Chapter I

Aleppo

✧

"Prayer is better than sleep"

Summer days are long, noisy, exhausting, and at the end of each I often feel as old as the souk itself, inevitably covered head to foot with a thin coat of dust. I awake at dawn to the Islamic "call to the good," the *Fajr* prayer (where the crier calls out twice, "Prayer is better than sleep"), though loud catfights also punctuate the still of the night. Four hours later I awake again to the clanging of cast-iron locks and the rumble of rolling aluminum doors. Sometime after midnight I fall asleep to a resounding pitter-patter of shoes rhythmically pounding against the large stone-paved streets. In between, I am immersed in the sounds of muttering, milling customers and the shrieks of merchants who lure them into their shops. Then there are the vendors without shops, with merely a tray or a table or an open suitcase tied to their necks or a mule-drawn wagon; they must be more aggressive—block the aisle, cry out as loudly as possible—to entice someone to buy their merchandise.

From about 10:00 a.m. until noon, the loudest sound on the busy intersection near my apartment is "*Abufaaaas*, *Abufas! Abufaaaas*, *Abufas! Abufaaaas*, *Abufas!*"—the baritone call of a middle-aged man. For the longest while, I had no idea what he was selling. Then someone explained: *abufas* is a general purpose cream that works, especially for arthritis.

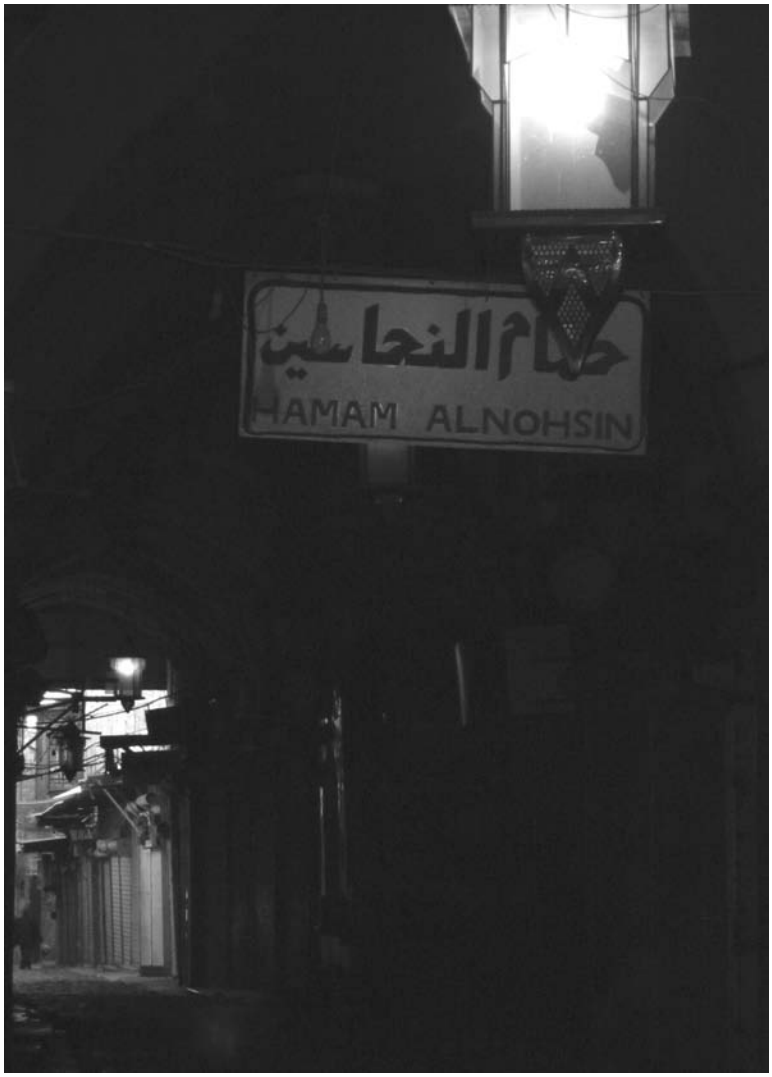


Figure 4. Bathhouse in the Souk al-Atarin

Whereas days the souk is congested, nights it is nearly empty except for rowdy men and boys entering and leaving the Hammam Alnahosin across from my apartment—wedding parties, men's nights out, friends on a lark, patrilineal cleansings. There, especially on the evening before Friday—or the Muslim Holy Day—

they enjoy a scrub, massage, and collective bath. On the streets outside my living room until about 2:00 a.m., the sounds of animated talk, singing, and shoes-against-pavement bounce off the vaulted stone ceilings.

I live in the middle of my research, in the Souk al-Medina in Aleppo, Syria, where I rent an apartment that is the former Venice Consulate in Khan al-Nahasin (the "Khan of Coppersmiths," though now a shoe market), right off the famous Souk al-Atarin (the "Spice Souk," now mixed with textiles), running north and south from the impressive Citadel, which successfully resisted waves of Crusaders and now rises above and anchors the city, to Bab Antakya, one of the original gates, both dating from the same period. The Venetians had financed the fourth and final crusade from 1202 to 1204 and enriched their city-state with the plunder of Constantinople, then capital of the Byzantine Empire. Later in the thirteenth century they were the first of the many European traders to arrive and build a khan—a caravanserai, or inn, for commercial travelers—as part of the Silk Road linking the Orient and Occident.

For most people who work in the souk, the day begins at nine or ten, and ends at six. During Ramadan, the holy month of the Islamic lunar calendar (which, being eleven to twelve days shorter than the Gregorian solar calendar, falls on a different date each year), Muslims are forbidden to eat, drink, smoke, or have sex during daylight. Therefore days during the holy month begin at ten or eleven, break at five in the afternoon for an hour or two to eat *iftar* (literally, "breakfast"), every day a few minutes earlier, then resume until 9:00 or 9:30 p.m., until the last week of Ramadan, when most shops lock up closer to eleven. The last several days of Ramadan the workers in the courtyard of the khan where I live are active until three the following morning. Most people go home to eat *iftar*, but some stay and have a meal prepared by one of the local bakeries, or their wives have something delivered from home.

At the invitation of several of eight brothers who work together in the souk, I occasionally join the men and boys in their family—fathers, uncles, sons, nephews—for this breakfast. Since I have al-

ready eaten (I do not fast along) I merely nibble, but for the others, after about fourteen or fifteen hours of fasting, they are edgy, and desperate, especially for water. Even people who are not particularly religious fast; some give health as a reason, others that it teaches patience. I tell a friend that the people in Aleppo do not look particularly patient at five o'clock, but more like animals, using the Arabic word *hiyawan*, which is more antithetical to the human than its English counterpart, more disparaging in tone. He finds this amusing and now often jokingly accuses his relatives of being *hiyawan* as they stuff their mouths with food. Yet they smile and call out, "*Tfaddl! Tfaddl!*" (Welcome! Welcome!), to any stranger who happens by, an obligatory display of generosity. On more than one occasion, the strangers, usually tourists, take them up on this offer, which means less food for themselves and, because they have fasted the whole day, a tinge of unacceptable resentment at not being sated.

One friend starts to pray during Ramadan after not having prayed for three months. I tell him, "You have found a good balance, three to one: Aristotle insisted balance was the most difficult and important principle in life. Even better would be four to one: four months off, one month of prayer. Religion is dangerous!"

At the time, he does not react to my comments. I thought perhaps it was because I had overreached in my humor and offended his religious sensibility. In the 1970s Aleppo had been one of the major sites for the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni-based, antisecular movement engaged in assassinations and bombings, and it was rumored that they had been active in the Souk al-Medina also. In 1982, the Syrian state under Hafez al-Assad crushed them in a massacre many recall with a roll of the eyes and nervous change of topic. Now, more than twenty years later, I am unable to see any trace of this former radicalism in the souk. Later that evening, in front of a small group of men, my friend blurts out, "You are really intelligent, you know."

