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In the End, the Cedars Remain

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Sample Translation by Simon Pare

# I

“How was I to know at the time that that picture would haunt me forever?”

## PROLOGUE

Everything is pulsing, everything is flashing. Beirut by night – this sparkling beauty, a diadem of flickering lights, a ribbon of breathlessness. Even as a kid I loved the idea of being here one day. But now I have this knife sticking between my ribs and the lancing pain in my thorax makes even screaming impossible. *But we’re brothers*, I want to shout as they tear the rucksack from my back and kick me until I sink to my knees. The asphalt is warm. The wind is blowing from the Corniche, and I hear the sea beating against the shore and the music from the streetside restaurants. I smell the salt in the air and the dust and the heat. I taste blood on my lip, a metallic trickle on dry skin. I feel fear welling up inside me. And rage. *I’m no foreigner here*, I want to yell after them. *My roots are here*, I try to call, but only a gurgling noise comes out.

I see my father’s face. His silhouette in the doorway of my childhood bedroom before my eyes shut, our final moment together. I wonder whether time and regret have preyed on him.

I think of the verses that the bearded man mumbled just before: *Then they will have no way of calling for help and they will find no salvation.*

The rucksack, I think, and by that I don’t mean the money and the passport that are now gone. I mean the picture in the sewn-up front pocket. I mean his diary too. All gone. I almost pass out from the pain.

I’m responsible for a man’s death, I think. Then, as blood seeps out of the wound: Pull yourself together. This must mean something. It’s a sign.

The men’s footsteps die away. I am alone and all I can hear is the beating of my heart.

If you survive this, I think, feeling strangely calm all of a sudden, then it's for a reason. Then your journey is not yet over. Then you can still try to find him one last time.

[...]

## 2

A few days later the two of us were sitting by a lake, relaxing. The chain of mountain peaks on the far shore was like a restless electrocardiogram in the sky, with spikes that kissed the clouds. We were resting, though. Quality time between father and son. A day to ourselves. Fir trees on the banks in their dense cloaks of needles, looking as if nothing could sway them. The two of us with two dozen walnuts on the grass in front of us, each with a pointy stone in his hand.

“Make sure you don’t damage the shell too much,” father had said. “Ideally, the two halves should remain intact.”

I had no idea what his plans were, but it didn’t matter. I was simply happy that we were here together. The days had passed in a flash. The removals boxes were now folded up in the cellar, we’d tidied things away into our cupboards, and the scent of fresh paint had evaporated to be replaced by wet washing as our living room’s defining smell. And if there wasn’t any washing, the room smelled of my parents, who spent a lot of time there. The kitchen smelled alternately of washing-up, spices and the flour Mother sprinkled on the rolled-out dough when she baked flatbread. The bathroom sometimes smelled of soap, citrus-scented detergent or shampoo, sometimes of damp towels, and often of both at once. Everything smelled of home – and the hallway smelled of worn shoes. But that didn’t matter because it showed that someone lived here who kept going out and coming back again to his home, where he would kick off his shoes and walked around the flat to absorb the smells of a family. Around us, other families. Every time I went out into the street someone would give me a friendly wave or nod. Men with moustaches and berets would be sitting at folding tables by the side of the street, playing checkers or Nine Men’s Morris, eating pistachios and sending shisha smoke rings through our neighbourhood. I felt at home.

We cracked the walnuts open with pointy stones and tried not to damage the shells. It was a warm late summer afternoon. The scattered clouds sketched

fanciful, grotesque shapes in the sky, and a quiet wind whispered secrets to us over the water. Two dragonflies circled above our heads. My father noticed that I kept gazing over at the fir trees along the bank.

“It’s a pity they’re not cedars.”

Cedars. The mere sound of the word was enough to entrance me.

“Do you like them though?”

“Uhuh.”

“Then you’d love cedars. There are no trees more beautiful.”

“I know,” I whispered, even though I’d never seen one, a state of affairs that played on my mind. I so wanted to be able to join in when the men sat together and reminisced.

“Do you know why our flag has a cedar on it?”

“Because no tree is more beautiful?”

My father laughed.

“Because no tree is *stronger*. The cedar is the king of plants.”

“Why?”

“That’s what the Phoenicians said.” As always when he talked about Lebanon, his voice was heavy with secret longings and imbued with an undercurrent that made it sound as if he were talking of a lover he dearly missed. “They built ships from its wood. Cedars made them mighty merchants. The Egyptians used our cedars to embalm their dead with oil, and King Solomon built his temple in Jerusalem with them. Just imagine: our cedars on Mount Zion and in the pyramids in the Valley of the Kings . . .”

