

# 6

**M**y father was a good provider. Yes, he was firm and authoritarian in our upbringing, but he loved us dearly—too dearly. He strove hard to put into our hands the tools that could make our lives easier than his had been. The last thing he wanted was to deprive us of the things he had been deprived of when budding to life. He cared not at all to have us do it the hard way, as he had done. And if education was a must to bring about that easier life, then by God we would have it, and the best his money could buy. I say this because a good education was very costly in Lebanon, and it was at the expense of the parents and not the government. Since my father dreamed of seeing us become engineers, architects, doctors, or any other of the well-thought-of professions in our country, he was more than ready to foot the bill. He wanted us to succeed. He insisted upon it. He also wanted us to be men of the world. So, he sought to provide us with all that was necessary to bring that about.

Take swimming, for example. He couldn't swim—actually, he could swim, but only under water, not on the surface of the water. Please don't ask me to explain; it's a mystery to me to this day. Because he couldn't swim, whether he was in a swimming pool or on the beach, he never ventured far from the area where his feet could touch bottom. If he went into deep waters, he always went a short distance and returned to the

same shallow point he started from, to avoid having to catch his breath in deep waters. And should he now and then venture far into deep waters, he always went to a midway point, where he could hold on while he surfaced to take the next breath, then continued his stretch underwater. Weird? I know, but it was vintage Henry. What he did was to measure the maximum time he could stay underwater with one deep, deep breath, and stick to that time religiously. And rather than solving his problem by letting us teach him how to swim, as we offered to do once we became good swimmers, he just worked on improving the maximum time he could stay underwater. He didn't let anyone teach him anything; he did it by himself if he wished to. Now I might be critical of my father's ways, but there's a lot of my father in each of us, his progeny, when it comes to sticking to one's *modus operandi*. *Genes oblige*.

The example of the swimming shows how my father went about things. Right or wrong, he insisted on having them his way. And if he couldn't swim, his sons would, come hell or high water. Thus, not only did he enroll us in a swimming club, *Oiseaux des mers* at Bain-Français beach (next to the famous St. Georges Hotel, a ten-minute walk from where we lived), but he provided us also with the best swimmers in town to turn us into first-class swimmers. In time, we became champions—by Lebanese standards. As you might expect, each of us chose a different style of swimming.

Chucry chose freestyle, breaststroke, and butterfly. He wanted to shine in as many ways as he could. Georges concentrated his know-how on freestyle, and he became so good at it that he ended up having the best style in town. When he swam, he moved with the soft strokes of a swan, hardly disturbing the waters. That's how smooth he was. *Eh oui*, even in swimming. *Et les filles en raffolaient, s'il vous plaît* (The girls were infatuated by it, please). Saad was dubbed the youngest swimmer in Lebanon by the news media. When he was five years old he could swim like a pro. As to yours truly, after trying all styles, I stuck with backstroke. Why? Well, it kept my head above water at all times, and kept me comfortable while swimming—a requisite I sought to establish later on in everything I tackled in my life.

When it came to daily life, my father's prospectus for success provided me with the right pointers, but it made no provision for spiritual matters. True, it included principles and morals, but they dwelt mainly on how to treat my neighbor—or foe—and not what to feed my soul. It failed to afford me justification, a way of putting my soul at ease. And since the outside world had nothing better to offer either, I withdrew into myself again. The difference this time was that I was no longer shielded by my innocent dreams.

Since I no longer considered the Church as the beacon of my faith, I had stopped following her precepts. What can I say? My conscience refused to be at peace whenever I confessed my sins to her. Hence, I saw no point in hiding myself behind the curtain of the confessional booth. Why bother when I could sin to my heart's content and still get away with it? Or, if there was anything to pay in return, it was so little—a few *Ave Marias* or *Pater Nosters* and a passe-partout “Go in peace, my son.” Easy for the priest to say. I was the one grappling with my uncertainties, while he was burping his absolutions as though pardoning a turkey marked for Thanksgiving Day. I was the one out of my bearings, while he slept on both ears, convinced he had already secured his place in heaven.

I was at a loss and I knew of no other spiritual candy store where I could buy some soul-gratifying answers for my questions. So I started to change, for the worse. It was unavoidable. When you are uncertain where a road leads, why take it? And when you feel like going nowhere, why bother walking at all?

