love. It was the "yes...and" and not the "yes...but" kind of ping-pong between them.

THEY ARGUE? SURE

Who doesn't? Christian is talented, fast, creative, courageous,

and a visionary with a wealth of knowledge. Nehmat is calculating, proper, well-prepared, and doesn't like ambiguity and making mistakes. He can wing it. She has to prepare every step in advance.

Their working relationship was tested during a two-year program, where she barely caught up with his pace. It got to a point where they would go live with the two of them barely communicating on camera. Until the episode wrapped up, and they got swarms of congratulations.

This was when Christian jumped in with a devious smile: "She was the one who made up with me."

On another occasion, they were about to go live for the 7:30 pm news. Nehmat sat waiting for Amale, who worked the teleprompter, to arrive. The slow elevator at Télé Liban was of no help. As Christian ordered the generic jingle to start, Nehmat sat camera-facing. Amale is still not there. At 7:30 sharp, they went live.

As she had nothing to present, Nehmat panicked. He fully improvised the introduction and talked through it until the teleprompter was ready. Once off the air, she went ballistic. "Don't to me right now!" "He did poetry. I had to give facts!" she told me.

NEHMAT, CHRISTIAN, AND STARBUCKS

Nehmat fell in love with Starbucks before Christian. She cherishes her coffee time. It is her refuge when she's sorting something out. Coffee starts her day as she goes with Christian to Starbucks with intention. They like the culture, the service, the smell, and the coffee. It's become a ritual — their oasis and escape place. Especially nowadays, in Lebanon, Starbucks dates have become simple periodic pleasures. Among all the challenges and changes in this world, the coffee experience got better.

THE PRESENT LIGHTNESS OF BEING

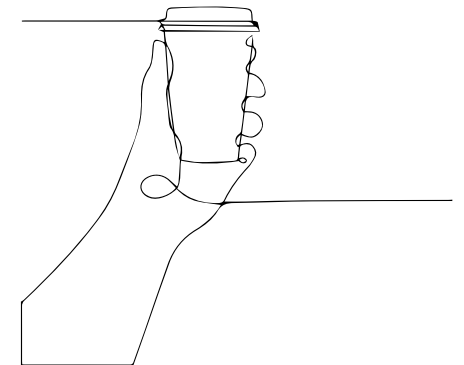
She says: “I love him very much. He’s one of the few people that I learned from so much. I learned from him in my personal life and in my professional life. Christian has what I don’t have, as we complement each other. He’s so accepting of people.

On the other hand, if I can’t stand someone, I simply don’t care. He learns from the people who bother him. I learned to deal with people who are not like me.”

He says: “Nehmat is my weakest point. I am all taken by her, and she is my total life partner. A wonderful person, a loving mother, a devoted wife, and much more of what any husband could wish for. Loyalty is of utmost importance to her. Her family comes first, and I respect her for this. She’s raised two boys; now men on their own.”

They learned to work together and still leave room to breathe.

I like their story. I liked being around them. They’re accessible, fluid, authentic, and light on the heart. 33 years! It felt like they just started dating and had been friends for an eternity.



**I'M
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THAT MY
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ENJOYS.**

GIVE UP ON LEBANON!

DREAMER, BELIEVER, DOER.

When my usual conversations with him covered technology, entrepreneurship, and politics, this one took us to a different level altogether.

He roared with laughter when teasingly I asked him: “Why don’t you just give up on Lebanon?”

Passion is not something you decide to have or abandon. It’s a state beyond everyday decision-making. When you are passionate about something, the balance of pros and cons takes a second seat. He’s passionate about human beings and their behavior. Having roots and belonging to a time, a place, or a group contributes to making someone a better person. You can be a citizen of the world and still belong.

Belonging is beautiful.

BELONGING TO A TIME

If you see yourself as part of a continuum, consider that somebody started before you and others will continue after you; you’ll look at time accordingly. It means that the universe does not begin with you and ends with you. You develop a less selfish

character when you adopt a concept where your existence is a blink in eternity. You wouldn't subscribe to the 'what's in it for me' club.

BELONGING TO A PLACE

In a geographical sense, belonging helps to establish and maintain roots. This physical attachment encourages you to behave better. If it's a village, people know you, and your actions are remembered. If you become an outlaw for any reason, you're much better off leaving. Being in one place requires a minimum level of social conduct where the community imposes it. Imagine sustaining a family reputation for 3 or 4 generations. In Lebanon and other societies, you are the 'father of' (Abou Fadi) or 'son of' (RobinSon). From a social construct, and if you accept it, you're locked in.

BELONGING TO A COMMUNITY

You could be a global citizen and still belong to an ideology or a set of values contributing to society. You could be like a bee collecting nectar from the best flowers in the field, working hard, and turning them into pure honey for others to benefit.

THE 'WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME' CLUB

The club whose members' life starts with them and ends with them. The club with characteristics so stealthy and intelligent that it outsmarts its members. It makes them think that how they live is selfless when it's all about "what's in it for me. Me. Me. Exclusively me."

What happens when you consider the place you live in as a hotel? When the service deteriorates, you leave and check in somewhere else. Imagine if everybody did that. In essence,

there will be no well-kept places to go to. Beautiful villages, neighborhoods, cities, and countries have been built and paid for with hard work, sweat, tears, and, most often, blood.

Members of the materialistic 'what's in it for me' club are generally bound to things. Accumulation of wealth dictates their trajectory in life. It is difficult for them to transcend into other states of mind. It can happen, but seldom.

During our conversation, Fadi turned to me, threw a disclaimer, and said that he's not a social scientist, but these are his observations. I like how he can talk about specifications for some e-government IT solution and then hover up to 30,000 feet and discuss the meaning of life!

THE KIND OF PEOPLE HE LIKES

He likes people who see themselves as passers-by in life and still seek impact, the kind of people who get joy in moving communities forward. If not for them, places, groups, and days would be less exciting for the rest of us. Fadi likes individuals who contribute without asking for anything in return. He believes in criticizing them less and leaving them alone to do what they do best. He is the dreamer, the believer, and the determined doers. They could be anywhere in the world: Kabul, Paris, Caracas, Abuga, or Beirut.

SPEAKING OF BEIRUT

When the dreamers, believers, and doers increase in numbers and self-organize, they can make a real difference and realize the change. But first, they have to believe it, Fadi tells me. All groups can do what they do best in the humanitarian and other fields, and they can also get politically organized. Lebanon is no exception.

We are living in a dilemma. Lebanon is a beautiful country with enormous resources for its size. The Lebanese can be living a decent quality of life. Even today, despite all the damage and chaos, people still fall in love with the place.

Today, we are a mere shadow of the country that we aspire to be. When it has been barbarically gutted out from its essence, Fadi believes that Lebanon will be somewhere else when people work together.

He's so believable. This entrepreneur makes things happen at work, cares for his community, develops an action plan, and is already executing. He speaks with contagious certainty.

His experience and actions reconciled with his political thoughts, crying out to stop waiting for that someone to do something.

We cannot keep waiting. We have to cross swords with our opponents with whatever means we have. Let's go for it and continue learning.

His iterative process keeps him going as he adds new features and adjusts the roadmap.

LEBANON LEBANIZES YOU

The location on this planet, geography, language, religion, and vegetation make the environment that shapes the people who live in it. Lebanon's natural makina lebanizes the ones who decide to make it home. Lebanon is in a unique spot on the globe. A location with specific unexplainable energies. A place where there's a concentration of micro geographies. While there are many more beautiful places on Earth, the variety of elements in such a small place is remarkable. It's at the crossroads of three continents and has seen many empires over the millennia.

"I'm fascinated by the density and the layers of civilizations that my homeland enjoys."

Most lands are named after the people who conquered or inhabited it. Lebanon is one of the few, if not the only, where the land names the people who chose it as home. Once they decided to stay, they became Lebanized. They become Lebanese.

And then a lot of them travel again. They carry that DNA with them to the rest of the world. The DNA that overflows with ambition. The one who built ships invented the alphabet and was instrumental in forming the Founders of Civilizations club. We are offsprings of these people. For the past 40+ years, they have made us belittle our past and ridicule our present. We allowed them to fuel our low national self-esteem. The Lebanese have so many vital elements working for them. It's time they realize their importance and role in the new world as a nation, not just as successful individuals. Our history is rich and deep, with many legacies we take for granted.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Lebanese need to organize. We need to reclaim our public administration that has been systematically dismantled over the past 4 decades. Once this starts, we can rebuild our infrastructure, clean up our water resources, initiate reforestation, rebuild the Beirut port, and nurture the human capital. The weather cannot be stolen, and our natural gas resources will find their way to Europe or wherever needed. Lebanon is small enough to be cleaned up and developed quickly. Lebanon can regain its competitive edge in the region and internationally through its local potential and the networked diaspora.

It is time to replace corrupt and incapable public officials

Lebanon will be back on the regional scene to show that diversity and differences can be factors for success in a neighborhood with predominantly one-colored political systems. Lebanon will continue to be a witness and a haven for freedom of speech, thought, and expression. It will again be a home for people to work and live in dignity.

AND THE PRACTICAL STEPS...

Let's wait to discuss the constitution right now, he suggests. He understands all the repression tools that the people in power have used to dishearten and break the revolution. They have succeeded on the streets but have yet to be in the hearts. Fadi is inviting all good people to organize around a political agenda to run the country as administrators. Make simple things work again. He's asking citizens to solve the leadership problem by replacing those leaders through elections. More specifically, he and other colleagues are calling for:

- An independent cabinet with special powers for a limited time
- Early monitored elections
- Get the diaspora to vote easily
- A media channel to support their work

Fadi is proud of how the revolution has manifested itself. He understands that people are broken and tired. Yet, he believes that we can rebuild a newer and better republic.

AND THAT KID IN MANSOURIEH BHAMDOUN

The little boy from Mansourieh Bhamdoun in Lebanon's mountain village would spend his summers playing with friends and family in the orchards. Fouad, his father, made sure his family took the time to spend in the village. All sweaty, and at sunset, Fadi bicycles back

home. Mom sends him straight for his bath as she prepares a cold cranberry juice from concentrate — 'toot.' Summer nights in the village turn cool and breezy perfect for a good night's sleep. Fadi would occasionally sneak up to the roof and lay face up, observing the stars in the clear summer sky. The stars became his. He was one little boy, connected to the universe and acting on this globe's life stage.

Today, Fadi is a few decades older. He still goes up to the family's house that he rebuilt. Away from his banking solutions business, he reverts to his tomato plants, chicken, and the cedar trees he's planted for generations to come. His powerful sense of belonging helped him develop intimacy with himself and life.

He got older as the stars did. He belongs to that house's rooftop in that one little village — the rooftop that his father took care of, his grandfather, and one day his son. Fadi belongs to Lebanon, the land reclaiming itself through organization and self-respect.

August 2080, on a cool breezy afternoon, Fadi's grandson, Fadi, is with his family, enjoying quality time with his children and wife under the cedar tree that his grandfather planted back in 2020 — the year when Lebanon was renewed.

The 'toot' is still as good!

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

CANAANITE LYDIA

HUMBLE, UNAPOLOGETIC, LOUD.

I met her a day before her birthday (A gentleman never forgets a lady's birthday but always forgets her age). She loves Aquarians. That's me. She's happy, grateful, thankful, and full of empathy towards other people. She is spiritual and works on her inner harmony. She reads the sages: Rumi and Gibran. She seeks wisdom and has done it since she was a little girl. She expressed herself through poetry, music, singing, and dancing. Today, her words and hands are as loud as her passionate and present voice. She keeps you engaged by periodically calling your name.

MUSIC

Art accelerates and amplifies your spirituality. Especially music. Music. "Tony, I feel that music, of all the arts, gives instant gratification." It pierces your heart and shakes your body. The frequency pulsates positivity.

Even when you're sad, music gives you a happy sadness.

Music soothes your pain and speaks to your moods. Music is universal. You can listen to classical, heavy metal, rock, opera, Arabic, or pop. It doesn't matter. It will touch your heart. You

**TONY, I FEEL
THAT MUSIC, OF
ALL THE ARTS,
GIVES INSTANT.**

know why? Because it is honest. It's nonjudgmental. Music is truth and truthful.

THE GIRL GOT THE PART

Growing up during war times, the teenager expressed herself in music. She grew up listening to the beautiful songs of Olivia Newton-John, Crystal Gayle, and the big voice of Shirley Bassey. The all-boys hard rock band wanted a male lead singer.

"It's crazy. It's a fantastic story, Tony. You want to hear it?" she excitedly asked but never waited for an answer.

A friend encouraged her to audition. She trained on *Separate Ways* by Journey and let her strong voice deliver. She got the part. The long-haired down-to-her-ankles pre-teen angel-faced was since known under her stage name — Angel.

She still maxes out the sound engineer's audio needles when singing. They got used to putting the microphones a meter away. She became the lead singer of Equation, the famous rock band of Lebanon's late '80s. They rehearsed in the drummer's apartment for about nine months before their first concert.

WHAT WOULD PEOPLE SAY?

