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Tomato!

(Words originally spoken in Arabic in italics)

A living room. Amman, Jordan. 2014. Aunts. Children. Husbands. A dog. Furniture, cushions, fine patterned Persian rug. Crossed legs, ankles on knees. *Candy Crush* sounds. Embroidery of Jesus, Byzantine folds, fingers lifted in benediction, beaming heart. *The Little Book of Calm*. Mechanical light-up reindeer, red bows. Router, defunct fax machine, Toshiba laptop. Reading glasses in a decorative bowl of possibly useful objects—lighters, stray pills, business cards. Orientalist reproduction of a Bedouin encampment, lilac sky, kilim draped camels. Chew toy. *MegaCorp*. Danielle Steele's *Betrayal*. Photographs of wedding days from the late 1960s to 2005. Bumper Sudoku book. Crocheted doilies, one under the glass of the glass topped coffee table. Raw cauliflower heads in beige Tupperware, lid off. *The Jordan Times*, *Al Ra'i*, part read, folded. Fake bronze cherub figurine. Feet crossed, in slippers. Scented bin liner. Flake, Twirl, KitKat. One pack Silk Cut, one pack Kent, one pack Marlboro Lights, one pouch Golden Virginia. Box of tissues in a perspex holder. Four remote controls. Candle burning vanilla and pomegranate. Half eaten orange, cups of water, tea, beer. Peanuts. Plastic tray with drawings of lemons and pale green ribbons. Blue smoke hanging. TV, on mute. Window open slightly at the back, white gauze exhaling. Clatter of dog's claws on tiles. Large ashtrays. Knitting needles. Mobiles. Chargers looped neatly or plugged in. Carrot batons. Pumpkin seeds. Rogue decorative bauble. Hand sanitizer.

Record. Once upon a time hahaha. Lights a cigarette, Kent. Once upon a time hahaha. *Come on, you're both here*, lights a cigarette, Silk Cut, *so if one forgets the other can remind her*. Crosses legs, leans forward a little,

red nails. *We were studying at university, both of us, at the AUB in Beirut, Lebanon. '82. Don't feel you have to change the way you speak. Yes, I went in '79 and L followed in '80, the whole time there were problems in Beirut but in '82 the... what's ijtiyah in English so they understand? Invasion. Invasion. Israeli invasion. The Israeli invasion started in the south of Lebanon, in no time like this, clicks fingers, it was reading period at that time and we had a week for you know we were studying at university for our exams. There was no resistance at all ok, they got in from the south, from Tyre and Sidon, in no time, clicks fingers, less than an hour they'd say they've reached this place and that place and that place till they came to be very very near Beirut. On the spot of the university. How did your parents let you go in '79 and '80 there were so many problems and—Yes there were but on and off and internal things, issues in the militias themselves. It wasn't anything like Lebanon against Israel or another country. Since '75 there were problems all because of you know sects, religious sects. So in '82 we're studying and all of a sudden they told us they'd cancelled the exams and they'd work it out from our midterm papers and so on and a lot of people started to leave Beirut because it's very risky and the Israelis were very near the capital. So what happened, you know, you visited the AUB right? 1992. The mountains, the humid city. My sibling and I pathetic with diarrhoea. Weeping on a curb our father, his bulk. Bullet holes, trash, feral cats, the sea. Yeah. Rolls a cigarette, Golden Virginia. In the Green Field down there it's the football pitch near the sea, near the American embassy, so all the helicopters came there, British citizens, American citizens, all the important people would take the students in the helicopters and move them ... they were safe ... but us, the other nationalities, us and the Palestinians, Syrians, Kuwaitis, and the other countries... nobody. We'd call our embassies to say please can you provide... help us somehow, we'd ask and ask and no one would listen. So we decided we should leave Beirut. Lights a cigarette, Marlboro Light. At that time east Beirut ... Jounieh, al Ashrafiyeh, because they were mostly Christians ... were on good terms with the Israelis so there was less worry about east Beirut. So what happened is that we made a big convoy, we decided we should leave, so it was all the Jordanians, some*