Little by little I let go of the virtues I had held onto as a child. They were attached to my dream, so they went the way of my dream. Was it because I was growing up, or was it that I no longer believed in the values the grownups insisted I held onto? Hard to say. We were entering the fast-food age where everything was served on a paper platter, and in this *méli-mélo* of things-to-go it was hard for me to be at speed with the flow. Besides, I had reached that critical age when I began to lend an attentive ear to the subtle nuances in the social merry-go-round in which I was living—or

struggling, to be exact. Rich, as opposed to poor; smart and witty, as opposed to run of the mill; a Valentino, as opposed to a Quasimodo; upper crust, as opposed to commoner; in a profession with a Midas touch, as opposed to a subordinate one that earns barely enough to sustain a life. The list is endless.

These were subtleties that made our Lebanese society wag. They were also differences that could make or break a person, in that they could influence the course of his or her life should he or she remain passive to them. So there was a need to be or get prepared, which entailed making the right choices and taking firm steps—not that easy a feat when there is no certainty in life to hold onto. That was my problem. Nothing seemed to matter anymore now that I had lost the values I held onto as a child.

If I was at a loss at any moment in my life, that was it. I was completely disoriented in the aftermath of my fast-track escape from cloistered life. This is understandable. One day I was hard-set on becoming a saint, and, on another I saw no “heaven” in it—by heaven I mean future, the future of a soul. And what made it worse was that things were moving at high speed. While I had confined myself to the walls of my church, life had evolved around me, unconcerned whether I was preparing myself for it or not. That’s why I woke up one day feeling a dire need to catch up.

I must admit, my first steps back into society were rather awkward, if not embarrassing. A meet title for this chapter and the one that follows would be “The most embarrassing moments of my life.” If I say this, it is because of a few incidents that were instrumental in reminding me how unprepared I was, and how far from the new trends going about—how much I was lacking with-it-ness. Maybe one or two examples will better illustrate what I mean.

But first, allow me to give you a picture of the way I used to spend my days before my Alamo—or Beit-Mery, if you prefer—so that the debacle I faced after that fateful cloistered summer will be more comprehensible.

My life was simple—full, though. As I’ve said, I filled it with the many activities available to me, be it in winter or summer—school and

the religious and social activities available there, and scouting and sports.

Scouting was an activity that attracted me right away. Two things in particular drew me—apart from the fact that Chucry had preceded me to it, that is. First was the spirit of honesty and chivalry it entailed. Second was the outdoor camping life, which allowed me to visit the beautiful Lebanese countryside and gave me a way to have an away-from-home life, which I was lacking.

My father was too busy taking care of his sites to take care of us, so he rarely took us anywhere. Fishing trips to bond with the brood were definitely not on his must-do list. Saturdays, he worked. Sundays were his days of rest. He used to sleep till late in the morning, and once he woke up he'd supervise the copious lunch of the day. He never came home for lunch during the other days of the week. He ate once a day—dinner—and went to bed. What did he have during the whole day? Nothing but cigarettes and Turkish coffee, occasionally. He smoked like a chimney. He was what is commonly known as a chain smoker, a very heavy one. He smoked over three packs a day. His hair and fingers carried the traces, the rich yellow hue of nicotine. I hate to think what shape his lungs were in after all the tar he inhaled. In the course of his life, he had to go through two major operations because of the damage caused by that scourge. We had well begged him to stop, but he would hear none of it, saying, “Take ten years of my life, but don't take away my cigarettes”—quite a pitch for a cigarette ad campaign, no? And he said it right after he came out of the first operation. Too stubborn for his own good? You bet. That was Henry.

As I was saying, Sunday's lunch was a family affair, and it was a feast. It was either *Meshwee* (chicken or meat barbecue); or Yabrak (stuffed vine leaves cooked in a lemony sauce with cloves of garlic and steaks); or *Lahem-B'ageen* (literally “meat in dough,” a kind of Lebanese pizza, with minced meat cooked in onions with a soupçon of tomato, or pomegranate molasses, as topping). That last one was a religious ritual for my father. He used to go first to the butcher to handpick the meat and let the butcher mix it with the necessary condiments and ingredients he

brought along, then take the mixture to the baker to supervise the way it was baked. He was well known by both the butcher and the baker, and liked too. They didn't mind him being choosy and fussy, because he was knowledgeable, and because he was generous—another of Henry's particularities. And I tell you, I've never tasted better *Lahem-B'ageen* in my life than the ones he prepared with his own hands.

Since Sunday was his only day of rest, and he insisted on not being disturbed during the time he was at home, our weekends were a drag if we happened not to have prepared some sort of outdoor activity beforehand to occupy our free time. Scouting and sports came to fill that void with zest.