In this majestic old bazaar I meet only Muslim shop owners, renters, and workers, all Sunni Muslim, as are, officially, 74 percent of Aleppo's residents. In fact, 90 percent of Aleppo's residents belong

to some Muslim sect, and the city itself is famous for the number of its mosques; some people say it has the third largest number of any city in the world. There are still a few Christian owners left in the Souk al-Medina, and indeed, Christians from Austria, dealers in Bohemian porcelain, originally built the khan where I live, which had served the caravans linking Europe to the Far East for nearly five hundred years. Christians had already arrived in Aleppo at the time of Christ, and although Christianity originated with Christ's birth in Jerusalem, men in Syria were the first to call themselves "Christians" and to develop the organizational structure of what we now call the Church. Today, officially, 10 percent of Aleppo's residents are Christians, but their numbers have been in steady decline the last quarter century, as is the case throughout the Near East, and most people say this figure is closer to 6 percent. Within Aleppo, many Christians left the Souk al-Medina in the chaos that followed the end of the French Mandate, around 1944, and moved to modern apartments in newer sections of the city. During the mandatory period, many persecuted groups—such as Armenians and Kurds from Turkey and Assyrians from Iraq—found refuge in Syria, and each of them has a souk in Aleppo. Across the street, on the east side of the Souk al-Medina, is the Russian souk, apparently with all Christian Orthodox owners and workers: in Jdeideh, a ten-minute walk northeast, is an Armenian souk; and near the Pullman bus station, a twenty-minute walk southeast, there is a large Kurdish souk.

Customers in the souk where I live, in contrast to the merchants, are of mixed confessions and nationalities, with tourists making more than half of the purchases of carpets and fine textiles; the tourists are mostly from Europe, although I see the occasional Australian, Malay, Japanese, Iraqi, Lebanese, Turk, Kuwaiti, and Saudi. Within Syria, Aleppo's Muslims are known as business-oriented but culturally conservative; they generally do not permit women to work with them in public. Some of the men and boys in the souk tell me that their mothers, wives, or sisters have never even visited them there. They see these women—their female relatives—only in the evenings, though even then they often eat separately or entertain in

separate rooms, and on Fridays, the Holy Day when the souk is closed. For the boys, to spend all day with other men would mean nothing special—historically in nearly all parts of the world day activities and frequently nights, too, have been strictly segregated by gender—except for the fact that nowadays the influence of Western advertising and film is so prevalent that nearly all of these men imagine they should be obsessed with desire for women, and this obsession begins long before they have any opportunity to have sex.

There are many women customers in the souk, however, and I find particularly delightful the sight of men and boys, without embarrassment, selling women fancy bras, slips, and underpants in specialty shops, in improvised stalls, on wagons, or simply in piles on the ground. Merchants give foreign women, most of whom are tourists, special attention. Anytime I bring a woman to the souk, questions about her presence, her status, my relations to her, her future, her intentions, follow for weeks after the visit.

"When is Katherine coming back?"

"Jean-Marie, did you see her today?"

"Lucy, she's my cup of tea."

"Ah, Katherine, you going to visit her in Damascus? Can I go in your suitcase?"

All of these women happen to be younger than me, sometimes much younger—students, recent graduates, journalists, filmmakers. Interest in their age has little to do with attraction, however, but with the attempt to understand my relation to them. So at first, they ask me if these women are my daughters. After about six weeks, they stop asking, since they all know my response, I think, since I have repeated it a zillion times: I AM DIVORCED WITH NO CHILDREN. Usually this response is followed by the question, "Are you going to remarry?" "No," I say, "why should I?" "Why not not marry?" "Once is enough for me, but you should marry several times." This they find hysterically funny to the point of being absurd, though it usually stops this line of questioning for the time being. The point is, most men not only in Aleppo's Souk al-Medina but also in Syria generally think adult life begins with marriage, and they obsessively fantasize about these absent women and their presumed availability.

Imad's Japanese Girlfriend

"You wouldn't believe today—I knew what was coming," says Imad as I enter his shop in the afternoon. "A woman"—he always tells me a version of the same story—"came in from Australia, shorts up to here," he points his fingers two inches below his crotch—"and on top, everything spilling over," his hands cascade down from his chest to his navel, and then swerve to make an hourglass shape.

"So why is this new to you, Imad? You know what women look like, you have seen them before."

"But she is special!" he pleads, forever confused by my lack of enthusiasm.

"This is just what your mother looks like. You've seen her hundreds of times."

"But she is different," he twists his head away and scoffs dismissively, "and anyway, I don't look at my mother like that."

"Then you should look at her sometime, so you know what you are talking about."

Imad, at seventeen, is a boy desperately wanting to be a man but with no intimate experience. Of average height and build, he dresses about twenty years older than he is, wearing long-sleeved, striped shirts in conservative colors, buttoned at the collar and at the sleeves, his hair cut short, perfectly parted on the side, and too-neatly combed. His mother and her brothers, for whom he works in the souk, are raising him. His father wanted the divorce, which is still uncommon but not unknown, but he also wants no contact with his son, which is very unusual and predisposes Imad to a very ambivalent relationship with men. He aggressively inserts himself into the center of all adult conversations, and he unreflectively questions the authority of men older than him, which I have seen no other boy his age do.

Regarding women, however, Imad talks a very straight line. One of his uncles told me he chases after "anything with a crack, she can be ninety years old and it doesn't matter." With me, however, anytime sex or sexual experience comes up, he refers to his Japanese girlfriend.

"Oh yes, I have had sex," he insists, "for a week with my Japanese girlfriend."

"Then you must know it is nothing out of the ordinary. What was it like?"

"Wonderful! First, she is beautiful, and willing to do anything. Then," his loud voice becomes a whisper, "we go to her hotel room, she takes me inside, and"—he pumps his hips back and forth and sniggers loudly. "She really liked it."

"If it was so wonderful, why don't you keep contact with her?"

"Well," he sighs, perturbed by my doubts, "she's in Japan, I am here. But she wants to keep in touch."

I take to teasing Imad about his Japanese girlfriend, especially since he seems relentlessly eager to tell me about any foreign woman he talks to in the souk.

"When is your Japanese girlfriend coming back to visit?"

"She wants to, she leaves messages all the time, but I don't answer."

"How many messages, twenty?"

"Eighteen."

"Why do you avoid her when she is so nice?"

"But really, first, she is not nice. And second, her eyes"—and he stretches the skin on the side of his big round eyes so they appear slanted.

"What do you mean, she is not nice? Japanese eyes are beautiful, the opposite of yours, and opposites attract."

He ignores my bait. "And then, down here"—he points to his crotch—"she is like this"—and he makes a triangle with his hands and tips it on its side, indicating her vagina has a horizontal rather than a vertical opening.

"That just means you have to be more flexible."

"I know youuuuu. You'll always say the opposite of what I say."

"You should respond to her calls. I'd like to meet her."

"Why do you want to meet her?"

"She sounds like an interesting person."

I ask Imad to tell me his dreams. "I cannot remember them," he says.

"Just try. The first thing in the morning when you wake up, think of what was on your mind."

The next day, I ask again. "I dream I marry a woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes, medium-sized breasts. We have sex, and then I sleep with her a whole day and night. We do not leave the bed."

"But that is a daydream, Imad. I am interested in your night dreams."

"I'll give those to you later," he promises.

Several days later, Imad says he was on the top of a tall building and fell off, but he woke up just before he reached the bottom.

"Everywhere he goes people remember him," another uncle tells me. "Even in the most remote places of Syria. Imad has been there, and he leaves behind a black stain."

That is indeed what happens when, after work, we meet a group of Belgian tourists at a café outside the souk, and Imad joins us. He sits himself in the very middle of the table, with the Belgian men on one end, the Syrian on the other, and proceeds to loudly question the Belgians in very vulgar English about their sexual lives.

I am acquainted with the cashier, who takes me aside as we are leaving and asks, "WHO is he?"

"You mean the Belgian tourists?" I ask, wanting to evade responsibility for this gathering. "No, HIM," he says, pointing to Imad, "NEVER bring him again."

Although Imad seems to irritate everyone I know in the souk, or at least they direct toward him much of the anger resulting from their daily frustrations, this does not seem to bother him much. He carries on in public as if aggressively oblivious to any offense he causes.

I am sitting in a small shop with several people, including an older uncle, whom Imad tells, "There is a customer waiting for you in your shop," as he wiggles his way in between us. The uncle bellows at him, "*Rooh! Rooh!*" (Get out! Get out!), and chases him down the aisle, beside himself at his nephew's lack of respect. Others tell Imad to leave for the day, but he just makes himself scarce for a half hour before resurfacing. Frequently someone takes him aside for a chat, and Imad then agrees to stop the behavior in question—only to do the same thing the next day. What Imad lacks, of course—and everyone is aware of this—is a father who cares—who acts like one—and all the quiet confidence and security that comes with this authority.