foreigners, some other Arabs. There was a group called Group 16, they were a Lebanese army group – Meow. Meow. Ai ai don't bite me! She cannot place me. A childless foreign adult—they walked with us. We left in groups, in buses, buses that were open at the back, all the students got on with our baggage and everything. They dropped us off so we were safe in Jounieh. The idea being that from there we'd make contact so they'd take us by sea to the closest place which was Cyprus, ok? Meow. Why couldn't you go back to Jordan, because it was inland? Another Kent, eyes sharp. We couldn't, we couldn't. The only solution was to go from Jounieh via Mina, the port, and go from there to Cyprus which was very close. Hello Frostie! Their first dog, loved by and loving of all, to greater or lesser degrees. A tender but never specific engagement with my sibling and I, recognizing us most by our glaring non-belonging, trying everywhere to mask it, or to let it into our arms, or to not... So ok we moved from Beirut to the east, we stayed in one hotel, The Holiday Beach something hotel in Jounieh, for one night, till we made connections and agreements and affirmations that we were students and not involved blah blah blah so they'd let us leave Lebanon. So we were obliged? to stay in the hotel and sleep in the lobby, they used to you know step over us. If I didn't invite anyone we'd never meet up! Everyone put in 10 and we can share. They found a cargo ship, the crew were Egyptians. We were supposed to cross from Jounieh to Cyprus in less than 16 hours. Stop shouting, she's recording it. 10 dinars is enough! Because it was a cargo ship it was slow, it would take 16 hours from Jounieh to Limassol, Cyprus. So at the last minute some people started saying we had to buy sleeping bags and things, other people said it didn't matter. Marlboro. Pins her fringe back in a curl with a long clip, for the morning. So after we left at 6pm, at 8pm, after the ship had been going for two hours, in the middle of nowhere in the sea and it's dark, all of a sudden we heard loudspeakers, big speakers, are you listening? No I spoke to him, I'm telling them the story, I'm telling them the story, she's recording it, yes no. We got out into international waters and saw these big speakers, like in the movies, you know, they turned these huge lights on us. And you cannot see but they can see us, the speakers loudly saying stop where you are, don't move. Ok,

so the crew, they stop the ship, the engine. They sent these rubber boats, the light is on us, and it's very dark, the water's black, only these lights and these rubber boats full of Israeli soldiers holding guns. It's like a scary movie, seriously, they told us to—*you guys go into the kitchen, none of this is going to be recorded, now when she presses rewind you'll see there'll be nothing there. It's ok, it's ok, it's just water, go and get a towel, hurry up.*

Whatever towel I choose will be the wrong one. There are systems upon systems. Order, pride. *Why are you playing with the water? Why are you playing with the water? I didn't play with water. I saw you. I didn't play with it. I saw you! I didn't! You cutie I saw you. This isn't going to work. Why not, it's a towel? What kind of water is that? Water. It's just water, normal water—when the priest came here and he blessed the house the first day and he sat and—*leans forward, exhales, elbow on knee, in normal times you know these people are psychotic enough, but in war time, just off a war zone when they're catching a boat full of random people, it must have been horrible, it must have been absolutely terrifying. *Yes we were kids, students, but the way they treated us—*what's going on to such a degree that you're leaving the country in a cargo ship—but you know what happened, when they stopped us we decided that one person should talk on our behalf. It was a mistake. Kent. One guy he volunteered to talk to them on behalf of all the students, his name was ____, it's a Palestinian name, well known, so it was a mistake. He assumed that because he had an American passport he was in a better position to negotiate with them the Israelis. They stopped us, they came on board, he said I have an American passport ... but once he started they said stop and they came on board. What they did is there were three small rooms for the crew, they took the small rooms, put desks in each room and they told us one by one to go in. They started to investigate us, they asked us questions, you won't believe how much they know about Jordan, Amman, each street, the name of the street, the name of the building, we were amazed from the information they had. Anyway they checked us all and were very skeptical about three or four guys so after three or four hours after they'd finished