I have only good memories of being a Scout. I loved every moment and aspect of it. I loved it not only because of the many edifying and wonderful adventures it put within my reach but also for the clean principles it motivated me to abide by and the spirit of camaraderie it induced me to live by. After earning many badges, I was given the sobriquet *Gazelle Solitaire* (Lonely Gazelle). What in the world caused them to pick that totem for me? Beats me. I had the same reaction of surprise when I heard it after my initiation. In my audacious mind, I was hoping for an Eagle, a Lion, a Tiger, or a Leopard—at least a Panther, like the name of my patrol. I asked my patrol chief, Georges Saba (a classmate of Chucry), who had picked that dispassionate nickname for me. He readily answered, “I was the one to suggest it, of course. Who knows you better than I do?”

“But why Lonely Gazelle, of all names?”

“What, you're kidding me. Gazelle, because you're very fast and hard to catch.”

“A cheetah is fast, too. Why didn't you pick that animal?” I protested. “Frankly, I'd rather be a beast of prey than be the prey.”

“It's not a question here of what you would like to be, Joseph, but what you are in reality. Your totem should reflect your true nature, not your aspiration. And frankly, your character bespeaks you more of a gazelle than a cheetah.”

“What about the ‘lonely,’ then?” I asked, a little intrigued.

“Simple,” he expounded, in a matter-of-fact tone. “You always insist on working alone whenever I assign you a task or send you on a mission.”

He was right on both counts. If I was fast, it was due to the many sports activities I was involved with. As to insisting on working alone, it was because I could get better results that way. I didn’t have to refer to anyone when I had to decide which course of action to take. I was jealous of my individuality even in scouting. I know, the beauty of scouting is in its activity as a group, not its activity as separate individuals. But that’s the way I was. Still, I did have a wonderful time while it lasted. As a leader, we had a Russian native, Rascatof, a real soldiery type, a volcano in eruption. His assistant, Elie Shalhoub, was just the opposite—a hibernating, domesticated bear, so calm and unassuming was he. What a pair, a good combination, very similar to the couple I had at home: my parents. Under the leadership of these two Scout leaders, our La Salle band put so much heart into the different competitions they put us through that we won the honorific title of First all over Lebanon. All in all, it was good and healthy fun.

Sports were the other side of my religious coin. I went at them with voracity. Especially basketball. What I liked best about basketball was the fact that I could play it alone. See, I insisted on being alone even in sports. To basketball I allocated most of my free time. I used to practice hours and hours on end and wouldn’t leave the court unless I heard the voice of my mother calling me from the balcony of our apartment. With that kind of passion, at length I became one of the best players in our school, in my category. The funny thing was that when a new sports instructor, Georges Atallah, was assigned to our school, and he set out to form a junior team, which we didn’t have at the time, I didn’t go to the tryouts so as not to be picked. What’s so funny about that? Well, later on, I made sure to beat every one of the team members in a one-on-one game, when they were not practicing. And everybody kept telling the coach, “Why haven’t you picked Joseph Chaccour? He’s one of the best!” that he decided to look for me.

One day when I was playing in the court, I saw him coming our way. He asked the kids, “Which one of you is Chaccour?”

All fingers pointed at me, the one with the ball. He asked me, while smiling an ear-to-ear smile,

“So you’re Chaccour?”

“Depends on which one you’re looking for.”

“Why, how many of you are there?”

“Four.”

“*Mon Dieu*. And you all play basketball?”

“Sort of.”

“Good for you. But I’m interested in Joseph right now.”

“I am Joseph. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I heard you’re a good player, Joseph, so I came to ask why you didn’t show up at the tryouts.”

“What for? I know how to play; I don’t need a team to teach me.”

I know, what arrogance. But hey, I was good, so I was entitled to some arrogance, no? But he seemed to have dealt with fancy players full of themselves like yours truly before, for he readily said to me, point blank,

“No, maybe you don’t. But you can’t call yourself a good player unless you’re able to play as part of a team. And obviously you aren’t. I can teach you that. So how about it?”

He sure got my attention with that witty remark of his, so I decided to join his team. What can I say, I have a soft spot for smart alecks, especially when their first name happens to be Georges. And it turned out to be a wise decision, for in time basketball became a religion to me. And he was right; you can’t enjoy this game unless you are in unison with your teammates, which was true in our case. For on my team, Anis Siblyny, Khatchick Babikian, Zaven Zeintounzian (sorry, I can’t remember the name of the fifth), and I formed a fivesome hard to beat on any court, we played in such harmony. Ah, those were the days of wine and roses, and beautiful hooks too.

