

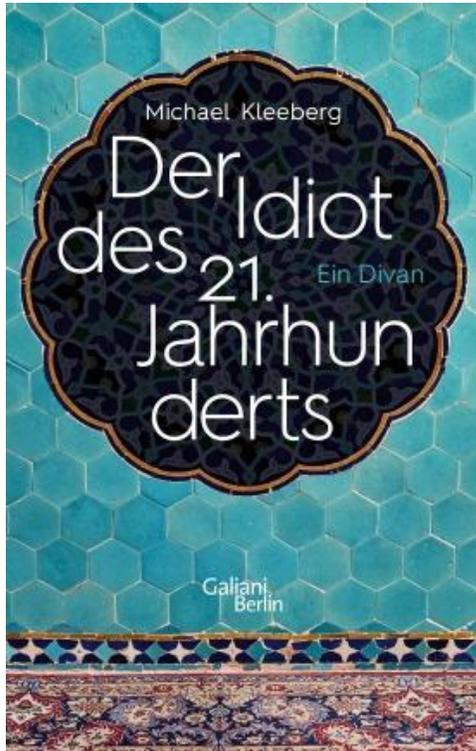
Sample Translation (chapter 3, pp. 63–89, 100–113)

THE IDIOT OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by **Michael Kleeberg**

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Se Eshgh Nameh
The Book of Three Loves

Tested by grief, this heart will survive.

Do not give up hope!

This heavy head will find peace.

Do not despair!

Hafez

The Fourth Couple

The man whose story is told here was supposed to be the protagonist of the fourth great love, but it was not to be. For thirty years he has wondered if he escaped just in time or threw away the chance of a lifetime – if he is saved or damned.

For the rest of his life he will struggle with the story that, for him, begins . . .

In the summer of 1985, the scene from which everything else follows is the tennis court on the lower level of a terraced compound and the view it affords Matthias of the perfect blue diamond of the ether, the steely blue of the sea far below that merged with the sky in a lilac gouache at the horizon, and in between, an ocean of yellow roses billowing in the light breeze. The smell of wild herbs rises from the beds and bushes. At the edge of the bright brick-red clay court, his racquet meets the yellow ball on the bounce with a dry pop, and the most beautiful woman in the world returns it. On the headland in the haze below, the white cubes of Beirut's houses, and in pure parabolas above them, the tracers of rockets and grenades on their flight from East to West Beirut and vice versa, first in utter silence and shortly thereafter, the small, toy-like smoke clouds of the impacts and – slightly delayed – the weak shudder of the detonations, no louder than the scape of tennis shoes on red clay.

There was a war on down there, but they didn't go to it.

He was beating Christine 5:3 and it was his serve. He wore a cap with a dark green plastic bill against the sun. He was shirtless and had already lost several points because he kept being distracted by the unbelievable pleasure of regarding his own tanned and wiry torso. His victory in the set was underlined by the muted flourish of an exploding bomb.

It was a dream come true for an adventurous, bright young man of twenty-four. Love and war. A love in wartime. Just the arrival alone: with a UN helicopter because the Green Line was impassable. As they were landing, he could see the half-moon of the bay that was considered the most beautiful in the whole Mediterranean before the war. Sam's limousine was waiting for him at the harbor and brought him up the serpentine road, mounting higher and higher above the sea, and through its open windows drifted the

bitter-sweet, balsamic fragrance of the country. It went without saying that he would help out in the clinic even though, like Christine, he hadn't yet finished medical school. It was the summer break in Germany. What he really wanted was a pediatrics specialty, but what was needed here was not pediatrics, it was emergency medicine and surgery—amputations. Without pause, ambulances delivered the victims of bombs, mortars, and grenades. There was no question in Sam's mind that his daughter's boyfriend would work in his hospital along with them and by the second day, with just as little question, Matthias was in the OR. Severed arms, feet still attached to legs only by the tendons, open skulls, backs riddled with shrapnel – it was a horrendous butcher's shop and required a strong stomach. Matthias had one, but perhaps only because he had the constant feeling he was watching a film while acting in it at the same time.

He perceived the sounds of the war as everyday noises. Rocket fire sounded like New Year's fireworks, the impact of a grenade like a truck carrying steel plates and jouncing over a grade crossing. When someone brought in a plastic bag full of severed limbs after a strike, Sam said, "It's just nauseating, not tragic. The stories are what's tragic." There were moments when he was shocked by the very composure with which the others acted: Marlene holding up her dress with one hand so she could wade unencumbered through the ruins of a bombed-out church, looking for surviving works of art, or Sam being handed a severed arm and with a bit of twisting and pulling, retrieving a diamond ring from a finger and sticking it in his pocket before tossing the arm onto a pile of other body parts.

The nightmares and sleeplessness would come only years later. It was like working in a field hospital except that in the afternoons they went up to the villa and a servant would hand him a drink at the edge of the pool where he swam his laps while Christine in a white tennis dress practiced her serve. In the evening, a German-Lebanese chamber ensemble played Schumann and at night, he and Christine made love by the open balcony door. Their room was in a different wing, but Matthias couldn't believe that no one in the big house heard her singing.

It was a liberal house. No one objected to the fact that his room and Christine's were connected by a shared bathroom.

"So this is your fiancé. Welcome to our house!" That was how they greeted him, all very direct and cordial, if a bit ominous, because Matthias had not yet given any thought to the future since first meeting Christine in a lecture hall at Aachen University. Nor had he noticed anything explicitly foreign about this self-confident, eloquent, and obviously wealthy girl, although Christine's hearty laugh and some special tone, some alertness, something that struck Matthias as enormously alive distinguished her from the German women at the university.

Not until he'd met Sam—the patriarch, charmer, ladies' man, surgeon, clinic chief, string-puller, and life of the party who didn't conform the least bit to Matthias's idea of an Arab or any other Mediterranean type—did he realize why Christine (her mother a socialite and musician from Freiburg and her father a Maronite millionaire) seemed so much more classy than the other women at the university, although not what he would have imagined as a veiled Arab beauty. The only time she wore a head scarf and gloves was when driving her MG convertible on their weekend excursions into the Eifel region or to Belgium.

They'd been together for a good nine months and now here he was in Lebanon for an entire vacation, working mornings and sometimes at night as an assistant surgeon, and in the afternoon and evening living in the most beautiful house he would probably ever inhabit. He played tennis, ate, drank, swam and waterskied in the bay with a view of the rockets, made love, and learned how to live in style – something that was by no means a foregone conclusion for a forester's son from Höchenschwand in the Black Forest.

Once a week, whether the war was on or there was a ceasefire, whether there was shelling or the power was out, there was a chamber music recital with twenty or thirty people filling the salon and being waited upon by the Filipina housemaids. Trios, quartets, quintets -- depending on how many guest players the external circumstances of the war allowed. Among other things, during these months, Matthias became familiar with the repertoire of German chamber music.

Sam and Marlene were admirable and awe-inspiring, an ideal couple. They kept an international, quadrilingual house and maintained a functioning social life despite the war. They had multifarious interests and were well-informed, witty, and charismatic, which perhaps was also suggested by the fact that in company Sam called his wife "*la*

patronne" whereupon she retorted that Wagner never gave her migraines, but at most only stomach cramps (jokes that were lost on Matthias's with his primarily scientific education).