they said come with us, they took the three guys and one girl. We, we assumed they'd randomly chosen the names. Her name was ____, but we remembered her mother was very active in small communities ... they took them on the rubber boats? Yes. Quiet. Till the morning they brought them back. When we checked with them what happened the girl said they treated me very good, they brought me some food something like that, as for the guys, I think they beat them or something, they were unable to tell the story. I guess they mistreated them or tried to take information from them, they didn't talk about it, they didn't want to say what happened. Nobody challenged them? These were international waters ... they were armed! We couldn't! We were terrified. In the morning when they brought back the guys and the girl, the helicopters, *you won't believe*. During the night, we didn't have sleeping bags, you know how cold it gets, from the morning the sun shines. Me, when I reached Amman, I had second degree burns, the blood was coming out of my face, vessels, for one week, points, I couldn't see anybody. Lights a Kent off a Kent. Anyway, when they brought back the kids, the helicopters started taking movies, pictures—helicopters from where? From their side, definitely, why? Because they came on the ship and brought with them food on *silver trays*! Imagine, they started to give us food, you know, propaganda, like they're treating us in a good way. Me, they gave me one tomato, so I threw it back and he took it and threw it at me, he said *eat the tomato!* Anyway, instead of taking us 16 hours to reach from Jounieh to Limassol, it took us 36 hours in the sea. 36 hours. There was one bathroom, it was loaded with water. Me, I used to take my jeans off and go inside. The guys have no problem, they go in the sea. So after three days we reach Limassol, we find the Red Cross there giving anyone who wants help or food and we found a plane coming from another place, they ordered it to stop and take the Jordanians back. It was really frightening for the parents why? Because the last thing they heard from us was when we left Jounieh and all of a sudden in the middle of the sea the contact was lost. They were checking with the foreign ministries, what happened to our kids you know, reaches for a cauliflower head, we couldn't reach each other and we were kidnapped

in the sea and we supposed to reach Limassol in 16 hours max, we didn't reach there and nobody knew where we were. *Can you stop changing the channel? What difference does it make, it's on mute. Exactly!* We retreat. This is not our home. Do you think they tortured them? Now nobody knows the true story. Was it in the news? Yes, yes that one. But I mean imagine your families are waiting to hear news from their kids and suddenly no connection at all ... Rolls a cigarette. It seems the Egyptian crew one or two of the guys were Americans so after two hours after we left from Jounieh they said, we heard them, they said, they were standing on the, the—*speak Arabic! On the edge of the ship*, we heard them saying that we're not heading towards Cyprus because the route should be across the, the, it should go straight forward, it's a very small distance. But we went deep in the sea, we weren't heading towards Cyprus, they knew, they took us to Haifa, that's why we stayed for a longer time – Did they know? Did you know their names? Was it planned? They ordered them, they could do nothing you know ... The point is they took you into Israeli waters so that if anything happened, if the story came out, the army can say or the navy can say that this ship is in sovereign Israeli territory so we can, we have the right to— ... to check if these students were involved? Their point was to check if there are if we have any Palestinian *fedayeen* among us. Yeah. But they checked and ... poor students exiting a war zone and they do a whole PR exercise with the emphasis on the Israeli army and the— ... to say we're helping these poor Arabic students. Awareness of the child's restlessness and its correlation with her grandfather's. Kissing the rosary hanging upon the rearview mirror before reversing out. How was L? Oh my goodness she was cryyyyying! Laughter. Marlboro. Really? I was crying because I'd left my boyfriend there! He was a Syrian guy and he could not leave with us. And then we found a *wasta* ... him and three other guys went to the Maronite church who hid them so we met only for 10 minutes before we left Jounieh and we cried, said goodbye and they stayed in Jounieh for three days and the Maronite church they took them back to Syria, they sent them back, and we came back to Amman ... did you throw a tomato too? She threw the tomato, he'd have shot her.

Laughter. He'd have shot you. He told her *eat the tomato* and she said *I don't want to eat the tomato!* Laughter. I thought to myself, he's shot her. Laughter. And you're there winding them up. An older sister. Of course, he's a pig. Well, we went to Israel and we talked to them and I didn't feel a thing, not a difference. Welcome to Israel. Come on, come on, she's tired, come on. Is it still recording? Remind me to find the picture and there was a poem my friend wrote about it and—