I imagined everything my father was describing – vividly, in magnificent colours, as a seven year old imagines the stories his father tells him with passionate abandon.

My father often spoke of the splendid cedar groves of Lebanon. He must have visited the Chouf Mountains a lot as a boy and a young man. There he would sit in the shade of the giant, ancient trees and breathe in the reassuringly spicy scent of a secure future. Protected by the conifers, he sat under a dense canopy of needles, leaning against their trunks and gazing out over sparsely populated high valleys towards the coast and a glittering, silvery Mediterranean

with Beirut gleaming and nestling softly in its bay. As I grew older, I would often imagine him like this – and time after time I conflated this picture of him with an imaginary happy childhood.

My father took a few toothpicks from the breast pocket of his shirt. He pulled some red crepe paper out of a cloth bag, tore off a piece and pressed it into my hand.

“Fluttering banners,” he said and began to tear the paper into long, thin pieces.

Patiently we glued the strips to the toothpicks and fastened these to the intact half-nutshells. A little later we looked up to see a host of little nutshell ships lying in the grass between our outstretched feet. An entire fleet decked with red banners and ready to put to sea.

“Come on.” He stood up, and we walked over to the water, which was lapping gently against the shore. Both sun and mountains were reflected in the malachite-green lake. For a while we simply stood there with the little ships in our hands, breathing in sync. “A cedar can live for many thousands of years,” he said. “If a cedar could speak, it would tell us stories we’d never forget.”

“What kind of stories?”

“Lots of funny ones, probably. But lots of sad ones too. Stories of its life. Stories about the people who’ve walked past it or rested in its shade.”

“Like you?”

“Like me. Give it a go. Imagine it with the fir trees.”

We were standing by the shore and I imagined the wind streaming through the needles. The noise it made was the whispering of the firs as they told the tale of their lives. I wished that they would one day remember us standing here on the shore, imagining what they might be saying about us.

When I was a boy, I had an insatiable yearning to see Lebanon. It was a great curiosity about an unknown beauty wreathed in legend. The way my father talked about his homeland, his passion and enthusiasm, gripped me like a fever. The Lebanon I grew up with was an idea – the idea of the world’s most beautiful country, with old and mysterious cities lining the rocky coast, opening onto the sea through their colourful harbours. Behind them: countless

winding pass roads, beside which river valleys spread wide on the slopes, their fertile banks offering perfect soils for the world-famous wines. And then: thick cedar forests in higher, cooler climes, surrounded by the Lebanon Mountains whose peaks were snow-capped in summer, and visible even from a lilo far below on the surface of the sea.

We stood by this lake, breathed in this air and shared this nostalgia. Apart from love, I think shared nostalgia is the strongest bond that exists between two people.

“What would the cedar on our flag say?” I wanted to know.

My father gave a brief smile. I sensed the words settling on his tongue as he groped for an answer, but then he simply clasped his lips together.

We set the little ships on the water. A very small number lost their banners after a few metres; most, however, flaunted them high into the sky. We stood there. Father had laid an arm around my shoulders.

“Like the Phoenicians,” he said.

I liked that. Me, Samir, a Phoenician ship’s captain.

“May they sail for a thousand years!”

“May they return laden with heroic tales!”

Father laughed.

I’ve often thought back to that day. I know that he wanted to treat me that late summer’s day in 1992, and I really was very happy. Barely a ship sank. A few rocked perilously, but none capsized. We stood there until the very last nutshell was no more than a dot in the distance. The reason I remember it so well is because it was one of the last days we ever spent together.

[...]

## 5

In that warm late summer of '92 when we found the new house, I was seven and Yasmin was nine. Hakim and she moved into the flat below ours, which had a similar layout but was smaller. Almost all the dishes in our street pointed 26.0° east. We felt at home. In the playground Diddl mice changed hands, colourful bracelets sealed friendships, Bill Clinton laid a hand on the Bible to take his oath and Take That sang *Could It Be Magic*. Parliamentary elections were held in Lebanon, and everything seemed to be heading in the right direction. Everything looked promising. I felt like a bear cub who could contemplate the coming autumn and winter calmly and serenely, because there were sufficient stocks of food and the cave was warm and cosy.

