

SOUAD



PARIS

August 1990

Souad wakes with a start. The sound of a French news channel trumpets through the rooms. She has been sleeping fitfully since the invasion, at odd hours. Everyone in the house has been doing the same, *Khalto* Mimi and her brother Ammar taking long naps after lunch, Lara sleeping through the afternoons and waking at night.

She blinks against the pillowcase, squinting toward the open curtains. The streaks of setting sun stain the wooden floors red. From the television, the newscasters' words drift through the room in bursts.

"Troops . . . vacillating . . . the borders."

Not a nightmare. Each waking, there is this moment—the clearing when she remembers everything, realizes once again what has happened.

Souad sighs and turns, pulling the thin blanket around her. She is a messy sleeper, the sheets always twisted when she wakes. Shutting her eyes, she buries her face in the pillow.

"Sleep, sleep, sleep," she whispers to herself. She wishes to sleep for hours, until it is midnight outside. But it is too late, her mind is already crowding with everything, the invasion and Elie and her mother's dreaded phone call. Of the three, the invasion feels, ironically, least pressing.

Souad sits up in bed, wincing at a twinge in her back. She is thirsty, her muscles sore.

An image of Elie comes to mind, his silhouette beneath the streetlamp last night, after the whiskey and dancing. He'd shrugged. *Think about it.*

SOUAD'S ART PROFESSOR at school, Madame Jubayli, had recommended her for a summer program at the newly opened L'Institut Supérieur des Arts Appliqués, but when Souad brought up the idea at home, it had caused many arguments, what Karam referred to as "the Paris impasse."

"There are painting and textiles; it's perfect. It's exactly what I need," she said, over and over, to her parents. Her father vacillated, diplomatic but reluctant, while her mother outright forbade it.

"You want us to send you to Paris by yourself, like some street girl?"

The months churned on. There were charges and pleading and nightlong fights. Souad convinced Madame Jubayli to meet with her parents and speak about the program, its reputation, the colleagues she knew who taught there. Souad requested a copy of the brochure, went through it line by line. Still her mother refused to let her go.

"You're just jealous!" Souad finally screamed one evening. "Because you're stuck in your little life, you want everyone as miserable as you!"

Her mother's face stormed, and her father finally intervened, telling Souad to go to her room. Souad went, paced, kicked her door and walls, then finally stomped back out to the living room, ready to scream at them both.

But when she drew breath, she collapsed. Falling onto the sofa in front of her parents, she wept like a child.

"Please," she said between sobs. "Please, please, please." She finally lifted her head, looked her mother straight in the eye. "Mama. Mama, *please.*"

Where yelling and bargaining had failed, tears worked. Within a week, *Khalto* Mimi, who'd moved to France years ago, was called; she agreed to have Souad stay with her for the summer and, like magic, Souad found herself on a plane headed to Paris.

SOUAD KICKS THE COVERS off and gets out of bed. The blue and white room, with lacy curtains and small porcelain figurines, is the elder daughter's old room, Mira now living in her own apartment near the Sorbonne. In the drawers of the armoire are playing cards, a nightgown, an old notebook covered in stickers.

She is in awe of the girls and their European lifestyles. They are each in their twenties, Lara still living with her mother, both cousins leading sophisticated, unmarried lives. Every Sunday, Mira comes over, and they eat brioche thick with warm berries and watch television, the girls chattering in their alluring fusion of French and Arabic. They wear knee-high boots even on sunny days, and tight, short dresses above them, their hair barely grazing their shoulders. And as much as they coo over Souad's slimness, her curls, she cannot help but feel unmodern around them, with her skinny legs and long hair. It is the same on the streets of Paris, Souad—who was always the vogueish one in Kuwait—feeling plain among the swarms of elegant women smoking cigarettes, their lips painted the color of apples.