And then there was summer. It was the sea, the sea, and occasionally, writing poetry—in French, please. French was the language my brothers

and I communicated with, even at home. After my father enrolled us in that swimming club, we started to wake up at five-thirty every weekday to go to our training session at six. We practiced in the pool till eight or nine, at which time we went back home for a quick bite, only to come back to the sea. And we stayed there for the remainder of the day, roasting in the sun, braving the waves, and playing in the pool or on the rocks together with the rowdy bunch that came to swell our ranks, depending on the days and the moods. That's how we spent our beautiful summers in Lebanon, and we cherished every moment. As to poetry, you have to admit, with the many inspiring sunsets I witnessed all through that idle time of summer magic, a poetical quill must eventually have sprouted from my head. So I dabbled in rhymes for a while. But don't be alarmed, it didn't last long. It disappeared the moment I found out that poetry doesn't feed an empty stomach in Lebanon.

As can be noticed, girls have so far been conspicuously missing from my pages. This is due to the fact that there was no girl in my life at the time. Why? First, being part of a family comprised only of boys, girls were not in my thoughts. In a sense it was "Out of sight, out of mind," and out of reach too, since no sister was there to facilitate the occasional rapprochement. Second, going to an all-boys school didn't help either. Girls were just a conversation piece to pass the time with during recreation breaks. They were also the type *Shem wala E'dook* (Smell, but don't taste)—Arabic equivalent of "Look, but don't touch." Everyone could brag about his many conquests, knowing he didn't have to provide any proof.

I know, these are not strong enough reasons to forgo having a romantic liaison of some sort. Every kid goes through the forging experience of puppy love. Perhaps the third reason will better explain my early reticence. It is hard to become a saint with a beautiful girl hanging on your halo: ask any priest and he will vouch for this truism. Mind you, being aloof from the gentle gender had its compensations. It made me a safe friend to have around, in that I wasn't that keen on making conquests in that hazardous domain. My close friends never thought twice before introducing me to

their pretty girlfriends. And in most cases, I became a trustworthy confidant to both parties.

Indulge me in another aside. These happy *ménages à trois* led to quite a number of funny situations, and thinking about them makes the pleasure of digression irresistible. The situation that comes to mind in particular concerns a classmate of mine, Georges Sayess. (I know, another Georges. No, not everybody in Lebanon is called Georges, but I seem to have attracted them like bees to a flower. Somehow, that name must have been stuck to mine even before I was born. Come to think of it, another appropriate title for this chapter would have been “The many Georges in my life.”)

Georges Sayess was not only a classmate and a remote relative but also a buddy swimmer in the same club. He also lived in the neighborhood, in Ein-Mreyseh District, to be exact, which is next to the district of Phoenicia. We used to spend a lot of time together, especially during the summer vacation. It was no surprise, then, that when he and his girlfriend were having their first lovers’ quarrel, he came to me for help. He wanted me to intervene to patch things up between them. And that led to quite a funny scene, right out of one of Woody Allen’s movies.

A meeting was arranged at the Corniche’s promenade (which, by the way, was an extension of Ein-Mreyseh). The Corniche was a place frequented by people looking for calm, beautiful scenery, the fresh air of the sea, and also for occasional girls of ill-repute—a fact I wasn’t aware of at the time.

Since Georges and his sweetheart were on no-speaking terms, she stayed in one corner, and he in another some twenty paces away, while I went back and forth, carrying their buckets of mutual grievances.

And so it went, “He says, blah blah blah,” and “She says, blah blah blah,” while I wondered how they could be mad at each other when the reason for their dispute was so ridiculous. Every age has not only its problems but its trifles too. Mind you, I didn’t confine my noble mission to just carrying their sulky messages in turn, but applied myself to sneaking some good sense between those messages, hoping to mollify

their unrelenting stands. But it got me nowhere. She stuck to her prerogatives as a coy girl, and he stood by his wounded pride as a Don Juan in the bud, while I was stuck in the middle, with people wondering what the heck I was doing, going back and forth like that.

While in my altruistic mind I felt like a frustrated American envoy on a conciliatory shuttling mission to solve the Middle East problem, bystanders there must have seen in me an entrepreneurial Tom Cruise in his now famous role in *Risky Business*. They must have, judging from the way they were whispering and laughing in their sleeves. And I did feel a little awkward, if not ridiculous.

After an hour or so of this tiresome and fruitless *va-et-vient*, I decided to put a stop to the whole affair. I stood halfway between the two obstinate belligerents and shouted at the top of my lungs at both of them.

“Hey, you two, you either stop this whole nonsense right now or I’ll throw you both into the water.” A little humor ought to do the trick, right? And it worked: both of them were laughing now. (Maybe that’s what the American envoys should do to solve the interminable conflict in the Middle East. No, not put in some humor; a lot of that is already in there. How else could the American envoys have survived for so long? No, what they should do is, throw all the belligerent parties into the sea, once and for all, and let them flounder in the rigmarole of their own ambivalence.)