A few weeks after the move we were sitting in our living room, where the television was showing familiar post-election pictures from Beirut. Hakim had told me his Syrian joke, and I'd laughed. But Father wasn't laughing. It was then that it occurred to me how distracted he'd been for several days, and how rarely he was cheerful. Instead, he would scratch the back of his neck absentmindedly and seemed to gaze through walls and yet see nothing. He said little, his thoughts turned inwards. Sometimes he would leave the house for hours after dinner – for a walk, he said. And if I put on my jacket and shoes in the hallway to go with him, he'd already be out the door and pulling it shut behind him. Some days I imagined that his limp was more marked when he returned. I'd never known my father without his limp: it was part of him, as normal as his hair colour. Someone who didn't know would barely notice it unless Father had exerted himself. He still walked as upright as ever, but his head remained bowed and he seldom looked at me. Whenever I did manage to catch his eye he'd flash me a smile, but he didn't say much and would generally immediately glance away again, as if he felt ill at ease or caught out. His breathing sounded like sighs, a little forced and coming from somewhere deep inside him, as if he'd climbed a thousand steps. Sometimes as he passed he would run his big

hand over my head. And there were moments when his eyes looked red, as if he'd been crying, but that is pure conjecture – I never saw Father cry.

There was also the other extreme, however. Moments when I looked at him and realised he was staring at me, couldn't take his eyes off me, as if I had a strange mark on my forehead. Instants when I imagined there was something tortured in his eyes, for a split second, until he noticed my gaze and squeezed out a smile. When he cuddled me, he cuddled me far too hard and didn't want to let go. I put up with it, though it was almost painful. And if he did speak to me at those moments, he spoke quickly in an endless, unbroken stream, as if he wanted to stop me from standing up and leaving and make me sit down beside him and listen. Then he would start making wild gesticulations, trying to sweep me along – and he succeeded, every time. He did the same thing with my sister, but she didn't really get it, I don't think. But what worried me most about his condition was that he didn't talk to Mother. Whenever she addressed him he would merely raise his head slowly and nod ponderously and silently. And for some reason he couldn't bear to look her in the eye.

Only a few days previously we'd been at the lake with our nutshell ships. If I had to pin down the moment his behaviour changed, I would say that it was that day – or rather, that evening. That evening, after our return from the lake, Father showed us some slides. That evening is seared into my memory. It's the reason I recall that summer and the following autumn in sepia tones. Every scene is bathed in nostalgia-tinged light and enclosed in my memories.

I knew nothing of the existence of the box Father placed before us on the living room table; it hadn't caught my attention during our move. He simply pulled it from the shelf, turned around to face us and walked towards us with a solemn tread.

“What's that?” I asked.

“You'll soon see,” he said and grinned mysteriously.

Mother smiled too. She often smiled back then. I don't have that many memories in which I see my parents like that. So complicit. Standing so close together, so tender. I never saw them like that again after that evening. It was obvious they had prepared the evening and were looking forward to initiating

us into their secret. I was very excited. It was only then that I noticed that my mother had even put on some perfume, despite the fact that we were alone. I knew where she kept the little bottle labelled *Arzet Lebanon* in the bathroom, and I imagined her standing in front of the mirror, dabbing one or two drops onto her neck. She smelled heavenly.

“You smell good,” I said.

“Thank you, Samir,” she answered, running her fingers over my cheek.

There was a knock at the door.

“Should I go and open it?” she asked.

“No, I’ll go,” said Father and gave her a quick peck on the forehead. That too I had seen only very, very rarely.

Outside the door stood Hakim and Yasmin. She was wearing a blue dress with white polka dots; she looked like an almost cloudless sky. He was clasping a large object with both arms that I couldn’t further identify because it was wrapped in dark fabric. It seemed to be extremely heavy because Hakim could only stagger the last few metres into the living room, where he set the object down carefully on the table.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll soon see,” he said.

“That’s what Papa just said.”

“Then it must be true.”

When I gave Yasmin a quizzical glance to find out what Hakim had hauled into our living room, she simply shrugged her shoulders.

Father motioned to us to sit down. The three adults remained standing. I took my sister on my lap; she was sucking disinterestedly but contentedly on her dummy. Yasmin sat down next to us.

“Hakim,” said Father, raising his index finger, “drumroll, please.”

Hakim moved his hands up and down as if they were holding drumsticks and made a noise vaguely reminiscent of a drum. In the meantime Father walked towards the living room table, tugged with his index finger and thumb at the cloth covering the object and removed it like a magician performing his favourite trick. “Ta-da!”

On the table stood something grey that reminded me a little of a raccoon. A robot raccoon, with a right-angled metal base mounted with an oval casing that had a long tube protruding from its front. I had no idea what it was.

“What is it?”

“A Leitz-Pardo,” cried Father.

“A what?” said Yasmin, arching her eyebrows.