Lydia is the fourth of five children in a conservative Christian family from the mountain town of Brummana. Her father was never going to accept that she performed on stage. What would they say about her? What would they say about them? He forbid her. She tried to reason with him. He wouldn't budge. The music in her soul defied him. The teenager lied and snuck out of the house.

The evening of her first concert, she threw her leather outfit

and gear out of her bedroom window, dressed the proper way for her father, and walked out the door pretending to sing at the school. In the car, she changed into her leather outfit and made sure her plain hair turned wild. Her siblings were in on this.

THEY PACKED THE HOUSE

The car was packed. They were running late. Traffic was awful on the way to the theatre. Afraid that she would miss the curtain opening, Angel jumped out of the car and ran to the venue to find out that the traffic was bound to the concert venue. 800+ people attended that night as they ran out of printed tickets, and people queued outside. The seventh and eighth of July, 1984, were defining evenings in Angel's life. Passion, defiance, perseverance, and raw talent delivered a potent taste of self-fulfillment. There was no turning back. She experienced how eagles soar.

She did many concerts for the next five years, packing thousands of music lovers. She loved her fans and later realized the impact she had on so many of them. For some, she was an inspiration to carry a guitar instead of a Kalashnikov. Some parents hugged her for saving their children.

She wrote poetry, lyrics, and melodies of her own songs. With time, her style became rock-pop. Local and international media labeled her the first female rock star of the Middle East. The child prodigy who can compose music without the need of any musical instrument nor can she read notes; the big rock star of the Middle East moved to Switzerland where no one knew she even existed.

SHE SOARED INTERNATIONALLY AS LYDIA CANAAN

She moved to Switzerland, where she had family, and took the challenge of continuing her journey on the international scene.

You know. Nothing puts me down. We're Lebanese. We're resilient people.

Sony Record Company wanted to sign her up as a heavy metal artist. She declined. Her mezzo-soprano voice skipped to perform opera but was destined to work with the most prominent players in the business.

Her beginnings in Europe got her to make a song of her lyrics and melody with a Swiss producer. One day David Richards, the producer of Freddie Mercury, Queen, David Bowie, Chris Rea, and the Montreux Jazz Festival, asked to meet her. Then Jim Beach, the manager of Queen, became her manager. She recorded in the same studio where Deep Purple recorded *Smoke on the Water*. When her songs were playing on the radio in Switzerland, she made a breakthrough on the London scene — every singing artist's dream. She then made *Love and Lust* with the drummer of Queen, Roger Taylor, and duets with Robin Scott. She also worked with Barry Blue on *Beautiful Life*. Lydia's *Beautiful Life* was a hit in South Africa when Nelson Mandela adopted it for a charity event under his auspices. She sat in her London apartment watching *Madiba* on TV, swaying to her tunes. Her song became Mandela's song, and she couldn't be more honored.

And yes. Lydia Canaan, as of 2015, is the first and only artist from the Middle East who is listed in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum Library and Archives in America with the likes of Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, Ray Charles, Bruce Springsteen, David Bowie, and The Beatles. Did I miss anyone?

She talks about some of her accomplishments with excitement, a sense of self-fulfillment, and an equal dose of humility.

While artists invent stage names for themselves, Angel wanted to revert back to her origins. Lydia Canaan, the biblical melodic name, worked very well for her. I am very proud of my name.

I AM NOT JUST AN ARTIST

She is an artist with a purpose: To use her speaking and singing voice to give hope to people and to advocate humanitarian causes in Lebanon and abroad. She's become a United Nations delegate to the Geneva United Nations Human Rights Council.

When a voice transforms emotions, it can change behavior.

LYDIA'S BYTES OF INSPIRATION

While all the big names in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame make a great company, her idol is Gibran Khalil Gibran: His ambitions, his genius, and his work. She understands him. She knows her talent's power and is unapologetic about it. She believes she's as spiritual as her idol and can see herself living similar enlightened experiences. Despite the different conditions and times, she connects with him on many levels. The parallels reaffirm her to travel the road less traveled and swim against the current. When there is negativity, resistance to change, and surrender, she pushes forward and recharges when adversity knocks. She is positive and an incurable optimist — it is easier to navigate life this way. Here are a few poignant takes from our conversation:

- Practice appreciation, thankfulness, and gratitude for the

tiniest things.

- Turn negative experiences into positive lessons.
- Forget gut feeling. It's a heart feeling. Listen to your heart.
- Children... Do not listen to your parents.
- Parents... With all due respect, you don't always know what's good for your children. Your job as a parent is to listen to what they want. Listen to their hearts and lift them to achieve their goals.
- Hug life. Be whatever you want to be. Be happy. Your energy will attract.

Her energy is contagious. "Never, never, never," when I asked her if she gets tired.

"What would make me tired? I am a spiritual person. I believe in God. My faith and spirituality empower me. They nourish and nurture my heart and soul."

Today, her base is in Lebanon. For her, Lebanon is going to be okay. She reflects back to the times when their dining room served as a makeshift hospital during the war. She lived in Switzerland, a country torn by war for hundreds of years, and now it's one of the most peaceful and prosperous places on the globe. When we look at nations in perspective, we acquire patience.

I'm very hopeful. I believe in a positive spirit. I believe in love. Love is my religion, as my heart guides me.

Lebanon will bounce back regardless of what we're seeing today. In life's seasons, this dark cloud over Lebanon will pass. When people are leaving the country, there are people returning — silent, enlightened angels are rolling back.

I have faith. I believe in this country. I believe in the spirit

of these people. I am the daughter of this land. I'm a Canaanite.

The little girl, one of five children who left Lebanon, returned home and is giving back. She defied her father until he was proud of her. She challenged Switzerland and conquered the world. She got famous. Fame did not get to her. I never knew of or her. I skipped the 'fan' stage to become a friend of this loud soul.

BEIRUT 8: CELEBRATE LIFE

I'M
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ENJOYS.

She's clear-headed, in a good place, and grateful. An hour of intense conversation about the people who left an imprint in her life. The ones who helped her become what she is today.

"I'm here because of them. It all started with us eight."

Jeddo (grandpa), Téta (grandma), Tato (maternal aunt), Papa, mama, sister, and my brother, I take them all with me everywhere I go. They're on my license plate [Beirut 8] to remind me who I am and where I came from.

She prayed that God would keep them all. Josephine and her two siblings were raised by a little tribe. Grandpa, grandma, aunt, dad, and mom juggled the three. While each adult had their own character, they still synchronized and provided for them. Each took their space and naturally assumed a responsibility. Alpha roles were not their thing.

Mama maybe?

It must have been an experience to be with and around them. How did the three kids play the father and the mother to their own benefit, as all children do? In this case, all five. At José's Beirut-8 home, all five tangoed. It worked. Do you know her or any of the eight?

Ye shall know them by their fruit. Matthew 7:15–20 (KJV)

P A P A

Her father was a romantic of the first degree. He left his finance job in Switzerland and turned down the Swiss nationality to return to Lebanon. He would drink and smoke, waiting for their garden roses to bloom and pick the most beautiful one. For her mom. Papa was a 24/7 poet. He taught the kids to love literature. He scheduled José's reading list and picked books from his personal library. As per Papa's plan, reading *The Brothers Karamazov* was at age 16.

On summer nights, he would call her. The little girl sat next to him while they counted the stars. Then, they would turn towards the horizon and gaze at the moon's reflection on the Mediterranean. "How many fishermen's boats are there? Count with me," he would ask José as her searching eyes looked into the darkness. That's how it was with him. He worked when he wanted to and loved them all.

She was close to him and said he understood the living game early on. Some will make the best of life because it is vulnerable, fragile, and fading. Others do their best during their time on Earth. And some live freely as life takes care of itself — her dad's outlook. She tried to convince Papa to stop drinking and smoking.

"It will kill you."

"I have three wonderful kids. My mission is complete. The rest is not necessary."

He died when she was 17. He lived and passed his way. She nurtures his memories, tenderness, and poetic soul.

T A T O

Their mom's sister never married. She worked, lived with, and supported them: schools, cars, universities, and everything

else. She considered them her own, and they loved their second mom. Auntie gave José her drive and ambition. She knows that she can achieve because of her. Tato's unconditional dedication and perseverance are José's North Star. When José reaches any milestone in her life, her aunt would be the first to hear about it.

F A T H E R G R A N D P A

Jeddo, the priest, was the sage of the village. The community sought him for spiritual, emotional, and financial support. He never owned a car or a phone. He was in charge of three parishes in Northern Lebanon. He served them on foot. His investment? A good pair of shoes to be replaced when they got worn out. His vices? A glass of Arak for lunch and exactly three cigarettes per day. No matter the weather, especially going uphill, he would not accept a ride.

"Father, it's raining," hop on. ابونا، عمبتشّتي. طلاع.

The road to heaven goes up." طريق السما طلوع

His day started at 5 am, working for two hours in his vegetable, fruit, and rose garden. Then, he would celebrate three masses in his three parishes before reading the Holy Book. Nature is God's temple. He contemplated in the garden. He watched the birds drink from the tip of his water hose, always with astonishment and refreshed awe. He would sit and gaze at the sea for long periods. Mother Earth was his temple.

"Come, José, come. Look at the sunset!" He would watch it sink into the sea every day with the same innocence and astonishment. Jeddo was a man of God, a hard worker, a saint, and a liberal. He supported her to leave home for Beirut. He encouraged her to take her first steps towards independence as she wanted

to get an apartment to live in and to use as a clinic. He said,

“I have one question. You know that we are in a society that does not accept that a woman lives alone. You are still not married. Would this affect you?”

“Jeddo, if someone is not going to marry me because of this, then I don’t want him.”

And that was it. He taught her to balance faith, money, and health. All in moderation.

GRANDMAMA (TÉTA)

When José’s parents’ house got hit with a bomb during the early years of the way, her parents moved to live with her maternal grandparents in Nahr Ibrahim. The family got larger overnight. Her grandmother was sweet, light-spirited, and tender. You couldn’t help but laugh around her. She was funny and equally lazy. She was known as the ‘wife of the priest,’ the khouriyeh. The khouriyeh was an excellent cook. Regularly, villagers would drop by for advice from the parish priest.

Being the khouriyeh and all, she had to stay presentable.

Téta would change skirts several times a day efficiently. Unbuckle the skirt and drop it. Do the exact thing several times, leaving little cloth circles on the bedroom floor. It was easier to change that way. She stepped into a circle, lifted, buckled, and off she went. Sweet, lazy, funny, and a blessed good cook.

MAMA

Her mom is solid and strong, with a present personality at the center of the home. She is the rock of the house. She kept everyone

moving at their own pace and in their own direction yet kept them all together. She held the balance between her mother, father, husband, sister, and her three children. She was the peacemaker and the provider of tranquility. She balanced and still managed to have a continuous open house for parishioners and friends by throwing the most delicate and elegant parties. In José’s eyes, mama is the hero.

There is more. José is grateful for way more people in her life. Beside her siblings...

ROUBA

Rouba was... she teared up and kept quiet for the longest time.

As a young girl straight out of high school and searching for a major to study, José was interested in journalism (her dad’s lineage and influence) and archeology (playing in their garden’s dirt).

One day during the career fair that one woman invited her to consider speech therapy. She applied, competed for, and got one of the ten seats available that year. Rouba turned out to be the head of the department.

José remembers fixing herself to look pretty for the first day of classes. She walked in late. Rouba: “If we were in France, I wouldn’t have let you in.” Sassy José: “Good thing we are not in France.” Rouba laughed it out and said she might like this student. Liking was an understatement.

Zeina, José’s best friend, the one who showed her discipline and helped her build a schedule and better study, also became very close to Rouba. Rouba was a fighter, a devoted professor, a mentor, a friend, and an extraordinary person who lived with cancer for 10 years without complaining. She was the kind of person you wish was still alive. To keep giving. Rouba, the woman from Tripoli’s Mina,

was an atheist who converted and became a passionate believer overnight, lived her last days in a convent, and was buried there.

José's eyes went somewhere else. A place I couldn't see. I think Zeina was there also. It was genuine, deep, and impactful. Rouba completed something for those two young ladies. Lucky students, lucky professor.

IN HARMONY WITH SELF AND JONATHAN

She teared up again when she mentioned Jonathan. He is someone... you can't be around Jonathan and not want to be the best you can be. You cannot be around him and be average. You cannot. He pushes you to be the best version of yourself in the softest way: Spiritually, emotionally, and physically. I am more content and grateful because of Jonathan.

"He came at a time in my life and helped me apply everything I learned. I now understand life better."

Jonathan came into her life to seal the deal. He complements everyone's contribution to her life so far. He helps her self-actualize. José is content with the harmony that is in her. She learns to live in the present and the Now. While she cried for all who left Beirut 8, she carried them with her. She celebrates them, the people in her life, and the ones to come. She lives to joyfully give back. She lives to pay it forward.

Today, thousands of miles from Beirut and Nahr Ibrahim, she pours her heart into her work and young family: husband, son, and mother-in-law, in harmony. She sips her Scotch at the end of the day like a poet. Their address became THE go-to place for many neighbors and friends: a chat, coffee, food, or the periodic drink like her Lebanese home.