As to the denouement of this one-too-many tryst, as I said, it pays to have a third party involved in your dispute. Not only can you blame the third party for the misunderstanding, should the peacemaking fail, but you can also claim that he (or she) was the reason you decided to reconsider, should it come to a happy conclusion. And that’s how they kissed and made up, for my sake. And it wasn’t a moment too soon.

If you are wondering whether this scene is one of my embarrassing moments, it is not. But I am now coming to that moment, and it involves the same buddy of my youth, Georges Sayess. It was his birthday, and he organized a party to celebrate the happy occasion.

In our Chaccourian home sweet home, that annual event was never celebrated, not even mentioned. With five boys, it’s definitely

not recommended. But that was not the case with Georges Sayess: he was an only boy, and, for good measure, he had only one sister, called—what else?—Georgette. Hey, I'm not kidding, that was really her name, honest. Georgette was a little younger than Georges, but that didn't stop her from introducing him to girls. A sister is always practical to have when it comes to meeting girls—I presume, but don't take my word for it because I have never had a sister to begin with. Maybe that's why I had never been to a party before, either. That being the case, I was quick to decline Georges's invitation.

"Why not?" asked Georges in a half-surprised, half-disappointed tone.

"Well, I've never been to a party before, and I don't know what it involves."

"What do you mean 'what it involves'? All you have to do is dance, eat cake, and have fun."

"Dance? With whom?"

"With whom? With the girls, of course."

"There will be girls too?"

"Of course. How can you have a party without girls? Say, where have you been living the last couple of years?"

"Never mind that. I still can't come."

"But why, Abou-el-Zouz? I swear it will be a lot of fun. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. I've been to many parties, so I know what I'm talking about."

"I'm sure you do. My problem is that I don't know how to dance."

"So what? Half of us don't, either. We fake it. What's the big deal? You just shake as though there's a bee stuck in your back, and in no time you'll be dancing like a pro."

"That kind of a ridiculous pro I can do without, Georges."

"Ridiculous? Oh, come on, don't make such a big fuss about it, Joseph. I promise you it will be fun."

"Oh, I don't know ..."

"All right, say you don't know how to dance. Don't tell me you don't know how to eat cake, either, or have fun. Come on, if there's one guy

I'd most rather have there it's you, Abou-el-Zouz. We always have fun together, don't we?"

"I know we do, Georges, but this is totally different. We won't be among friends."

"Of course we will. The whole bunch will be there, and everyone will bring his girlfriend."

"What? His girlfriend? But I don't have a girlfriend."

"So what? There will be plenty to go around; my sister will see to it. It's her birthday too. We were born a couple of days apart, so we celebrate at the same time. It's more practical that way. She will provide most of the girls. And trust me, I'll make sure she invites only the beautiful ones among her friends. So don't worry, you'll have a good time. I guarantee it."

"I don't know, Georges. The whole thing looks fishy to me. I'd rather go shoot some hoops. It's a Saturday, you know, and not many people will be on the school playground—just the way I like it."

"Come on, Joseph. You can play basketball anytime you want, but a birthday is a once-a-year celebration. Besides, you can't refuse me this favor; I'm your friend, ain't I? I insist you come. Otherwise, we will come, the whole bunch and I, to your home to drag you with us."

"All right, all right, Georges, I'll come. But I warn you, at the first hitch I'm out of there."

"You worry too much, Abou-el-Zouz. You'll have a great time. You'll see."

What Georges forgot to mention was what to wear, and I didn't think it important enough to ask. You see, in those days I wore only shorts. To me shorts were practical and fun; they allowed me to move fast without restraining my nimble feet. I wore them everywhere, even when serving mass. And since I was going to that party to have fun, as he had repeatedly pointed out, it was only natural that I wear shorts, no? Sunday's shorts, of course.

That was my first mistake—say rather, disaster. For as soon as I entered his home, I realized how much out of place I was. Everyone there

looked dapper in his best suit, with long pants and cravat, or a colorful bow tie. In a word, I was ridiculous, from head to foot. I never felt so embarrassed in my life. My first thought was, “You’d better skedaddle out of here, pronto.” I turned on my heel and headed for the door.

Just when I was about to step out, I heard Georges’s voice. “Oh, you’re here at last. When did you come in?” he asked.

“Uh ... I just arrived.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“Uh ... I just remembered I forgot my wallet at home. I thought I would go back to get it.”

