Segue
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What My Mother Taught Me

My father died of a brain aneurism when I was two. As a child, it was just Mother and me alone on our olive farm twenty kilometers south of Trablos in Lebanon. Mother did not marry again despite the interest of many suitors. She said she could never love another man, and she never did. Over time, she learned to run the farm herself, but hired students during the harvesting season to help pick the olives. Looking back on my childhood, before the civil war, we lived a very happy life.

When I was twelve, Mother pulled me out of school and stopped hiring the help so it was just the two of us year round. She felt it was a waste to be paying a stranger for help when she had me. She said that I was pretty enough to marry a rich man who would take care of me anyway, and there was no point in continuing my education. I didn’t think of myself as pretty. My hair was often tangled and dirty, and some of my teeth were rotten, but Mother assured me that I would mature into a beautiful woman.

During the spring and summer we maintained the grounds and cultivated new trees. We harvested from autumn through winter to get different variants of the fruit. Our black olives became famous in town for their sweetness. Mother knew exactly when to pick them, and how long to cure them for. We often couldn’t keep up with the demand, which afforded us a very prosperous life as a child.

We’d spend hours in the field milking the olives into sacks tied around our waists. I always found it peaceful: the solitude of being in the trees with only the sound of wind streaming through the leaves and the sight of the sky in the distance. I could’ve slipped away in those trees to live the rest of my life and never come down. I told Mother this once, but she thought I was being silly.

In the evenings, after our chores were complete, we would make dinner together. I loved to cook, and Mother taught me how to make many traditional dishes like stuffed grape leaves and meat pastries with hummus. I could make an entire meal myself by the age of ten. Mother was proud and said that I would make somebody very happy one day.

The farm had been in our family for five generations. Mother and I were born there and I’d always hoped that my children would be too. During the war it was our paradise, untouched by the cruelties that affected the country. It was like an oasis in the countryside. When I heard that some of my school friends had died from crossfire in the city, I felt guilty for living on the farm, but Mother said that the farm was a gift.

I loved wandering the farmland through the rows of olive trees, and playing in the shadows of their gnarled, twisted trunks. Our house was at the foot of a hill that was covered with bushes and boulders. The land seemed to go on forever, and I’d often walk until I could walk no more, using the large snowcapped mountains in the distance as my compass to help find my way home.

After dinner I’d go outside by the pond, which was next to the barn, and wait for the feral cats to come. They became my only companions during the war. I loved them very much, and they loved me too because I always fed them. They came most nights, and we played for hours. Sometimes I chased them or they chased me. It makes me laugh to think that such games can amuse you as a child.
As the war got worse, it became impossible to travel into town without trouble. One day, on our way back from Trablos by bus, some armed rebels stopped us as we left the city. They forced the driver to open the door and turn the engine off. Mother put her arm around me and tightened her grip without saying a word. She didn’t need to though, even as a child I could sense the danger and remembered thinking, this is why we were warned not to travel the roads. A young rebel, who couldn’t have been more than a year or two older than me, walked down the aisle of the bus. I’ll never forget his face. He smirked like he was drunk on power as he surveyed the bus with his machine gun. He ushered us Muslims to the back of the bus, and forced the Christians out onto the street. There were cries and pleas from both sides, as our fates lay in the hands of a child. He lined all the Christians up along the gravel by the side of the road and the children too. The young rebel shot them all in cold blood with one sweep of his machine gun. It happened so quickly the victims didn’t even have time to scream. They dropped to the ground in the order in which they were shot. Blood spilled out of their heads and drained into the gravel. I think I cried, but it’s hard to remember. I do recall the young rebel coming back onto the bus, and people screaming, and Mother whispering a prayer. Mother’s prayer got the attention of the rebel. As she squeezed me tighter, I was sure that we were next: that the rest of us were going to die too. I closed my eyes and wondered what a bullet to the head would feel like.

“Allah is with you, my sister,” he said to Mother. She kept praying. Once I realized he wasn’t going to kill us, I opened my eyes again. He made his way back to the front of the bus and instructed the driver to proceed. He then looked at me and smiled like he was a hero, and exited the bus. When we continued down the road, my hands began to shake and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get off—I was going to run out of air, I was sure of it. Mother told me that everything was going to be all right, and stroked my head until my breathing returned to normal. I convinced myself that the rebel would come back and shoot me in the head just like those children who were left to rot in the gravel.