But here, at least, her restlessness has found a place. She loved Paris from the beginning. The people were neither friendly nor particularly welcoming, for the most part treating her coolly. It was part of the Parisian appeal, Elie told her. He has summered in Paris since babyhood and has a French passport; he knows the quarters and streets like an old lover. It was Elie who pushed her to do the program at L'Institut so they could be together for the summer.

Their last summer. Then he would remain in Paris for university, and she would return to Kuwait, their lives forking apart. That was their unspoken agreement. Or it had been, until the invasion. Now everything, *everything*—her family's house, Karam's engineering

program, Souad's own reluctant plan of beginning courses at Kuwait University—was suddenly suspended, uncertain, like sand lifted by malicious hands and tossed everywhere.

SOUAD DRESSES IMPULSIVELY. Black leggings, oversize black shirt—in Paris, she retired colors—a cat's-eye swipe of kohl. Outside, the sun has nearly set.

She walks toward the sound of newscasters, into the living room. At the doorway, she stands for a moment, unseen. Mimi and Ammar sit on the large sofa. Lara's legs are stretched onto the coffee table; she is painting her toenails. All three of them watch the screen.

"Here she is, Sleeping Beauty Liz Taylor!" Ammar says, catching sight of her. His nickname for her, the absurd moniker for her constant napping and thick eyebrows. "Sit, sit."

Souad sits next to him, and Mimi speaks, her eyes not leaving the screen. "Your mother called."

Souad bites her lip, waiting. This is what she has dreaded since the other calls, the first to say they were safe, the second to say they were leaving for Amman as soon as her father organized finances and passports.

"What did she say?"

"Oh." Mimi sounds distracted. "I told her you were sleeping; it's been a rough couple of days. That she should let you rest. She said they'll call tomorrow morning."

Souad feels a rush of gratitude toward Mimi. "Thank you."

"Asshole," Lara blurts as Saddam's expansive, grinning face appears on the screen, standing beneath an Iraqi flag. *We will take what is ours*, he is saying. The room falls silent, all of them watching the man raise an arm, not a shred of fear on his swarthy face.

The news report cuts to flames, bulldozers. The fires on the television screen—Souad thinks of her neighborhood, the auditorium she walked across in a graduation gown two months ago, the shopping mall. She feels a rising nausea. There are moments, these last

few days, when she has felt as lost as a child, the urge to scream like bile in her throat. Souad averts her eyes, fixing them instead on the Persian rug, a landscape of spirals in shades of green.

“He’s insane,” Mimi says.

“No,” Lara says deliberately. “He’s an asshole.” Ammar snorts with laughter.

There is a lived-in feeling in the apartment, one of camaraderie and airiness, a nonchalance among them that reminds Souad of those Amman summers, how envious Souad would be of Mimi’s lackadaisical upbringing of her daughters. There were times in the past weeks when Lara lay her head on her mother’s lap, and Mimi braided her hair. Souad cannot imagine ever doing such a thing herself with Alia. With her mother, Souad is her prickliest self, a cat stroked the wrong way.

DURING YESTERDAY’S PHONE CALL, her mother had yelled. The line was staticky and her voice kept being cut off.

“Goddamn this phone! Souad—Atef, I can’t hear a damn thing.”

Souad’s mouth was dry as she repeated into the receiver, “Mama? *Mama?*”

“Yes—Souad—can you hear me?” A coarse sound, like the rustle of leaves, muffled the line. This alarmed Souad, as though the sound were somehow pulling her mother away. Suddenly her mother’s voice broke through, clear. “. . . goddamn reception. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes!” Souad stood on her tiptoes, pressing a palm against the counter in Mimi’s kitchen. The granite was smooth and cool. “How are you? What are you all doing?”

“Souad, we’re leaving. In a couple of days, I think. It depends on how quickly . . . with the car . . . the airport’s gone . . . Your father’s trying to sort things out with the bank—not sure how long.” Her mother spoke rapidly, in fragments, and Souad had a difficult time understanding. “We can take only a few things,” her mother continued. “Small enough to carry. I know you have some clothes, but is

there anything you want me to—that I should take.” Only at these last words did her mother’s voice falter; there was a distant clicking sound, like a swallow.