His mother and her brothers are his only protectors, but they are proxies, not the real thing.

To tourists, however, Imad is quick with languages and can be clever and charming. One friend who visited me from Damascus loved it when he said to her, "I want to come back in my next life as your necklace." Reference to sex is also one way men in the souk get tourists to stop and look at their merchandise, and many sellers, including Imad, tend to make no distinction between male and female partners, often deliberately creating ambiguity. But when Imad speaks about sex to tourists, his vocabulary is limited to phrases like, "Did you fuck him (or her)?" or "*Willst Du mir Ein' blasen*?" (Want to give me a blow job?), which he yells down the corridors.

"Nobody understands," he says.

"But I do," I say, "and if anyone else does they will be offended." Imad takes great pleasure in sex talk, finding it genuinely funny, and it does get people's attention, though they do not, on the whole, find it humorous. He tells me that the Catholic priest from France who visits the young men in the souk regularly warns him not to use this language when talking about sex between men, that he should restrict his talk about sex to relations between men and women alone.

During the last five days of Ramadan, a man of about thirty, retarded, unwashed, legs too mangled to walk, shoeless, with one foot bandaged, is planted early each morning before most people arrive, ostensibly by his parents but nobody is sure, in the middle of the aisle of the al-Atarin Souk. When vehicles need to pass, someone drags him over to the side, after which he inevitably finds his way back to the middle. A tin bowl for coins sits next to him, and I see people give him figs and bread and tea. One friend approaches and asks him if he would like a prostitute, and though he cannot speak intelligibly, he seems to understand and laughs heartily. Then one of the many overweight Muslim women dressed in an all-black burqa, everything covered except the hands, who young people in the souk refer to as "moving tents," stumbles and falls on top of him, scattering the money from his tin bowl. She picks herself up, her black robe dirtied on the side, and someone I take to be her daughter

appears and ushers her forward. They leave without looking back at the man, now tipped over on his side, rolling in laughter. A friend says, "This is black humor." Another, "He is sadistic." And Imad, "He is laughing because it is the first time a woman has laid on him, and it will be the last time."

Farce

In portraying Imad's desires as farcical, I wonder if I enact a sort of violence on him. Would it not be preferable to solicit his agreement and arrive at a collaborative representation? His meticulous attention to being straight—buttoned-down collars, long-sleeve shirts, polished shoes with pointed toes, hair never out of place—suggests that he takes his life seriously; he is what he appears to be, a boy preternaturally a man; he is already what he will become, or, minimally, wants us to think so.

But there is a perverse complicity in this portrayal, as Imad stubbornly ignores the advice of others (including myself) to desist with the Clean Gene look. His public assiduousness may be just a cover for a private world he wants someone to crack. Perhaps he wants his hair messed up, his shirt torn, his shoes scuffed, his virginity taken away, by whomever, whenever. The absence of his father makes him desperate for sensuality, for the automatic touching and giving most Syrian boys like him enjoy. A father may withdraw his affection, occasionally, purposefully, but a permanent absence is unthinkable. "In the Middle East," a professor friend here confides in me, "the father never dies." Imad is forced to make do without.

What could I possibly be for Imad? He consistently rejects or ignores the advice of his grandfather and uncles, treating them more as equals than as father substitutes. In his own mind, he bridges, or in his more aggressive moments, negates, the differences that separate them, and he does the same with me. Not only age (I am older) and education (I know more) but, equally important, desire separates us, for I cannot (or am unwilling to) give him what he most wants. I, therefore, do not submit to his insistence on equality: I query his

Figure 5. Imad's Shoe

motives, mock his fantasies, fashion his stories to unflattering ends—I admit, without risking much of anything myself.

Yet, while most of our exchanges may be unequal, we greet each other daily, a kiss and handshake in the middle of the souk, which confers on him the public recognition he longs for—the acquaintance of an exotic foreigner; and for me, even more crucially, it signals to the public that the merchants accept me, that I am integrated into their complex relationships, that I am solicitous of one of their odd ones. On another level, although my humor may not harm him, it is *his* vulnerabilities and deceptions and fabrications that are revealed. Nothing about me is exposed, while I reveal and dissect his motives and entire appearance. Is revelation, though, not part of a process of human recognition, of bringing to consciousness, and with respect to Imad and myself, an intrinsic quality of the adult-child dichotomy?

The basis of our relationship, it seems to me, is an ambiguity within this process of revelation. I am to him neither father, brother, uncle, nor sex partner—in large part, because of my own resistance to his claims. Nor am I much of a teacher, a relation I have with other young men and women, since Imad is not eager to learn the sort of things I teach. Perhaps I am merely an *adult stranger*, with all the vagueness, danger, and possibilities for projection that implies.

The dichotomy between adult and youth has largely broken down in many circles in the West, especially among the professional middle classes in which I am usually situated, yet here I am, in Aleppo, in situations where this dichotomy is alive. In the United States, as an adult stranger interacting with children or youth, I am frequently reduced to a sign of danger, and the differences between us are largely understood as predispositions for coercion and exploitation in encounters. Those predispositions exist, for sure, and so do the opportunities to carry them out. And Imad is at some level aware of this, even desiring the forbidden exchange for which we both would risk punishment. But I resist thinking of our encounters as reducible to a mutual exchange, exploitative or liberatory, requiring an ethics of agreement or collaborative representation, and instead prefer to characterize them as mere episodes, experiences without closure.

"I would rather have children than fly"

Back in Princeton, I was told that classes in Aleppo begin in mid-September, so I arrive two weeks early, even making a detour through Damascus to pick up the books and articles that I had shipped for teaching. I am to serve as Senior Fulbright Professor of Social Anthropology, as a cultural ambassador, a gift from the U.S. government to Syria's Ministry of Education. My professorship is for one semester of half-time teaching and half-time research in Aleppo.

I am not new to the Fulbright Program, as I had been awarded a Fulbright professorship in 1995 in Berlin, Germany. Formally independent though financially and administratively supported by the Department of State, the Fulbright is the oldest U.S. government–

Figure 6. Coffee, but No Break

sponsored academic exchange program, one of the few relics of the Cold War that has not been discredited and disassembled. It was initially an attempt by some less hawkish American congressmen to establish warm relations through continuous international scholarly and artistic exchange—its brochures emphasize "mutual understanding"—between Americans and people from other countries, including those toward which the U.S. government was politically hostile. And it has been able to survive despite the end of that war and the start of a new series of global conflicts, and this year even expanded exchanges to Syria, one of the countries that the U.S. government currently considers to be harboring terrorists.

Intensive field research on the changing relations of fathers to sons begins on the day of my arrival. The Souk al-Atarin is one site for my encounters, and I choose it because of its reputation as a traditional commercial center dominated by Sunni Muslims. I quickly become an odd presence, part of the daily life of those who

work there: drinking excessive amounts of Arabic coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon, listening to stories and jokes, sitting for extraordinarily long hours in shops as indecisive tourists and local customers occasionally buy something, or more often simply wander by. Whereas nearly all of the people who work in the souk have abandoned it as a living space, I decide—to the amazement of everyone I meet—to reside there and take part in its activities as well as its arrivals and departures.

My presence at the University of Aleppo, the second site of my research, where I am to teach a course on American secularism, is another matter altogether—contested, rumor-driven, and fraught with obstacles. Although my teaching is delayed for several months, I still visit the university and meet students informally once or twice a week. Founded in 1960, the university has a large, modern, and sprawling campus about two miles outside the city center, with over sixty thousand students (though some people estimate the number to be closer to eighty thousand). Study is tuition-free, but only in some fields is matriculation limited. There is a standard entrance exam, also used to screen students into majors, with medicine and engineering being the most coveted and restricted fields of study. The university is formally secular (dominated by the Ba'ath Party), most of the students are middle-class, and, in contrast to the Souk al-Medina, all of Syria's ethnic and religious groups are present.

In the cafeteria of the Arts and Humanities Building, I frequently meet for coffee with Abdella, a pious third-year student of English literature whom I encountered one night at Hammam Nahasin, and with a group of students, all male, all Muslim, all majoring in English, with whom he hangs out. Initially, I had suggested we exchange Arabic for English lessons, but these lessons never came to pass (once Abdella told me he felt quite guilty for dropping the ball on this). Still, we see each other weekly at the university; his friend Omar has a cell phone, enabling us to find each other after my appointments and lectures.