Beautiful. Sweet. Adventurous. Humble. And most importantly, thankful. The little girl's eyes are still amused by everything, just like on those summer nights as she watched the stars with her father.

THE MAN WHO HAD TO PLAY MOM

TECHPRENEUR, FATHER, WARRIOR.

A ball of fire. A bull at work. A big teddy bear at home. I met him through a common friend in Baskinta — a beautiful village in Mount Lebanon. Anthony encouraged me to have a coffee with the man. Fady has a story. A few weeks later, we met at Starbucks. It was early afternoon, and he had not eaten lunch. A croissant did the job. Coffee kept him up.

HIS LIFE CHANGED

After two minutes of small talk, he told me he had a significant change in his family. He became a mom and dad overnight. His wife of 15 years had passed away 39 days prior, leaving him with his 13 and 6-year-old daughters. The light-hearted, successful, shy interior architect left him.

He has always been present for his children as a father. He knew nothing about filling his wife's shoes, his daughters' mother. He knows that

“you can never have enough motherhood.”

WHEN YOU
LIVE WITH AN
ANGEL, THERE
IS NO PERFECT
MOMENT. ALL
MOMENTS ARE
PERFECT.

Now, he has to help them put their clothes on and buy girl stuff, including new clothes. What does he tell his oldest when she asks to put on plastic fingernails? He was always the more conservative one. What does he do when she starts to see boys? How does he answer their uncomfortable questions? Their mom would have been a natural at it. Too many decisions. Even though Mama had been battling cancer for about a year, her leaving was too quick, too soon.

He's cleaning, washing dishes, sweeping the floors, dusting, and planning the bath schedule. Three times a week. Do we alternate Fridays and Saturdays? What did Mama do?

He's almost done with the house he had planned with his wife. He wants to move his daughters to the new place as soon as possible. On top of the Lebanese revolution, COVID-19, the economic crash, and the political meltdown, he still had his work to worry about.

A BIG FIGHT BACK. A QUICK HEALTH DECLINE

They discovered her advanced-stage cancer in August 2019, with one and a half to five years to live. It took a week to have the news sink in. She accepted the fact and told him: "I want to fight it." Even though her medical file was accepted in several hospitals outside Lebanon with an increased chance of survival, the catastrophic conditions in Lebanon and their impact on everyone's livelihood prevented them from leaving. A couple of weeks later, she reiterates: "I will fight in Lebanon."

Alternating between a week at the hospital and another one at home gave the family a healthier mother to spend Christmas with. It was to be their last Christmas

together. They drove around Lebanon and visited all over.

In April 2020, she insisted on going back for a scan. The cancer had come back. The preparation for her leaving had started between them, in direct conversation and many other ways. She wanted to make sure that he got along with the little one. She talked to her children and discussed what would happen if she died or if she stayed alive. She prepared them. She prepared him.

"Continue with your life. Finish our house. Go. Meet someone."

She broke down and cried when she knew she had a month and a half at most.

At Starbucks, with so many people around chatting, laughing, and arguing, he could not hold the lump in his throat nor the tears in his eyes. Neither could I.

"We don't want to cry, whether it's one and a half months or one and a half years. We want to continue," he told her. He did not want to give up.

They found another treatment in Lebanon. Coming back from the doctor's appointment, they cheated the Aug 4 Beirut explosion by taking another route home. Her operation was delayed by three weeks. She did it anyway and got another 5-week bonus with her family.

In her last moments, when she went into a coma on her bed in the hospital, he got his two daughters to pray with and for her. "It was okay to cry," he told them. A few minutes later, they kissed their mom goodbye on the forehead. They left the room and waited for Dad with the psychologist in another area.

"When you live with an angel, there is no perfect moment. All moments are perfect."

And then the angel left.

MOVING ON

His 13-year-old wants to go to MIT. She loves to work with robots. The younger one takes after her mother in the arts. He has a huge house that he's finishing in the middle of this whole turmoil. It's so big that he could turn part of it into an Airbnb on the Lebanon Mountain Trail. Who knows.

AND WHAT ABOUT HIM?

He's always been techy and very entrepreneurial. It took him years and three universities to graduate with an undergrad degree. He's creative and a doer with a low tolerance for slow systems. As a young kid, he wanted to become a pilot.

It's never too late; he might get back at it.

Until he figured out what excited him, he started his first business as a cell phone store. In 1996, he got into the internet business when it hit Lebanon. His astronomical phone bills used for dial-up internet service proved his passion. This early adopter took online courses in finance and e-banking through a university in Canada when he discovered the power of data. He loves data. Big data. He's a hound for finding it, loves collecting it, and gets excited when analyzing it.

As a university project, he built his village's website. He bought dozens of books, learned how to build websites, and did it. Business came out of it as he started making money building websites for clients. He also started a DVD rental business, just like how Netflix began. He's been in several businesses, serving clients in Lebanon and the world. He's had many successes and some failures. All in high tech. Today, he's back to developing solutions and

collecting data. As well, as taking pride in being a digital marketer.

FADY'S LITTLE BIG PEARLS OF WISDOM

- Life is like ice cream. Enjoy it before it melts.
- When you admit you succeeded, it is the time you acknowledge that you failed.
- Some people wait for you to fall.
- Try your best to keep a smile on your face.
- Share your wealth while alive.
- Enjoy other people's success. If they're happy, you're happy.
- For a friend who has everything, gift him respect.
- For the lover who has everything, love them more.
- Throw a surprise birthday party for someone.

CHAPTER FORTY

CHEF CHARBEL FROM QARTABA

SCIENCE AND ART ON A PERFECT PLATE.

Originally from Bauchrieh, a northeast suburb of Beirut, his family fled to the North Lebanon mountainous village of Qartaba. It was their home for a long time. As most homes do, they live in our hearts until the day we depart. Charbel's home is no different.

THE QARTABA DAYS

They lived alongside this one traditional family whose customs were like those of the Lebanese villagers of a century ago. The man woke up at dawn, carried his steel pick, and walked down the valley to work his orchards at the river bank. Later in the day, his wife prepared lunch, wrapped it in a cloth, tied it to a wooden staff, and gave it to the children for delivery. Charbel and the other boys had the mission to feed Ammo ('uncle' in Arabic; often used as a term of endearment). The boys would wait for him to eat, then pick up the staff, the cloth, and whatever dishes were there and return them to his wife.

Over the years, he witnessed village traditions and survival techniques in action. Almond sap was used to make glue. The hyssop plant (zoufa) was a soothing hot herbal drink. He saw

**I DID NOT GO
TO SCHOOL TO
WASH DISHES!**

them turn wheat into flour. All sorts of wild herbs made delicious salads, zaatar included. He would descend to the river bed to pick round, smoother rocks to grind wheat, mix with fermented milk, and turn it into kishek — all dried under the hot summer sun on the flat house roof. Some vineyard extract was scrubbed on the head to decrease hair loss.

They worried about it, even back then.

They collected and processed their food from early spring until September. In the winter, they played cards, kept the woodstove going, baked potatoes, ate, laughed, quarreled, and lived a simple life.

A RASCAL AT SCHOOL

The family traveled down to Beirut only to ensure the kids attended school. School for Charbel was not his cup of tea!

He did not like the system or the process, and I'm sure, like all kids, some of his teachers. His parents tried. They shifted him from one school to another. He started with English as a second language and then moved on to French. In hindsight, he gained two languages and painfully reached 9th grade (brevet). In 1993, his mom pushed him into hospitality management and culinary school.

"You're tired from traditional schooling. I am tired, too. Don't waste your time anymore. You have a knack for cooking; go and study it. Khalas."

After all, he enjoyed making omelets and crêpes. Not any crêpe — this recipe he still makes today without changing anything. Coming from an executive chef, that's a big ask. Hewas 51 when this 'girl' friend gave him her French grandfather's recipe.

Was she a 'girl' friend or girlfriend? For 23 years, the same recipe. What doesn't he want to change? The recipe? Or the memory of the teenager who once gave it ot him?

He ended up enrolling in a technical school for their three-year program. He knew that cooking was what he was going to learn. The shock set in from day one.

POTS AND PANS

They divided them into teams that rotate weekly. For the first week, his team was in charge of dishwashing. He spent it at the sink.

"I did not go to school to wash dishes!"

He struggled. Charbel remembers their teacher's first pep talk:

"Forget your families and friends. Your girlfriend? Forget her. You wil be working Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays You will work nights. When everyone is having fun, you wil be working."

The struggle continued. He got scared of the future. He worked all the time and was frustrated and exhausted. He took courses for 4 months, then practical training for another four. He would finish his shift at 1 am and frequently found it difficult to find public transportation home.

The kitchens were hot, loud, screaming, and fast-moving. Imagine trying to feed and please 300 people with different requests and tastes. A waiter got a complaint from a client and thenwalked into a kitchen to tell an overstressed, yelling chef. Charbel has seen it all.

THE RASCAL BECAME TOP OF HIS CLASS

The dish washer quickly climbed the ladder to become

‘chefde partie.’ He worked everything: cold and hot departments, assistant to the sous chef, a sous chef, and a chef. Despite his success, he hated it and did not want to continue. It was too tiring. His whole being lived it. It consumed him. It ate into his life. The stress was too high. At the time, he had two choices: quit after seven years or turn up the high heat for the foreseeable future and become somebody in the discipline. He chose the latter.

Charbel doubled up on work and took morning and evening shifts. 18 hours a day. Work and sleep. No life.

His mom saw him drained and regretted pushing him toward that industry.

Still, he kept at it and gained experience working in and for various restaurants. He went to train under top French chefs, learning priceless techniques.

“The French cuisine for cooking is like the NBA for basketball. Learn it, and you’ll get places.”

At 22, he got his first chef position. His big challenge and break was when he got an opportunity to join a tourist complex with several venues and restaurants. At 23, he rounded up all his courage and a 23-year-old naivety to take an executive chef position.

In one year, he was challenged like never before. He worked hard and proved himself. At one point, he had 45 people in the kitchen working. Most of them were older than him. At times, he would go to sell their services to catering events. The ladies in charge occasionally would not give him the job. hard and proved himself. At one point, he had 45 people in

the kitchen working. Most of them were older than him. At times, he would go to sell their services to catering events. The ladies in charge occasionally would not give him the job. “No offense. You’re young and inexperienced,” they would say. Others liked the idea of having a young chef in charge.

He spent 5 years using unique, exquisite, and most often expensive ingredients. He got the best produce to cook with. He invented, experimented, and created dozens of tableaux for the eyes and mouth to feast on. Those five years were a turning point for Chef Charbel.

LET’S TALK SHOP

Their business is a science and an art. It starts with science. For example, you must know how to treat, talk to, and cook the meat. You dry it, let it rest, get it ‘thirsty,’ and then marinate it. Colors are big when plating. Pick what’s edible and still go with the main ingredient, and at the same time, make it colorful and pleasing to the eye. It’s like drawing a painting. Cost is critical to your menu. What’s the benefit if you could cook and serve the best plate at a loss? Business continuity is vital.

“You have to win all three together: cost, presentation, and flavor.”

SOMETIMES, SUCCESS COMES WITH REGRETS

At 28, he left his biggest adventure and started consulting for restaurants. Working 16-hour days gave him unique experiences. He loves where he’s reached. Today, he can set up any restaurant concept and loves the excitement anytime he starts or wraps up a project. However, he feels that he burned his 25–35 years — in the

kitchen. He feels that he missed out on living his mid-twenties to mid-thirties. There's a price to pay for everything. Eventually, he realized that there is life beyond work, and travel is a big passion. Since then, he's been taking a vacation every year to visit a new place in the world. He travels to see and taste authentic food in their original places.

Mixing a little work with fun never hurt anyone. And the best is when you don't know the difference.

Today, he doesn't know the difference. Today, he's good. He's happy.

M O M

Mom overcame her guilt. Now, she's so proud. People would call her to talk about her son and his TV show. They love him. Her heart swells with joy. The other day, she told him she watched him on TV, unlike every time. She saw him with her heart, realized what he'd become, and cried. The big man gave her a long, warm bear hug. They both cried. Her bet on him worked out as he's reaping the fruits of his labor. She is Charbel's mom.

He could not hide the love he has for his parents.

He says that they gave everything to him. He appreciates them now more than ever. He loves them not because they're his parents. He loves them because of who they are. He feels that whatever he does, he could never repay them. He enjoys spending time with them, sipping a morning coffee, conversing, laughing, and feasting on a good meal. With them, he's happy. He gives them as much time as possible, not because he has to, but because he wants to.

A N D T O D A Y

Between his consulting travels in the Middle East, he hosts cooking episodes on the Lebanese MTV station. His conscientiousness pushes him to prepare his shows so well to give the maximum benefit to his audience.

“What did I give them? Is the technique easy and doable at home? Is the dish seasonal? How does the plate look? The setting?”

If people give their time, he feels he has to prepare well. The more followers he gets, the more responsibility he feels.

Did you watch his “Wild Lebanon Cooking Series”?

He wants to create a small cooking workshop where people would learn from his techniques and recipes.