Souad was confused. “Take where?”

“Take with us.” A familiar irritation crept into her mother’s tone. “Souad, we’re leaving Kuwait. We have to. Everyone is.”

“But on the news they said it’ll be over soon. That Europe or America will help.” Even to her own ears, Souad’s voice was childish, whining.

“*Habibti*.” Her mother’s tone softened. “We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“But they’re saying—”

“We’re leaving.” Alia ignored her, kept talking. “Things are bad, they’re getting worse. What do you want me to take?”

Their house rushed through Souad’s mind. The rooms, the photographs on the walls, the sunlight through veranda windows. Her own bedroom, suddenly empty—she knows the room as she knows her own body, and she couldn’t conjure a single image of it.

“Nothing,” Souad heard herself saying. “None of it.”

“Are you sure?” Her mother sounded startled. “What about your jewelry? Clothes?”

“Nothing,” Souad repeated, firmly. “I’ll see it all when we go back.”

“Souad,” her mother said. “Souad, no one knows what will happen. We have to get to Amman as soon as possible.” There was static on the line, and then her mother’s voice returned. “. . . so we’ll send you the ticket as soon as we get there. Probably next week.”

“A ticket to where?” Souad felt slow, muddled.

“To Amman, Souad,” her mother said. “I don’t want you so far away while this is happening.”

“But Mama”—a wild, spinning panic rose in Souad’s throat, Elie appearing in her mind, *so few nights left*—“Mama, the program isn’t over for three more weeks.”

“Souad!” Her name hurled like a knife through Alia’s teeth—disgust, pity—and Souad fell silent. Her mother took a deep breath,

and when she spoke again, it was with finality, the way one speaks to those in shock. “Souad, there is a *war*.”

SOUAD SITS IMPATIENTLY in the living room, jiggling her leg. She glances at her watch every few minutes. It is only eight, and the Elie nights, as she has come to think of them, with their sidewalk cafés and bars and glasses of sherry, begin around now, everyone gathering at Le Chat Rouge to start the evening.

The phone call looms ahead of her. And with it her old life, slung, no longer hers and morphing into something unrecognizable: Amman, a new house, Riham and her family.

And Karam—her ally, the only one in her family she feels close to—when she spoke with him yesterday, his voice somber: “Sousi, I might be going to America. There’s no good architecture program in Amman. We called a university in America, one where Baba’s dean went, somewhere called Boston. They said they’d consider an emergency application. They’re calling it asylum.”

AS A CHILD, Souad hadn’t been afraid of the same things her brother and sister were—spiders, heights, sandstorms—and she’d known wordlessly, from a young age, that people thought her intrepid. She was the only girl in the schoolyard to squat next to a lone scorpion and, later, the first one to light a cigarette, to sit daringly in the front seat of a boy’s car, the wind raising her hair into a cloud. People wanted her like this, she understood. They loved watching the fearless.

This was why, as a girl, she’d never spoken of what she *was* afraid of. Never said that she was in fact *jealous* of her siblings, jealous because their fears had such specificity to them, could be labeled and confronted and dismantled.

What Souad spent her girlhood afraid of was incalculable, nameless. Not a creature so much as a shadow, a room emptied of lighting. She hated dusk; it filled her with dread. Hated the last few stairs when coming down from the roof of her grandmother’s building.

When she was in bed sometimes, her small heart pounding just before she fell into sleep, she felt an endless plummet, as though someone had pushed her. Her fear had something to do with not being able to breathe, her mouth filled with water, with some enduring want. A suffocation. It was something like pursuit, something like not being fast enough.

This is what Souad thinks of as she watches the army tanks roll into the desert in tidy green rows.

