

She missed the funeral. To her mother and aunts, Arwa pretended she had a big gig booked in L.A., *a lead in a multicam pilot*, but of course there is nothing, just the same internet company commercial that she'd booked three years ago, which did surprisingly well. They've asked her to do two more since then. The concept is simple: she is part-superhero, part-vixen, trying to outpace the competitors' connection speed. The pay is fine. The rest of the time she temps, going from one overly-air-conditioned office to another, veterinary offices, spas, rehab centers. The staff never learns her name, nor she theirs.

Her mother and aunts don't know about the internet commercials; they don't get them in Beirut. She tells them that she does a lot of theater work, which is sometimes true—she was George in a feminist adaptation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* last year—but mostly they don't ask questions. Anyways, Arwa's great disappointments had come early: theater major, a move to California, hundreds of failed auditions, the rained-out ceremony to Tag at a friend's backyard. Tag himself. Sometimes Arwa pictures the Atlantic and Europe like stalwart bodyguards, protecting her from her family.

'But you'll come right after?' her mother had asked. Her voice was nasally and weak. Her own mother had just died, after all. Arwa felt the lance of guilt rush across the world and nip her throat.

'Yes, Mama.'

'Right after,' her mother repeated. Arwa looked around at her cluttered living room. When they'd first moved in, the cottage—on the cusp of Echo Park, where the junkies met the hipsters selling vegan dog biscuits—had seemed charming, like something out of a Disney movie, with the shedding jacaranda and large windows. Tag had built a small fire pit in the backyard, and they'd drink mojitos there. Now it's overrun with weeds. When he left, he only took his clothes, but sometimes she wishes he took more, the house feeling claustrophobic at times, all that evidence of their old lives.

'I need a week.' The timeline was arbitrary but felt right. Teta's body—the very thought of it, a body removed from its master, gave Arwa the chills—would be buried right away. The formal *azza* would last three days, well-wishers pouring in from all over, with food and flowers, her mother and aunts weeping into each other's arms. A week was perfect. She'd miss all of it.



Four days in Beirut and she already feels herself regressing; on the ride from the airport, she'd held her breath while her mother drove through the tunnel. In Los Angeles, winter is a concept, evoked by iced pumpkin lattes and tinsel palm trees. But the air was too sharp outside her mother's car to keep the window down. She's always hated January in this country. Even the Mediterranean looks unappealing, gray as oatmeal. At least she remembered to pack a jacket. It is leather, one of Tag's old biker ones, with patches on the elbows.

'The Alami children came,' her mother said as she drove. 'And the Ghosseinis, and the Salems. All the way from London.'

Arwa said nothing. She decided on the plane over, she will be silent, submitting to her mother and aunts. It is easiest this way. Her mother suggests a hair trim, and Arwa goes, the salon thick with hairspray and cigarette smoke. Everyone still smokes here. Arwa always forgets. The hairdresser offers her a cigarette and *oohs* over her hair.

‘You’ve got curls for days, *chérie*,’ he says. His eyebrows are manicured to perfection. Her mother and aunts have been coming to him for years, for the identical hairstyle that every woman over fifty in Lebanon boasts, that helmetlike bouffant, highlighted with reddish streaks.

The television in the hair salon is on FashionTV, the sullen, bony models of Arwa’s youth stalking the catwalk in feathery lingerie. She used to dream of being one of them, back then. The very thought of Los Angeles would make her salivate. Now her strongest association with L.A. is the heady scent of diesel, snaking traffic, the click of heels in audition waiting rooms.

Back in her mother's apartment, the television stays on reruns of a popular Turkish soap operas. There is still food leftover from the *azza*, and they all return to the same bowl of *roz bel haleeb* a neighbor had brought over, holding out spoonfuls of the sugary rice. The building is old but in a nice neighborhood, her mother and her two sisters sharing an apartment. Her grandmother had lived in the one below. There is no elevator. Garo, their doorman, is Armenian and pushing sixty; he has been there as long as she can remember. His quarters are on the ground floor, a small room that she has caught glimpses of over the years—stove pot, plaid blanket on a twin-sized mattress.