I didn’t sleep properly for months after that. Anytime I closed my eyes I saw the rebel covered in blood, smiling at me. Mother had become much quieter too, and often couldn’t keep her focus during conversations. She didn’t let me go for long walks alone, nor did she let me go out at night and play with the cats.

One evening, while we were doing dishes, I asked Mother why we were at war. She said people were sick and that religion had nothing to do with it. “Everybody is killing everybody,” she said as she put a plate in the cupboard. “The whole country is going to die.”

Over the next few months we didn’t make a single trip into town to sell our olives or to buy food. Mother became nervous during this time, going over to the window if she heard the slightest sound outside, and insisted that we kept all the lights off in the evenings. She’d even yell at me if I brought a candle too close to the window.

One day she announced that we were running out of food, and had choice but to travel inland, up the mountains for a couple weeks to hunt enough meat to last us the season. We had stocked up on food just as the war started and our supply seemed plentiful from what I could tell, but she was determined that we left as soon as possible. I didn’t question her.
She found my father’s rifle in the basement that he used to use to celebrate weddings and birthdays. She spent the next few days teaching me how to use it as she felt it was a good skill to have. I’d taken to it quite well. “You don’t look good with a gun,” she said during my third lesson. “A young girl shouldn’t have to fire a rifle.” It was odd. She had learned to hunt as a child on the farm, but had forbidden me to. I was only to use the gun in an emergency.

The next week we packed the pick-up truck and made our way inland. We hadn’t taken the truck out in some time, and it stalled twice but was fine after that. Along the way mother explained that we would mainly hunt foxes, jackals and boars. Although they weren’t the tastiest meats, they were food. It was haram to eat the boars, but Mother said that if it was for survival, Allah would forgive us.

The trip into the mountains was exciting. I’d only ever been as a young child, and as we drove up, I found myself getting lost in the curves of the mountains and in their silhouettes that flowed like waves as they tumbled over each other as far as you could see. The clouds were low, on our way up, creating a puffy floor beneath us. I imagined that’s what being on an airplane must’ve been like, moving high above the earth, leaving the humanly world behind. “Momma, do you feel like your ears are blocked?” I asked as we drove further up.

“Do this,” she said, looking over at me and yawning. When I yawned my ears popped and everything became louder.

When we got high into the mountains, just below the tree line, we parked the truck and made our way across the side of the mountain by foot. The soothing wind moaned, causing the grass to dance and the trees to shake. It was easy to forget about the ordinary things up there. Mother said that in Islam, mountains are the pegs that stabilize the earth. “They do not shake when you shake,” she said.

I didn’t understand what she meant. When I looked at them, they just reminded me that we are part of something bigger.

As we walked along, I picked yellow horned poppies and gazed up at the clouds that gathered beyond the horizon. “Look, Momma,” I said, pointing at one. “Do you see the man with the cap?”

“What? Where?” Mother grabbed me with one arm, and lifted her rifle with the other.

“In the clouds, Momma.”

She lowered her gun and smiled. Without looking up, she turned to me. “Yes. I see him, I see him.”

After an hour of trekking we stopped. Mother removed her hejab and wrapped it around her neck. She admired the valley below for a few moments without saying a word. Her face carried the burden of a thousand women, so very hard and proud as the wind blew her hair back, turning her tangles into curls. Her eyes changed then, like they swallowed the moods of the sky: the savage and tame, and fearful and brave.

We set up camp by a cedar grove to give us protection from the wind and rain. Mother still had the tent that she and her father used when they’d go on their hunting trips. It was green and made of lacquered canvas with black patches all around. She instructed me to dig a hole for the fire pit a few meters away from the tent. She pitched the tent and hung the clothesline up. After lunch she put aside enough food for dinner and tied the rest up in a tree so animals wouldn’t get to it. We then went out and collected firewood to last us for a few days. I tried to carry as much as I could in
hopes of impressing Mother. I collected so much that she sang me a silly song about how I was the smallest yet strongest cat.

The next morning, I went to the nearby creek alone to wash up for prayers. The creek led to a large forest of cedars that continued all the way down the side of the mountain. As I sat and began washing my hands and arms I sensed the presence of something around me, so I quickly lifted my head towards the forest. Although I couldn’t see anything, I knew there was something out there. I removed my towel from around my neck, placed it on the ground and slowly made my way towards the trees.

“Samira, where are you going?” Mother said, sneaking up behind me.