IN THE LIVING ROOM, Souad watches Lara closely. Since her arrival, Souad has learned to blend in, to act nonchalant and follow the older girl's lead. They haven't become close, though Souad has joined her for drinks, met her intellectual French friends, all young professors like Lara. They laugh and tell stories, but, having taken English throughout school, Souad has a meager command of French. Lara's Arabic is broken after years in Europe.

Souad knew instinctively that Mimi wouldn't ask Souad's mother about rules and curfews. Still, she is careful, always slipping out with Lara, pretending that she spends her evenings working on art projects for her program.

Ammar flips to an Arab channel, where an American reporter speaks, her words dubbed in Arabic.

"The United Nations has released its strongest condemnation," the ethereal voice says as the reporter moves her lips out of sync. Her blond hair is cut above her eyebrows, straight across, like a doll Souad once had.

Lara stands and stretches, her midriff visible beneath the shirt. "I'm going out."

"Okay." Mimi continues frowning at the television. "With?"

"Luc," Lara says.

"Have fun."

"Be safe," Ammar says.

Souad watches the exchange, as she always does, with a fascination

that still hasn't abated. In her own home, this would never, ever happen, the topic of boys—even harmless, friendly ones—a minefield of arguments with her mother.

She knows this is her moment; stands. "I'm going too," she announces, then holds her breath.

They barely look up. "Be safe," Ammar repeats, his eyes on the tanks and bombing onscreen.

ON THE STREET, she fumbles for a cigarette from her purse and smokes as she walks into the evening. She feels a sudden urge, now that she is outside the apartment, to clear her head. This is her favorite thing about the city—the ability it gives you to walk, to literally put space between your body and distress. In Kuwait, nobody walks anywhere.

Mimi lives in a quiet part of the city, mostly residential, with small, pretty apartments, each window like a glistening eye. The streetlamps are made of wrought iron, designs flanking either side of the bulbs. There is a minimalist sense of wealth in the neighborhood, children dressed simply, the women always adjusting scarves around their necks, their hair cut into perfectly symmetrical lines. Souad walks by the manicured lawns of a grammar school, empty and discarded for the summer. Next to it a gray-steepled church. She tries to imagine that, elsewhere, there is smoke and destroyed palaces and men carrying guns. It seems impossible.

The night is cool, and Souad wraps her cardigan tightly around her, crosses her arms. A shiver runs through her. She is nervous to see him, a familiar thrill that he always elicits in her. Even before last night.

Le Chat Rouge is a fifteen-minute walk from Mimi's apartment, but within several blocks the streets begin to change, brownstones and Gothic-style latticework replaced with grungier alleyways, young Algerian men with long hair sitting on steps and drinking beer from cans. One eyes her and calls out, caressingly, something in French.

She can make out the words for *sweet* and *return*. Bars line the streets with their neon signs and she walks directly across the Quartier Latin courtyard, her shoes clicking on the cobblestones.

“My mother’s going to call tomorrow,” she told Elie yesterday. She wasn’t sure why she said it, but it felt necessary. “They’re taking me to Amman.” In the near dark, Elie’s face was peculiarly lit, the sign making his skin look alien.

“You could stay here,” Elie said. He smiled mockingly. “You could get married.”

Souad had blinked, her lips still wet from the kiss. “Married?” She wasn’t being coy—she truthfully had no idea what Elie meant. Married to whom? For a long, awful moment, she thought Elie was suggesting she marry one of the other Lebanese men, that he was fobbing her off on a friend in pity.

“Yes.” Elie cocked his head, as though gauging the authenticity of her confusion. He smiled again, kinder this time. He closed his fingers around hers so that she was making a fist and he a larger one atop it. They both watched their hands silently for a few seconds, an awkward pose, more confrontational than romantic, as though he were preventing her from delivering a blow. It occurred to her that he was having a difficult time speaking. She felt her palm itch but didn’t move. Elie cleared his throat, and when he spoke, she had to lean in to hear him.

“You could marry me.”