‘May the remainder be in your life,’ he murmurs to Arwa when she first arrives and she thanks him. He used to give her licorice sticks when she was a child. Her grandmother always liked him.

For the first few days, Arwa avoids looking at her grandmother's door when she climbs the stairs. It is childish and superstitious, but she hurries past the up the stairwell, like something might try to catch her.



Her grandmother was spritely and magnetic. She raised three girls on her own, her husband dying before the war even started. Her girls were barely out of middle school when the first bullets rang out. During the war, when the neighborhood heard of soldiers coming their way, her grandmother had gathered every piece of jewelry in the house, making her daughters remove even their cheap bracelets, and neatly arranged them on a silver tray next to her engagement ring and wedding gold. The soldiers went from house to house, ransacking the bedrooms and china cabinets, forcing gold from women’s wrists. She was waiting at the door for them. She had the tray in her hands. The neighborhood folklore was there had been a dozen men, rifles hoisted on their shoulders like purses. Her grandmother hadn’t flinched, holding the tray out to them. *For your daughters*, she’d said, and they’d left without taking a thing.



Arwa goes to the grave with her mother and aunts. They listen to weather reports on the car radio on the drive there. As they all walk down the path to the cemetery, she can feel them glancing at her. She is hit by *déjà vu*, a vague memory of years ago, walking along the Corniche as a little girl with them. It may be colder than California, but it’s hot for Beirut, it’s all anyone can talk about, how it hasn’t snowed in the Cedars once this year. Her leather jacket is too heavy.

The cemetery borders south Beirut, with rows of headstones and a backdrop of unadorned trees and shrubbery. Arwa is glad for the winter. She cannot imagine this place in the spring, verdant and in bloom, with cherry blossoms littering the gravestones. It would feel too mocking,

all that new life. She feels guilty for her own legs, the easy pitch of her lungs against her ribcage. Her grandmother used to balance books on Arwa's head, *if you want to be a star we need to fix your posture*. And now Arwa is standing on the dirt that buried her.

Her mother kneels near the gravestone, puts her lips against the stone. Her sisters do the same. 'Immi,' her mother croons. They turn to Arwa, waiting. There is something expected of her, Arwa understands. A performance.

She bows next to them. In high school, she'd played a nun in *The Sound of Music* and they'd knelt just like this, her and the other fake-nuns, on wooden pews some kid had built. Arwa places a palm on the gravestone. It is smooth and cool. Who inscribes gravestones? she wonders suddenly, almost violently. Her grandmother's name, the years that went along with her. When Tag came to Beirut with Arwa, that one time after they got married, her grandmother was the nicest one to him. She taught him how to make spinach pies, his slender guitarist fingers alongside Teta's. *She's good people*, he'd said to Arwa. It occurs to her she should probably call him, let him know. Arwa digs her fingers into the dirt, pretends it is cool, swollen dough.

The other women get up, dusting their pants. There is a small bench near the gravestones and they sit, not realizing the sound carries. They whisper about her. Arwa hears them talk about Tag and Los Angeles and how she has wasted her life. Her aunt says that she should be crying and Arwa does the watering trick, the one she learned in college, where she blows air up towards her eyeballs, but it doesn't work, her eyes sting and prickle but don't water.

When they aren't looking, she sucks the dirt from her fingernails.



Afterwards, she goes out alone. Garo the doorman is lugging water bottles when she leaves the building. She is wearing a black dress, a nightgown actually, from the thrift store near her house in L.A., but when her mother asked she said it was Dior.

'*Bonsoir*,' Garo says. He always has a half-stricken expression on his face, the consequence of too-wide eyes. 'Enjoy your evening, Arwa.'

'Thank you, Garo.' She feels a strange impulse to ask him about grave inscribers, or the recipe for spinach pies, or whether she should call Tag now or wait until she returns to California. Maybe she can ask Tag to meet for a drink, that tiki bar they love, with the Latin music and fish mango tacos. She can envision it clearly—the sexy flicker of the candles against their clasped hands, Tag repeating that her Teta was a class act, then the inevitable drunk walk home, Arwa pretending to twist her ankle. Much of her time is devoted to such fantasies these days; scheming ways to get Tag back.