In the kitchen and servants' hallways half a dozen Filipinos and Filipinas slaved away, as invisible as house elves, to keep the place clean and running smoothly. And if conversations (including between Christine and Matthias) turned to political fundamentals, the necessity for equal rights, the possibilities of socialism, or the situation of suppressed ethnicities (which meant the Palestinians), they always took place against the unshakably self-evident background of enough personnel to serve these utopian gatherings.

Marlene treated Matthias with the same friendly respect she had for visiting artists and musicians, except more like a young man, a friend of her son's. Sam treated him like a man, a colleague, and a probationary son-in-law.

The mood that reigned in the family was always cheerful and sometimes almost boisterous, which astounded Matthias all the more because they had suffered a terrible blow of fate a year and a half ago: Christine's older brother, having just completed his M.D. in Paris after beginning his studies in Giessen, had been killed in a motorcycle accident in France.

"We're in the middle of a war here," Sam shook his head as he told Matthias, "so to keep the children safe, we sent them to study in Europe. But things happen as they are meant to." And then the atheistic Maronite added, "Inshallah."

What Matthias couldn't get used to was that the whole family always talked about this son and brother as though he had just left the house or was away on a short trip. He never heard them use the past tense about him. Nevertheless, he would have had to be less awake and sensitive than he was not to understand that now the focus was all the more on Christine.

There was the clinic, which was growing, and then the German Christian kindergarten and school founded by Marlene with financial assistance from Sam and sponsored by the German embassy. Marlene chaired its board of directors. All of which was intended to be inherited, passed on, and continued as the German-Lebanese partnership that had proven so successful.

By the end of two and a half months, Matthias sometimes started awake in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, and it had nothing to do with the summer heat. What was running through his head was that they wanted to buy themselves a son-in-law and were prepared to pay handsomely for one.

He thought about it more and more till he no longer knew if he was in love or was being corrupted in the pleasantest way. But he was conscious that at some point, he would have to make a decision before he was no longer capable of doing so and others would make it for him.

Of course he loved Christine. He'd never had a girlfriend who was so vital, so alive, who had such flair and class. And in moments of clarity he plainly saw that if he turned down what was being offered him on a silver platter he would never again find a woman who could compare with her. A woman that beautiful, that special, that rich.

Since they had been here in a Lebanon torn by civil war, life with her possessed a higher intensity and greater density than life at home in the Federal Republic where life seemed by comparison planned, buttoned up, timid—even a bit cowardly. Here in Lebanon, freed from the mildew of rules, traditions, entitlements, vested interests, and the all-embracing enviousness of his homeland (and with the slight but definitely real risk of running into a bullet or being blown up), he inhaled a tingling, effervescent, champagne-like air—*vivere pericolosamente*, he thought and felt he was part of a star-studded cast, or at least a Cinemascope version of the Matthias of his youth.

That was one thing. Another was that he had indeed thought about what a future with Christine would be like. Wasn't he obligated (and he knew this thought sprang from a traditional, conservative image of manhood that Christine as a modern woman had no time for), wasn't it his duty to conquer such a woman, abduct her from the royal castle, or at least show up before its gates with an army as impressive as the king's?

For he had come to the bitter realization that this future could not be in Germany. Christine as the wife of an intern at a hospital in the provinces or a licensed practitioner in some small town in Germany? Unimaginable. Doubly unimaginable even if, in his ambition, he could see himself as Sam's equal in twenty or twenty-five years. For she wasn't just the daughter of this family, but thought of herself as entirely Lebanese—maybe even more because she was half German. How she had urged him to at long last

visit her "in my country"! But she was also the daughter of her family in another sense, which Matthias sadly confirmed every time he watched how she made use of the family's domestic staff without a second thought. It was a seigneurial attitude that was part of her flesh and blood, something Matthias would never learn as long as he lived. You had to have grown up with it and never known anyone who had a bad conscience about it—or had even considered such a possibility.

Matthias saw quite clearly that if he let the trap snap shut, his bed was made for him here. A luxurious, king-size bed to be sure, with a damask bedspread. A career and money and privileges without end (which no civil war and no revolution would ever change). And a monstrous amount of work.

But he had only to look at Sam, now fifty, to see just as clearly that he would always be the junior here: the son-in-law, the ersatz son, the number two who derived his authority from Sam alone. Even when he reached fifty himself and was long since nominal director of the clinic, whenever he issued a directive or decided on a new approach, all eyes would be on the old man, now eighty, and only if he gave an almost imperceptible nod would they do what Matthias told them.

Matthias didn't suffer from any inferiority complexes, but he had studied enough economics to know that it was capital that made the decisions here. In this Lebanon, in this house, in this clinic and family he would never get past Sam as long as he lived, not even after the patriarch's death. And he would always wonder if he couldn't have made it on his own.

He had never asked Christine if she would give up all this for the sake of their love and follow him to Germany. He knew all too well what her answer would be and wanted to spare her the embarrassment of having to lie. And it would be even worse if all this wasn't clear to her and she said yes in an over-abundance of emotion.

This life, this summer on the mountain above the loveliest bay in the Mediterranean, was so exciting, so stimulating that Matthias put off the question, the confrontation, the decision for as long as he possibly could.

That was where things stood when Marlene announced that she had invited two of her old friends and their husbands to dinner.

The evening would prove to be the last time the three couples who are the subjects of this story would ever see one another. It is the story of three women from different regions of Germany and very different social and family backgrounds. Without knowing one another, what they had in common was that each one, at about the same age and in the space of the same few years, had fallen in love with a Lebanese man and followed him to Lebanon.

And they had one more thing in common: after a few short years in the putative Paris and Paradise of the Orient, the civil war had begun and changed all their lives forever.

Marlene was the middle daughter of a Freiburg history professor and by far the most musically talented person in the family. She was also the most rebellious and political daughter and the one her parents worried about most. After high school she went to the conservatory, but by the time she was twenty, although her family hadn't realized it yet, it was clear to her that she fell short of the talent needed for a career as solo violinist. Marlene had no desire to play second fiddle in some provincial orchestra or become a high school music teacher. She had great ambition and when she met with an insurmountable obstacle, she began looking for other paths into the big, wide world. By lucky accident, the quintet she played in had been invited on a several-week tour to the Goethe Institutes in the eastern Mediterranean region. It began in Alexandria and their third concert was in Lebanon. Already at the Beirut airport she had fallen in love with the bouquet of the country, and after the concert she fell in love with thirty-year-old Sam. He spoke German, had spent a semester in Heidelberg, and was just beginning his work as head physician of the small clinic his father had founded.

It was quite simple: she was standing on the beach looking out over the water. The powerful white bull approached. His eye was gentle and long-lashed, his body muscular as a Spanish *miura*. His hide was taut as a silken skin covering a mechanism of steel. Around his neck she placed flower wreaths she had picked and woven at the foot of the Temple of Byblos. He thanked her by sinking to his knees before her. In high spirits, she grasped one of his horns and swung herself onto his back. As soon as she was settled side-saddle on the massive beast's fragrant white coat, she mischievously dug her heels into his side and he dashed off into the foaming spray with alarming speed and energy.

Naiads and mermen surfaced beside the wake he made, blowing their horns in triumph. The warm Mediterranean water caressed her feet and calves. Farther and farther out they swam, danced round by the gods of the ocean. Wails and protests were futile; he had abducted and possessed her.

Marlene broke off the tour and remained. She sent her parents a card informing them of her wedding. This was Sam's realm, the blooming, fragrant, shining Levant. It belonged to him and he ruled it and with a snap of his fingers opened up for her a world of opportunities she would realize, one after the other, with German thoroughness.