I know, such a lame excuse argues yours truly unimaginative, but it was the first excuse to pop into my mind. Hey, I am no Georgie (my resourceful brother). Come to think of it, he would never have put himself in such an awkward situation to begin with. Anyway, Georges, my friend, was quick to gibe at me for that silly excuse of mine. “Go get your wallet? What for?” he said. “Everything is free here. Ha, ha, ha.”

“Cute, Georges, your sense of humor is extra-sweet today. Too much *Ghazel’al banat* already?” (Arabic for cotton candy, but literally it also means flirting with girls.)

“Come on, buddy, lighten up a bit. You’re here to have fun, so why the long face?”

Either he was blind, or he was being tactful in not mentioning my shorts, for no one could have missed such a blunder if not an eyesore. I opted for the second and tried to lighten up a bit, as he suggested.

“You may be right,” I said. “But right now I feel like a fish out of water, everything is so new to me. Anyway, happy birthday. Here, I brought you a little present.”

It was an Elvis Presley LP; he was à la mode then.

He thanked me, told me I shouldn’t have, said my presence at his party was present enough for him. “And I’m not joking. Believe me, I’m glad you came,” said he with his big birthday-boy smile. “So, what are you waiting for? Mingle, blend in, have fun.”

Was he serious? Did he say mingle, blend in? With those shorts?

When my first reaction was to bound away into the salvaging maze of our streets, as fast as my nimble feet of a gazelle could carry me? I would rather have died. But I figured, since he was an habitué of parties, he must know a thing or two—surely more than I did. So, when he left me to ingratiate himself with the rest of his guests, I set myself to act on his advice to mingle and blend in.

That was a big mistake. As soon as I stepped into the reveling arena some girls started to look askance at me, giggling all the while among themselves, and making no effort to be discreet about it. Obviously, my first attempt at being friendly with the gentle sex was a total fiasco. So I kept out of sight as much as I could, hiding behind a sofa or next to a high buffet, or staying out on the balcony. But Georges kept coming to the charge to check if I was having fun. I wished he'd be less of a caring host for a change.

After his third inquiry, I asked him when the party was supposed to end, to which he replied, “Why? The party has just started. Surely you're not thinking of going already?”

“Oh, you know how strict my father is, Georges. I can't stay for long.” I was lying in my teeth (you already know how it works: always blame it on a third party). But Georges really wanted me to have a good time. He checked how much time he had to make that pan out, asking me how long I could stay.

“Till eight—that is, I have to be home by eight.”

“Hey, it's not even six and you're already thinking of leaving. Why? Aren't you having a good time?”

“*Au contraire*, Georges, I'm having the time of my life. Believe me, I'll never forget this day as long as I live.”

That was no lie. I am writing about it, ain't I?

Things went all right for a while. No, I didn't invite any girl to dance; I'm not that daring a fool. Hey, I didn't even accost the friends I knew, to avoid having to explain why I had come in shorts and why I wasn't dancing. Actually, with regard to that last social interaction, I thought I was safe. I just hid behind the practical man's prerogative, the one that

stipulates it's the man who invites the girl to dance and not the other way around. I had understood this general custom of etiquette from the few inquiries I had made before coming to the party, unaware that people never stuck to the rules. In my neophyte's mind, as long as I invited no one, I was safe. Wrong. In no time, I heard some stupid jerk suggest to the entire bunch there, "Hey guys, it's time for the girls to invite the boys now." That's when I started to panic. But I quickly reassured myself. Who would want to dance with an awkward duckling wearing shorts? Wrong again. Oh, this was surely not my day. Lord, I thought it would never end.

As soon as that bright idea got the enthusiastic hurrah of the boys, and the customary bashful giggles of the girls, every Casanova hurried to sit and wait to be picked, while I sat in a corner, expecting to be ignored—correction: praying to be ignored. Things went well for a few minutes. I was blissfully left out of everybody's mind. Then I saw a young girl coming my way. "Uh-oh," I thought. "I hope she's not coming for me." She was, unfortunately. I quickly cast my eyes to the floor, thinking maybe if I didn't look at her she'd go away, or change her mind and go straight to the girly-killer sitting next to me with his greasy coif à la James Dean. He was fretting and fidgeting conspicuously, making eyes at all the girls passing him by, so they'd pick him. But, no luck—that is, no luck for me. For I soon saw her shoes stop at my station. They were white—I think.

"My name is Anna," said a gentle voice. "What's yours?"