'The remainder in your life,' Garo says again, and Arwa feels crashed back into herself, into the memory of her grandmother's silhouette against the kitchen counter, guilt at the Tag daydream.

'And in yours,' Arwa says, nonsensically, the response idiotic, and besides that, Arabic feels awkward in her mouth, a leather jacket in the wrong weather.

Her mother told her to take the car but Arwa walks instead. She'd given some vague response about where she was going, about old friends. A semi-truth, the divvy college bar unchanged from her youth, the same bartender who greets her with a hug and air kiss. Ever since she moved to California, he calls her Monroe. *Don't miss us too much, Monroe. Hey, Monroe, you ever see Brad Pitt out there?*

The bar is filled with university students, impossibly young in polo shirts, drinking B-52s. Arwa orders a whiskey, clean, then another. She doesn't say anything about her grandmother to the bartender who, anyways, loses interest after the first half hour, drifting to a trio of pretty girls in tight sweaters. Arwa waits an hour before she signals for the check and, when he brings it, she leans in.

'Half a gram, if you've got it.' She slides the folded bills across the sticky bartop.

A shuffling beneath the bartop, his folded palm in hers. 'It's good to have you back, Monroe. Good thing you're not too famous to visit.' He winks at her.

'Good thing,' she echoes. His smile is too wide to convey the sting. She leaves.



Tag had seen her on television before they ever met. Her biggest break, the one that led her and her friends to reserve a table at the elite Rosehip, ordering oysters and cognac like stars in a rap video. It was a guest starring role on a popular sitcom about four men living in Manhattan. She was the main lead's love interest, an ill-fated plotline, no repeat appearances, the director made sure to tell her, but still it was a prime-time spot, something for her reel. Later, Tag would confess that he'd seen the episode, months before they met a friend's birthday. She remembers now, years later, the day of that shoot, how she'd been getting over a cold, blowing her nose in the trailer bathroom, pinching her cheeks for color. The studio was massive and lively as a beehive and the fluorescent light fixtures were too bright. She'd sweat so much the assistants had to keep blotting her neck. She had no idea, walking to her car that evening, after a twelve-hour shoot, the cool air exhilarating against her bare arms, that her life was different now. That someday a man would watch what she'd just done and marry her.



She is drunker than she'd like to be, but it is too early to go back. Her aunts don't sleep until midnight, after the late-night news. They are upset with her, were terse on the drive back from the cemetery. The least she could've done was cry.

The road outside the bar ends at the entrance of the American university, and Arwa waits until the security guard turns, then darts in, trailing a group of students. They are laughing and speaking loudly about some party. One of the girls has an earbud in and the dangling, and when Arwa passes her, she catches a refrain from the song, French, pop-y. She remembers when it first came out, dancing to it with Tag at a housewarming party in Los Felix, a bedraggled yard with Christmas lights entwined around strawberry cacti.

The song reminds her of another one, the *je t'aime, je t'aime, comme un fou* one, that her grandmother had inexplicably loved, back when Arwa was in high school. Her grandmother, stick-thin, embroidered duster, twisting her toe like she was putting out a cigarette.

'What time's your flight?' Somebody asks the pop-song girl, who grins. She pulls the other bud out of her ear.

'Six a.m. Just enough time to get *wrecked*.'

'So lucky, Lisbon sounds epic.'

They hustle past Arwa. She has no understanding of Lisbon, has never been. What she envisions comes from movies, airlines ads—candy-colored houses, uneven hills. And this girl, coltish, wearing a furry coat, walking through the paved streets. Arwa is surprised to feel jealous.

There is a large map near the library, but Arwa doesn't stop; even though it's been years, her body moves fluently through the campus, under the oak trees, from one building to the next. It is comforting how little has changed—only cosmetically, renovations, electronic charging stations, but the actual buildings are imposing as ever, the brick shining whitely in the dark. She walks until she reaches the green oval, uncreatively named after its color and shape. Facing it, tall and shadowed, is Fisk Hall. The English department.

Her memories of that time are mostly faded. All-nighters on the quad, huddling in oversized hoodies on the damp grass. Hash browns and cigarettes after a night of drinking. A perpetual autumn, leaves crunching beneath her boots, a dramatic fringed scarf she'd worn for an entire semester because her grandmother said it made her look like Grace Kelly. Her first blowjob behind the Chemistry department, the antiseptic taste of semen in her mouth. She remembered time as something different back then, not just less paltry, but the very smack of time felt more luxurious somehow, a berry waiting for her to bite.