A year or two after her marriage, she met Karoline and Younes at a charity buffet in the church.

Karoline was a few years younger than Marlene and the two were as different as water and fire. She was the daughter of a pastor from the Taunus Mountains. As a girl she'd been quiet and dreamy, shy and devout. But at night in bed she would flee the strict, joyless Protestantism of her surroundings into the many-splendored world of the *Thousand and One Nights* with its caliphs and heroes. They entered her tiny room on winged horses and spirited her away to a splendid, shining land where no guilt or original sin weighed upon her and where good was repaid with good and evil with evil.

After high school she went to the University of Bonn and majored in Oriental and Islamic studies, as one of very few women with that double major. In her second year she paid a first visit to the East (it was also her first time outside Germany, incidentally), alone with a backpack, very little money, and the carapace of her naiveté and virginity--which proved more effective than a diplomatic passport. She traveled to Istanbul, met some friendly people there who passed her on to their relatives in Kars. From there she continued to Iran and from Teheran via Mashhad to Afghanistan. Her second trip took her via Syria and Iraq to Saudi Arabia, her third to Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. A shorter trip to the Maghreb convinced her that she preferred the character of the Arabian Peninsula and its people to North Africa. In the course of her studies and travels, her dissertation crystalized as a project to collect and classify Arabian folktales. The warm hospitality she had received everywhere was a life-changing experience. She had little concern for current politics. The Orient—the Orient of Novalis and Friedrich Rückert—was her "blue flower," the goal she was seeking.

And then one day she saw an announcement on the departmental bulletin board that Khalil Jean Younes, a doctoral candidate in theology at the University of Lille who was spending a semester in Bonn as a visiting French instructor, was giving a reading of some of his own poems entitled "The Message of the Nightingale." Karoline went to the small seminar room where the reading was to take place and found a quiet, reserved, and slightly awkward man dressed in black. He looked like the young Omar Sharif and at the same time like a dreaming faun, and the dream he lived in was an ecumenical grove of the Muses. A Christian and a utopian Romantic, curiously adrift between the past and the present, full of antiquated courtesy, doe-eyed naiveté, and aglow with piety. Although he was present in body, his spirit roamed a distant past, pure and innocent, that clearly existed nowhere but within himself. He read his poems in a muted voice and in sharp-edged, gravelly French and they sounded to Karoline like a mixture of Saadi and Novalis.

There were at most twelve people in the little room. Karoline was the only one sitting in the front row and had plenty of leisure to observe this tall, gentle Pan, half man and half woman. After the reading she bought a copy of his slim book, and since he was standing around a bit at loose ends, she invited him to a coffee in the cafeteria where she said she'd like to translate his poems, which had touched her profoundly, into German.

And so this love began as a collaboration. Its symbol would later be their two desks in the study they shared, placed at right angles and touching each other like the temples of a chaste couple. At first, they could see all the way down to the water from their balcony in Jounieh, north of Beirut, but eventually high-rises shot up all over the slope like mushrooms after a rainstorm and their view was limited to the kitchen balcony across the way or downward, that is, into the past. These two desks, covered with books, manuscripts, ink bottles, and pens—one of blond oak and the other of linden wood—fertilized and inspired each other. Questions, answers, jokes, and words of encouragement and comfort flew back and forth. Like the hut of a holy eremite or the cell of a medieval scholar, the room was filled with the sweet, flowery, somewhat musty odor of the spirit – in this case, the spirit of an ancient Orient that had never existed anywhere but in the alliance of Jean and Karoline.

It was clear to both of them from the start that their alliance could only be lived out in the Orient. But she wanted to finish her degree before getting married and Younes

wanted to get married before being ordained: since according to the concordat between the Maronites and Rome and the long-standing principle of *virī probati*, a married man may always become a priest, but the Vatican had insisted that once ordained, a priest may not get married. On one of the first days, Jean led Karoline up to the source of Nahr-Ibrahim to show her the red water of spring. Every year after the snow has melted it runs with blood from the wounds of Adonis as a sign that, though mortally wounded, he would again be resurrected for half the year. The flowers they picked were not blue, but the crimson anemones that grew here. Astarte, Adonis's mother and lover, had drenched them with his blood after the bold hunter had been gored to death by the jealous god of war in the shape of a wild boar.

Adonis and Astarte, the martyr and the weeping mother-bride, became the first godparents of their love, but would not be the last.

Jean's pastoral duties were not enough to put food on the table, and so at some point he found work as a local employee of the Goethe Institute, where the couple met another young German woman who had been hired to teach German in the institute's white building in Manara, beneath the old lighthouse.

Her name was Beate and she and her husband Mahmoud constitute the third couple of our story.

Beate and Mahmoud had met in the Bavarian Broadcasting canteen in Munich. Beate was financing her major in library science with her voice – a deep, sonorous, smoky alto that was especially erotic when she laughed, which she often did. She was hired to do the weather and read ads and the news. When she wasn't working, she was part of the Bohemian scene in Schwabing, the student quarter.

But she'd never met a man like Mahmoud there before. Ah, let's get right to that bold lion of Tripoli, that proud eagle!

At the time she met him, he was already a professional cameraman, a visiting student at the Munich University of Television and Film, and an admirer of the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto of young German filmmakers. He also had a part-time job as a cable puller and gaffer at the Bavaria Studios. He was strong, bold—sometimes even cocky and foolhardy—and very proud, but also a perfect, courteous gentleman with great chivalry toward women. As Beate soon learned, this was no mere Oriental

conventionality but the expression of respect and, above all, a conviction that everyone possessed equal dignity, whether man or woman, child or adult, beggar or millionaire, idiot or sage. Moreover, as Beate learned when they became intimate for the first time, there was a gentle, sensuous tenderness possessed only by a man who has no hidden complexes he has to compensate for and is free to let his love flow. He proposed to her less than twenty-four hours later.

At first it was less clear in the case of Mahmoud and Beate than of the other two couples where they would end up living. They felt comfortable in Munich, and Mahmoud enjoyed the freedom from his family clan, even though his Levantine soul drooped like a cut flower in the Munich winters. More crucial was the subtle and not-so-subtle racism directed at Mahmoud—and Beate as well—in the Munich of those years. Once in the apartment building in Giesing where they'd found a little two-room apartment, they encountered a lady who, without looking up, snarled as she passed them on the stairs, "Shame on you, you brazen Arab whore!" Or the director's assistant who told Mahmoud during a shooting, "Hey Ali, go get me those cables." Worse, even the editors and managers who weren't so openly prejudiced didn't give him any credit. They were worried about entrusting him with expensive equipment and seemed to fear either that he would steal and sell the stuff or, as an ignorant Oriental foreigner, simply not be able to use it correctly. Which was all the more laughable because Mahmoud was a much better, more inventive, and more experienced cameraman than any of the full-timers. But it was painfully clear that Mahmoud hadn't a hope of a permanent position either with German Public Broadcasting or with a production company.

The first time he brought Beate to Lebanon, he pulled over to the side of the road after driving for half an hour and told her to open the window. Reliably, the light on-shore breeze streamed in with an incomparable, sweet-sour, intense, sunny fragrance that tickled her nose and filled everything—the car, the air, the sky, the entire plain south of Tripoli—like a life-giving drug. Shortly thereafter they drove into a green, sun-drenched paradise that stretched to the horizon and down to the sea and right up to the first houses: the orange groves of Tripoli. Beate got out, ran in among the trees, and spun around like a dancer. She felt like taking off her clothes and embracing every tree. Born again in this

moment, touched, marked by the magic of the sun, she gave her heart to the Phoenician landscape, the cradle of civilization.