It is rare that a professor meets with students privately and socially, and each time in the cafeteria I sense that I am not merely the only professor present but the only person over thirty. At our first

rendezvous, the students seat me at one end of the table, so everyone will have access to me, and Abdella then exchanges seats with another boy so he will be seated next to me, to my left. Abdella is ruggedly handsome, with a strong nose, brown hair, dark brown eyes, a shortly trimmed beard, and a quick, slightly nervous, smile. Omar, seated on my right, is darker than the others, and slightly pimpled, with startlingly deep, alert, black eyes and full lips. The other students around us—somewhere between one hundred and two hundred, males and females, watch curiously but without making much fuss; a few drop in now and then to listen. The big question they pose right at the beginning, almost with a sigh, as if dying to know but wanting to get this over: "Are you married?"

"No, divorced," I say.

"Divorced? Why?"

"We decided to lead different lives," I reply

"Are you getting married again?" they ask.

"No."

"Any children?"

"No."

And with this response, they are demonstrably frustrated. Such nonsensical answers! They follow up, "How old are you?"

Syrians everywhere pose this question to me, as they do to all foreigners, men and women alike, and regardless of how I answer, their most common retort is, "Just what I thought you were." Sometimes, I joke about my age and say, "I will turn thirty-nine this year, just like I did last year; it's good to stick with an age for a few years." This time, I answer directly, "Fifty-two."

"I thought thirty-five," says one.

"I look young for my age, while you look mature for yours," I say. "It depends on what kind of life you lead."

All of my responses border on the unimaginable for them, as does my grey hair (men with grey hair tend to dye theirs black), and I increasingly risk their disapproval but also pique their interest, especially regarding marriage and children.

"Why aren't you married?" they return to the point. "You need a wife to cook for you, to take care of you."

Figure 7. Wedding Dresses

The follow-up question allows me to evade the first one, "But I am an excellent cook. A wife would make me fat."

"Then we know why you don't need to marry," says one student half-heartedly, trying to be nice. They are obviously anxious to know who fulfills the other "wifely duties" for me but are either too polite or too apprehensive to go there.

Instead they settle on another topic, which they say they discuss all the time, "What do we have to do to be prepared to marry?"

I am unsure whether they want to talk about love, sex, and romance, or about the problems of the institution of marriage. Most Syrian men do not marry until they are thirty, which means these guys have nearly a decade to prepare. "First," I say, slipping into a safe anthropological mode—after all, it is my first encounter with students—"marriage is about property, and second it is not about you, really, it is about your families and the larger groups external to you." This academic reply proves very confusing to them, and not very satisfying, but I feel it is too early in my stay to respond

more intimately or reflectively, with a personal answer about emotional and sexual preparation. For about twenty minutes, they keep asking for clarification.

I attempt a comparison of the pattern of serial marriage in America with Muslim multiple wives, or the Shi'a *mut'a*, a fixed-term temporary marriage, to make the point that there is no single monogamous marital pattern, even within Islam, and that whereas each marriage may be about pleasure (for at least one party in the relationship), it is also about social organization, an expression of a particular social opportunity. They seem puzzled, though what I say is at some level common knowledge. I remark that both before marriage and after divorce, arrangements with wives are frequently determined by property relations alone, and that sexual satisfaction (which surely is on their minds, though they never introduce the topic directly) is often not possible within a single marriage.

"As Sunnites," says one student (all in this group, as I am later told, are pious Muslims), "we abhor the *mut'a*." The others nod agreement. Syrian Sunnites assume, and in schools are apparently taught, that they are the only real Muslims; the other sects are all heretical. They express particular disdain for Shi'a (the dominant sect in Iran; a very small minority in Syria) and Alawites, who many assume are merely a Shi'a sect. Another student follows this with a question soliciting my agreement, also meant to understand whether I have moral character, "Don't you?"

"Yes, of course," I say, and offer my opinion, "It is not a moral institution; it exploits women for sex." I know the topic is controversial, but since one student introduced it, I take the opportunity to solicit their judgments of alternative Islamic practices closer to home, "But some Sunnites also have similar arrangements," I continue. "Look at all the Bulgarian and Ukrainian women imported to Aleppo to have sex. Who are their customers? Certainly large numbers of Saudi and Kuwaiti men."

"Not only them," admits a student seated to my right, "many local men here in Aleppo, too." The other students fidget some and are clearly uncomfortable with this critical turn in the discussion, yet

they listen attentively and are supportive of others asking and answering questions.

I think some more about their questions, and my shifting role. Am I here simply to learn their cultural models of affinity and care, or am I to bring my own understandings to bear on our discussion, and make the students less naïve about the representations of any model of marriage, including their own and the romantic one that they watch in American films? I explain that marriage responds universally to insolvable problems; it is a human institution asked to do a number of impossible tasks: it must regulate relations between groups, childcare (by giving the child a name and descent), property relations, familial authority, and sexual practices. But it is never very successful in regulating sex, I add. A student on my left smiles and nods agreement.

Abdella concludes that he has to marry because he is unable to imagine not having a child to call him *baba*. That is something he really wants. Several students say that their parents will surely select their wives for them, or in any case they need their parents' approval. I tell them about a scientist who told me of a survey of Aleppians that found over 30 percent married first cousins, and over 50 percent married first or second cousins. This is perhaps why Aleppo appears more conservative than cities like Damascus or Latakia. I risk a provocation and encourage them to marry outside their groups, to foreigners if possible.

They do not respond to my statement, but instead return to the point, but less seriously, "Perhaps we'll convince you to marry again before you leave," says Abdella. "And to marry a Syrian," adds another. "Why would you want to stay alone?"

"Look at it this way," I explain, as simply as I can, "life has a certain meaning for us, as humans, that is different from animals who just repeat, instinctually, the same patterns all the time. We can, within our groups to a large degree, make up different meanings, which is why there are different cultures, and different marital systems, and different patterns of love, and these keep changing as people adjust and innovate. You can either decide to be exactly like your

grandfather or you can ask, 'What opportunities are there for me now, in this year, 2004?' I, for example, can fly and come here, have new experiences, which I could not if I had a wife and children. I can meet you, talk to you, even learn from you."

"I would rather have children than fly," Abdella retorts.

"That is your choice," I say, and smile at his clever and wise response. "But the issue is not about moving around, really, but about being able to have other sorts of experiences, taste different cuisines, learn things one does not know. I am a professor of anthropology. I study others unlike myself. I see being unmarried as a particular set of opportunities."

"Earlier you had mentioned you get someplace with hard work," remarked one student, regarding an exchange about how I became a professor at Princeton even though my parents were both poor farmers with little education. I add, "Hard work and luck."

"Five percent luck," opines Omar.

"I think more than 5 percent," I respond, "but without luck you fail; hard work is not enough."

"Where does luck come from?" Omar asks.

"Good question." I had never thought about the origin of luck; they had me there. "I don't think it comes from anywhere," I say. "It just happens in the moment of doing something. It is accidental."

"It comes from God," he says with a broad smile, and the other students nod in agreement.

"Perhaps," I say, "but if you attribute everything to God, then God becomes an abstraction, and you cannot explain anything in particular."

My equally abstract response furrows their brows, reducing them to silence. Not what I intended. Perhaps they are not attributing everything to God, as I thought; perhaps they are using him only to explain accidents, circumstances that resist explanation. I think: how can I get out of this position of always explaining? But I am reluctant to question them further, to put them on the spot as they are doing to me. They know each other, and we are talking in public. To ask personal questions in front of each other might force them into denials.

"Yes," says Abdella, "one must ask what is the meaning of life, but I prefer the life of my grandfather."

"That may no longer be possible for you," I caution him, knowing that, as he told me in our first meeting in the hammam, he hopes to leave Syria as he has no job prospects at home. I mention that marriage is also an issue in the United States now, with a debate around same-sex marriage, *zawaj al-mithliyeen*. They know the concept, and all look down, as if ashamed or embarrassed. Abdella asks, hopefully, "Do you oppose this?"

"No," I say, to his dismay. "Everyone should get married at least once, regardless of who the partner is."