“Nowhere.”

“What is it? Do you hear something?”

“No.” I went back over to where my towel was and continued washing.

When Mother looked over at the trees, I wondered if she too felt it, or if it was just my imagination. “Never go into the forest alone. Who knows what’s out there.”

After prayers we got ready to go hunting by covering our faces with ash so that animals wouldn’t see us coming. Mother grabbed some ash and sprinkled it onto my head. “So pretty,” she said, laughing. “My pretty girl.”

We made our way deep into the cedar forest at the side of the mountain because Mother felt we’d have good luck hunting there. The forest had a mystic hue to it that morning, like we were looking through pale, green glass. The roots of the cedars covered the boulders. Moss stained both the stone and roots, and reached all the way up the trunk of the trees. While we walked I threw my hands up and reached for the rays of sun that peered through the branches and needle-like leaves.

“Samira, enough playing,” Mother said. “Come.”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Do you know what this is?” She pointed to tracks in the mud.

“A tiger?”

“No, not a tiger, dear.”

“A kitten?”

“They’re wolf prints.”

“A real wolf?”

“Yes. And they’re fresh, so we must be careful.”

When we continued through the forest, Mother turned to me and smiled. “We’re going to play a game,” she whispered. “From here on, no talking, okay?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“And do not step directly on the ground. We must clear any twigs or leaves before we put our feet down.”

“Why?”

“Because those are the rules. We must be quiet,” she said.

I wanted to laugh for no reason because I knew that I couldn’t. A chuckle escaped me, but Mother gave me a look like I’d betrayed her, so I swallowed it. I followed her through the forest, clearing any twigs or leaves from under my feet before stepping down. It took me a while to get
this part, and I’d slip up from time-to-time, cracking a twig under my heel, but Mother was very forgiving.

After about an hour of miming and tiptoeing, Mother stopped and twirled her finger in the air. “Turn away,” she mouthed, so I did. Moments later, she fired her rifle. Birds flew out of the trees and filled the sky. Something began to shriek; it was the most unusual sound, like the distorted squeal of a monkey. Mother fired her rifle again. The forest was silent. She killed something, I thought. I turned, expecting to see a monkey, but it was a fox. She said a prayer, threw the fox over her shoulder, and we continued on. The fox’s body was so limp, it looked like some doll that was never real. I was surprised, though, by how peaceful its face looked in death.

“I feel sad for the fox,” I said.
“Shhhh!”
“I can’t look at it.”
“Samira, I feel sad too, but we will be the ones dead if we don’t eat. Do you understand?”
“Yes, Momma.”
“Feeling sad is good. It means you’re human.”

A few hours before dawn, after Mother dressed the fox’s carcass, we placed it in cloth bags and climbed to the snowy area of the mountain. We put the bags in a larger sack with snow, and hung it up in a tree so scavengers couldn’t get at it. Mother said we’d collect the meat at the end of our trip.

Once I finished evening prayers, I sat listening to the crackle of the campfire against the steady wind. Mother prayed on the other side of the tent, off in the darkness. I was falling asleep sitting up, exhausted from the day. I should go and sleep in the tent, I thought. When I opened my eyes briefly, I heard a sudden cry. I dazed at the fire for a moment, groggy—I thought I was dreaming.

“Stop!” Mother screamed, startling me. My heart took off, like it tore through my chest. The first thing that crossed my mind was the wolf whose tracks we’d seen in the mud earlier that day. I convinced myself that it was attacking Mother.

Mother’s rifle was leaning against a log to my side so I grabbed it and stepped slowly past the tent. I found her with her shirt ripped open and breasts out. Her hejab was tangled around her neck, with strands of hair hovering over her face. I immediately looked away and closed my eyes, embarrassed for witnessing her in such a state. But where’s the wolf, I thought?

Mother cried again. It was followed by the most sinister laugh. Who is that, I wondered? I opened my eyes and sidestepped further past the tent. It was a man, not a wolf, and he was pointing a knife at Mother. He was an older man, perhaps in his sixties. There was a caged frenzy in his eyes, like he’d been starved, and was feeding for the first time in months. He laughed as he tugged at Mother’s shirt, a laugh-turned-hiss that lingered in his throat. He wore an oversized, white button down shirt, the kind that’s sold at discount in the market streets by beggars. Neither Mother nor the man noticed me approaching. He pulled again at her shirt. Her arm got caught in the sleeve and she fell to the ground, screaming. He laughed again.