There had been a professor, Haidar or Hader. It became messy, of course, a ripple of gossip through the department, rumors of elopement though in truth they'd barely dated, a few times crammed in the back booth at an Armenian restaurant near the marina, the two of them smashed on arak. The best rumor was that he'd gotten a tattoo of the letter *A* on his bicep. She may have started it herself. Had there even been a tattoo? She can't remember anymore.

Arwa climbs up the stairs to the building. The doors at Fisk Hall are locked, but there is a small ledge that she sits on. She doesn't have a key, nobody in their neighborhood locks their door. She pulls out the baggie and does a bump, messily, on the back of her hand, which she hates, because some always spills, but the coke is decent and she wishes she'd bought more.

Two voices, footsteps. Arwa peeks out over the ledge. A couple of students approach. They are walking across the oval, the male dorms. The name, Penrose, blooms in Arwa's mind like a bud.

'Hey!' She calls out. They look startled. She always forgets that teenaged boys are like this, more afraid than fearsome.

'Yeah?' The taller one seems suspicious. He has nice arms.

'I want to ask you a question.' She moves towards them, jumps down the last two steps. This is her favorite part—when the drug whispers up and down her spine like a bass beat.

They glance at each other. 'Lady,' the other boy says, more politely, 'we have something to get to.'

'Totally, totally.' She sounds feverish to her own ears, which is a little unnerving. 'Real quick, I promise.' She hooks her thumb towards the building behind her. 'Do either of you know Professor Haider? Or maybe it's Hashem?'

The boys look at each other again.

'Is Professor Haidar still here?' Her voice is a little hysterical, and she swallows. 'Never mind.' She wants to ask if they have any cocaine, then has a vision of the security guard slipping her wrists into cuffs. 'My grandmother died,' she says instead.

They look at her as though she is speaking another language and for a moment she wonders if she is. 'Let's get out of here,' the tall boy whispers, loud enough for her to hear. 'This lady's weird as fuck.'

'Sorry about your grandmother,' the other boy, the nicer one, calls over his shoulder as they turn to leave.

'Thanks,' she whispers.

'Fucking weird,' she can hear the tall boy repeat, their bodies receding into the dark.



There are dozens of bars in Hamra, winking like beautiful women. But Arwa ignores them, walking homeward instead, shedding the university and its memories like a dress. Beirut has grown and shrunk in the last decade, become a facsimile of itself with its kitschy bars and Anglicized locals. If she never had to return, she would be fine. Her grandmother, a stone grave with years on it. That first year in California, the same dream plagued her over and over—turquoise waves rising from the beaches in Tripoli, Saida, Jbail, and crushing the city, flooding the cafés and gas stations, reaching even the skyscraper rooftops. She was always in the exact same spot, on the verandah outside her grandmother’s bedroom, her grandmother’s bare feet propped up on the railing. When Arwa started to panic, her grandmother would sigh, speak in Arabic, a phrase Arwa could never remember hearing in her waking life. *Everyone removes the thorn from their own hand*, her grandmother would say. After that, it was just silence, emptiness, the two of them watching the water coming for them.



Garo is sitting on a plastic chair near the back entrance when she arrives at the building, a nearly finished cigarette in his hands. He tosses it when he sees her, and rises, the sort of old-fashioned, gentlemanly decorum that reminds her of being a child. She can’t remember a time before Garo, though it must have existed; her mother and aunts have wistfully mentioned a handsome doorman from their twenties.

‘How is your evening going?’ Arwa asks. This, too, from her youth—the feeling of being caught, trying not to slur her words. In this way, Garo knew about her adolescence better than her mother and aunts, the one who’d unlock the gate when she came home after midnight, tactfully looking away as she got into cars with old boyfriends. She never thanked him for it. To do so would have implied negligence on his part; better to pretend the driver was her violin teacher, the late night was for studying.

He smiles shyly. His teeth are awful, browning. Garo is not attractive, but he is tall enough, beloved. ‘Good, good. The winter has been kind, God is good.’