Nearly two hours had passed, and I notice they are tiring, of listening and speaking English, if nothing else, and I want to get back to the souk. We agree to meet again soon.

"Once you love deeply, you never forget"

Ali is forty-two and works in the souk with his brothers. He is an average-looking man of medium height, with dark curly hair and large round eyes, and a clever man, quick to joke, especially to comment on his taste for female tourists walking by, "Look, look! She is my cup of tea." Often, however, he looks miserable when he arrives in his shop in the morning. He persistently complains about his wife. "I don't fight with her," he says. "There is just no feeling. She is cold to me, cold"—he gives the word depth, a chill—"she is like a corpse to me." Once I bring an American tourist with me to his shop, and he complains to her about his wife. She scolds him, pointedly, "You only think of yourself. Maybe you don't make her happy. Why don't you think about how you are making her unhappy?" Ali undoubtedly thinks her out of line; he does not respond.

Other men are not so explicit to me in criticizing their wives. Every day when I greet Ali, with a peck on both cheeks, an extra one on the right, I take to asking about his wife and his children—he has six, five girls and one boy. He would say, "She is cold, cold. I devote myself to my children now. They need me."

I ask Ali's nephew why Ali is so unhappy, and he explains that Ali as well as another older uncle had tried to realize a very common dream: of having a second wife, one that they love. Muslim men are officially allowed to take up to four wives, though most in Syria are content with one, or, if unmarried, with the thought of one. However, since the first marriage tends to be arranged, at least for men of the over-thirty generation, many dream of marrying a second wife whom they would be able to choose themselves, on the basis of qualities that they value or on the basis of romantic love. All men I talk to distance themselves from the Gulf Muslims' practice of acquiring multiple wives, though they concede that if Syrians had as much money, they might, like the Saudis, accumulate more wives.

But neither Ali nor his brother are wealthy, and for this reason their other brothers eventually force them to end their relationships with foreign women. Since all the brothers work together, and will collectively inherit property from their father, who is still alive, an extra wife makes property issues very complicated. Moreover, sources of new wealth are scarce. Especially since the loss to Israel in the 1967 war, the government's financial investments in security and military hardware have meant less money for social infrastructure. Correspondingly, the economy has stagnated, unable to keep up with population growth. The one brother eventually ended his relationship with his Belgian girlfriend before marriage. Ali actually managed to marry a French nurse from Paris, and he stayed married to her for over two years. He even rented an extra house for them to share for the part of the year she stayed in Aleppo, and once he even visited her in Paris—"A magical month," he says.

"And your first wife," I ask, "how does she respond?"

"She wanted to kill me."

"With the kitchen knife?"

"No, not with knives. She wanted to use her hands, to strangle me, yes, or put poison in my coffee. One kilo poison!"

One problem was, he says, that the French authorities did not recognize his marriage to his French wife because he had to prove he was single. They do not recognize Islamic marriage, which is

what he had with both wives in Syria. So, by French law, he had to divorce his first wife, his Syrian wife in Aleppo, before he could marry his French wife in France. But what most doomed his second marriage was that his French wife also began to demand that he comply with French law and divorce his first wife so he could join her in France.

" 'We agreed already,' I tell her. 'And what about my children?' I ask her. And she says, 'I will take care of them. I want to take care of them. Divorce your first wife and bring them with you to Paris.' But my family is against this. They do not want me to divorce my first wife. And I think, but that doesn't work: Who would take care of my kids in Paris? A French woman? French women like to travel, they want to go to the theater, to the cinema, to visit their friends. And I ask my children: They do not want to go either."

Because Ali speaks no French and his French wife speaks no Arabic, they conversed in English. But Ali's English is limited to simple, useful expressions. "It does not matter. We understood each other well; communication was not a problem," he insists.

"Do you still love her?" I ask.

"Once you love deeply, you never forget."

"My father says he saves for me"

Zuhayr is the oldest son of an oldest son, and today he is in a miserable mood. "I hate my father," he exclaims as he offers me a chair in his shop. His father had sent him a customer, and Zuhayr then sold him some engraved wooden boxes. But since the customer did not have sufficient cash on him, they agreed he would pay later. When Zuhayr informs his father of the delayed payment, his father is furious that Zuhayr agreed to this delay. "But he sent him to me!" Zuhayr protests. I try to comfort him, but he is inconsolable.

The next day Zuhayr is still stewing over his father's anger. "His shop is four times as large as mine," he explains about his father's shop, "yet I bring in four times as much money." His uncle, who has

a shop across the aisle, agrees, joking that Zuhayr probably brings in five times as much as his father. "Also, he does not know how to sell," Zuhayr continues. "He comes to my shop, and in the middle of a sale, just like that, tells a customer of mine, 'You can have this for 50 lira,' when I had been trying to sell something for 100. And he complains all the time." Zuhayr's uncle again confirms this, adding that at home the father is even worse, representing the old way, more strict—as the oldest son usually is.

My own relations with Abu Zuhayr, the father of Zuhayr, as I and most others call him, are warm and friendly. He always goes out of his way to express concern for how I am doing. Once, after someone kidded Abu Zuhayr about not smiling, he approaches me and asks, "Have you ever seen me smile?"

I say, "Yes, just now."

Zuhayr, on the other hand, has an infectious smile, which he shows readily to the tourists, and he has memorized elaborate and often humorous greetings in flawless French, German, Italian, English, Japanese, Russian, Polish, and of course in Arabic, his mother tongue. He jokes with customers, badgers them into stopping, and then cheers them up with his smile; his raised eyebrows make his deep brown, wide-set eyes appear ever alert and intense. He says he learned everything about sales from his uncle, who says that his nephew now in turn teaches him things.

Zuhayr's shop is at a busy intersection, but it is one of the smallest on this street, with room for only one chair, and Zuhayr insists that size is everything. Customers feel more at ease in a big shop, he says; since they can take their time, he does not have to make a quick sale. Many shopkeepers with small shops put goods in the aisle in front of their shops, and Zuhayr shows me how he enlarges his shop by moving the table out near the edge, past where it is legal to do so, so he has a place to sit or stand inside. Inspectors do make unannounced visits to fine people for such infractions, though the rumor of their presence spreads so quickly that goods are removed from the street and shops shrunk back to legal size before the inspectors ever make it inside the souk.

Zuhayr explains his situation, "At sixteen I decided not to continue my studies, since I thought I would be working for my father later anyway. I work six days to have one day off. I earn 1,000 Syrian pounds; that is $20 a week, enough for cigarettes and one meal out, little more, the same as my other nephews, who are all younger. I cannot save anything with this salary. I cannot save to buy an airplane ticket to leave."

"Is there no way to schedule for you to get pay raises?"

"I don't ask for more because I know the answer. I have been earning the same for six years now, minus the two years' military service. Nothing will change until I marry, and I do not want to marry, not yet." In any event, Zuhayr needs a substantial financial raise from his father, most likely also the purchase of an apartment, in order to marry.

"But don't they have incentives for you to work harder, or be creative?"

"My father says he saves for me. They know if they pay me more I will save the money and leave, just take off. I am waiting for an opportunity, and if I get it I will leave."

"Would anything make you contented here?"

"The problem with this work, it is the same every day: get customers, sell to them even if they don't want to buy. I want to sell something people need, like bread."

"There is no money in bread; you should sell oil or water."

"I know I will be happy if I get a bigger shop. Then I will be satisfied, I can sell better; people will come in on their own."

The month of Ramadan presents a particular struggle for Zuhayr. Five times daily he does his prayers, which he usually neglects, and only once does he break his fast. On that occasion, his family is invited to his mother's parents for the late evening meal, but his father refuses to go. Zuhayr identifies with his mother and threatens to break his fast if they do not settle their argument. His father does not budge, however. So in the morning Zuhayr drinks a glass of water in front of them—meaning that sometime after Ramadan he will have to repeat a day of fasting. Afterward, he feels that his father

is contrite, although no apology is offered. Moreover, the family had abruptly cancelled the visit to his maternal grandparents the previous evening, ruining his mother's plans.