My hands were shaking as I lifted the rifle. I aimed at his shoulder and pulled the trigger. I was worried that I’d missed, but a moment later he began moaning and blood rushed out of the palm of his left hand.
Mother stood up, untangled her hejab and covered her breasts with it. The man staggered about, then moved towards Mother. I aimed the gun at him again and fired, this time hitting his knee. He dropped to the ground. “Sharmoota!” he yelled.

I ran over to Mother and hugged her. “Good girl,” Mother said, taking the gun from me.

He continued to scream, calling me a bitch and a whore. He then picked up a rock and tried to throw it at us, but Mother shot him in the head before he could.

I covered my eyes, thinking that somehow I’d been shot too. When I heard Mother’s heavy breathing, I knew that I wasn’t dead. I opened my eyes and looked down at the man, who had a hole at the side of his face with blood pumping out of it. The rest of his body had stopped, but his neck looked tense as his head shook.

My stomach felt heavy, but I couldn’t look away. I kept staring, and Mother too, we both stared for the longest time. He’s dead because of us, I thought. Who was he and why was he in the mountains? Did he deserve to die?

Yes, he deserved to die.

The wind swept through our camp, shaking the tent and rattling the trees.
The stars twinkled above.
It was a full moon that night.
“Are you okay?” Mother said.
I looked over and tried to smile. I felt like I was going to vomit.

“Help me move the body before we attract unwanted guests. Grab his legs,” she said, as she reached for his arms. I couldn’t move. “Samira, you’re not a little girl anymore. We have to move the body.”

I finally went in between his legs and tried to pick them up, but screamed and dropped them. They didn’t feel real. He didn’t look real either—he seemed sub-human in death, with such a wound on his face, still pumping blood into the soil. His blood looked exactly like mine. It was the only thing that looked real.

“Please, my darling,” Mother said. “We must move him. Wolves will come if we don’t.”

As I reached for his legs, I turned my head up so that I couldn’t see him, and tried to imagine that I was carrying logs. We dragged him into the forest. I was always frightened of the forest at night, thinking that some monster would appear in the shadows of the trees, but I wasn’t afraid anymore, not after that. We dumped his body in some bushes. Mother assured me that the wolves would dispose of him by morning.

We washed our hands and went back and sat by the fire for the rest of the night. Neither Mother nor I felt like sleeping. I thought about Lebanon and what it’d become. Then I thought about the moon and wondered how a man ever got up there. After everything was destroyed on Earth, would people go and live there? Would they just destroy that too?

Hours went by, silently, before Mother turned to me, without making eye contact, and said, “You must learn to hunt.”

I just wanted life to go back to the way things were, but my desire to have an ordinary life, to pick olives and play with cats on the farm seemed trivial. The world was so much bigger than us, and we had to survive.
Author Notes

James’ work has appeared in the Blue Lyra Review, Instinct, Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, and Fab Magazine. His play, Everybody’s Whore, was named “Best Bet” by Eye Weekly Toronto; his interactive narrative, Painting the Myth, received a Gold National Post DX Award. Lethe Press will publish his first novel in August 2015.

About the Work

Both of my parents immigrated to Canada from Lebanon during the Civil War, after witnessing unspeakable cruelty and instability. Violence and death were reoccurring theme in their lives, and the lives of many Lebanese people. I was born in Canada but I’d traveled there on my own a few years back and lived there for a year to get in touch with my roots. What Mother Taught Me was inspired by my experiences there, as well as my parents’ stories and the stories of people that I met there. This story was initially about Samira living in modern day Trablos as an adult. She was a widow herself, shamed by the illegal actions of her late husband. As I started exploring her childhood through flashbacks, I became fascinated by this young girl I was creating and soon the story shifted so it was solely about her experiences as a child with her widowed mother.

Living in Lebanon made it very easy for me to write about the country and the mentality of the people: their hopes and fears. I also connected with the landscape, in particular the mountain region. I went on several hikes while I was there. The most difficult part was writing in the voice of a young girl, and to understand what a mother-daughter relationship is all about. To get this right, I got the opinion of many female friends and bounced ideas off them. This was followed by many re-writes.

Writing “literary fiction” is all about connecting with an emotion, an idea or some type philosophy, for me anyway. It’s a form of expression and exploration that helps me understand the world around me by diving into certain themes and characters.