“A Leitz-Prado,” he repeated, still in role and in a voice that sounded as if he were pronouncing a magic formula. “The best slide projector money can buy.”

I looked over at Mother, who had her head bowed and was smiling bashfully. If Father was convinced by something, it was the best thing in the world. Full stop. He knew in which shop you could find the crispest lettuce, which second-hand car salesman had the safest winter tyres and which snack bar sold the world’s best kebab. The snack bar would keep changing, but the kebab would remain the world’s best. And now we were sitting in our living room and before us stood the best slide projector in the world: a Leitz-Prado.

“Why did you buy it?” I wanted to know.

“I didn’t. Hakim borrowed it for us.”

“Why?” asked Yasmin.

“We want to show you something.” Father nodded to Hakim, who pushed the plug at the end of the projector cable into the socket and turned off the ceiling lamp. Then Father flicked the switch. The projector cast a large, bright square on our living room wall. Specks of dust danced in the beam of light.

“We want to show you some photos,” said Mother. “Photos of Lebanon. And of us. So that you can see where we come from.”

“So you can see where *you* come from too,” said Father.

I liked this. I, Samir, born in Germany, was about to find out more about the country my family came from. Father had touched on this briefly once: “The whole thing’s known as the principle of descent. You were born in Germany, but we’re not German – we’re Lebanese. That’s why your passport says you’re Lebanese.” I had reacted with a terse “Okay” and showed no further interest in that piece of cardboard.

Father now inserted the first photo and the projector chattered. A colourful picture of my mother appeared on our wall. She was sitting on a chair, wearing a magical wedding dress.

“Wow,” said Yasmin. “That’s gorgeous.”

Mother rarely put on make-up and almost never emphasised her eyes as starkly as she had in the picture. She looked like a very expensive work of art that someone had commissioned – somehow fragile, but radiating an uncommon aura. I had never seen her so done-up. She was really very pretty.

Then came the next slide: Father alongside a woman I didn’t know. She had frizzy black hair and a very upright and dignified bearing. Even on this old picture she radiated a sense of gravitas that was difficult to ignore. Father towered over her. The woman had slipped her arm under his and was smiling through tight lips.

“That’s your *teta*,” he said, noticing my questioning look.

“That’s Grandma?” I studied the picture more closely. “She doesn’t look sick at all.”

Father bowed his head, but he smiled. “No. But she is sick now, you know that.”

I nodded.

“When was the picture taken?” asked Yasmin.

“1982,” said Mother. “That was our wedding day.”

In the picture Father was wearing a fine-looking suit. Grandmother had on a blue dress and had applied thick lipstick, making it hard to figure out her real age. I guessed she was in her early forties. She was wearing gigantic earrings, which stood out all the more because her frizzy hair was short. Father’s smile looked forced, but then he had never liked being photographed.

“Here it comes,” Hakim announced excitedly. The projector chattered.

The picture we were now presented with stunned us. My parents were standing opposite each other. And behind them stood Hakim.

“You’re playing the guitar,” I cried.

“That’s a lute,” Mother said. “Hakim played beautifully for us.”

Hakim's eyes in the photo were focusing on a point in the distance, as if he were gazing after the notes that had just floated from his lute.

"How did you know each other?" Yasmin wanted to know.

"From another wedding," Father answered. "Hakim played at a lot of weddings."

"And where's Yasmin's mother," I asked.

No one appeared to be expecting this question. That's how I realised that I'd never asked it before – neither to Hakim, nor to my parents. In all the hours I'd spent playing and dreaming with Yasmin, during our long quest for a shared secret, I hadn't once asked her that question, either. And now it hung in the room like a wrecking ball that might at any moment come crashing down on us from the ceiling. The three of them glanced at each other. Yasmin looked at me. And I felt uncomfortable, partly because I got no answer.

More pictures followed, mostly of the reception and of guests chatting, until Father said, "Here comes the final photo of our wedding" and slipped a slide into the projector. There were so many people in the picture that it took me a moment to work it out. It showed my parents standing in front of a tree – a tall, sturdy fig tree. They were clearly in the middle of the wedding dance. Guests stood in a semi-circle around them, clapping. All the women were decked out in large quantities of jewellery and were conspicuously made-up. It appeared to be a warm, sunny day. The sky was bright blue, the women in colourful dresses, the men in suits. Some of them had their jackets draped nonchalantly over their shoulders and looked like male models. But what struck me most was that there were other men there, men we hadn't seen in any of the other pictures. They were standing in the background in front of an earthen wall. Some of them were watching the dancing couple with their arms crossed. They were dressed in brown trousers and khaki-coloured T-shirts. And embroidered on the left chest pocket was a cedar – a cedar with a red circle around it. A rifle was leaning against the tree.