During Ramadan, Zuhayr's unhappiness turns frequently to anger, either directed against himself for not selling more or against others for stealing his customers. "I am happy when I have a good day because my father is happy. I can see it even when he doesn't say anything. And when I don't sell anything, I see he is unhappy and I am unhappy, too." I am touched by how he maintains his identification with his father's happiness and sadness despite his struggles with the restrictions and authority imposed on him as the eldest son. The same might be said of his relation to Islam, which, though obviously more strained than that of his other male relatives and in fact of most of the men I meet in the souk, he nonetheless maintains it—it seems to me, more out of a principle of loyalty to his family and religious tradition than out of conviction or familial coercion. Nonetheless, Zuhayr's daily contact with foreigners in the souk reinforces his general pragmatism as well as a willingness to assert self-interest. He adds, "I've had enough of Ramadan. I hate it. I need a day off. I will take Saturday off even if they extend Ramadan until Sunday."

I explain how everybody had to work on the dairy farm where I grew up. My only brother, Bob, who is the oldest son in our family, and ten years older than me, abandoned the family at the age of sixteen to work for a neighbor. Bob wanted spending money to save for a car, in order to take girls out, but my father refused to pay him more. My mother, sisters, and father had to work much harder after he left, and I often sense my sisters are still resentful.

"Your brother was right," says Zuhayr.

"As long as she gets along with me, she will have no problems with my mother"

I never meet the mothers and sisters of the men and boys who work in the souk, because they never visit them there. But men do talk about their female relatives, the younger men most frequently about

their mothers, with whom they have intimate and reverential relations. They say the worst insult one can pay to another man is to insult his mother, but, though they say this is common, I never did witness someone cuss another's mother. When parents are fighting with each other, many sons find themselves caught in between, but they uniformly tell me that if they are unable to stay neutral, they come down on the side of their mothers. Men who are married also say that if their wives and mothers fight, they tend to support their mothers over their wives. When I discuss this with women outside the souk, several take the opportunity to complain that their husbands never defend them against their mothers-in-law. This omnipresence and omnipotence of the son's mother, or the daughter's mother-in-law, is a common feature of Mediterranean families, irrespective of Muslim, Jewish, or Christian affiliation.

I ask one thirty-year-old man in the souk, whose father died a year ago and who intends on marrying in the next year or two, if he will continue living with his mother after marriage.

"I don't think I could financially afford another apartment," he says, and then adds, "my mother means everything to me. I couldn't leave her."

"What if she has conflicts with your wife, as often happens with mothers-in-law?"

"As long as she gets along with me," he says earnestly, "she will have no problems with my mother."

"What are you looking for in a wife?" I ask.

"Beautiful!" he exclaims, and laughs. "I want a woman who stays home, who I can talk with."

"Does that mean she should be educated?"

"Before my father died, I just thought about material things, things I want, but now I think I should have gone to the university. It is not all about money—though you'd never know," he lowers his voice to a whisper, "from the others in the souk. That's all they think about: money and gossip."

"Would you insist your wife veil in public?"

"Oh yes," he says without hesitation. "I do not want to share her beauty with others. She should have good morals."

In all our interactions, this young merchant is humorous, open and forward-looking. But when it comes to the idea of a wife, he resorts to a textbook version of traditionalism: a woman like his mother, whom he protects from the public and who remains largely hidden from view. From what other men tell me about their sisters, who are ambivalent about this traditionalist role, I am doubtful whether he will easily find or even be happy with such a woman for a wife. But for now, premarriage, that is his wish.

Everyone agrees that mothers are powerful. Even deceased mothers are powerful. Ali, who was pressured by his brothers to divorce his French wife, tells me that the reason he continues to work with his brothers, despite feeling quite stifled emotionally and economically, is his mother: "On her deathbed, my mother said it was important for all of us brothers to stay together."

In addition to reverence, sons grow up emotionally close to their mothers, who often treat them as the husband they had wished for, showering them with physical affection and promising unconditional love and loyalty. This relationship sets the horizon of expectation high for wives, who must learn early on in marriage, if not before, to cook their husband's favorite foods, to replicate the recipes of the mother-in-law. Many if not most fail this lesson. But when these women have children of their own, they replicate the same structure as their mothers-in-law; sons always prefer the cooking of their own mothers over that of the paternal grandmother. The wife's day will come, provided she has a son.

Some young men still living with their parents say their mothers cook to their tastes, pay attention to their moods and habits, cater to their favorite foods rather than those of the husband. Husbands and wives do not always share the same bed every evening, although this is often a matter of economic class, of whether there is enough money for separate rooms for the boys, girls, and parents. Men tell me that they were frequently able to climb into their mother's bed until the age of twelve, by which time, I assume, most young boys already have strong libidinal desires. The combination of intimacy and reverence for the mother makes the position of the new wife

precarious and sets up a classical oedipal conflict between the father and son as well as dreams of mother-son incest.

"Do you desire your mother?"

The evolution of desire between mother and son is integral to shaping all other relationships, including between father and son and husband and wife. Incest is the form of its most radical intimacy, and because of the taboos surrounding this outer limit, few men will share with me personal stories of this desire. Third-person accounts are somewhat less threatening, and therefore more frequently offered. One journalist tells me the following story from his village:

A mother stops menstruating and notices her belly enlarging. But since she is divorced and lives alone with her son, she has no explanation. Eventually she goes to a doctor, who tells her she is pregnant. That is impossible, she says, I live only with my son. The doctor tells her he is certain she is with child, and asks her to explain anything suspicious or unusual about her daily routine: Where and when does she come in contact with men other than her son?

"With no one. Never," she says. "There is one thing, however. Every night when my son comes home, he first showers. Then we eat what I have cooked, and he makes a special tea for us before we go to sleep."

The doctor tells her they must bring in the police to investigate. The police arrive one night and observe through a window. They notice the son come home. He showers, he eats with his mother, and then he makes his special tea—putting a tablet in his mother's cup. The mother falls asleep, the son undresses her, the police arrest him. The son goes to prison. The mother gets an abortion.

I say to the journalist, "It is implausible that the mother would not have known about the sex. Even if she had been unaware of the sleeping tablets, the morning after she'd know she had sex."

"No," he insists, "the mother was naïve. The police observed the son's actions."

I want to ask him more questions of interpretation but sense I have reached the limits of acceptable prying. He had, as I requested, narrated a story of incest; an interpretation would perhaps risk revealing too much of his own fantasies. Yet I am curious about why he lets the mother off the hook totally, why in the story she would not be placed under the slightest suspicion. Surely the desire of the mother's son was not merely his own but the product of an interaction with his mother's desire, including her desire for him, sustained by her continuing devotion to him, and freed from certain restrictions by the death of her husband, of the boy's father. The death of the father, in other words, represents the beginning of freedom for both the mother and her son.

Once, discussing Freud with Ziyad, a bright student of English literature, he asks me about the difference in the study of literature in Syria and the United States. I reply that in the United States he'd be introduced to psychoanalytically informed readings.

"And you agree?" he asks.

"Yes."

He challenges me, "Then you believe that all sons desire their mothers?"

"Yes," I say, somewhat shocked by the bluntness of his question, "but that doesn't mean we are aware of the form this desire takes. It may not be sexual."

"Do you desire your mother?"

"You cannot take Freudian theory so literally," I say, and elaborate my understanding of infant development: all babies are first attached to the breast, and in most cultures a substitute, initially a pacifier of sorts, is introduced. But to wean the baby from the breast is difficult, met with tremendous resistance, because sucking the breast is not merely a physical habit but also represents an emotional attachment to the mother, and to wean the infant is to bring about a separation, a sense of primordial loss. This initial desire for the breast, and the mother, then, is normally interrupted, but it remains present as fantasy and loss, and then takes other, displaced forms as the child grows up. As the child becomes sexual, it takes the form of incestu-

ous desire: fantasized, perhaps only in dreams not remembered, even though unthinkable.

"Then what about the Oedipus conflict? Do you want to kill your father?"

"He's already dead," I reply, "though I did want him dead many times. But, again, don't understand the father here as merely a physical person. He is also a source of authority, represents a force external to you, unlike the mother who was initially a part of you (actually, you a part of her). Hence there is ambivalence about submitting to this external authority, who, for most of us, interrupts, or takes the responsibility for, the separation from the mother." My intellectual clarification of psychic conflict meets with a shrug. Ziyad remains skeptical.