Now, even in re-creating that moment, Souad feels the swoop in her stomach, her mouth drying. It is a thing she wants in the darkest, most furtive way, not realizing how badly until it was said aloud. *Eighteen years old*, a voice within her spoke, *eighteen*. Too young, too young. And her parents, her waiting life.

But the greater, arrogant part of Souad’s self growled as if woken. Her steps clacked with her want of it. The self swelled triumphantly—*Shame, shame*, she admonishes herself, thinking of the war, the invasion, the troops and fire, but she is delighted nonetheless.

THEY MET AT the Shuja'a café in Kuwait a year ago. It was a space near the university where the intellectuals went to smoke cigarettes and talk about the war in Beirut and the PLO. People sat around circular tables and drank Turkish coffee. It was a favored spot for those who considered themselves Communists, the young men wearing chains with dangling sickles.

Souad loved it. She felt like an academic, crushing her cigarette neatly when she was finished with it, the lipstick stains around the butt unspeakably elegant to her. In the Shuja'a café, she felt like a version of herself that was nearly complete, someone whom others would want. Would envy. She spoke in a low, murmuring voice, batted her eyelashes. It was different than the boat parties and dancing, where the *ajanib* fluttered around her. There, she got more attention but it felt too easy, those blue-eyed men hungry for her laugh. At the café, women were poets or working on manifestos. They wore baggy pants and cursed like the men.

The pity of it, then, was that she felt out of place at the café. She hated to admit it but knew it was true. Souad had never been a strong student; she didn't have a sturdy sense of history or politics. Frankly, the topics bored her. She just wanted the sickle necklaces and the berets. Still, she faltered through Marxist writings and began to read the newspaper. She learned to laugh when the men finished a sentence with a sardonic arch of their eyebrows, for this signified they'd said something they found—in a self-defeating way—funny.

Souad began calling Elie's group of friends the Libanais, a nod toward their French-infused upbringing, and they seemed taken by her. Elie was the center of the group, with bushy eyebrows and an egotistic charm about him. He was the quintessential Libanais, leaving Beirut after the violence began, summering in France since boyhood, and attending the Lycée Français in Kuwait. When he argued with the other men, he switched to French, the language silky and eruptive in his mouth. Three years older than Souad, he had already begun university, studying political science, though his true passion was writing.

“I’m moving to Paris,” he told her the night they met. “At the end of this year, I’m transferring there to study writing.” He spoke to her about his dead mother and overbearing father, how Elie had finally struck a deal with his father, after much argument: Elie would move to France after two years at Kuwait University.

“How can you know you’ll still hate it here in a year?”

He’d looked at her pityingly, as though she were a child. “Some things you know, *poupée*.” The nickname, meaning “doll,” stuck. Souad hated it, but she learned not to throw tantrums. In Elie she’d met someone, finally, who was more volatile than she.

He has many faults. He becomes grandiose when he drinks, is prone to exaggerated gestures and endless, solipsistic speeches. He winks at waitresses. He emanates a certain smell, not entirely unpleasant but slightly baked in, like leather or day-old bread, especially after a night of drinking. He seems not to see her sometimes, blinking when she speaks to him as though he’d forgotten she was there. And Souad, accustomed to attention—the youngest of her family, the liveliest of her friends—is scathed by such indifference.

Still, when he kisses her, pulling her summarily against him, she feels all of her selves scatter and then, exquisitely, repair.

SOUAD WALKS THE length of the courtyard until she sees the fountain, two teenage girls sitting at the marble lip and smoking cloves. One of them wears large, black-framed glasses and is speaking rapidly in French while the other girl nods. Souad crosses them and sees the red of the Chat Rouge sign.

She pauses outside of the entrance, watching her reflection in the dirty, reddish glass, her chest split by the curve of the *g*. She is afraid. Though Elie mystifies and infuriates her in many ways, Souad understands him well enough, she realizes slowly, that she will know instantly whether he meant what he said last night. She will know as soon as he looks at her.