"Who are those men?" I asked.

"Guests," said Father.

"Friends," said Mother.

Hakim didn't say anything.

There was a brief silence.

"We've got more pictures," Father cried abruptly. He rubbed his hands together. "Now I want to show you the country."

And he did. As always when he got talking about Lebanon, he became completely absorbed and enraptured. We saw pictures of the sea and of Beirut with its tower blocks. Pictures of the Pigeon Rocks, the city's emblem, soaring above the surf off the coast. He showed us a picture of the Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek, six of its columns still intact. It was night-time and they were beautifully illuminated. And as he showed us the picture of a harbour he said, "See that? That's Byblos. That's where the Phoenicians, our ancestors, invented the alphabet. A lot of people don't know that. Everyone says, 'Look at the Egyptians and the wonderful pyramids they built! What a highly developed Arab culture!' but I'm telling you – if we'd modelled ourselves on the Egyptians, we'd still be reading picture books today!"

I saw Hakim and Mother exchange glances. They knew there was no use interrupting Father at this point, but we children were infected with his enthusiasm. He didn't just show pictures, he always told a story about them. Sometimes it was like a lecture.

"Lebanon is the only Arab country with no desert," he said, showing us a photo of Lake Qaraoun in the Beqaa Valley plains. It was sparkling in light shades of blue and mirroring the mountain chain behind it. "There's so much fertile land, so many vineyards."

"Especially in Zahlé," cried Yasmin, her eyes sparkling.

"Exactly," he said with a quiet smile to himself. And then he reached for the next slide – the picture that changed his demeanour.

In retrospect I think he'd picked up the wrong one; he simply hadn't looked properly in his excitement. I think he'd really wanted to take the slide next to it. The picture he actually showed us was so far back because he'd deliberately weeded it out – so that it didn't end up in the projector, so that we didn't see it.

The projector chattered.

My mother gave the picture only the most cursory of glances, then looked away before immediately turning around again, as if she had to check that it was really there.

On the right-hand side of the picture stood Father, next to a young, good-looking man with a full head of black hair, dark brown eyes and a winning smile. The two of them were standing under a chandelier in a large lobby in front of a sweeping staircase with golden banisters. The steps were covered with fine carpet. Opposite them – on the left-hand side of the photo – stood a photographer. He had the camera to his eye, and they were staring at him. A group of curious onlookers had gathered around the photographer – other uniformed men, a young woman and people in waiters' outfits. The man at my father's side was in uniform, a pistol stuck in his belt. There was a cedar embroidered on the left side of his shirt – a cedar with a red circle around it. Then I studied Father. He was very young and seemed almost timid, with a look in his eye that didn't seem in keeping with the rest of the scene. Today I would describe it as dreamy. Father was smiling in the picture. He was smiling dreamily and saluting. And he was wearing the same uniform. A pistol protruded from his waistband too.

There are moments in life when you witness something and are amazed. And further moments of amazement follow. And only much later, when you can barely recall those moments any more, do they take on new meaning because by then you've learned more about this or that person than you knew at the time. All the gestures, looks, movements and ways of behaving that you were previously unable to decipher suddenly make sense – as if you'd found a piece of a jigsaw years later and added it to the puzzle you'd kept the whole time so that one day you might complete it.

There are moments in life when you wonder whether to ask a question – and decide against it. Tentatively you venture into the moment and feel resistance. You sense that the question doesn't fit the moment. Adults do that. So do children. And years later when you know more than you knew at the time, you regret it, regret not having asked the question back then – the one

question that might perhaps have explained everything. For example, why he was wearing a uniform, why he was carrying a pistol, who the man next to him was. It would have made so many things so much easier.

Father stared at the picture as if he didn't recognise himself. There he was, resplendent on our living room wall next to another man who looked as if he'd worn this uniform his whole life, so thoroughly melded to it did he seem. Today I can only guess at what was going through Father's head at that moment, what feelings the photo aroused in him, what memories, what pain perhaps. We all gazed at the picture. For a moment that seemed like an eternity nobody said a word. Then my sister began to jiggle about and cry. Mother shook herself out of her torpor and took the wriggling body from me. She walked out of the room, rocking the little girl in her arms. Hakim nodded to Yasmin to signal that they'd better go. She glanced uncertainly at me, slid off the couch, took his hand, and they left the flat. Father switched off the projector and slunk, head bowed, from the room. I remained behind. Seconds earlier I'd been about to ask him what was in the picture. Now, though, I decided against it.