A N D T H A T O N E T H I N G H E D I D N O T C H A N G E

Crêpe Suzette

- Sugar (1 cup)
- Milk (1 cup with powdered milk)
- Warm water (3 cups)
- Whole eggs (5)
- White flour (1 1/2 cups)
- Baking powder (1 tsp)
- Vanilla stick (1 pc)
- Salt (a pinch)

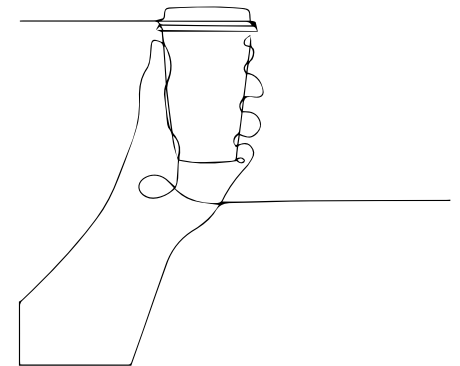
Add sugar and salt to the eggs and whisk them. Mix the vanilla with the flour and the baking powder. Add the milk to the egg mix. Sprinkle flour over eggs while mixing. Let it rest for 15 minutes. Heat the pan and cook.

Add melted chocolate in the middle

or

Sauté the dough with butter and flambé with cognac, brown sugar, and mandarin juice.

Sahtein!



CHAPTER FORTY ONE

G.I. JEANINE**MARY POPPINS, JULIA CHILD, MRS. SMITH. PUT TOGETHER.**

“Mommy. Mommy. Mommy.”

Three children buzzing in that suburban house. Each has their own needs, quirks, and wants. And when do they want it? Now. Mamabear is a master juggler. She’s a zen master, fearless in her moves, caring, giving, knowing, and elegantly sloppy. At 29, Jeanine surfs life with zest, faith, and laughs.

The family left Lebanon over a year ago and settled in North Carolina. Coffee in hand around her kitchen table, she spoke to me. With three vivacious children, she was constantly interrupted and still managed.

THE ELDEST OF FOUR

Jeanine’s father worked abroad. When her mother would travel to spend time with him, their aunts would send them home-cooked meals. At an early age, she decided to give her aunts a break. She acquired the art of cooking to feed herself and her three siblings. She’s good. I know. I tasted. She tells me that her mom is the master chef, and her moujadara is still the tastiest.

At 16, she asked her dad to teach her to drive. One road was of importance to her. Home to the hospital — in case

**IF YOU GIVE
THEM ALL THE
LOVE THEY
NEED, THAT’S
ENOUGH.**

her mom needed emergency transportation. She speaks fondly of when her mom would leave them to visit with her dad. She took charge of the household and liked it.

Born responsible.

The kids would wait for their mother to come back with gifts and, most importantly, stories. Jeanine told me about the surprises her father pulled for her mother and the fun and crazy things they did together.

Her uncontrollable reflective grin was saying that they lived apart, yet they lived together.

The most significant gift was when Papa walked through the front door with Mama.

IT TAKES A BEACH COMPOUND TO RAISE A CHILD

She grew up in a closed community north of Beirut, and it shaped her. She swam and trained in winter and summer. She competed and got top awards. She did 10 years of ballet. She was no stranger to playing tennis regularly. Her days were full. Neighbors took care of neighbors. Children would retire to their apartments late evening and crash until the following day to do it all over again. Ex-pat families would spend the summers at this complex. Jeanine developed close friendships with other children who lived in America, Australia, and England, among other countries.

Can you hear the crashing waves and the basketball dribbles, feel the summer heat, smell the pool chlorine, and taste that bubble gum ice cream?

HOTEL MANAGEMENT

During her first semester studying hotel management, the most prominent hotel in Lebanon came to recruit. In 2009, at 18, her CV had nothing except for the high school diploma she got the year before and her experience with the Model United Nations program. So, she added her picture on it as a filler. They called her for an interview.

Panicked, Jeanine called up her professor and asked him to train her. She practiced, learned to answer typical questions, and how to conduct herself. CV in hand, she interviewed and got a call the following day to meet with the front desk manager. What she started that Monday morning went on for a few years in the guest relations department. Working at the Phoenicia Hotel was a school by itself. She was exposed to all nationalities and experienced the intoxicating vibes of a fully-booked hotel.

Her daughter interrupts and asks in English. She responds in Lebanese. It's all good. Everyone understands each other. She does it to keep the three languages going at home.

She resigned after she got into a car accident due to exhaustion. She thinks that her father was relieved. He encouraged her to do her own business. Jeanine left with fondness. She learned a lot, loved it, and struggled to remove a few habits.

She kept opening up the door for people and ushering them first for a couple years after. The elevator? Same thing.

THE DAY SHE MET HIM

Jeanine wanted a break. With her mom, she signed up to go on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. She needed the space, the quiet, the peace, the praying time, and the opportunity to reflect.

Little did she know that she would meet her love and the father of her three children on that plane bound for Medjugorje.

Wherever he was, he filled the space. Her first impressions of him were loud, camera in hand, and trigger-happy. She told her mom she couldn't stand him and dreaded that he would be with them for the whole trip. Her mom liked him because she knew him from TV shows and movies.

The trip ended on June 6. She bonded with her mother. Survived him. Still, he was able to take her number and one picture.

AND THE DAY AFTER

June 20: Mass. Mar Elias Antelias's church is fully packed. Of all the churches in Lebanon, she unknowingly walks in and sits in front of him. Two older people asked for his seat. He nudged the young lady in front of him deep into prayer and asked if he could sit by her. Surprised to see him, Jeanine slid on the polished wooden bench and made room.

She remembers that he spilled hot wax on her blue jeans. After mass and in the parking lot, their cars were parked door to door. They talked for a while. The gentleman insisted on following her by car to ensure she got home alright. He called her again and continued talking.

Interrupted: "Mama. Habibti, I'm talking to zammo (uncle)."

On the 22nd, they visited Anaya for the monthly St. Charbel procession and prayer. Everyone saw them as a couple.

And one more time: "Mom, it's enough."

Their conversations continued, their spirits got closer, and the deal was sealed when they prayed the rosary together at St. Charbel's tomb.

"I did not want the rosary to end."

They spoke about it later and realized that it was the most beautiful rosary she's ever prayed. That event was pivotal in their lives. Samer, "The man who lives at Center Cross," knew the woman would be his wife. He won her heart, and they got engaged three months later. Her family took the time to vet him the Lebanese way: official records, dinners, cooking, drinking, laughing, joking, and serious discussions. The process took two years :-)!

INSTANT FAMILY

Preparing for their marriage was a nice period. She had children instantly — two out of three unplanned. Haha! She read and researched about child-rearing. She told her mother that she wanted to raise her children on her own. Her own way. She wanted to feed them, bathe them, and wake up at night for them.

"My babies. My deal."

When she was running her parents' family-owned fish restaurant, she made sure that whatever she was working on, she was home by 3 pm. The children always take priority. When she ran her own events management company, she made sure that she always left work at 3 pm. "I think I missed my twenties. No regrets. I'm 29 with three children (6, 5, 3). I've had professional experience before starting a family."

The most significant advantage of having kids in her twenties is the abundance of energy that she enjoys.

LIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA

Jeanine and her husband are pulling the impossible. Similar to many families during the COVID era. Three children

at home who are also taking classes and have playing needs.

Mama also started her own business. Building on her hotel management studies, her Phoenicia Hotel experience, her mom's cooking, and her culinary skills, she launched her own cafe in a business center in North Carolina.

She works, teaches, cooks, and entertains her children and others. She caters to “mommy, mommy, mommy” and her work! Their challenges have become the new norm—the new life for many families. She keeps an eye on the children while they're on their laptops. She also supports the teacher across the screen to keep the children engaged and learning.

After “school” time, they “commute” to the dinner table and then return to the same desk to study. Mother helps them with their homework. The cycle repeats the next day. It's too much. Parents get exhausted. This is new to everybody, except maybe the home-schooled families.

Lockdown is by itself a challenge. Initially, it was difficult to explain why they were not going to school, couldn't touch other people, and could not play with other friends. Put on masks, sanitize, wash hands — It looks like children will accommodate much quicker than adults.

Parents try their best to fill the gaps. 90% of their lives is how much dad and mom love them and dedicate time for them. You're shaping their lives. That's a big, fantastic, and rewarding job when they become the best version of themselves.

“If you give them all the love they need, that's enough.”

TODAY

She deals with backache. He deals with tennis elbow. She is faithful at face value. He believes and is knowledgeable in the scriptures. She is close to God, hates no one, envies no one, and is delighted to live in her own world — a world full of people to entertain. They both make 9612 Center Cross a much warmer neighborhood to live in.

BECAUSE I CAN

**GENTLE, FUNNY, LIBERAL, RELIGIOUS,
SHARP, TACTFUL, TO-THE-POINT, AND
THAT LAUGH TO TOP IT ALL.**

So proper, she showed up with a box of chocolate in a beautiful bag. How did she know I like chocolate?

Ah! Her laugh. I can still hear its reverberations. Contagious. Starts deep from the guts and blasts out to a high-pitched giggle. The 6-second roar detoxes your spirit like a 60-minute massage relaxes your body. Happy, clean, pure, and joyful!

TRAVEL WITH COMPANY

She's from Lebanon and has been to Belgium, France, Dubai, Sri Lanka, Qatar, Canada, Italy, Serbia, Saudi Arabia, and Portugal. She has a US visa and intends to use it. Traveling widens her perspective on the world by meeting its people.

I usually meet people at Starbucks. Currently, in Doha, it is not possible. So, we had to meet elsewhere. To level the communication ground and break the ice, she reached out to me and asked where I've been in the US. We talked about Ohio and Texas, where she has friends. She wants to visit China and Australia. "Why do I love traveling? Why not?"

Happy laugh.

**I LIKE THE
FACT THAT
I HAVE THE
SUPPORT THAT
IS BIGGER THAN
ANYTHING ELSE
IN THIS WORLD.**

Traveling in groups is her preferred choice. The positive dynamics of like-minded and kind-hearted people fuel her experience. She especially appreciates when they share the same background, age range, prospects, inspirations, and psychological state. Everyone is ready to help the other. They all want to invest their time in seeing as much as possible.

She started telling me about her trip to Sri Lanka. So I asked about the famous massages they give over there. She casually diverted the subject to the ‘the elephants were great’ statement. I called her on it. She blushed and cracked a big you-caught-me laugh. No massage for this world traveler. So, I played along and inquired further about ‘the elephants.’

They’re her favorite animals — intelligent and empathetic. Despite their enormous size, they are gentle, emotional, and playful. She relates to the empathy part as she seeks the child in the people she meets. She skipped taking a ride on one, having seen how they’re exploited. Elephants cry.

She looks away and smiles.

She remembered the Sri Lanka trip. Six sleepless nights as she and her friends toured the country in a rented van.

“Why do you travel?” I asked.

“I like the whole experience. I consider myself an extroverted person, and it’s obvious.

We both laughed because she was talking up a storm! Ghina is so easy to get along with.

The COVID solitude has affected her significantly, and she’s had enough. The first month of self-reflection was good. Later on, Khalas! She misses life. She misses meeting people

for conversations, discovering new personalities and places, making connections, and learning something new. Yet, she says 1000 Hamdillahs to God for the opportunity he’s given her to travel this much and to witness when the magic happens.

“Travel brings me joy. My mind and soul open up when I talk to new people and when I eat specially-cuisined food for me. When someone sees me through a food experience. How mind-blowing is that? How cool is that? Right?”

Hold the wine. Ghina does not drink, but she’s tipsy with life itself. She visits cities as if she’s visiting family or friends. Ghina becomes alive in Lisbon, the proper, wiser older sister to Porto — the adventurous, wilder, fun, crazy little sister. Porto is where the sea, ships, and rocks listen to Fado music. The city is where you dine at a windy hilltop restaurant while you share the food with the local birds.

Traveling for her is experiencing the little moments, the unexpected vignettes that become etched in one’s memory. Once in Brussels, after walking the whole city during the day, they came across a stairway setting where you could grab a blanket and enjoy an open-air movie as part of a film festival. At sunset, in that setting, among those vibes, Back to the Future with Michael J. Fox will always be a personal movie to her.

Where were you when you watched it?

HER LIFE FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS

The COVID experience changed her perspective on life.

She learned more about herself, her capacities, patience, and perseverance. She learned what she wants, doesn’t like, what is worth it, who is worth keeping, and who

is best to let go. Still, the travel bug keeps itching.

“I want to visit spiritual places, meet as many people as I can, and find a career that is more like me.”

She likes to get another perspective on life and religion by visiting places in Thailand, Japan, and India. She wants to start conversations with strangers as it comes naturally to her. She is genuinely interested in people and their life stories.

She wants a career that is more like her. She’s not sure yet, but she knows she does not want to be a management consultant all her life. She wants a job that is more Ghina. She’s looking for something that taps into her creativity and passion as it builds on her analytical skills.

“Maybe go into digital marketing?” she asks, “or go full throttle and become a TV presenter? I don’t know.”

There was a pause and then a deep laugh. She saw it. She felt where she would be. Seeing where you’re going is halfway to making it happen.

And then she continued: “I like to have my own show. I just got this idea. I like it so much. Very much. I think if I do that, I’m going to wake up happy. Every day. It’s going to shake me. Yalla Ghina, get up. You have something to do. I will feel the impact. Just like now. By talking. How simple is that?”