For a moment, Souad remains outside, listening to the girls, catching the words *jamais* and *collier* and *merde*. It is like listening to

an orchestra. She wishes she could walk up to them and take a seat, ask them if she should go home, ask them what will become of Kuwait, whether she should trust Elie.

A couple stagger out of the bar, laughing and carrying beer cans. The air from the bar whooshes outside—music and chatter—and Souad steps in.

The bar is always crowded, chain smokers seated around small tables. One side of the room has a long wooden bar, the bottles behind it twinkling like jewels. Ivan, the bartender, pours glass after glass, his silver hair cut into a pageboy, a gold hoop dangling from each ear.

The group, Albert, Sami, Marcel—the Libanais who spend their summers in France—sit on stools, their usually boisterous tones muted, glum. Elie is at the edge of the bar, his eyes on the television, another news story about Kuwait—already the flames and bulldozers are familiar to Souad—his expression grave. The television flickers on his face, his eyes hollowed and somehow older, much older.

Watching the forlorn expressions, Souad feels something click within her and she knows that she will remember this moment, that she will come back to this as the crux of her life, the instant when she fully understood the gravity of it. There would be no return. Her clothing—so much of it borrowed from Budur—the large evil eye dangling from her window. The map she'd hung after an argument with her mother years ago, enormous, spanning an entire wall with blues and greens. Her old school, the chalk on her classroom floor, the market her father likes to buy melons from. She suddenly recognizes it all as lost. It is enough to make her weep, and she walks to them, wishing to tell Elie, praying that he will be kind.

“Souad!” Albert says, and voices tangle in greeting. Souad keeps her eyes on Elie, watching him as he turns. She sees the truth assemble itself on his face. And she knows: He meant it. He meant what he said last night, and he means it still.

“Do you see this bullshit?” Sami asks her.

“It’s awful,” she says, trying to keep the joy out of her voice. *He meant it, he meant it.*

There are murmurs of assent, and Souad walks to Elie's side. A horrible thought crosses her mind, a doubt—that he would never have asked if Saddam hadn't invaded—and she is briefly, disgustingly, grateful for the flames on the television. She shakes her head to banish the thought.

"You came." His voice is low, full.

"They've burned everything."

"I know."

Souad watches the news, a pretty reporter speaking, though the sound is muted. Behind Elie and Souad, people are having lively conversations in French. They wouldn't be able to find Kuwait on a map.

She orders a whiskey sour, eats the cherry first. The alcohol is harsh on her tongue, but she drinks gratefully. She and Elie talk carefully, predictably, about other things. The airport closing, his father going to Lebanon.

"And you?" she asks, her heart filling with the question. She is afraid, suddenly, of saying yes or no.

"Fuck Beirut," he says, a glimmer of his old self showing. "I keep telling them. Makes no sense, trading one war for another. My aunts say the mountains are fine. But Jesus—a village life? Sheep and chamomile tea every morning? *Non, merci.*" He squints his eyes at the television in a gesture Souad recognizes as studiously casual. "Your mama still going to Amman? Did you talk to her?"

"I missed her call," Souad says, her mouth dry. This is it; they are coming to the heart of it. "But it's still Amman. Amman for everyone."

She holds her breath as Elie swallows his beer, turns finally to her. His eyes fill with recognition, then transform entirely. Gentling, dark and warm. He looks luminous.

"Hey," he says.

Souad turns. Fucking *S raphine*. She is a childhood friend of Elie's from the summers he spent in Paris. She stands, a shot glass in each hand. A blue scarf is twisted attractively around her torso, slithers of pale skin showing. Tassels fall against her hips. Eyes like a cat's, bottle

green. Her nose tiny and sloping, a smattering of freckles across her cheeks. Over the weeks, Séraphine appeared at various parties and bars; Souad befriended her with the wariness of one who wishes to keep a threat close.