I lifted my concentration from her shoes all the way up to her eyes. They were blue, a beautiful azure—I am sure of it. She was good-looking, and some two or three years my elder. Maybe that's what attracted her to me; her maternal instinct must have compelled her to come and rescue little Bambi, in such a sorry state was I. Once I found my tongue, I introduced myself, making an obvious mess of my attempt at controlling my blushing.

"I am Zou—" *Faux pas* here, but I was quick to correct it. "Uh, Joseph. I am Joseph."

“All right, Zou-Joseph. Would you like to dance?” she said, trying to be as accommodating as my low spirit was begging for. A short silence followed her invitation. I didn’t know what to say. A blunt “no” with no explanation would surely hurt her feelings; or she’d think I was playing hard to get. I opted for the truth; it usually worked better than lying, for me.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to dance,” I said, in a barely audible voice, lest prying ears get wind of my handicap.

“Oh, I see. That’s why you kept aside all this time,” she answered.

Wow, somebody had actually noticed. I gave her an appreciative smile as a tribute to her sagacity. (Sagacity is a marvelous thing in girls, especially in a situation like this.) She went on to say with the same amiability, “Oh, there’s nothing to it. Besides, this is only a slow. Come, I’ll teach you.” And without even waiting for my consent, she took me gently by the hand and led me to the dance floor (my Waterloo-to-be). I dragged behind wondering, “Why, how many dances are there?” I was soon to be given a pungent clue.

Once in the wiggling *mêlée*, she ceremoniously took my right hand and placed it halfway around her waist, and placed her left arm halfway around my loins. Then she took my left hand—palm facing up—raised it a bit, and let it hang there in midair till she gently tucked her right hand—palm facing down—into it. I am meticulous on details. So far, so good, I reassured myself. Then I heard her say,

“All right now, let’s move. Oh, by the way, you’re supposed to lead, not I.”

“Lead? Lead where?” I asked, hoping she’d say, “Off the dance floor.” But her sense of humor was focused on teaching me how to dance at all costs, probably to rid me of my aloofness once and for all.

“Lead the moves, of course, silly,” she remarked coyly.

“But how can I do that, when I don’t even know how to move?”

“But it is very simple. You just sway to the rhythm of the song. Here, I’ll show you: one, two, three; one, two, three ... see, it’s very simple.” She was swaying gracefully to the rhythm of the music.

“Yes, but how can you tell which way I want to go?”

“Simple. By the way you move your body. It’s our specialty, us girls. You see, it’s up to the boys to lead, and the girls to follow.”

In view of my being still wet behind the ears, I was tempted to suggest that it would have been much better were the girls to lead; they were leading the boys by the nose anyhow. But I thought it better to concentrate my freshly acquired insight on learning how to be a good leader rather than a smarty shorts. I started to move, one, two, three ... making sure not to put my three before my two; and she followed, applying herself to proving to me that this business of leading wasn’t such a big deal after all. In no time I saw myself going roundabout the dancing floor, bumping now and then into other couples. Well, what can you expect when I kept my eyes fastened on the floor? I was trying to avoid her feet—with no success, I am afraid. And each time I stepped on her toes, she was the one to apologize. That’s how gracious and kind Anna was. The poor girl.

Hey, the poor me. They were all watching us from the corner of their eyes—at least, that’s the impression I got. Fine pair we were. She was a little taller than me. And don’t forget the other salient feature we both had in common, unlike the rest of the couples. We were the only couple with matching hemlines—I with my shorts, she with her skirt. How embarrassing. But she seemed not to mind a bit; on the contrary, she was very confident of herself, and did her best to put me at ease, while I returned the favor by trying to avoid her toes as much as possible. And it worked. I was dancing the slow. That is, until the music stopped suddenly, and another stupid jerk said in a loud partying voice, “This is too boring. Let’s liven up the party a bit, guys.”

A few seconds later I heard the voice of Elvis Presley singing “Blue Suede Shoes”—probably my record. Everybody started to jump like crazed chimpanzees. Everybody, that is, except us. So I shouted in my teaching partner’s ear (the music being at an ear-piercing pitch by now), “And what’s that?”

“Rock-and-roll,” she shouted back in my ear. “Would you like to try it?”

“Oh no, please,” I begged her, while taking her away from the bouncing frenzy. “I’m still struggling with the slow. Would you mind sitting this one out? I’m afraid I might break not only your toes but your legs, too, if I tried.” She laughed, and we went out of the whirling circle.

Once aside, I thanked her for bearing with me, then excused myself and made a gazelle line for the door, and I never looked back. No, I didn’t wait for the birthday boy to blow out his candles; mine were all blown out already. Even if he were to catch me on my way out this time, I was set on putting my foot down—or out, in this case. No more partying for me. I had had it with his fun.