She wants to make a living meeting people, talking to them, making an impact on the world, and, in the process, having fun.

And as Ghina says, “How cool is that? Right?”

SHE WANTS MORE BECAUSE SHE CAN

She has a dilemma between the Hamdillah I have what I have and the guilt of wanting more. She wants more because she knows she can. She can do more, explore more,

and impact more. Ghina doesn’t want to settle for ‘good enough,’ nor wants to look back one day and say: “I wish.”

The home she grew up in made her ambitious. Her parents are the most selfless people she knows. Her mother is a perfectionist. They’ve given everything to their children. They want them to soar without a glitch. Ghina needs help seeing how that can happen.

She chooses to walk in a minefield early, for the price of a mistake can be more affordable than later. Her mother is afraid for her and afraid of the mistakes that she would make. She wants her out but can’t let go. Ghina is not scared of mistakes, the ones that will help her grow.

“I want that. I’m scared shitless. And still, I want the opportunity to make mistakes, including catching COVID.”

She believes Sobhan Allah when she starts on a new adventure, He will work it out for her. He would make sure that she would be safe and that she would worry less about her parents. The ones who grew up in a turmoiled country and live to worry about their children. She says the mutual worry and her guilt of not being there for them should end. Doing more and traveling frequently gives her the freedom she yearns for.

One of three girls who love each other to pieces. Argue? Sure. Who doesn’t? They’re all trying to break their home’s “I love you, I worry about you” philosophy to a “go, just go” attitude.

FAMILY, SPIRITUALITY, AND RELIGION

Ghina loves to learn about other religions. As a practicing Muslim, she’s curious about other people’s perspectives on spirituality. She enjoys discussions with her Christian friends. She discovers and, in the process, harnesses the best.

“The Prophet (PBUH) taught us to be good with people of other religions and learn from them. I practice. I fast. I memorized a big part of the Holy Quran and got deeper in its meaning.”

She credits her parents for raising them on sound values and religion. She learned, listened, argued, and then understood her faith. She witnessed the love and practiced her beliefs.

In this Holy month, she’s fasting to stay in a praying state. Day after day, she’s feeling stronger. She turns and talks to that imaginary person who’s been with us in the conversation and says:

“Ghina. Look at yourself. Look at what you’ve accomplished. And you’re also fasting. ...Damn!”

And she claps for herself and ignites her own imaginary cheerleading squad.

She believes in pushing herself to test her limits. God knows what she’s going through as she opens her hands and prays. He puts you in situations so you think of Him and ask Him for the strength to conquer challenges.

“I like the fact that I have the support that is bigger than anything else in this world.”

She loves Ramadan. The Holy Month encourages her family to practice love and patience with each other, awaiting Iftar at the end of day.

She concludes: “I don’t know how we got here in the conversation.” and signs off with her usual: “How cool was that?”



A RAY OF INSPIRATION

11 LESSONS ON BUSINESS AND CREATIVITY FROM AN 11-YEAR-OLD.

**SOMETIMES,
IT'S GOOD TO
SIT DOWN AND
THINK.**

I was visiting with his parents in Doha. His dad called him to greet me. Ray appeared slender and tall, shook my hand, said hello, and quickly turned back to attend to whatever he was doing. The parents and I visited. One conversation led to another and another. I wanted to say hello to Ray one more time.

Dad: “Ray... Ray... Would you come over for a second?” Ray: “Yalla!”

He told about a dozen things in one minute. I saw someone exceptional and wanted to learn more from and about him. The parents, my friends, okay’ed me to interview him. Ray agreed to sit with me at another time. That evening was adult time over good food, talking about Lebanon, Qatar, family, and life.

He’s 11, in grade 5. Mathematics and English are his favorite subjects. The other subjects? “Not as interesting,” as he says. The more I talked to him, the more I discovered how much he loves so many other subjects without him knowing. They come disguised in the pre-teen adventures he has taken. In the projects he’s created. I visited a second time. Ray and I went into the workshop room of the apartment. I told him that I was recording

our conversation. Focused, he started showing and telling.

I transcribe about 3500–4500 words in my usual interviews for about an hour of conversation. Ray's was 3800 in 25 minutes of audio. I loved every single second of it!

RAY, THE WRITER

He started telling me about The Tale of Justice Junk. If you haven't heard of Justice Junk yet, hear Ray out.

Seven superheroes converge from Marvel, his favorite video games, and some he created from scratch into a hero's story. Chapter one starts with Junkman: who he is, how he talks, what he does, and what he was before. And then, it's about other characters like Superman,

"You might know him," Ray tells me, "he saves the world."

and other people, like normal ones. And it's like a video game with one team leader named Codel. The pink bears against the pandas and stuff. You only knew there would be a team once the author made them one in chapter seven.

Junkman will invite all the superheroes to the party, and they will have fun in his junkyard. He cleaned it all up and made it like a disco place for people to have fun. To create new teams and live together, and some stuff like that.

So that happens. And then, there's the best team. Junkman's best team is called Justice Junk, formed from Codel team leader, Superman, someone named Jello, another one BeeBlop, and the famous Mr. Bag (AbouKees). He's got plenty of bags he uses as weapons: poison bag, fire bag, ice bag, all hidden in his cape.

You know, Junkman was a small chicken named Chris whose family ignored and used to call him bad names. He

moved away, found a portal, and became a highly creative man. He found a junkyard and built a smart car that he named Coco. It can talk to other cars and turn into a plane and everything. Junkman also created the time machine and other inventions.

That was chapter one.

In chapter two, Superman saves a kid thrown from a 10-story building by the enemy. He punches the enemy first, then picks up the boy right before the kid hits the ground over a fire. Batman uses ice to freeze the fire.

There's also like AbouKees. He was poor from a small village and fought the bad guys who came to steal stuff. One day, AbouKees found a weird costume in his attic. His mom told him that it was for his great great great grandfather who used to be a superhero.

24 chapters, he wrote. And never printed the book. The computer crashed. His parents are trying to fix it.

"I want to rewrite it."

He wants to use the "correct words." He wants to use deep and detailed words so people see them in their heads.

He wants to add color and incredible details. Miss Amal taught him this. He likes his English teacher.

It's important to put details on the first page of the first chapter. If you don't, readers will think the book is boring, and they will ask for a refund.

A writer and an entrepreneur.

LELA — THE COMIC BOOK

Four years ago, when he was seven, he produced a comic book. And then he casually dismissed the accomplishment and told me, as an 11-year-old grown-up:

“It’s full of seven-year-old imagination stuff.”

He drew nine pictures and added conversation around them—his first comic book, Lela.

“My drawings are not that good.”

He sold all his Lela books except for one he wanted to keep. He’s thinking of a new edition with upgraded pictures and coloring.

CUSTOMIZED E-PENCILS

He makes and sells customized electronic pencils (e-pencils) that work on any tablet. If you’re talented and your finger is not good enough to draw on a tablet, use the e-pencil. It’s terrific and much cheaper than an Apple pencil.

“So it’s basically some electrical charges, like an electrical movement or something. So you have to touch the tinfoil for it to pass the atoms.”

Three dollars a pencil. You’ll need your finger and a little water. You customize it, too. Pick any color, background, or motif. You can print your name on it. Of course, it will cost you more, like 5 riyals. He needs the money for the paper, the work, and a little profit.

“Because it’s my invention.”

It’s on YouTube, but he made it work and decided to customize it. He tried and failed many times until he got it right. Some of his finishings were “really bad,” as he says. He took me through his three versions until he proudly showcased his latest.

SEASHELLS ANYONE?

His family stayed at a compound in Dubai with his cousins once. When the parents left for dinner, he got his brother,

cousin, and yet another older cousin to collect seashells. They got a huge pile. They were able to get even more the next day. And more in Lebanon. He started selling them to family and friends. He’s thinking of decorating, painting, and customizing them.

“But I don’t have the glue gun.”

CARDS

He also sells Pokémon cards. His friend gave him about a thousand cards. He took tin foil, wrapped 10 at a time, stapled the sides, scotch-taped the pack, and sold each pack for 10 riyals.

HE’S KING_RAY141 ON TIKTOK

To date, he’s got 20.6K followers and 149.0K likes on TikTok. One of his latest videos got 1.2 million views. His account blew up (this is good)! His content? Him playing with his toys. When he got his Pokémon books, he did a TikTok of its opening. He has a mouse that changes colors when he clicks it. So, he told his followers to say to him how many times he changed colors. If they follow, he follows back. He makes them guess on other things. If they guess right, he follows or gives them a shout-out. If they don’t, they can always try again. He sometimes makes his plastic figurines fight on camera. Followers enjoy this. Occasionally, he shows Pokémon cards, decks, or books. Sometimes, he posts some memes.

LESSONS LEARNED

Ray reminded me of the boy in me. The one men tend to forget as they seemingly move into the more important phases of their lives. In those 25 minutes, I couldn’t help but re-learn:

1. To dream again,
2. To create again,
3. That first impressions count,
4. When you lose everything, start over,
5. To identify what you're not good at,
6. Give your clients value,
7. To use what the sea throws at you,
8. To bundle the discarded because someone out there wants it,
9. Sometimes, it's good to sit down and think,
10. When you love what you do, it won't be work anymore,
11. And...

DON'T LEAVE MONEY ON THE TABLE

"Do you want to buy an e-pencil?"

"Sure."

"I can give you a deal if you buy a bundle."

"What's in the bundle?"

"I'll customize the cover for you and give you three tips for 30 riyals."

"Okay."

He comes back with the merchandise, and then he puts it in a package for me. This boy will not leave any table empty-handed.

The 25 minutes with Ray went so fast. Yet, writing this piece took me decades deep into the spirit of a child that I left behind somewhere on my road.

It takes a village to raise and nurture the Rays out there. It takes parents, extended family, friends of the

family, a brother to play with, teachers, and Miss Amal.

A special shout out to Miss Amal and all the misses and misters who dedicate their careers to educating our children. To influence their and our future.

TINDERELLA

HER CHRONICLES ON TRANSITION, ROOMMATES, AND MEN.

**I THINK
THERE WAS
SOMEWHERE
I PLAYED IT
WRONG, OR
I STARTED
EXPECTING
SOMETHING.**

Hold the coffee. Meeting Nancy was over steak and sauteed vegetables. As we prepared lunch, two Martinis, an intriguing discussion, and air-conditioning, we were isolated from the 42 degrees in Doha.

She was ready to go anywhere, joining the other talents who had to leave Lebanon seeking other opportunities. This one English teacher turned down an offer from Congo. The offer from Sri Lanka was a close call. Or so she thought. After receiving the documentation, her two-day short-lived dream of working reasonable hours, enjoying a massage every so often, and tucking money away burst as she recalculated the package again. A Sri Lankan rupee is not the same as an Indian one! The package was way off!

For the past nine months, Doha has been where she has settled.

BUT THE HAIR!

She was given 48 hours to pack and report to her new mission. Leaving home, her country, and her workplace for the past 12 years was a tough pill to swallow. All her apprehensions, stress, packing, goodbyes, and uncertainty got in her hair.

“How can I fix my hair by Sunday?”

She laughed. It didn't matter that she would still be

quarantined for 14 days—the hair. With a 20 kg suitcase, she joined many of her friends who had already left to other corners of the world. She boarded that plane bound for Doha.

YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN YOU NEED TO BE VERY STRONG AGAIN

The first few months were about newness: a new city, new friends, bigger malls, and new roommates. Even at 33, when you think you have things in order, life throws stuff at you and manages to throw all of you out of balance. Transitions tend to test the weakest points in us. To deal with her own anxiety, she recalled the conversations with her therapist. She confronted all the questions whirling in her head.

“Why did I leave home? What am I doing here? A grown-up woman in an apartment in a foreign city with two other roommates? I don’t even have my own transportation. Where am I? What am I? Was it a good decision to leave?”

She doesn’t feel that she belongs yet. To call Doha home is a big word. Maybe a house. Not a hotel. Time is working its magic. Today, she connected and feels lucky to enjoy the company of a dozen friends. Good people with good energy. Transparent and nice. Weekends and breaks are more enjoyable with them.

SWEET SURRENDER

She believes that things happen for a reason. The universe is always at work. It has put her in Doha for a purpose.

“I don’t understand it right now, but eventually, I will know

why. Career-related, as part of my growing up.

As I sizzled the steaks, she asked me whether I needed help. And then she continued.

Now, it feels easier. She feels proud to show the city to friends who are visiting. As she surrendered to her new routine, at least for now, she reflected on the lessons she learned.

LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS

She was living in a bubble in Lebanon. Everyone around her had the same background as her. She didn’t know what the ‘others’ were like. It took living with someone who is very conservative and from another religion to understand. To understand how lucky she is to have had her parents growing up. To have been raised empowered, be free to take action, be independent, and bear the consequences of her actions. It helps when you have the right tools to survive the world, jump over obstacles, mature, and stand on your two feet.

Today, she reflects more on women’s issues. She’s interested in how religion, belief systems, culture, and traditions affect their empowerment or lack thereof. Imagine getting a divorce through a husband’s relative with no justification, clarification, or closure. Nancy cannot understand women who decide to be helpless.