Mahmoud had lost his father when still a young boy and his mother had died during her last delivery. He soon found himself nominal head of his extended, conservative Sunni family of sisters, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and grandmothers. When important decisions needed to be made or disputes settled, they all waited for and counted on his word. In Tripoli, private life was a foreign concept, an impossibility. But Mahmoud was a modern man and wanted to live a modern life, with the kind of independence and anonymity he had learned to appreciate in Germany. That's why he and Beate did not move to the city of his birth where—despite frantic growth, constant demolition, and gigantic new buildings—he knew every alley, every souk, and every inch of riverbank and the river where he had swum as a boy. Instead, they settled in the capital.

In the early years, the three women whom life had cast up in Lebanon with Lebanese husbands were fast friends. They gave one another the feeling of home. Together they celebrated German Christmas with a tree and "Silent Night" and German Easter with Bach and colored eggs. But before long their relations grew looser and more attenuated. The three were too different from one another, their husbands too different, as were their social milieus and political convictions. At that time, anything like a Lebanese identity, which could have given them a sense of commonality, was not to be found.

Then the war broke out, and war forces everyone to declare their allegiance.

Every day, Jean drove across the demarcation line to open the Goethe Institute where he worked and which he had, in the meantime, made into a beacon of the spirit in evil times. Karoline collated and translated her folktales while she waited for his return. When they made outings to Yahchouch, Younes grew disconsolate when he saw how neighbors who had coexisted peacefully for years were now throwing stones through one another's windows or killing one another's sheep and goats. For him, the brotherhood of man Schiller invoked in the "Ode to Joy" was a pure reality and a guide for life, but he appealed to it in vain. It didn't have the desired effect. When he cried out from the pulpit, "Brothers, above the starry sky there must be a loving Father!" they threatened him with a beating.

German Broadcasting, which had developed a sudden interest in Lebanon, hired Mahmoud on as a local assistant. All they really wanted was someone who could help with the language and knew the local terrain, but before a month was out, he was shooting the videos that then appeared on the nightly news in Germany. No one else dared to get as close to the front line. Half out of fear and half from a guilty conscience, the German correspondents, feeling as adventurous as cynical old Graham Greene alcoholics, drank whiskey in the bar of the Commodore and waited for his footage, which they would then use in the reports they read for the camera in front of the hotel, where no sniper threatened and no stray shells landed. They knew what they owed him and thanked him for it.

But for his wife, Mahmoud's coolly calculated daring was a storm of steel. It plunged Beate into a state of constant fear that lasted for years and, as she herself thought, aged her faster than a quiet life at home would have. Nevertheless—or maybe for that very reason—she felt it to be the most intense, sensuous, wide-awake, vibrant period of her life, when time was postponed and distilled to perfect purity and every drop tasted in equal measure of gall and ambrosia.

Each glass of wine, each cigarette, each poem; every cloud formation far above the billowing smoke from the shelling; the sight of snow on the mountains, of sun on the capital of a fallen pillar from two thousand years ago; the taste of an apple, the consistency of labneh, the color of arak – everything was painfully beautiful, crucially important, and unforgettable.

Marlene refused to give up civil and social life just because a war was on. She spun her threads, intensified her relationship with the German embassy and the shrinking German community. She found financial backers for her school and helped Sam make the hospital more profitable.

And so the three friends went their separate ways during the war years. There were no open conflicts between them, but they were separated by their political views, loyalties, and sympathies. Sam considered Mahmoud a closet revolutionary and Palestinian sympathizer and Jean a dreamy oddball. Mahmoud thought Sam was a Falangist and it's unclear whether Younes was even aware of the other two and if so, how

they fit into his world view of the previous century, except that he of course respected them as creatures of the one God just like everyone else, from president to goatherd.

That was the situation when Marlene invited them all together again after such a long time. None of them guessed it would be for the last time.

She had already made several attempts, but something had always come up – the war, or work. But this afternoon everyone showed up on her wide terrace, and the fourth couple were also there: Christine and Matthias, the future. Neither the Youneses nor Mahmoud and Beate had children.

Matthias and Christine had clearly had some disagreement. She sat down next to her mother and Matthias pulled a spare wicker chair up to the table so as not to have to sit next to Sam. By the time the latter arrived a few minutes later (the most important person present is allowed, no, is *required* to make a separate entrance after the others), things had gotten off to a bad start. No one had a specific topic to kick off the conversation with; no one said any introductory words. Sam didn't just preside over every gathering as a matter of course, he animated the conversation and was the heart and soul of every group he participated in. Some people are at their best in a small group, among three or four other people. Mahmoud was such a person. There are others who remain silent and inconspicuous, but everyone later vividly recalls their presence, and that was Khalil-Jean. But Sam shone all the brighter the larger the group. Then his charisma would begin to throw off sparks. If you were alone with him, the talk always involved concrete things: work, decisions, instructions, advice. He was not the man for the meta-level, thought Matthias, no philosopher or deep thinker, but a gifted string-puller, persuader, communicator. Out of the corner of his eye, the younger man watched with fascination and envy the way Sam lifted his glass, complimented Beate on her dress while gazing with pleasure at her legs, asked Mahmoud about the situation in Tripoli and the welfare of his family (he knew all about such details and recalled what he had once learned), and asked Karoline if she'd translated "The Waiter and the Princess" yet.

While the Filipinas served coffee and cake as if it was a Sunday afternoon family get-together in some German back yard, Matthias studied the faces of the three other men with a mixture of admiration and fear as they discussed the attack on the American embassy that had rattled all the windows here in the house.

They were different than the men back home. The lines in their faces were deeper, their brows more furrowed, but their lips were also fuller and seemed better supplied with blood. The seriousness beneath their jovial exteriors, however, reminded Matthias of his own father, who had fought a year on the Russian front and then survived five years in a POW camp. For the first time he recognized and understood his father in a way he never had before: a life in the permanent company of fate.

Fear, listlessness, cynicism, lust for life, coolly discharged responsibilities, bitterness, maturity, fatalism, serenity – he felt himself to be so much softer than these men, made of a different, more modern, more attractive, smoother, but definitely less sturdy material. But at the same time he felt superior to them, more up-to-date, free of ballast, less archaic, less grounded and tethered. I don't want to be like them, he thought, and saw in his mind's eye the shattered bodies: blood to be staunched, wounds to be sewn up, limbs amputated, vessels repaired. No that's not what I want, but then, do I want to become one of the soft and innocent German child-men of my generation?

Christine too was different than the three older women, including her mother, but at the same time, a product of this country and this war. It left its mark on her, a daughter of the victors, just as it would if she were a daughter of all the losers. And when he held her in his arms, she weighed so much more than all the German girls he had known.

And then he turned his gaze back to Sam and saw quite clearly that if he stayed here he would never get past this man. He was like a rushing river and wading or swimming across it to reach the other side was a completely absurd idea. His power would simply sweep you along.

The grownups (Matthias actually thought of them as "grownups") gave no particular thought to the young couple, who unlike all the others were not sitting together. They would pick up the baton; carry the German-Lebanese partnership forward into a future era of peace. Young and full of promise—what more was there to say? No one had any doubts about their union. Matthias tried to decide which of the three women, so different from one another, had most profoundly taken on the identity of her new country and which of the three men would survive the best in Germany.