Okay, boys, okay, one at a time, Séraphine will say at last call when the Chat Rouge men clamor to buy her another drink. She seems to pick favorites arbitrarily. Sometimes Sami, one of the Libanais visiting from Kuwait; sometimes Émile, a thin bearded Parisian. A slew of other artistic, handsome men. On any given night, she focuses almost exclusively on one man, often letting him kiss her before reapplying her lipstick right at the table, with everyone watching her.

“Whiskey,” Séraphine says now. “For this shitty night.”

She sets down one for Souad and one for herself, and Souad lifts hers. They clink glasses. Souad swallows, welcoming the fire in her throat.

Assieds. Elie stands, and Séraphine smiles at him, taking his chair. Now she and Souad are next to each other, one of her tassels against Souad’s thigh.

Séraphine clicks her tongue. *“Horrible, c’est incroyable, ce qu’ils ont fait.”* She glances at Souad, switches to English. “He is a terrible man, Saddam.”

Rage inexplicably bubbles within Souad. How dare she, this tiny exquisite thing, click her tongue and look sad? Séraphine’s face is grave, her eyes on the television, on images of troops barricading the city. Souad wants to shake her. How dare she gaze mournfully at the screen?

You can’t leave me, she’d told Karam yesterday, her voice breaking. *You can’t.*

Sousi. You can’t imagine what it’s like here. Everything’s gone.

“They’ve burned everything” is all Souad says now, repeating herself, and the other woman hugs her, abruptly, enveloping Souad in the scent of something spicy, like cinnamon or pepper.

ONE NEWS REPORT replaces another. The volume remains muted while French-language updates about the invasion travel across the bottom of the screen. As the rest of them watch, Souad looks around at the faces of the Libanais. She remembers her bitterness toward Séraphine and feels ashamed, small. Sami, she knows, went to college on a scholarship; his family lives in a small house in the city's center. They would have no money to leave. Marcel's brother worked with the royal family—no one has heard from him since the day before yesterday. *Missing, assumed dead*; Souad remembers the phrase from history class, the line that emerges during any catastrophe. She says, again, a quick prayer for her family, her friends, her aunt Widad, Budur, all those still alive.

Everyone talks of news back home, stories of their families, the people they know in Kuwait. The French, Émile and Séraphine, remain respectfully silent, listening.

"I heard they're looting the hotels."

"They're saying the soldiers barricaded the roads."

"My sister can't get out. They've shut down the electricity."

"The water too. He's making the sick die of thirst in the hospitals."

"And in the outskirts? They're going to start eating sand out there."

"America will come in."

"Fuck America. It's because of America that son of a cunt has power."

The voices swirl and become louder, people arguing, their eyes never leaving the television. Ivan pours them shots of vodka, refusing to take their coins. Souad wonders what the other patrons must think of them, with their raised voices and Arabic.

Hours pass. The men continue their talk; Séraphine braids the tassels of her scarf. *Turkish blue*, Souad thinks. She drinks one, two glasses of wine, stealing glances at Elie. He has fallen strangely silent. She needs to get back to Mimi's. It is nearly two. Her aunt and uncle will be worried, and she is suddenly tired of it, tired of going back,

always going back. She wishes she could have, just once, an entire night for herself, a blank stretch of road. The way the men do, the way Séraphine does.

Amman darts into her mind. Her drunken head throbs. A life with her sister and parents, without Karam, the endless arguments about curfew and college classes. She thinks of Riham and her quiet garden, little Abdullah with his anxious eyes, Riham's boring husband. It makes her want to scream.

The television shows another scene, a new one. A park, blazing.

"*Vous êtes certain? Je peux le changer. C'est trop triste.*" Ivan speaks to Elie, his brow furrowed in concern.

"*Non, non, c'est bien.*" Elie keeps his eyes fixed on the television screen.

They fall silent watching the fire. A sentence moves across the bottom of the screen: *Le parc a mis le feu dans les premières heures de ce matin.*

"Bastards," Sami says in Arabic.