As we set the table, she said, “Please let me do something.” “Sure you will,” I said with a grin on my face “there’s always the dishes.” She laughed, right on topic. As the steak rested, we crunched on two small bags of chips.

She’s had freedom of choice since she turned 18 and has been enjoying it responsibly. Some people are given this opportunity and decide to forfeit it. They’re shackled to their

traditions and imprisoned by their cultural surroundings.

“If you feel like doing something different, just grab the opportunity and do it.”

I could tell she was speaking of some first-hand experience.

She learned how to set limits and how to balance her work life and her private life. She learned how to pick her friends better. It only took 33 years to get to this clarity.

SWIPE RIGHT

One thing you get to have in Doha is the ex-pat experience. Nancy enjoys meeting people from different cultures and nationalities and has Tinder to thank for that.

Match 1: The German strikes first

Around 10 years ago, she matched with a German guy where she lived through one ex-pat experience in Lebanon. He got so drunk on whiskey that she had to drop him off at home. Laughingly: “Was I that horrible you had to get so drunk?”

Matches 2 and 3: The serious French and the Lebanese friend

She recently downloaded it in Doha during quarantine. “Let’s have some fun,” she said. For every 100 left swipes, one right one. No. No. Left. Left. Left. Okay. Left. Left. Ah! Right. With a few matches in hand, she started texting. Texting she did and leads she got.

“I was able to make 2 friends,” she told me and paused, trying to label them appropriately.

There was this French guy who was too serious and wanted to get married. She went: “Dude. It’s the first date.” He took her walking on the corniche. It wasn’t even dinner. She wanted an experience to awaken the wild child in her. Monsieur was not for the job.

And then the Lebanese. She suggested a sunset date; he said, “Why not sunrise?” They did it at four in the morning in the middle of the desert. She did ask him first if he was a psycho. He said no. She trusted his no. The child adventurer in her was exploring. [abrupt fast forward] She’s still friends with him.

I sensed the fast-forward in her story. So, I called her on it. She laughed, brushed me off, and continued explaining that they go for coffee, watch movies, and take Spanish classes together. That’s what they decided on.

And then she dwelled further on the topic and “There’s more.”

Match 4: The Swiss missed call.

And there’s the man who was going through a divorce. They talked for a while. The Swiss had a lot of what Nancy believes is the right person. Was it the wrong timing? Or was the situation messed up where you can’t find a place for yourself in the equation? A fantastic man divorcing an old life met this woman in a state of transitioning from her previous world to a new one. A lot was in flux. He was full of surprises and very much a gentleman. Language of affection? Incremental, thoughtful, small actions.

He loves the desert. She collects “The Little Prince” by Saint-Exupéry in all languages. She suggested that he reads it and promised to get him a copy in English. Preferring German, he ordered his own. She told him she would take his copy to add it to her collection once he was done. On their next date, teasingly, he kept throwing quotes from the book. Not wanting the date to end, they drove out. Having to refill the gas tank, they stopped. It was dark. He asked her to get him something from the glove compartment. Oblivious, she couldn’t see anything. He insisted. It got awkward. She reached in and

found a copy of the book in German. He had already ordered her copy.

They decided to connect with no expectations. It didn't work out, given her emotional roller coaster. She fell for him. Cupid did not sit idle.

"I think there was somewhere I played it wrong, or I started expecting something."

They ended up deciding to be there for each other. She knows if she needs anything, he will be a call away.

Again, Tinder has to pay. She hates it. And she's going to delete it.

Match 5-...:

There's this other French guy. He left 2 days after they met. They still talk on a touch-and-go basis. Nothing serious.

WHY ARE YOU ON TINDER?

When people ask her on Tinder: "Why are you here?" She replies, "I'm here because I'm bored. I'm lonely. I'm alone."

We continued eating without a word until I broke the silence:

"It takes guts to put yourself out there."

"See? These are things I could never do back home. Now, you can start from scratch when you're in a different place. A blank page."

Tindering with a Lebanese is different than with a non-Lebanese. In some ways, it's better, and in others, not so much. The Lebanese male ego, on average, is healthy, especially when paying the bill. With an ex-pat, what you see is what you get. Straight forward. With a Lebanese, the conversation is easier. The inside jokes are seamless. They know what you're talking about. You don't have to give the whole history and background to even start on a story.

She's been lucky to have dated many on Tinder. Most of them were nice: Two French, one South African, an

American Dominican, a Lebanese, and the Swiss guy. Even if it didn't go further, she still enjoyed her time with them.

HER TYPE?

It's about the person. It's not how they look, what they drive, or their nationality. She didn't figure out that secret mix for her perfect person. However, the experience taught her to look for the red flags you sometimes intentionally disregard. You learn to sense when things happen without effort—the real deal. If you're lucky to be smart at that moment, seize it.

TODAY

Nancy was so much fun talking to and sharing a meal with me. She was so transparent (okay, translucent sometimes), audacious, and daring. She continues to explore other religions and cooking with her friends. We hear that her tabouleh is out of this world. Mom's recipe. Of course, awesome.

Tinderella continues to enable/disable her profile. A few falls don't make a woman a failure. She's far from being a quitter. Her adventurous soul will find tranquility. Until then, swiping is the name of the game.

FR. PAUL

DOING IS HIS LOVE LANGUAGE.

He carries and has carried many titles. As for many of my friends and me, he's simply Fr. Paul to us. I spent an hour with him in this historic office suite in Bkerke. He wanted to dedicate our time to the issue closest to his heart — education.

“Tea?” he asked. “Sure.”

He took a few steps to the kitchenette that linked his office to his bedroom and turned on the hot water kettle. Carefully, he reached for two mugs, made sure I liked the one he picked for me, and gave me a choice from the assortment of teabags. He handles people and things with care and respect.

His room is modest, rich with books, paintings, positivity, and the lightness of the Virgin Mary's presence. Many a decision are and have been made there. Lives have been enriched. Issues were discretely resolved.

Fr. Paul's love language is by doing.

STRIVE FOR INNER PEACE

Educators have a huge role to play in shaping the future. While you may be able to teach, you may need to be better equipped to educate. Knowing what you know and what you don't know is essential. Understanding personalities and what impacts them makes you an influencer of minds and hearts.

**GOD IS RIGHT
THERE. SOME
DON'T EVEN
KNOW WHAT
THEY'RE
MISSING.**

It makes you an educator.

A good teacher is, first of all, a good human being with a loving heart who knows things and methods and can communicate them. Secondly, you don't forget a good teacher. You may forget what they taught you. But you always remember how they touched your life.

"They become part of you as you carry a part of them with you all your life."

The best are the ones who are reconciled with themselves. They know what they want from life, constantly self-develop, and always seek inner peace. As they continuously do so, they inspire learning minds. They touch souls who, in turn, build the future. So, teaching is a fantastic vocation and an honorable mission of clearing the way for learners to self-express and actualize.

ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Some systems are designed to earn the highest scores on criteria that they have chosen or have been imposed on them by others. For example, some strive for the highest grades at any cost, including systematically eliminating non-achieving or creative and non-conforming students. As a result, some students are made casualties or 'failures' of the system. Such an experience will affect them until they discover that a system that caters to the masses can not serve everybody, including some of the best.

"If you only keep the so-called cream of the crop, then it's not the system who did it. It's the cream."

Despite a system's shortcomings, an educator works with all kinds of students to help them become self-fulfilled humans, as people are gifted in different ways. An educator's job is to

work the system to help learners discover their strong traits and develop the weaker ones. To do that, you allow learners to be themselves. Love them. Give them a sense of security. Protect and don't judge. Allow them to contradict and disagree with you; in doing so, they will be bound to discover themselves.

What is a failing student anyway? In a school, academic success is never the student's sole responsibility. It's sometimes defined as the inability to reach an objective by the student and the system. Failure could be a misjudgment where the system becomes more important than the individual. Even geniuses can slip through the system without anyone noticing.

IT TAKES ONE

How would someone who always wanted to sail boats fit into a classical education system? As a little boy, most adults would put him with the rest of the kids who want to become firefighters, soldiers, construction workers, or the nation's president. "It'll pass," they'd tell themselves. As for him, it's in his innermost fabric. He was born to sail. It's his way of becoming the whole human being that he should be. For him, becoming a sailor is the most impactful way to self-fulfill and to positively influence everyone he touches.

And yet, as he's growing up, has anyone helped him link history and geography classes to sailing the world? Did his science teacher associate geometry, angles, speed, velocity, and the weather with sailing?

It takes a champion to see the dream in any person's life.

When challenged and feeling rejected, only a true champion reminds him that his dream is real. He'd make sure that he recognizes the small victories on his journey. He'd

nurture the boy's little steps as a gardener tends to a small Cedar tree shrub that would one day tower over all other trees.

It takes one person to make the whole difference. Someone hopeful, encouraging, and reassuring.

“Encouragement goes a very long way in everyone's life.”

SAME FOR EDUCATORS

They also need a champion, for their challenge is enormous. As they deal with kids entrusted to them by their parents, they still have their own personal challenges to handle. This is especially true when they constantly worry about making ends meet and earning enough to sustain their own families. Societies, in general, do not give education systems their rightful respect and commensurate treatment. Consequently, educators are often made to pay a heavy price for that.

Educators need as much intellectual freedom as anyone else. A non-conformist and creative teacher should have enough room to maneuver within the system.

AND PARENTS

Education is a global effort. The education system is designed to support the parent in rearing their child. The system complements what a student experiences at home, in the classroom, and in society.

To schools, parents are a great asset if one engages them. If you allow them to work with you, you're transparent with them. What they invest in is much more important than what schools invest in. After all, they are investing in what is most precious to them — their children. So, allowing them the freedom to bring in their input can be of enormous value to the administration,

the teachers, and, ultimately, the students. A natural all-around winning situation is created with enough engagement from willing and capable parents toward the education enterprise.

ROOTED WITH GOD AND SOFT ON YOU

Fr. Paul adopts four fundamental dimensions to a balanced life: a sane and deep relationship with God, oneself, others, and the environment. It's God's creation. If you don't look after it, it will eventually backfire.

God, unfortunately, doesn't always have the right place in many societies. As a result, people spend lifetimes looking for meaning without finding it because they are looking in the wrong direction.

“God is right there. Some don't even know what they're missing.”

He is a man of the cloth and never pushes anything, anyone, or any doctrine on you. Instead, with all humility, he just does. invites people in and is just himself with them—a master leader by doing.

HIS LIFE'S BLESSINGS

He considers that he's been blessed to have the opportunity to do the things he wanted to do in life. He's been interested in people and has worked with and for people all his life. He's helped many find their way through guidance and counseling. He trusted people to do the right thing. They trust him.

He remembers and is grateful to the people who trusted him growing up. They'd given him important tasks. Maybegrater than his abilities or his maturity at the time. Growing up, he was challenged to live up to high expectations.

He feels warmest when former students remind him of the little things he did for them, which he has forgotten about. For example, “Remember the time when I missed the school bus and you drove me home?”

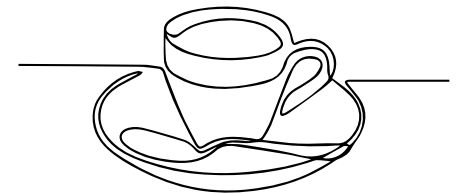
“It’s good to know that you did not waste your time kind of thing.”

THE TRAIL MAKER

His life is an ongoing labor of love. Nurturing it by the day.

The only constant is change. Education is the most impactful change agent. Falling is part of life, and so is success. Keep learning as you grow. Keep growing as you learn. Invest in yourself as you do in others. Ultimately, be honest with yourself, be open to change, listen, do your best, accept what comes out, and keep going. Educate for tomorrow and allow people the freedom to be themselves as they grow. Change is an integral part of life. In fact, to live is to change, and stagnation is another form of death.

Have you walked with him? This steadfast hiker knows his trails. Forget GPS. Just follow him. His side mission in life is to clean up the mountain surrounding Bkerke, reviving its trails and waterway. He never ceases to amaze me. He knows every detail of that mountain. Way better than I know my computer folders!



A SERVICE TAXI DRIVER

AND HE'S NOT DRIVING MISS DAISY.

It was a hot day. Noonish. 30+ Celcius. Muggy. An authentic Beirut summer day. If you've been, you know what I'm talking about. I'll describe this 2021 special blend.

Mixed dusty air saturated with lukewarm condensation on your sticky t-shirt, tight pants, dress, bra, and underwear, infused with Essence de Mazout, clouded by the occasional whiff of grilled meat as you walked by a shawarma place. As you continue, goosebumps get awakened when you're hit with the cooler breeze from the empty clothing store. Yikes!

The sensible person wears lighter, fluffier clothing. That day, I wasn't. Having been dropped off at my appointment, I thought I'd either Uber, taxi, or service taxi back home. Hitchhiking is no more, and my teenage years are over.

PICKING YOUR SERVICE TAXI

Backpack carried on one shoulder, I stood on the street waiting for a service taxi to slow down so we could negotiate.