Despite the war, Karoline lived in Lebanon as if in a book—in one of the folktales or classic stories she was collecting and translating. She was aware of the war (how could

she not be, when Jean was in constant mortal danger) but at a deeper level, this war was no concern of hers. She lived among the gods and heroes of Mont Leban, in the old, cultivated French colonial era, among peasants and monks. The naiads of Nahr-Ibrahim whispered in her ear and Adonis died and was reborn in the circle of the year.

Like many sensitive people of her generation, she had inwardly called it quits with her native land after the Auschwitz trials—not with family or nature or the landscape, but with Germany as a nation. Too much horror, too much guilt. And so like other young women who joined Action Reconciliation Service for Peace and went to pick grapefruit on an Israeli kibbutz, she went to the East, just not to East of today. She and Younes lamented the hatred between different faiths that served as a pretext for very different struggles, but for Karoline it was a single region, namely, the land through which the Redeemer had walked. He had gone down to Tyre and Sidon from Galilee. Two thousand years were to her like a single day on which the divine is not just remembered but recurred again and again, and Matthias thought that perhaps for that very reason, she had remained the most German of all three.

Marlene, on the other hand, reminded him of the undaunted pioneer wives of the Wild West, driving their covered wagons relentlessly toward the setting sun, seeking uncharted territory. She came from the Old World and confidently carried its values in her baggage. She rolled up her sleeves and did what needed doing.

Her home was her circled wagons. She was the only one of the three who never bothered to learn Arabic because she could speak French with every civilized person in Lebanon and with the half-civilized—the Arabs—she could get along with English. But as much as she remained what she had been, she still got much more involved with the actual land she now lived in: problems with workmen, baksheesh, arrangements and appointments, carefully calibrated doses of corruption, flexible time management—she learned all that while forgetting none of the decisive values, for her life with Sam brought no culture shock with it. It was a life according to German and European patterns, with European literature, European classical music and philosophy, and with the corresponding technical and hygienic advances. And the Oriental part of it was better food, more genial dinner parties, and the warmer Mediterranean climate. The war? Yes yes, sure sure, we know what war is! This one here was a bit more chaotic, confused,

more idiotic and pointless than ours, and of course she hated that it was destroying and Arabizing the city she had fallen in love with. But as long as you didn't live in the wrong neighborhood and didn't stick your neck out politically and weren't financially strapped, you could survive this war too—inshallah!

Of the three women, it was Beate who had laid aside the most of her earlier identity to metamorphose into an Eastern, Arabian—almost a Moslem wife. Of course, that was the result of her marriage. She and Mahmoud were a couple who meshed like two gears. They were as one even in their political convictions. As a girl, Beate had lived through the political turmoil in Schwabing and been in a commune for a while. She was appalled and disgusted by the German past as well as the German present, which she regarded as a restoration of the former. Mahmoud's roots were in the pan-Arabic Socialist movement that suffered a traumatic defeat in 1967, and he supported the Palestinian freedom movement as the paradigm of a progressive political struggle. That was the convergence of his politics with Beate's. For him, pre-war Lebanon was a corrupt, outsourced bordello of the French, a state like Cuba under Batista. At first, the civil war looked to him like Castro's liberation movement. They experienced euphoric days until disenchantment set in.

Through Mahmoud, Beate met the politically like-minded avant-garde of young writers and poets, including Kadmos and his friends. Their door was always open to playwrights and musicians, they talked politics in endless discussions and in 1982, when the Israelis arrested Kadmos and tortured him for two days during their occupation of Beirut, he came straight to their place after being released and Beate nursed him back to health.

She didn't just plunge into the current conflicts and debates, however, but also was engaged in the older and more lasting structures, namely, when Mahmoud as head of the family went to Tripoli to listen to the questions and concerns and pleas for help from the members of his clan. The women in his family did what Beate never had to do and Mahmoud never asked of her: they obeyed him. Certainly for their own good, but when they were in Tripoli, Beate sensed a steady wave of otherness, perhaps of mistrust and envy, rolling toward her. For Mahmoud's relationship with her was something different. Not only was it a matter of course that Beate had a job and that all their decisions were

made jointly, not only did Mahmoud respect and admire her demonstratively and openly, but in private too he was no different and never despotic. He cooked, washed up, made the beds, and never failed to bring her fresh flowers when he returned from filming at the front. And he possessed what Beate had always sought but never found in her German boyfriends, the thing a woman like her prized most highly in him: dignity. He had the calm dignity of a man who owes nothing to anyone and has nothing to prove. He would never allow an insult to pass, however. He could be frightening . . . she knew of two or three incidents. But the friendly calm and natural authority he exuded prevented anyone from insulting him or her. Compared to him, the German men she had known were all like boys who only played at maturity and worldly wisdom. With Mahmoud she felt safe and invincible, even when bullets whistled around them—which happened more than once due to Mahmoud’s daredevilry.

Because of this natural dignity and his equally natural civility, everything that represented and surrounded Mahmoud acquired dignity in Beate’s eyes: the Arabic world and its traditions, the shabby beauty of Tripoli, the religion he came from (even if he no longer practiced it), his people, his native soil and its customs, its hospitality and its long and sensitive memory.

As a Christian and millionaire, a man like Sam was Mahmoud’s natural political opponent even before the civil war broke out, and nothing much had changed in that regard during the course of the conflict, especially after Sabra and Shatila. Of course, as an employee of German Broadcasting Mahmoud was obliged to be politically neutral, but that did not preclude personal partisanship. However, in the successive disappointments, betrayals, skullduggery, and disillusion, his partisanship had become hypothetical. You approved of the Palestinian struggle when the front was against Israel, but not when Arafat and his corrupt clan attempted to exploit Lebanon for his own purposes and almost completely destroyed it in the process. It was only fair to give the poor Shiites from the south more rights and a greater voice in national decision-making, but that didn’t justify the murders committed by the Amal militia.

At the time of Marlene’s invitation, even Mahmoud and Beate had lost their political and revolutionary passion, just like most of their other thinking friends. But it wasn’t just the foreign powers who, as in the Thirty Years War, were destroying the

country and making it a hostage in their battle for influence that made Mahmoud feel more and more like nothing but a pawn in their game, a slave to his time instead of its master. Something similar was happening on a small scale with his employers at German Broadcasting: the same racism and ignorant arrogance that had driven him out of Munich was being repeated here in comments like, “Can’t he just show us where to go to film something? Does he have to have a hand in doing it too? We’re running a risk.” Or, “He could give us a couple of tips. Don’t all these guys here know each other anyway?” Nor were these things said behind his back, no, they were quite open about it, as if he didn’t understand German. They were said by people whose film chestnuts he’d pulled out of the fire. Not only that, if they ever got up the courage to leave the Commodore in their utter historical and geographical ignorance, he had to keep them from falling victim to an ambush, or a sniper, or even just a sunstroke. Only the alcoholic old salt who was chief correspondent and was replaced after a few years because of battle fatigue and cirrhosis had confessed to Mahmoud with tears in his eyes after the twelfth whiskey in the hotel bar that he was ashamed to admit he looked up to him and considered him, Mahmoud, to be the real reporter.

Today, however, the afternoon and evening had passed in relative harmony. There had been only one brief argument between Sam and Mahmoud when the talk turned to the Syrians, and Younes had calmed the waters with a homily of peace. Now Mahmoud was sitting next to Matthias, both of them film nuts, and they were talking about Fritz Lang. Mahmoud was a big fan and a few years ago had helped Beate organize a Lang retrospective at the Goethe Institute. Now he asked Matthias if he knew Peter Lorre’s film “The Lost One.” Matthias shook his head.