Séraphine drains her glass. She frowns as she stares at the screen. "It is sad, of course," she says in accented English. "But what is a children's park when homes are being destroyed?"

Souad is suddenly angry. She remembers an afternoon during Eid, when she was six or seven, when her father took her to the zoo, as he always did—she loved to feed the giraffes, thrilled at the sandpaper tongues on her hand as she fed them crackers and seeds—and then afterward to the park.

"There are these little statues in the park," she says, and then fumbles in French. "*Comme des anges. Avec des petite chapeaux.*" Everyone is watching her and for once she doesn't care about her meager French. The eyes of the Libanais men are afraid, she realizes, like children's. Dwarfed in the face of this. "*Je les aimais.*"

"*Des figurines,*" Elie adds, then switches to Arabic, speaking only to Souad. He looks grateful. "We used to go as children as well. You remember the entrance? That little gate."

"The latch always stuck." Souad feels his sorrow. "My father would

have to jiggle it loose.” She has something that Séraphine doesn’t. Only she knows what is being burned, what is being taken in Kuwait. Elie shares this with her alone.

“My father too.” Elie smiles at her. “I’d forgotten, all these years.”

THEY SPILL ONTO the streets. The men roll hash cigarettes, the air pungent with the scent. Séraphine takes a puff and in the ethereal light of the streetlamps, she looks like something mythical. It is late. Far too late. *Khalto* Mimi will know she stayed out later than Lara; there will be questions in the morning. And they might smell the whiskey on her.

She lights one of Elie’s cigarettes, leaning into the flame in his hand, and smokes as they walk down the narrow, fairylike streets. Kuwait is burning; her mother is packing their house right now, as Souad walks.

Séraphine does a little skip, loops her arm through Sami’s. The tassels of her scarf sway back and forth, her hips moving like water. It reminds Souad of *Khalto* Widad, how she plaits her hair into one long braid after showering, the tip like a serpent’s tongue. They will go to Amman as well, *Khalto* Widad and *Ammo* Ghazi, everyone. Except Karam, who will go to some faraway city. Souad sniffs. It is too much.

They reach the Quartier Latin courtyard, where a woman is playing the violin next to the fountain, and two other women are singing. In her tipsiness, Souad first mistakes them for the women she saw hours ago, but, of course, they are different. Different beautiful women in this city of beautiful women.

“Let’s sit,” Séraphine suggests and they do, sprawling on the stone steps across the courtyard. The stone is cold, and Souad lifts her knees to her chest, Elie at her side. He puts his arm around her shoulders.

The women are singing Pink Floyd, their French accents shaping the English lyrics into an elegy.

“*Your heroes for ghosts*,” they croon. Souad thinks of the map on her wall at home. For the first time, she realizes sharply that it isn’t her wall anymore. The house is gone.

The music dips and rises, their little group swaying to the rhythm. One of the singing women wears a loose dress and she twirls, the skirt flaring, during the chorus. "Wish you were here." They finish with a flourish, and the men whistle, their applause echoing down the street. The women curtsy.

"Je ne regrette rien," Séraphine calls out and when the violinist plays it, they all begin to sing along. "*Ni le bien qu'on m'a fait.*" Even Souad, with her deep, graceless voice. She watches the musician, the singers, the fountain burbling water in the streetlamp light. Kuwait is a planet, a lifetime, away.

"*Je me fous du passé.*" Elie's voice, baritone, by her side.

She glances at him through her eyelashes. His eyes are shut, and a pure, boyish delight fills his face as the music drifts around them.

And she feels not love but detachment, an odd calmness as she watches him, as if she's appraising a house she's not sure she wants to live in. *I wouldn't have to leave*, she thinks. The realization settles over her, imagining tomorrow, her mother's fingers dialing the phone, a lifetime of *Souad, Souad, where were you, when will you be home.*

After the song is over, she decides. After the violinist bows and smiles, and the applause scatters, she will walk him over to the fountain, will slip her body against his and lean into his ear. Will whisper, *Yes.*