Whether you hop on depends on who the drivers already have in the car and where they're heading. Decision-making is as

**TIP LIKE
THERE'S NO
TOMORROW.**

sophisticated as Uber's algorithms.

You don't always take the first service taxi that drives by. I, for example, sometimes don't signal to want a ride if I see the car is too dirty or too beat up. The taxi seats are a big factor. Some seats have seen all kinds of wars and revolutions and bore the weight of many an ass. Suppose you're desperate to reach your destination. In that case, you'd probably ignore who's already in the car and settle to have your bottom commune with all other behinds who've endured those seats before you.

YOU GET 'DRIVING MISS DAISY'

Or almost. That day, I wasn't desperate. I was more curious than anything. An old Mercedes slowed down. Color? Not sure. Faded on the lighter side of the color spectrum. I could tell she'd seen her share of events and was driven on highways, city streets, backroads, alleys, country roads, and through no man's land.

She's overheard all sorts of conversations. If only she could tell the stories of people she's transported over the past 40 years. A vintage with no one able to take care of her, clean her up, give her a nice paint job, and house her body in a cooled garage, only to be taken out for the occasional weekend ride. She's getting old and can't quit. Life's been too hard. She looked tired, persistent, and proud.

She wasn't in the best shape. Yet, something drew me to her.

AND HER YOUNGER DRIVER

In contrast, the one behind the wheel was a slender, olive-skinned young man. "Antelias?" I asked. He nodded. The door by the driver squeaked as I pulled it open and hopped in, sinking into the seat.

He was sweating in his blue jeans, white t-shirt, and clean shoes—a hardworking and tidy man of little words. Is he the son or grandson of the original owner, I wondered. Did he go to college, graduate, and drive the Mercedes to make a living? How hard have the days been on his short journey? Is he still dreaming and hopeful of his future? In 20 years, where would he be? What would he be?

In my 15-minute ride with him, I witnessed two short vignettes.

THE FRUSTRATED WOMAN

A woman gets in. Two minutes later, she asks him how much the tariff is.

8,000 LL.

Her tone rose as she started arguing. The day before, service taxis took half the amount for the same ride. Her tone echoed anger, confusion, need, and much more of life's frustrations. He kept his cool as if he knew she wasn't venting her words at him. He continued to explain that, due to the devaluation of the currency, the government changed the tariff that same morning at 9.

"Drop me off here," she puffed the words from her lungs.

He pulled over. She got out. Without a word, he slowly got back on the road.

THE PROUD MAN

A few hundred meters further, he slowed down for a scruffy man.

"Would you take me with you?" he asked.

The tone, the way he asked, and his words made me guess he was asking for a free ride. He was probably too proud to say it in any other way. He needed a ride and had no money. The driver nodded. 10

minutes later, the passenger asked to be dropped off at some corner.

“Thank you,” he said in a plain tone, accepting the gift with no fanfare.

IT TAKES ONE TO GIVE YOU HOPE

In Lebanon’s callous times, people with so little are the richest of us all. When the tsunami of apathy and nonchalance overbears our day-to-day talks, and the media can’t stop itself from focusing on where we’re going wrong, people like this one driver make me proud to be Lebanese. Make me proud to be human.

I am hopeful. With total destruction and meltdown comes a new beginning. The genesis of a new nation can happen by its young, hardworking hands, big hearts, and the wisdom of its elders.

THE ASK

If you’re in Lebanon and can afford to spend a little more, if you’re here on vacation or planning to visit, think of us hardworking and proud Lebanese. While we thank you for the handouts you sent us this summer, we have a different ask.

We ask you to eat out and tip well. Very well. Obscenely well. Put on some fluffy clothes and get into a service taxi to experience a different shade of Lebanon. Leave a BIG fat tip. FAT. Hire us for your remote work. Pay us commensurate with our know-how and experience. Pay us honestly. Pay us well. Pay us what we deserve. All we’re asking is for an honest person’s wage.

Lebanese contribute to building nations many seas away from home. Today, I invite you to give some time, money, and love to the nation of your forefathers and mothers. Please allow

us to collaborate with you and get fairly compensated for it.

Rest assured, the land of the Cedars will shake off this existential crisis, regain its strength, and contribute once more to the development of humanity. Do you want a role in it? Are you with us?

Start today. Hire Lebanese. Tip: like there’s no tomorrow.

“WHY ME?” SHE ASKED

SEVEN SECONDS LATER: “SORRY. WHY NOT ME?”

“I have a mission in my life. It’s a strong one. I’m here to support parents who have children with special needs.”

She’s straightforward, transparent, vulnerable, and titanium-strong. Holding her coffee in both hands, she told me that no matter how difficult your life turns out to be, you have a choice. You can break down or consider what happens to you as a blessing.

Joelle’s career in marketing came to a sudden halt when her son was born. Everything changed. He needed his mom. All the time. She abandoned her professional dreams and devoted her time to him.

The child could not be diagnosed, and the doctors thought he could not hear, speak, see, or conduct motor activities. He stayed at the hospital from when he was born until he turned six months old, enduring multiple surgeries that continued through his first birthday. The last operation was for his tear ducts. Throughout that period, she would break down every time they rolled her baby into the operating room.

**GOD IS RIGHT
THERE. SOME
DON'T EVEN
KNOW WHAT
THEY'RE
MISSING.**

For his baptism, they could un-tube him for the trip to Saint Charbel's shrine and back to the hospital. His slow development got further delayed. No babbling, no crawling, and nothing from what babies his age do. An occupational therapist started working with him in month two.

Through all this, she was questioning, trying to understand, fighting to breathe, be there for her child, and get up from bed every morning. She struggled and couldn't sleep or eat. She lost a lot of weight and was constantly crying. Yet, she climbed from her dark, deep valley where every cell of her body was tested. For nine months, she fought depression and breakdown as she drowned in pain.

Encouraged by her husband to see a mental health professional, she did. Her choice was either to go on medication or to try getting physically active.

SPORTS SAVED HER

Joelle decided to give sports a try. So, she started to move. Literally moving her body from bed one limb at a time. Gradually, she pushed herself to work out. A few minutes at first, then an hour a day. She went further to two hours per day. Her sleeping improved; she felt better, rested well, and laughed again. The mother who thought she was sentenced to life slowly took her life back, embraced it, and owned it. It actually worked. She became happier, and her body regulated again. Exercising pulled her out of the most challenging period of her life.

Seeing her son in pain became a little more bearable. Knowing that he will be with her all her and his life is suddenly acceptable. He's never going to have independence. He will never go to university. He will always need her.

"When I leave this earth, who will care for him?"

All became okay. Accepted. She completely surrendered to faith. And she still got the energy to get off her ass.

JOURNEYS WITH PRIDE

She doesn't think too far ahead. She lives one day at a time. She tries not to get sad or angry. Instead, she sees the positive in things.

"I know he's never going to get married. I also know that I won't have to deal with the mother-in-law!"

She has embraced her journey in this life. She believes she's on this earth for a reason. She knows she carries a message for all. Some people can feel ashamed of a child or a relative with special needs. Joelle speaks of her son and his case openly and proudly. She makes sure he's out with her in public everywhere a child can go.

"I'm not embarrassed by him or with him. Zero."

She loves him unconditionally and is proud of him beyond words. Her attitude has helped many mothers who have the same circumstances. She contributed to their overcoming embarrassment and fear. She glows, knowing that she's inspiring others.

Listening to her, you feel warm, comfortable, and peaceful. You feel how deep, genuine, and aligned she is with her destiny. She is joyful, knowing that her mission is being served every single day.

Since physical activity saved her, why not share the benefits and what she learned with others? People need it, she thought. So, she decided to make it her profession. So, this fitness junkie acquired certifications and started to give group classes. It's time-flexible and convenient. She does her sports when her son attends the special needs school in Qatar. Then, later

in the evening, she gives another class after he goes to bed.

HER SUPPORTING HEROES

She's a positive person by nature who has been deeply challenged and propagates positive energy, no matter the difficulty. Sports play a big part in her life and therapy. She's joyful when she knows she's made a little difference in someone's life. She sees forgetfulness as a blessing and chooses not to remember the pain and to focus on today. Her journey was and still is difficult. But ...

“You don't know how strong you are until being strong is your only choice.”

Her husband, the rock, and her mom, the angel. Unwavering. At home. At the hospital. Every day. Each played a role, by her side and accepting. Mom is always with her, supportive and laughing. Chadi's strength and appreciation held her together while drowning her every fiber with love—bucket loads.

“God will always send you someone or something to comfort you and ease your pain.”

Joelle could not find enough words to describe how much her husband and her mom mean to her. On the other hand, I wondered how the two got along?

THE BLESSING

Her son is a blessing. God sent him to them because He knew they were capable and willing to care for him. To help him reach his potential.

Mom has her particular language with him. Dad, too. Mom is the bad cop. Dad is the good one. Mom: discipline, doctors, therapists. Dad: comfort and love. He turned 10 and functioning

at the cognitive age of 3 or 4. She tells me that he may be able to reach the mental age of 7 or 8. He started to use the iPad by himself! He's very musical with the sweetest, loving, purest of characters. Her little one lives in his own beautiful, pure, innocent world.

“I wish I could see the world through his eyes. I think it's much better than the cruelty we have in ours.”

STRENGTH FROM WITHIN

She's been to her darkest valley and back. She won her most significant challenge by working on herself and decided to be content. Life's simple pleasures bring her joy and happiness: sports, going out with a friend, listening to music on her walks, sunbathing, social media, and meeting new people. People she inspires and who inspire her in return.

It took them 10 years to be ready for another child. Her daughter is 1+ years old — brilliant and very aware. She and her brother get along and quarrel like the siblings that you'd expect. She waited that long to ensure her son got to the stage where he is a little independent. When she got pregnant again, she got scared that their second baby would have the same syndrome. And then, she released the process and gave her burden to the Virgin Mary. She delivered.

Out of the valley, this changed person learned to be patient, build resilience, love, and understand. She allows herself to still feel bad and cry every now and then. Because she knows she's stronger.

Parents want all the best for their children. All she wants for her son is to live, to stay with her. She doesn't care if he wouldn't talk, run, or write. She doesn't care if he won't be as tall as the average kid his age. She has no expectations whatsoever. She just wants to

love her children. It's lonely to be with a special needs person, and the circle of parents with these cases is tiny. Making friends with the mothers of her boy's friends is not possible. He doesn't have any. No sleepovers and no playdates. No Fortnite nor Minecraft. She's her son's best friend. She's the one who keeps him entertained.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

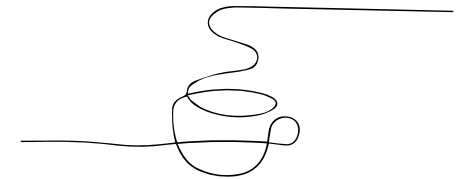
When was the last time you counted your blessings? Seriously. Like, ponder, and list 7. Joelle cherishes hers.

"You're awake. You're alive. It's a new day. At least you have that. Just saying."

Pause. "So, there." She giggled and smiled.

As I left our coffee table that day, I wondered, do we have to go through that much to be as genuine, strong, at peace, and on purpose?

What is the greatest blessing I've been sent, and what have I done with it?



PEACE WARRIOR. DAUGHTER OF ONE.

**YOU'RE IN THE
RIGHT PLACE
AT THE
RIGHT TIME.**

FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE SUCH LIARS!

To my left, she sat slightly shifted, looking out. Occasionally sipping from a cold drink, her virtual team meeting on her screen was engaging. This woman was so loud that I had no choice but to listen. Obnoxious, I thought! The volume of her towering voice owned the store. Fifteen minutes later, all my attempts to concentrate failed. My ears pleaded with me for cover. My mind admired her excitement, conviction, and passion. My feet carried me to another table a few meters away. AirPods in-ears, my favorite Zaz playlist jazzed away.

Later, a soft hand on my shoulder with a Julia Roberts smile: “Was I loud back there? I am so sorry.” I took her open apology as an invitation to tell it to her straight. “Yes. You were (with a teasing pause and a smile). A few decibels lower would have been manageable to all.”

We chatted for a few minutes that day. Even though I don't remember the conversation, it felt genuine.

I saw her again. She is an intriguing person — highly analytical, atomic energy, nuclear passion, loyal, and loves to the extreme. Jessica has been spending the good part of her 37 years winning herself over.

SHE PUTS MEANING TO HER WORK

Her professional life spanned 15 years in teaching, management consulting, systems design, process mapping, operations, strategy, corporate governance, and healthcare management.

She started teaching college students at 23. She's built the best relations with her students and seen them through good and challenging times. Her passion for mentoring youth lives on. She loves to work at the intersection of people and systems, analyzing processes and matching people to the right places. Today, she capitalizes on her experience to support the non-profit she's joined. Jessica's happy. She engages with international partners, collaborates with incredible colleagues, uses her skillset, supports vulnerable people, and contributes to social impact in the country she loves. Most importantly, she listens to the inner voice telling her: 'You're in the right place at the right time.'

"My presence is recognized, and it's beautiful."

Jessica interviewed for that job on July 4, 2020, when she was scheduled to deliver her first baby. The next day, she got the call offering her the position. She broke into tears. Sienna made her first sound. Celebrating her mama's accomplishment, maybe?