Mahmoud told him about Lorre’s astonishing path from a provincial Jewish family in Austro-Hungary via street theater and “M” to Hollywood and about his émigré’s misfortune when he tried to get a foothold in German movies after the war with “Der Verlorene” — “The Lost One.” And he related how all the returning exiles who went to East Germany but weren’t Stalinists got the cold shoulder. Lang had no luck either, artistic or otherwise, in his hope for collaboration and a sense of togetherness with the shattered souls of the Germans. A true exile, Mahmoud said, can’t be revoked or reversed, and Matthias thought he understood why life in Germany could not be an

option for Mahmoud. You have to go down with your countrymen, even when they're in the wrong and guilty, otherwise they'll never listen to you again.

Karoline, Beate—even Marlene to some degree—were lost to their native land forever. They were wanderers in the vacuum between cultures, deeply alienated from one and only really connected to the other through their husbands.

On the following day, Matthias left without saying good-bye. The airport happened to be open—who knew for how long—and by noon he was sitting in a taxi. He departed that evening and never returned to Lebanon.

[. . .]

And now back to the years before the Taif Agreement, the years of daily bloodshed on both sides of the Green Line.

How did the three couples who would never see each other again fare during the remaining years of killing and dying? What price did the unleashed gods exact from them, what sacrifices of body and soul did they have to make to survive those years in spirit and flesh?

For the Youneses, it started with a concert in Jounieh. They were sitting in the fourth row. A soprano was performing an evening of Mendelssohn and Schumann lieder and had just begun to sing “The Song of Suleika”—*With profoundest inner pleasure, / Song, I gather what you say! / Lovingly you seem to tell me / That I'm ever at his side*—when a siren began to wail and at the same instant there was a series of explosions that ended in a deafening detonation. The doors were blown off their hinges and plaster trickled from the ceiling. The hall was evacuated until the attack was over. Then the audience resolutely returned, the singer brushed the dust from her gown and shook out her hair, the pianist picked the pieces of plaster off the Steinway, and the recital was concluded to enthusiastic applause.

Even so, the following morning the Youneses decided that Karoline should return to the safety of Germany for a while and wait for the civil war to wind down a bit more. The airport was closed and there was no getting out of town to the south anyway. The

only possibility were the boats still able to sail to Cyprus from Jounieh's little yacht harbor.

This latest attack had obviously demoralized a lot of people. The streets and squares leading to the docks looked like a refugee camp, with people sitting, lying, and squatting on benches, curbstones, suitcases, bags, and bundles. Old people, crying toddlers, bearded men with deep creases in their gray, unshaven faces, ladies glittering with diamonds and wearing mink coats. All the boats were over-booked, over-full, and lying disturbingly low in the water as they chugged out of the harbor. People bargained and haggled, wads of money changed hands and got shoved into breast pockets. Desperate people at the end of their tether tried to jump on board at the last minute.

With her gaze turned inward, Karoline endured the ride with calm dignity although she had to stand in the open boat along with hundreds of others with no protection from the sun. Only the wheelhouse of the cutter was roofed over. Here night falls like a curtain and after two hours at sea, amid the roar and vibration of the engine, the stink of diesel fuel, the heeling and pitching of the boat, it had turned black as ink and a heavy swell began. The overloaded vessel struggled against the waves. Spray broke over the gunwales. It sounded like a boom at first and then it rushed in out of the darkness, rearing up like a gigantic specter. In just a few minutes everyone was soaked to the bone. Children screamed and cried, women whimpered, men moaned. Only the forced and sticky proximity of their bodies kept them a bit warm. Then people began to get sick from the rocking, the cigarette smoke, and the stink of diesel. Soon it was everyone. At first, those who were polite tried to get over to the railing before throwing up, but it was too crowded and soon everyone was just puking where they stood—onto their own shoes and pants, onto someone else's, standing, kneeling, sitting. No one paid any more attention to where the stream went or whether some still clung to their faces.

In the wheelhouse the skipper and his mate laughed themselves silly as they passed a bottle of arak back and forth and smoked cigarettes like they were going out of style. All the passengers' attempts to talk to them or ask them something were met with an obscene gesture and the refusal to even open the wheelhouse door.

At some point, a child's sticky hand grasped Karoline's and then was gone again. Karoline slept standing up, her head on someone's shoulder. Whenever he moved, she

jerked awake but people were so close together that she could not fall. A constant whimpering and moaning as if from mournful sirens underlay her half-sleep and half-waking.

The next day she telegraphed from Larnaka "arrived safely STOP no problems STOP fly Germany tonight STOP" and even paid for an extra "love".

Younes drove to the Goethe Institute below the Manara lighthouse every day the situation on the ground permitted. He was a lighthouse himself. The war continued, but the "Giti" stayed open. In his spare time he puttered around the family house in the Adonis Valley. He wanted it to look like the old houses of the area as seen in colored sketches from earlier times: built of large, ocher-colored blocks of stone with flat, bright red, hipped roofs and generous terraces covered in grape vines that served as summer living rooms. Inside, a large stone room with a mosaic floor and exposed beams, high-ceilinged and cool, a place for family and friends to congregate and where even sixty guests wouldn't be bumping into one another.

It was an ecumenical construction site. Christian roofers from the lower Adonis Valley and Muslim carpenters from farther up. Masons, tilers, roofers, and plumbers. And Christian fanatics from the lower and Muslim fanatics from the upper Adonis Valley threw stones through the windows, stole roof tiles, and sprayed the walls with the slogans of hatred.

The glazier became Younes's best friend. Younes paid him with baptisms and weddings in the little chapel of St. Seman where he read the Mass once a month.

"We're all children of the same God," he would say as he pulled the bell rope that lifted him a meter off the floor and the ringing poured out into the valley among the muezzins' calls to prayer.

To reach West Beirut, when he got to Antelias he usually took the old coast road that ended beyond Bourj Hammoud at the harbor in the center of town. There were fewer roadblocks and checkpoints and they were less strictly run. If he was able to, he left his Citroen in an empty container, paid a boy a few coins to watch it, and crossed the demarcation line on foot. Then he took one of the group taxis that went to Manara and Raouché.

On this particular day, there was a new roadblock at the end of the harbor. Syrian soldiers brandishing submachine guns forced him out of the car. He had to spread his legs and lean against the car on outstretched arms. With his back to the Syrians, he didn't see the first blow coming. A second blow struck him in the back of the head. As if from a great distance, he heard the men's mocking laughter and dirty jokes.

At that moment, a cloud drifted in front of the sun, things went black, and a mist arose that hid from view everything that happened in the next hour.

It was a miracle that he managed to drive back to Jounieh and get himself admitted to the hospital. His broken nose was set, his broken jaw stabilized with wire, his abrasions and burns cleaned and bandaged, and his internal injuries treated. Karoline was called, and by the time she was able to return to Beirut, he was already back home. Five days later he was able to visit the construction site in Adonis Valley again and after another week, he could drive to the Goethe Institute. But he wasn't the same man anymore. His hair had turned gray in a month. One hand still had a small tremor, especially when he was excited. He never talked about that afternoon and Karoline didn't push him to. For a year he wrote no poems. It took months—no, years—for his soul to grow scars over its wounds and more years until the scars ceased hurting and he stopped breaking out in a sweat at the slightest trouble.