‘God is good.’

This time, Arwa pushes the doorknob of her grandmother’s apartment, but it is locked. This makes her angry. In her entire life, she’s never found it locked. She clomps up the stairs to her mother and aunts’ apartment, hoping to wake them, but the house is quiet and dark when she enters. On the living room mantle, there is an ugly ceramic swan Arwa had made one of her aunts for a long-forgotten birthday. There, a bundle of keys, marked with little letters. Arwa takes the one with a lowercase *d*, for Delilah, and goes back downstairs.

Her grandmother’s apartment is the same as always, save for some packed boxes in the foyer. Someone has brought in the laundry from the balcony clothesline, a sad heap on the couch. They will bring in a cleaner, Arwa suddenly realizes, someone to disinfect the floors and bathroom, and the bleach will drive the scent of flesh and illness away.

She could cry now, if she really pushed it, but instead she walks down the hallway, spotted with photographs of family and trips. They are all from before, when her grandmother still had her sight. The biggest one, Arwa, twelve, thirteen, in a bikini, tan and wild-haired, oversized sunglasses on the tip of her nose like Lolita. There is a photograph from the wedding,

Tag in a white suit, Arwa's arms mid-dance. It was in Los Angeles, none of the family had come, but her grandmother had still framed the photograph. Nobody had told her grandmother about Tag leaving, Arwa understands. She unhooks the back of the frame and takes the photograph, folds it into her pocket.

In her grandmother's bedroom, a tidy bed. The dusted dresser, pill bottles nowhere in sight. The drawers are mostly empty, except for socks and a camera, one of her grandmother's, from years ago. It is a Pentax K1000, heavy, banged up. She distantly remembers using it herself, a brief crush on photography, her grandmother's fingers over hers as she taught her to adjust the light.

There are ten photographs left. The little red arrow counts numbers down as Arwa tugs back the shutter release. She stands at the window, overlooking the empty street. She knows enough about photography to know there isn't enough light; if someone develops this roll, these will be rectangles of black. She snaps photo after photo until the shutter release won't budge anymore.



The last of the cocaine, a speckle on the armoire. Arwa snorts. She turns off all the lights and lies down on her grandmother's bed. She tries to remember the rest of the lyrics to that French song. She checks her Instagram, but Tag's last photograph is still the Joshua tree with a police streamer around it. The caption reads: *only in cali*.

A murmur from the street below. Arwa goes to the window; it is Garo, speaking on the phone, lowly, though she can make out random words. He is talking about the funeral, the other inhabitants leaving flowers with him for Arwa's family. She wonders who is on the other end. There isn't a wife or children. Just a couple of nieces, black-haired girls she would play with when they visited, for Christmas or Armenian New Year. They always wore matching, clean dresses.

It happens quickly, the coke doing its whisper-dance in her veins, Arwa shutting her grandmother's apartment door behind her, realizing a moment too late, *shit*, that she left the key inside, then the stairs clacking beneath her heels. She wants to catch Garo talking and she does, standing outside his little room, whispering. When he catches sight of her, he gets off the phone hastily.

'Is something wrong upstairs?' he asks. Arwa shakes her head. He studies her face for a moment. 'It has been a long day for you, dear,' he says gently. 'You will feel better tomorrow.' 'I want to feel better now.'

She knows what she has done before doing it. In that sense, it is already over, the narrow mattress in Garo's room rocking beneath her back, the headboard snagging her hair in its splinters, his hands trembling over her body. His hairy belly skimming hers with each pump, sweaty, slick.

Garo sees it. 'Dear.' His voice shakes. 'You are good woman, the daughter of fine people. Your grandmother—'

She moves towards him. 'Uncle—' the word from childhood, the common phrase for any man not her father, the word suddenly filthy in her mouth, 'Uncle, don't say another word about my grandmother.'

He doesn't.



Afterwards, there is silence. There is an insistent whirr from some appliance, like wings beating against glass. It was quick and ugly, Garo jumping up immediately after to get Arwa a towel, straightening the blanket that has fallen to the floor. What has happened is, irrevocably, her fault, but Arwa knows that Garo will blame himself. He is the sort of man who believes in integrity and sin. The sort of man who will quit a beloved job if he thinks he betrayed his employers. He shuffles around the small room. He repeats the remainder is in her life.