Jessica insisted on assuming her responsibilities immediately. Five days later, she was conducting onscreen meetings.

She was a ball of fire when I first saw her behind the round table at Starbucks. How did it change with a baby around?

I later found out that the baby was not only around. Mama was able to nurse her while in meetings. Trick? Make sure you turn your screen on first, check that the camera does not go lower than the cleavage, and act as if nothing else is happening.

BALANCE IN HER LIFE

Despite the fire in her belly, Jessica enjoys inner peace. Finding serenity while being by yourself brings happiness. Exercising, meditating, and doing what you love help you reach an inner peace that you can leverage to support others circling your life. Without a pause, she told me about one of her tricks to get to clarity. "Start with the things you don't like," she said. Chances are that you will not like them again. And that would resolve half the challenge.

"I learned that people need people. We're not made to live alone. But we should still find peace when we are alone."

Her inner peace comes through balance. With a baby, it's more complicated. "It's quite a challenge to be a great mom, and a great professional." It's a demand problem. Children demand time from the mom, and there are only 24 hours a day. Yet, it's still beautiful.

OH! YOU'RE ASSAAD'S DAUGHTER?

She signs JAS — "A" for "Assaad," her father's name. He's her backbone — strong, soft, resilient, determined, and the source of her strength and inspiration. Assaad is her hero.

She showed me her phone. She listed Papa as "Hero Dad." Mom is "Lady Mom."

She thinks 'like a man.' She learned from him not to settle and to stay humble. A principled and fair man who fought

during the war. A leader who is respected by his comrades and foes alike. He inspired, served, battled for, and saved people. He kept his outside stories to himself. She would find out years later about her father from others. “Oh! You’re Assaad’s daughter?” people would say to her with fondness and admiration.

Growing up, he treated Jessica and her brother the same. Curfew at 1 am applied to both. He’d let her go out as long as her older brother was with her — the sweet and humane older friend who became a surgeon. The younger sister was too young back then. The years that followed matured the two girls to support and complement each other’s gifts in multiple ways.

Her mom, the unsung hero, supported and kept the family together, especially when her dad struggled to find work post-war. She is as much of a fighter as her husband, with a lady-like twist. She did her best to shelter her children from outside turmoil, whether schooling, nutrition, or family time. Mom inspired Jessica to become a better professional, seek a career, and be a good mother.

Mom and Dad taught Jessica to be fair, friendly, and firm.

AND THE DIVINE SUPPORT

“I’m not cocky. It’s that... I know that when I was born, my stars were aligned, and I have a mission and a calling.”

She got emotional talking about her inner voice and journey’s guiding light. She imagines God with his godly wand over her head. He tells her that she has an immense reservoir of goodwill to dispense from. He tells her she’ll carry a lot and assures her she can do it. Her voice helped her avoid significant detrimental events, and it helped her choose her husband. When she sleeps,

magic godly sprinkles energize her before every sunrise. Even at 37, the wand reminds her of her calling and purpose-driven life. She feels responsible. She does not want to let Him down.

“I think something in me draws people to talk to me. God gave me a gift, and I need to do something about it.”

SURFING TO WEDDING

“I think God put my husband in my way.”

She had broken up with someone and wanted me time. So one day, she chose to go to the Batroun beach, but not her usual hangout — a place she’d never been. Book in hand, sunbathing, she sees a tall bald dude teaching surfing by the water.

She asked the lady lounging beside her if she could watch her stuff because she wanted to talk to that man, pointing to him. The neighbor got all excited about the scene soon to unravel. Uncharacteristic of Jessica, she walked towards the water. American, she thought.

“Can you teach me how to surf? It looks like you’re ordering people around and know what you’re doing.” His Oakleys tilted down: “Oh! Really?” He paused and took his shades off. His eyes grabbed her: “Book a surf, and I’ll give you 15 minutes for free.” She snapped back: “How stingy! I’ll learn fast anyway.” The 15 minutes ended up being an hour and a half.

In the meantime, the woman watching over Jessica’s stuff was trying to figure out how the story was developing. She took a picture of them.

Back at shore, “Can I have your number?” he asked. “You know what? You can have it. But I don’t know if I will answer you back.” She played hard to get with him for three months as she was not ready for another adventure. She

wanted to stay free without attachment to anyone — work, travel, and life without complications. No for marriage, either.

Now, they travel together. Married with a beautiful year-and-a-half little girl. Sienna. Fabien got Jessica's heart when she drowned in his eyes. She locked him when their knees touched on that one surfboard. Today, Sienna gets her occasional water trip on a surfboard. God delivered Fabien to her. She said yes. He's her friend, confidant, lover, husband, and daughter's father. She's with him. Period.

echoes at home.

JESSICA'S LIFE HACKS

- Dream big. Execute in baby steps. Self-confidence will build in the process.
- 18-year-old girls should not get plastic surgery. Just because. Wrinkles and scars carry stories that make you unique and beautiful. Be true to yourself.
- When you're 30+ and feel the need to tweak your looks, go ahead. It will be part of your story.
- Your likes and dislikes will change. Your values, however, will not. Identify them.
- Write. It helps you clear your thoughts. In the process, you get to become a better writer. Never hurts.
- Find ways to recharge: sleep, listen to music, watch Netflix, do your nails, color your hair, get a massage, a glass of wine, whisky, or whatever tickles your fancy.
- The sea is a source of its own. If you can get to it, do. It soothes the soul.

Curtain roll: Jessica and Fabien are sipping wine and nibbling on cheese. Sienna is sound asleep while her parent's conversation

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

THE WOMAN WITH THE TATTOO. THE ONE I COULDN'T READ.

YOU SNOOZE; YOU LOSE.

It was a warm day. I looked up from my laptop screen to a tattoo. A barely legible one from where I was sitting and from where she was standing. Her back to me, picking up her drink. Something drew me to her. I squinted at the darn thing. Too far to read. It was too quick of an encounter for me to react.

You snooze; you lose.

The five-word, very-small-font sentence danced between her left butt cheek and the top of her extended leg. To frame it all, an obscenely short pair of shorts accentuated her God-given gifts. I couldn't help but stare. Embarrassingly stare. To no avail. What was tattooed on that thigh?

I recently got interested in tattoos. Many questions with very few answers.

Why do people do them? How do they pick what to ink on their flesh? Big or small? How many? Where to place them? What does

this one particular symbol mean to them? What happens when the meaning changes? When emotions fade? When she breaks it off with him, or he with her? What does that one numbered date on her neck mean? Why is it significant? How does that one piece of art change in shape when the canvas matures? Do they plan for aging? Is it worth the pain? If so, how come?

Back to the tattooed lady who dropped by Starbucks-Rabieh on a hot day a few months ago. The one who emanated creativity, poetic flair, audacity, and a splash of a wild, free spirit. If you get this, I'd like to tell your story. I could finally read what's inscribed on your thigh, leg, whatever.

Chances are that this was a once-in-a-lifetime encounter that would not repeat. You know. We've all had those. Some, we regret. Others, we're happy we dodged the bullet.

But what if she happens to read this, or someone who knows her does? The woman with a tattoo crowning her left leg. What if the universe wants her story told?



THE SAUDI UBER DRIVER

THERE IS
NOTHING LIKE
BREAKING FAST
WITH A SWEET
DATE :)

I had just finished a meeting that ended about an hour before Iftar. Taxis were scarce. So were Ubers; within 20 minutes, three canceled on me as I stood baking in the sun. Then, AbdulRahman, my fourth attempt, messaged me in Arabic to say he was on his way. A while later, I stepped into his clean, air-conditioned vehicle. Dressed in his traditional white Saudi garment, he welcomed me with the broadest, most inviting smile of any Uber driver I've been with.

Halfway through my trip, when it became okay to break his fast, he reached for a plastic bottle and politely asked me if he could drink — but not before he gave me a bottle. He continued to steer the cruising vehicle with his left hand. He reached for a plastic bag with his right and offered me dates.

The cordial me tried to resist and respectfully hint that they were his to enjoy.

Ha! It was like trying to turn down a scruffy, proud farmer as he offered you a hand-picked fruit basket from his orchards. Or when your tэта serves you that plate (well... more like a pot) of stuffed cabbage, you dare not wipe it clean. Like when you try to pay for lunch when your Lebanese friend insists that he got it as if it was a matter of family honor and national security.

AbdulRahman tilted his rearview mirror, looked at me, and made

sure that his smiling eyes meant business. I reached out and grabbed one. “Take more,” he said. Three ended up in my hand. This man waited until I started eating to take his first. We ended up feasting on a few. The best dates I’ve ever tasted. They were semi-sweet, soft, aromatic, unpretentious, filling, melt-in-your-mouth, and heavenly.

Was it his hospitality that made them unforgettable? His warmth? Energy? Maybe it was breaking fast together and appreciating life’s gifts bestowed on us. Or was it because the universe was smiling at the two strangers who genuinely connected briefly in eternity? I think it was God watching with enjoyment a follower of Jesus and a follower of Mohammad share their humanity. Share water. And dates.

The moral of the story is? There is nothing like breaking fast with a sweet date :)



ASSAAD: THE HAPPIEST ONE

At 88, surrounded by his children and their children, he lies in a hospital bed as he witnesses his heart pumping less, his organs shutting down, and his body failing. It was only two days prior that this lover of life quit asking when his doctor would allow him to leave the hospital.

Even one's passing can be beautiful.

80 YEARS BACK

His mom argued with the dad about sending the boy to school. Eight years old and had never been. Holding his hand, they went from Achrafieh to Hamra's "Frères Capucins" mission, meeting with one of the brothers. Standing on the abbot's side, the boy in shorts told his mom to get him his clothes because he was staying and not going back with her. He stayed as a boarding student for years, occasionally going home on vacation.

Starting school late made him run to catch up with all the other students and the learning he missed. Catching up, he did. Outperforming many, he did, too. Just like Forrest, once he started running and couldn't stop.

Run Assaad run.

Throughout his long life and until the end, his competitiveness was part of his mesh. His ego was his fuel. And his challenge.

LOVE:
THE BEST
MEMORY
MEDICINE.

THE LESSONS WE LEARNED

Eighty-eight years of life carry experience and wisdom. Some of the lessons we learned having been around him:

- Eat together.
- The freshest fish have sparkling eyes.
- The best sausages are Makanek (and the German ones).
- Attract grandchildren with donuts.
- Make friends around BBQ.
- Have your live-in house help join you at the family table.
- Solve issues over a meal.
- The best Arak is the one you distill yourself. And always one-third and two-thirds mix.
- Learn how to pick your vegetables.
- If you decide to go hunting, stop in Chtaura for sahlab.
- Buy the best you can afford (and everything German).
- Make education first and keep learning.
- Use every good occasion to teach your students outside the classroom.
- Mentor, support, and tirelessly teach the youth.
- Pick up hobbies: photography, cooking, sudoku, crosswords, ...
- Love God.
- Love Lebanon.
- Faith in family.
- Adore the Virgin Mary.
- Love your mom.
- Pamper your daughter.
- Spoil your granddaughters.

- Be a father. Play the mother. And succeed at both.
- Love again.
- Laugh.
- Smile.
- Be grateful.
- Be generous.
- Treat little children and giants with the same respect.
- Even fighting can be done with honor.
- Obsess with doing things “the right way.”
- Get up early to:
 - * work,
 - * pray,
 - * enjoy your coffee,
 - * go out and get breakfast for the ones still sleeping,
 - * get the best fishermen’s catch for lunch,
 - * prepare your theodolites and other surveying instruments for your class among Beirut’s pine trees.

WHEN HE FELL INTO THE POT OF SOUP

The little boy kept jumping on his uncle’s back and climbing on his shoulders until the rascal ended up in the massive soup pot. They developed a special bond, Assaad and Anis.

Uncle Anis would repeatedly tell his nephew:

Before Anis passed away many decades ago, he had forgotten everyone and everything except Assaad and those four verses.

يا أُسْعِدِ الْإِخْلَاصَ أَحْلَى مِنْ الْمَدِيحِ
 بِطَيِّبِ الْأَنْفَاسِ وَبِيشْفِي الْجَرِيحِ
 مَحَبَّتِكَ عَمُّوَجْ عُمْرِي مُسَجَّلِي
 مِثْلَ الْأَمَانَةِ الثَّابِتَةِ بِيَدَيْنِ الْمَسِيحِ

Love: The best memory medicine.

NEW YEAR'S EVE 2023

On Dec 31, 2023, at 3:40 am, 51 years and a week after his late wife, he took his last breath. He did well with the cards that life handed him. It was time to stop running. He lived fully. He left peacefully. His family believes he parted content.

MEANWHILE IN HEAVEN

His earthly friends and family greeted him right outside the gates. I can hear the cracking of dice on the backgammon board. He's playing with the usual crowd and was able to recruit new contestants, angels included. The Arak is flowing. BBQ and Tabbouleh. Laughs and conversations.

You can see him sitting with former students, debating life and technology. He's reached out to some of his old students and started surveying heaven. You know, building something up (over) there. Or mapping out heaven? You have to build something. No?