For Mahmoud and Beate, the ordeal came out of the blue, unexpected like all ordeals and catastrophes. There was nothing much new happening in the war and German Broadcasting came up with the idea of brightening up their reporting from Lebanon by including some culture in the midst all the images of explosions and ruins. As a local correspondent with knowledge of the country's geography and history, Mahmoud was sent on a solo day trip into the rugged, mountainous country above Tyre to shoot the excavations at a Phoenician archeological site. They allowed him to bring his wife along as an audio technician and they were looking forward to a nice weekend together – a definite possibility even in wartime with a little prudence, caution, and planning.

It was the hour of Pan when they parked their car in a village and began to climb the stony path to the excavation: quiet, hot, shadeless, and deserted.

The site consisted of several trenches reinforced with boards and extending along a rocky outcropping. They had unearthed a Bronze-Age settlement and the remains of its

fortified wall. From the nearest hilltop they could see the snow-covered summit of Mt. Hermon, but the village where they had parked the car was hidden behind a rugged hillside. Beate set out the picnic while Mahmoud scrambled around with his camera, looking for the best angle for a shot down onto the entire area, which was the only thing worth filming.

As usual, this daring man she so loved and admired and was in constant anxiety about moved with the assurance of a tightrope-walker or an experienced alpinist: unafraid of heights, sure-footed, his eyes alert under bushy eyebrows.

They had filmed, eaten and drunk, and the shadows were lengthening. They were just ready to leave when the rock face fifty meters behind them exploded and, still deaf from the noise, they were showered with a hail of pebbles and rock fragments. And in that same moment—Beate, frozen in shock, was still staring at the rock face in incomprehension—Mahmoud was already moving, quickly but without panic. Beate wasn't even aware of his lightning quick, orienting glances. He pulled her gently but firmly down into the deepest trench. He pressed her to the ground, put his finger to his lips, tucked his camera in beside her, spread their picnic blanket over her, and with both hands shoveled dirt and dust on it, so that someone would have to be standing directly over her to be aware she was there. Then he ran down the trench like a cat and was gone.

Shortly thereafter, all hell broke loose.

During the next two hours, the world consisted of nothing but shooting, explosions, shouts, the sounds of heavy vehicles, and the rattle and rumble of tank treads. Mahmoud explained later that they had obviously strayed between opposing fronts, probably a Hezbollah combat patrol returning from a mission at the border and an Israeli unit that was pursuing them.

Night had long since fallen when the shooting finally stopped and Beate felt a hand on her shoulder. Mahmoud knelt beside her, pulled her out from under the blanket, and gestured that she should crawl along behind him. It was so dark that she saw nothing but the soles of his shoes. They crawled through the trenches, then slipped into a dry streambed and continued forward on their hands and knees. Both had scraped and bleeding palms. At some point, Mahmoud pulled her to her feet and led her into the shadow of a rock wall along which they felt their way. In front of them rose a black,

smoldering silhouette. Before Beate, clinging desperately to her husband's hand, had time to be sure it was not a living thing, her foot slipped on something soft, but Mahmoud pulled her along before she could look down.

Twice they heard nearby voices speaking Arabic. Mahmoud pressed Beate flat on the ground until the voices receded and the red points of their cigarette ends had disappeared. Beate had lost all orientation. She didn't know where her husband was leading her or if he was just trying to get away from the fighting. Several times, they crossed a ledge so narrow that she closed her eyes and let his arm lead her.

Mahmoud's watch showed 3:30 when they emerged from an eroded gully and suddenly, the village was in front of them. Fifty meters away was their parked car like a ghostly presence from another world. Mahmoud grasped her by the shoulders to stop her trembling and ordered her to drive directly north without stopping. "What about you?" she asked, dumbfounded and frightened by her own loud voice. "Camera," he answered. "I'll follow and we'll see each other at home."

Later, Beate would not be able to say how, in her shock and trembling like a leaf, she had managed to hold onto the steering wheel and shift gears to get to Beirut. The sun rose, birds twittered in the dusty plane trees, and traffic whooshed by while she stood on their balcony smoking one cigarette after another and waiting for Mahmoud.

She had just made herself some coffee and stepped back outside when there was a whistle from down below and Mahmoud waved up to her with a broad grin on his face. She ran to meet him, threw herself into his arms, shook him like crazy, and pounded his back with her fists while her tears fell on his dusty shirt collar. "It survived," he said. "A bit dirty and with two or three little scratches, but nothing serious. I just dropped it off at the office. They would have torn my head off, those Germans."

"Does your fucking camera mean more than your life?"

"Of course," answered Mahmoud, shrugging his shoulders. "Someone gave me a ride as far as Sour and then I persuaded a taxi driver to bring me here. An expensive picnic! But the pictures are beautiful. I don't think they'll find much left there after last night. A good story."

Marlene and Sam were never in any personal danger, but death was a ubiquitous presence in the hospital and came every day to collect its toll.

Thus time passed and at some point, the war began to grow bored with itself, to lose steam, and suddenly there was peace and they were all fifty and that had been their youth.

Beirut lay in ruins, hardly one stone on another in the center of town, everything upside-down, but under the stones life was stirring in this old, tenacious, fatalistic, contemporary land. In thrall to death but in the service of life, the survivors went on eating, drinking, dancing, playing, earning money, learning, traveling, buying, rebuilding. And forgetting. Without forgetting, no peace. Lebanon had survived, indeed, it was now just beginning to be Lebanon. Suddenly, one could identify with a boxer who gets pummeled for fifteen rounds and then wins on points. Many Christians, Sunnis, Shias, Druse, Armenians—whatever they were and had been—spoke of themselves for the first time as Lebanese.

Hariri founded Solidere, people invested in the ruins, and out of the rubble rose a city center, a Levantine Trieste or Florence 2.0, an international shopping mall that the poet Kadmos hated because in all its gleaming radiance, it cemented the old inequalities that earlier—at least here in the souk—had dissolved in the swarming twilight of country and city-folk haggling and bargaining and buying. But after the free flow of money had been blocked and diverted during the killing years, it now broke free and it was just too tempting to pursue the second favorite occupation of man.

Like tropical vegetation after a rain, the demand for art as well as for entertainment also exploded. Bars, clubs, discotheques, and movie theaters were opening up everywhere. In every ruin there was a concert or a theater performance. It was the post-war era, always the most fertile time for everything new.

It was also a newly-won time of freedom for the three aging couples. Beate and Mahmoud enjoyed the new theater and performance scene and launched joint projects themselves between Lebanese and German musicians and theater troupes, listened to Claude Chalhoub's crossover music, and traveled.

The Youneses too paid regular visits to Germany, presented their folktale collection to church groups, and spoke about ecumenism. When German groups in return paid visits to the Adonis Valley, for many it was an unforgettable first experience of the overflowing hospitality of the country.

The same was true for Sam and Marlene, although their house saw different guests with other interests. It was a house that now, after the war, had a richer collection of artefacts than the National Museum itself, a cornucopia of three and a half millennia of beauty: Phoenician vases and mosaics, jewels and jewelry boxes from the Bronze Age, votive offerings from the Eshmun Temple, Hellenistic figurines and statuettes, artefacts from the Fatimid, Seljuk, Ayyubid, and Mameluke eras. With Marlene as their guide, art historians came from as far away as the US to admire their private collection.

Now they again regularly sent out their Christmas letter with family news from the past year, something they had done only intermittently during the war. It told of their travels, their house concerts, the progress of the school and the hospital and continued the tradition of adding personal greetings at the end, always seconded by their son and daughter. Every year the list of recipients grew longer, especially from the end of the Nineties, when they began to send the letter by e-mail. Only Matthias never got one and so never read the last lines that always ended with "And heartfelt greetings to all from Christine, too."