Traffic, or the Normal Order of Things

My usual route to exit the souk and go downtown is east in the direction of the Grand Umayyad Mosque. I turn left after I leave my apartment and pass, in the first fifty feet, in turn, stores for shoes, bedroom linens, blankets, baby clothes, umbrellas, buttons, and sundry odds and ends. Then I hit a small intersection. I have two options: If I go straight for the next hundred feet, I pass more baby clothes, textiles, fresh juice and cheese sandwiches, blankets; then I turn left for five hundred feet past raw cotton, ropes, silver, soap, and money changers. Or instead, I first turn left and then right, past two general stores with toilet paper, cleansers, sponges, brooms, and everything-for-cleaning kitchens and toilets; then butcher shops, a place I buy water that also sells soft drinks, yoghurt, milk, and halva, nut shops between a couple of bakeries, a few odd spice shops, several fresh vegetable and fruit stores, more butchers, another fruit store, more nuts; and then exit right through a one-person-at-a-time lane which opens onto umbrellas, canes, olive oil soaps, lavender soap, sponges. Either way, I end up at a second intersection in the open air, in front of the strategically placed money-changers—

one of whom always greets me and asks where I have been—followed by a row of more nuts, fresh and dried fruit, a restaurant, a public toilet whose strong urine smell, especially on hot days, forces me to hold my breath, and women's underwear, all across from the Grand Mosque.

The automobile and bus traffic begins at this final intersection, at the end of the Grand Mosque, with a view of the Citadel to my right. I cross the street where there are more linens, bedroom things, pajamas, bathrobes, leather, tailors, men's shirts and pants, women's underwear, industrial sewing machines, sewing machine parts. I cross another street, a very busy two-lane highway, with no intersection, hence no pedestrian crossing. I wait for the right moment and dart between speeding cars going one direction, then pause in the middle, standing as erect and thin as possible, and then I run between speeding cars going the other direction. This is Aleppo's worst street to cross. You have to just clench your teeth and go for it. On one side the traffic is four cars wide with five or six competing for the spots, on the other side two cars abreast in a lane for one.

So how do you cross with cars racing both directions? I often get stuck, not just between the two directions but between cars going the same direction. Never look back, I say to myself, only forward, and only in the direction from which the cars are coming. Since drivers pay no attention to lanes, they will simply route around you rather than slow down to let you cross. Sometimes, just before crossing, men will take my hand, or each other's, or women take each other's hand: some semblance of power in numbers. Because pedestrians are so concentrated on avoiding the cars, we often run into each other, or into the boys pushing dollies laden with goods.

The Russian market begins on the other side: mostly tailors, women's coats, lots of men's shirts, more sewing machines, Bazaar al-Shark, a fancy restaurant below ground on the right, an Armenian church on the left, a small mosque, bedroom things, leather jackets. I arrive, unscathed, at Bab al Farej, the clock tower next to the town library, epicenter of the old town.

Aleppians get used to this traffic, of course, so much so that they prefer walking on the dangerous street instead of the sidewalk, and they walk slowly, nonchalantly, as if they had the street to themselves. When I walk with people, I walk nervously, unsteadily, thinking I should go faster, and often I lock my arm in that of the man next to me and steer him back onto the sidewalk or we would always be walking on the street. I fear being sideswiped by the cars (actually it only happened once), but Aleppian pedestrians assume the cars or bicycles or donkeys will go around them, and true enough, they do.

It is also true that people throw garbage on the curbs, especially after work, and cats gather late at night to pick through it and fight; sometimes I see a person sorting through what's left, usually looking for plastic bottles. Such activity is dirty and unpleasant, something to be avoided; therefore, many people conclude, perhaps better to walk on the street, which is clean, washed by public trucks very late at night, occasionally even during the day; individual merchants and apartment dwellers are responsible for the sidewalks, which most try to keep clean, in fact sweeping them several times a day.

From late afternoon until early evening, the streets downtown are packed, mostly men and boys with sweaty bodies doing last-minute shopping for watches, jeans, perfumes, sweaters, shirts, electronic equipment, or simply loitering with friends after a day of work. They are skilled at passing each other without touching, just a slight turn of the body sideways at the last minute. If they touch, however, accidentally, nobody bats an eye. The smell of rose water on bodies, the preferred perfume, mixes with diesel from cars and trucks. I often walk another five minutes to the large public park, which is seductively lit at night, and where all visitors are greeted by the smell of jasmine trees so fragrant that I wonder why people do not plant them everywhere.

For longer distances from downtown, I take taxis, which are very cheap for a foreigner from the West: from seventy-five cents up to a couple of dollars. I strike up conversations with the drivers, who are mostly Kurds and therefore enthusiastically greet me as an American. "We are brothers," drivers frequently say to me; several

Figures 8a and 8b. Traffic

times they even resist payment. The assumption is, they inform me, that America will help establish an independent Kurdistan. "Bush good," they often exclaim. I learn to preempt this praise, not wanting to encourage the rather dangerous thought that the United States would actually support a Kurdish independence movement. In theory, perhaps; in practice, Kurds will be on their own, and the United States will be strategic about whom it supports and when. Early on in our conversations I agree that Americans and Kurds are brothers, but I give a thumbs-down and say, "Bush bad. War! Falluja!" I also meet Kurds who are not nationalists and who do not want to become part of a larger Kurdish state, but they are distinct minorities in their communities.

If I travel within Syria, I take the bus or train (which has railcars from the former socialist East Germany!). Men sit with men, women with women (unless they are a married couple), and seats are assigned. So I sit next to many strangers and meet all sorts of people, including a mullah who, after an intense conversation about colonialism and Iraq, offers me several CD recordings of his sermons. (My top experience with a mullah, however, is once after a long conversation about war and peace in a hammam, he takes off his ring and puts it on my finger, proclaiming, "We are friends," which makes me feel, for the first time in my life, as if I were a bride.) The intercity buses are usually on time and they are often full, but once we have a flat tire and wait for an hour for another bus to come and pick us up, and once we run out of gas a half hour after leaving the station.

Toward the end of Ramadan, the souk and the city itself become generally tense. The abstinence of the day seems to wear on people, so that by mid-afternoon I see a dramatic increase in the number of conflicts and physical fights. City traffic manifests this tension directly, and within Syria Aleppian drivers are infamous for their risk-taking habits. The end of Ramadan also marks the beginning of Eid al-Fitr, three work-free days of excessive eating, visiting all friends and both sides of the family, exchange of gifts, including the expenditure of a voluntary religious tax for the poor. In the days leading up to Eid, taxi drivers are unusually aggressive.

One day, I see two automobile accidents within the space of a twenty-minute ride from the souk to the university. The drivers jump out and are quickly in each other's faces, preparing to attack physically. A traffic policeman walks over and narrowly misses a blow from one of the men. I feel sorry for him; everyone seems to ignore traffic police. To be sure, some are known to stop cars and demand bribes. But their pay is minimal, and unlike in the West, nobody seems to respect their authority to give tickets. As they direct traffic at intersections, their effort seems to be merely to avoid an all-out traffic jam. Likewise, as in this case, most drivers simply circle around the occasional accident.

Returning from the university one day, my driver decides to pass every single car or truck on the road, and I literally fear for my life as he darts in and out of lines, inching forward at every stoplight to be positioned as the first to go once the light turns green. Twice I say that I am not in a hurry, but he ignores me. I dare not say more for fear of making him angry.

Another time, I am going from the souk to the airport in the late afternoon. I run into two friends, Ahmed and Rami, who work in a blanket shop near my apartment, and they offer to help me with my two very large bags. We walk to the intersection by the mosque where taxis pass. One stops and Rami negotiates for me. This driver insists on 500 Syrian pounds ($10), for a ride that usually costs 150. Another driver approaches and offers to go for 400. Rami says 300, and they repeat, in turn, "400! 300! 350! 300!" until the driver agrees, "300!" I put my bags in back and get in his car, in the front passenger seat.

The first driver gets out of his car and yells at the second for taking away his customer, even though there are other passengers waiting for a ride. He pounds the flat of his hand on the roof of our car. My driver gets out and holds his ground, arguing back, calling the first one names. He raises his right fist high as if to strike. The first driver is red in the face with anger, though, so he gets back in his car and drives at an angle in front of our car, blocking us from leaving. My driver then simply leaves me alone sitting in the car. I watch him enter the souk.