‘My husband won’t call me,’ Arwa speaks into the quiet room. She is dressing herself, slowly, buttoning the Cavalli jeans. They were expensive, a splurge after she first booked the commercial a few years ago. The boutique had been like the inside of a candle—fragrant, warm, beige.

‘God rest her soul,’ Garo says shakily. She knows he is talking about Delilah. Her Teta. He doesn’t care about Tag or Los Angeles or internet commercials. A woman he loved is dead. Arwa is something unnecessary, collateral. *Everybody removes the thorn from their own hand.* She remembers the dream, the phrase her mind crafted; she asks Garo if he has ever heard it.

A surprised look on his face, reminiscing. He almost smiles. ‘Ah, yes. Of course. It is an old saying. My aunts used to say it to us, when we’d fight with each other.’ His face wanes again. ‘Where did you hear it?’

‘Teta used to say it.’ This must be the truth. If Arwa hadn’t invented it, she heard it somewhere, likely from her. A false memory: Arwa, a toddler, wrecking something, her grandmother towering above her, frowning. At some point, there must’ve been some disaster. At some point, Arwa must’ve asked for help.



It is clear Garo wants her out of his room and the craving to talk has left her, so she leaves, smoking one of her last three Parliaments on the perch that overlooks the street. There are the same windows she has peered into every day for decades. Her mind is fried with the same memory loops. Every time she thinks of Garo, she thinks of her grandmother, and her hand shakes a little. She smokes the cigarette to the filter, then leaves it, burning, on the ledge. In the morning, there will be a little burn mark on the brick.

She doesn’t stop at her grandmother’s apartment this time, goes to the one where her family sleeps. She knows the houses like her own body. The women snore in their beds. Arwa tiptoes across the rooms, lifts jewelry boxes from the armoires. She takes their rings out, the necklaces and bracelets. She removes her own, the earrings from Chile, the pendant Tal gave her when she booked the commercial. With her palms cupping the jewelry, she goes back downstairs slowly and knocks on the Garo’s door with her sneakered toe. He opens the door and she steps in, drops the jewelry on his small dressing table.

‘For your daughters,’ she says.



Outside she walks until she reaches Hamra street. She has her purse and her credit card and her passport. The rest doesn’t matter, the small suitcase in her mother’s apartment. Footless leggings, favorite boots, MAC lipstick in the shade Merlot in Paris. They are irrelevant now. She



never wants to see them again anyway. There are the distant lights of a taxicab down the street. She holds her arm out. In college, she spent every winter in the theater department, preparing for Blanche DuBois and Shakespeare's Miranda, countless hours spent in the rehearsal room that smelled like chalk and feet. Her favorite part of any play was always the audition. It still is—the moment of possibility, everyone frozen in anticipation, waiting to see what you can do. It reminds her of the split second after a plane lifts from the air and gravity seems like a lie.

That's what this moment is like, as she holds her arm out for the cab, the car slowing down. She is auditioning, for the part of a woman who is letting something end. She wants the role.

When she gets in, she tells the driver, 'The airport,' in her breathy audition voice.

The last time she saw her grandmother, Arwa promised her she'd Tag had asked her not to call anymore. He told he couldn't keep trying. Arwa tries to imagine a first date, someone new to Los Angeles from Tulsa or Columbus. She'll fall in love with the next man she meets. She feels this so irrefutably it is a decision. It will be what happens next to her. Love is like that, a can kicked down the road.

As they drive through the tunnel, she takes a big gulp of air. She imagines that somewhere, off the coast of a country thousands of miles away, India or Nepal, a tremor hits and the earth begins to move, a tiny seismic shift, puckering the waves bigger and bigger until they reach Beirut. She'll buy a ticket at the airport, somewhere cold and cloudy. To Lisbon, she suddenly decides. She wants to see it snow. Maybe they'll seat her next to that cool girl from the campus. Arwa will tell her about Garo and the soldiers, her grandmother unhooking her daughters' bracelets. By the time the sun rises, she'll already be in the air.