And since time flies more quickly in peacetime (setting aside a few smaller wars like the Israeli attack in 2006)—September 11th had already happened, the Cedar Revolution was already underway, the Syrians were gone and Hezbollah was in front of the Parliament building—we've already reached the present and our three couples are all over seventy.

The Youneses were harvesting apples and olives in the garden of their family home and making cider and soap to give to friends. To tell the end of their story, we need to briefly return to one of the last years of the war when something happened that at first appeared banal but had serious consequences. It was at the time of the Aoun's offensive when one evening two very frightened men—Syrian soldiers who had gotten separated from their unit—knocked on the Youneses' door. They were being pursued and, weapons at the ready, they asked for a place to hide for the night.

"We are all children of the same God," said Younes, repeating his mantra, and opened the door to them. Karoline set out what little food there was in the house and they spent the night there, got drunk they were so afraid, broke one of the windows, and brandished their submachine guns, young and half-crazed with fear and shame and

alcohol and testosterone. At last they fell asleep. Younes woke them up before dawn and they slunk off through the garden and the underbrush on the riverbank.

This episode was long forgotten now as the couple gradually began to be tired and their only wish was that one of them would not have to go before the other. This wish and even more was granted to them, for the two Syrian soldiers had in fact been gods wandering the earth to test the humanity of humans in times of war. (Of course, in the shape of Syrian soldiers they had had to act like them, hence among other things the broken window, which however pleased the glazier.) And so the couple was standing in their garden as leaves began to obscure and hide their faces. And Younes was transformed into an oak and Karoline into a linden tree and both now stood in the garden amid the apple and olive trees. And what a happy sight it was when, at that very same moment here in our village, up in the garden of the parsonage beneath the castle keep with a view of Frankfurt in the distance, both of them emerged from just such an oak and such a linden, blinking and rubbing their eyes, to live ever since among us, freed from all their weariness, sharing their second and final life with us and every other year rehearsing with half the village the garden opera whose most recent performance we just attended.

Mahmoud and Beate traveled. Not only and not even mainly to Germany. He could read what she desired from her eyes and if they weren't listening to Kadmos in the smoky Café de Paris performing new poems for his friends in his gutted, shelled, ruined, skeletal Arabic—prose-poems that sometimes sounded like Kafka stories and sometimes like Gogol sketches—then together they discovered the equally surreal silhouettes of the Bay of Ha Long or the skyline of Manhattan from a view point down under the Brooklyn Bridge (although the application process for Mahmoud's visa lasted three times as long after 2001).

And then came the day, another family day in Tripoli when the clan recited their problems, arguments, and requests to the patriarch. They were all together in the big salon, sitting on faux gilt-edged Louis XV sofas, drinking tea and eating sweet petit-fours. Afterwards there was a walk up to the Qalat Sandschul, the ancient crusader fortress of Raymond de St. Gilles.

And just as in all previous years and decades, just as he had as a boy and as a wiry teenager, Mahmoud the white-haired lion sprang onto a parapet, balancing above the

precipice, nimble, vertigo-free, and sure-footed as always, while Beate suffered paroxysms of fear for her daring beloved, as always.

And then, while all eyes were on him, it happened that his heart burst open and the great bird Simurgh—both eagle and falcon with wonderfully patterned feathers, the lion of the air—freed itself from his breast, spread its wings, circled up into the blue, and caught the wind that lifted it higher and carried it off from the gaping, staring family below.

His wings glinted up there in the sunshine and he flew, flew to the snow-covered peaks of the Atlas Mountains, flew to his nest beyond the highest peak, where truth and self-knowledge dwell, his real home.

And not until he had become merely a dark speck in the ether did a hoarse scream of despair issue from the mouth of the woman he had left behind.

And that was the end of Beate's life as well. She spent the lonely time left to her waiting for him to come and fetch her as he always had. Now it emerged that she had always been a foreigner after all, at least for Mahmoud's family. She found no home with them, for the price would have been to melt into the mute, black chorus of Tripoli widows, to surrender her independence, her money, and her life in favor of the new head of the family, a bearded cousin of Mahmoud's to whom she meant nothing as a person and counted for nothing as a woman.

Their lovely apartment in Beirut had become a prison, a mausoleum. Whenever she went out on the balcony to smoke, she always looked up to see if Simurgh was coming to get her. But she needed to hatch the bird herself; she could feel it inside, pecking and scratching and slowly destroying the shell of her body. It took a long time to free itself, much longer than with Mahmoud. She was already in the hospital when at some point, in the twilight of a morphine doze pumped into her through tubes, she saw the great bird at her window. And it took her home.

Only Sam and Marlene still live in their villa high above the sea with its beds of roses and deserted tennis court. They're getting older and older and death has forgotten them.

On that morning so many years ago when Matthias had already half-decided to leave Beirut, he drove down to the hospital to speak with Sam.

He couldn't find him at first, and then they begged him to help with the emergency cases and so he put on scrubs and entered one of the operating rooms. It took a while to realize what he was seeing, to understand it – to suddenly understand everything, as he thought.

The surgical team was gathered around a surprisingly small body and two more stretchers stood further back in the room, but they were covered. People looked up briefly as he entered and probably thought that behind his mask was another surgeon.

Matthias froze. The child they were working on was dead, another victim of the war. There were several dead children in the room. And then he saw the containers. Saw the kidneys, the tiny lungs, the pancreas, the eyes.

He stumbled backwards out of the room as if someone had punched him in the chest. He lost his balance, caught himself on the doorframe, pulled himself through as if through a bulkhead in a hurricane. A man came running after him, supported him, took him by the arm and steered him to a chair. He pulled the mask off his face and it was Sam.

He drew up another chair, sat down across from Matthias, and put his hands on the younger man's knees. "You've got to understand. We do enormous good and help a huge number of people this way. We rescue them. Nobody could save these children here. The war . . ."

Matthias shook his head and ran off blindly. He drove up to the villa, stuffed his things into a duffle bag, said good-bye to no one, and asked the driver to take him down into the city. From there he took a taxi to the airport and checked in to the first flight to Europe, an Alitalia plane to Rome. He thought again of the severed arm with the diamond ring on one finger that Sam had removed without a moment's hesitation. It was the first time he understood that war engenders a hardness in people that isn't wickedness. It was like when Siegfried kills the dragon and then bathes in its blood and it makes his skin horn-hard and invulnerable. Matthias too could have bathed in that dragon's blood and would have become a different person. He stood at the edge of that slough but didn't step in.

When one of the Filipinas told Christine that her fiancé had dashed through the house like a madman, she looked everywhere for him. No one had seen him since. She

asked her mother and all the servants. At last she talked to the driver. She had him drive her to the hospital and found her father, who beat around the bush. Without knowing what had happened or what went on in the hospital, she figured out that her boyfriend had fled. She had to find him, keep him from leaving before he did something stupid, before he left her, before he was gone and she was left behind in her golden cage. Anything but that.

She told the driver to take her to Beirut, to the airport. Without being stopped, they reached the highway running south out of the city.

Then the world exploded. Along with the vehicles ahead of them that were the probable target, their car had been hit by a remote-control device detonated in a truck parked alongside the road. It blew to pieces their car and both people in it.

Christine was killed instantly. Her parents were able to identify her by the necklace that clung to a piece of flesh and skin and by a finger wearing a ring Matthias had probably given her.