The car in which I sit is now blocking traffic. A policeman comes over and says something to me I do not understand. I shrug my shoulders, and say I do not know what is going on. My driver returns about ten minutes later with a small bag in his hand.

"Need to use the toilet?" I ask.

"No," he says, "I just bought olives for dinner."

I point to my watch, and say, "Airport, please." But instead my driver reengages with the angry one; they resume yelling at each other. We are still blocked from leaving, and the policeman, now seeing both drivers present, again approaches us. I place my hand on my driver's arm, hoping to calm him, and gesture for him to just drive on. He does, slowly, with his head stuck out the window, yelling all the while. When we arrive at the airport, he insists on 350 instead of the price we had agreed upon. I pay, angrily.

At stoplights, drivers avoid lining up behind others, but circle around the ones in front so that three cars fill two lanes, or four fill three, or five or six fill four. They position themselves like runners in a race so that at the last second, just before the light turns green one takes the initiative and inches, slightly askance, into the intersection ahead of the others. This move is rarely perfectly timed, since drivers usually must pause again for a few seconds for the cross traffic that continues even after the light turns green. Still, this last minute jockeying gives some driver the advantage of being the first to go, and that itself is usually the only, but also sufficient, reward for the clever maneuvering.

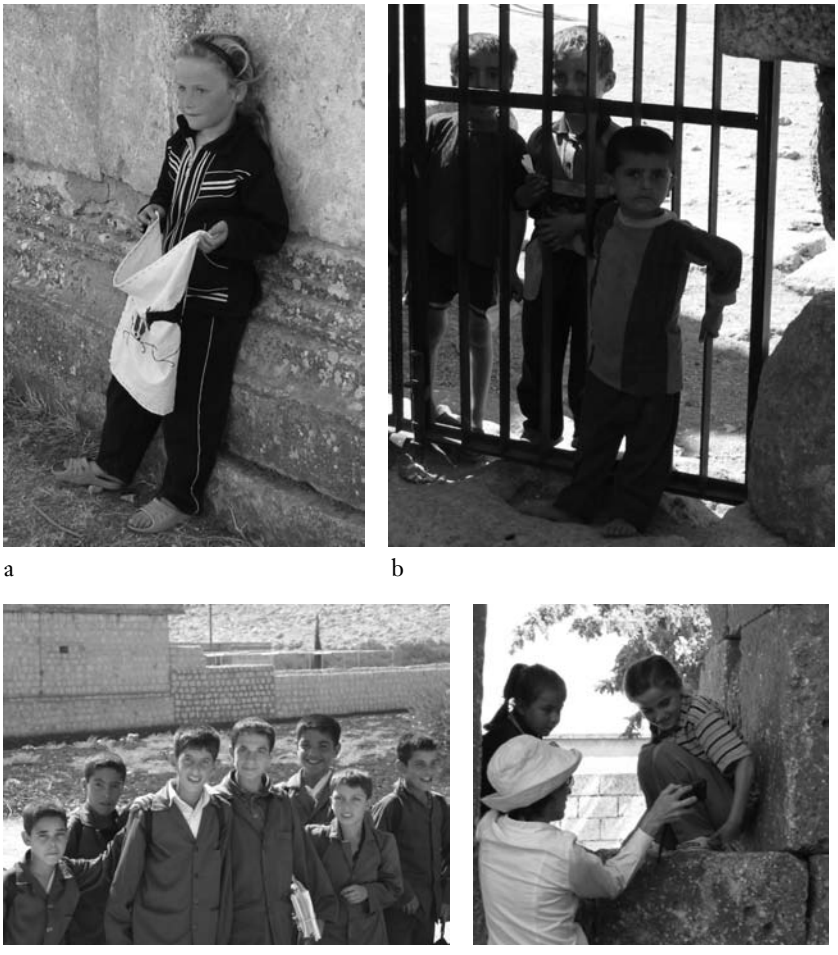
On the other hand, all this prepping for relative advantage for mobility and speed and desire to be number one is also counterbalanced by another behavior: as a friend puts it to me, "We Arabs like to sit." There is everywhere in Syria a readily observable attempt—in movement, in the slow caress of others, in speech, and in bureaucratic activities—to preserve a less hectic pace of thought and action, to slow things down and hold on to the moment.

Hanging out, not only sitting in the souk but also in cafés throughout the city, is a favorite activity. Mostly men, but also some women in some cafés and usually then only in late mornings or early afternoons, hang out: they sit, talk, smoke the narghile, and observe

others walking by. At cafés, the only quick movement is that of the waiters, who tend to be very polite and efficient, and children, who play unobtrusively without much bothering their elders, and who tend not to have fixed bedtimes. Children move quickly from running to napping, however, simply slumping over in a chair or lying on someone's lap for a snooze. If they seek contact with elders, they are rarely turned away but handed gently and lovingly from one person to another.

As girls enter puberty, they quit running altogether and slow their walk much more than boys their age. In lectures at the university and in conversations with young women, I discuss with them not only how their bodies are shaped by lack of physical exercise but also its effects on their posture, self-confidence, sense of freedom, and ease of movement. Obesity is a major unacknowledged problem in Syria, and, due to inactivity, women become obese more frequently and earlier in life than men. In the souk, I see many middle-aged women so burdened by weight that they can at most shuffle. But men also have weight problems, and while this is certainly attributable to the quantities of food they eat, it is also a result of pleasure found in sitting. In the evenings many of the streets in Aleppo may be bustling, but only some young men tend to walk any distance to speak of, and then it is more at the pace of a meander. "Nightlife," then, does not exist in the racy, urban European sense, or in what one experiences in certain sectors of Beirut (with a hint at such a life for the upper classes in Damascus)—energetic dancing in nightclubs, loud music from bars, parties with strangers. Aleppians might instead simply talk about their life at night, which consists in homes of playing cards or backgammon, or watching television, or for men in public sitting occasionally in the hammam but more frequently and prominently in the café.

Another striking feature of the Aleppian café is the widespread use of fluorescent lighting. In all but the most posh public places and in most homes, long-tube fluorescent lights have replaced incandescent light bulbs (not to speak of the older, nonelectric period of candle use). People uniformly explain to me that their use of fluorescent tubes is an economic decision; they are cheaper and last



a b c d

Figures 9a–9d. Children of Syria

longer (as well as being more energy efficient—an explanation not much offered). Occasionally people will add the desire to "be modern," or that now they are used to the glare. Never do they mention the aesthetic dimension of this decision, where it has its most dramatic effect. Regardless of intent, this kind of lighting has certain aesthetic effects that, when accompanied in public places by larger, clear-glass windows to the street, increase the transparency of interactions and visibility to outsiders.

Figures 10a and 10b. Shadow and Light

In pre-twentieth-century architectural styles, windows are not clear glass but latticework patterns cut into wood, which filter light into a room in various shapes and quantities. Ottoman-era tealight oil lamps and decorative hanging candle lamps made of brass and extra-fine glass illuminate not whole rooms but specific places. They cast shadows on objects, including people, with the double effect of revealing and concealing, accentuating a chin and mouth while obscuring an eye, lighting the page of a book while darkening the entire space of the room around its reader. Décor associated with the Ottoman period includes filtered lighting and partitioned rooms with few solid closed doors, both in homes and public places, which, much like the practice of veiling women, affords partial privacy but also arouses mystery.

Today this partial privacy is gone, unless one retires behind the closed door of a room in a home, in which case it would nonetheless be rare to find the older style of lighting. Ubiquitous are fluorescent lights, which in both homes and cafés embarrassingly reveal all blemishes on the face, every ball of dust in the corners of a room. Add to this the fact that in most private homes there are few pictures on the walls, and few of the exquisite Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Bedouin, or Syrian carpets on the floors. The harshness and glare of fluorescent light opens all presence and activity to scrutiny, and, in the name of transparency and efficiency, eliminates the work of shadows. This style became dominant in the 1970s, and accompanied, fortuitously, the tightening of discipline and the building of the police state in the regime of Hafez el-Assad.

In these well-lit spaces, then, of homes, cafés, restaurants, stores, and shops, people bask in immobility, conversing for hours over a Turkish coffee or cup of tea, but this slowness is countered by the high speed not only of traffic, but also the speed at which people eat, and the quickness of the orgasm in sex—for men, that is. It is hardly in jest that many people confide in me that Syrian men lead the world in this respect, though in fact they share this quickness with many others. (continued)