I ran down the stairs and once I was out in the street, I breathed with ease. It was about time; it had been getting too stuffy in there, or was it only me? A few steps further and I slowed down the pace, after I made sure the party boy hadn’t followed me. I didn’t go straight home. It was still early. I had told my folks I’d be back by nine or ten, and my father saw no objection since Georges’s apartment building was not far from ours. Were I to return earlier, everyone at home would want to know why I had decided to cut short my fun time, and then I’d have to explain. I had had enough embarrassments for one day. So I decided to go for a walk instead. A walk was the best remedy. I could let off steam and brood over my catastrophe.

What a mess. I couldn’t help thinking about the whole debacle. I had never felt so miserable in my life. “Never again,” I heard myself say. “I will never again be caught short. And most of all, caught in shorts.” One thing was sure, gauche didn’t get you the time of the day, and that party had more than proved it to me. So, what was the solution? I couldn’t always avoid that kind of social interacting, or run away from it. That experience had shown me how off-tune I was from the rest of the boys and the prevailing trends. I had to shape up or be a loser for the rest of my life, or so I thought. I know, that was drastic, but I was a kid, and kids overreact when they’re hurt. I suddenly saw nothing but doom and gloom around me.

Thus, I strolled and strolled and thought in between, heaving a long

sigh now and then for lack of answers. And the remaining time went swiftly by. It's amazing how time flies when you have a lot on your mind but no answers. Soon I was home. My father was having his once-a-day meal. He said nothing. Not so my mother.

"Did you have a good time, dear?" she inquired, while serving my father.

"Yes, a very good time," I quickly answered, trying to be convincing. I didn't want to raise any suspicion on the part of my father, who had already begun to penetrate my thoughts. I knew better than to throw any troublesome affair in his lap at night. Should it be necessary to worry him, we always left it till the morning, to give him time to sleep off his share of all-in-a-day's-work contrarities.

(The ritual was that as soon as Father came home, tired and worn out, he'd go straight to the shower, while my mother set the table for him. One phrase my mother made sure to scratch, for good, from her already abridged vocabulary was "Did you have a good day at work, honey?" That was a definite no-no. For when it came to giving tidbits about his business, my father was always parsimonious, and he made sure that no one interfered or asked questions. He had a lot of advices, though, when it came to let us know how he wanted us to tackle life, and the one piece of advice he kept repeating to our ears was "*Lazem itarku al-hayat*," [You must fight life, or grab life by the horns.] Knowing him, I believe this mantra ran true to form. He wasn't the kind to go with the flow. As to fighting life, he did it with his heart and soul, if not with his bare hands. Life had taught him a lot, surely enough to make him overcautious. And though he was disillusioned by it all, he kept his disillusionment to himself. But he never missed an opportunity to offer his valuable mantra to my brothers and me. Somehow we always felt like soldiers in training, waiting to be ready to join his ranks to fight life with him. But that didn't mean we could tell him how to wage his battles. Accordingly, if there was anything to say about his work, he was the one to initiate it, and at a

time he thought opportune. Otherwise his world was off limits to us. And if he held that strict line of conduct, it wasn't so as to hide something from us but to keep all headaches away from us. On his ship, Mr. Henry—as we used to call Father when we referred to him, was the sole captain, and he insisted on being at the helm all the time, while we stood by, helpless, praying he'd be able to withstand the hurricanes and weather us through the impediments of life. That's why when he came home at night, it was not just to rest, but to think about his moves for the next day. He could not afford the luxury of putting his mind on “pause” lest he be drowned by his problems.

He would be sitting there, eating, with his left leg resting half bent on his chair, and his mind would be busy surveying his site. And thus, between a mouthful and a chew, he decided the way of his moves for the next day. Moments like these made us, my brothers and me, realize how much Father was immersed in his own world—to the point of being utterly oblivious to ours. The world in which he was fighting left him no time for respite. We understood that fact of life and tried to be as considerate as our age allowed us to be. And so we often felt it wiser not to stand in the way of his stampeding thoughts.

But, strange to say, he was a different person in the morning, and mostly in good humor. And that was the proper time to approach him with our personal problems. My father was a morning person, and we profited from that fact to run to him with our demands, like early birds seeking to secure their beak-full for the day.)

“You must be full, with all that good food, cake, and all,” asserted my mother.

“Yes, they had a great variety there. Everything was good, especially the cake . . . I'm really full.”

“Georges's mother is a good cook. She must be, she's from Aleppo, isn't she?” observed my mother.

I acknowledged the fact with a smile, then excused myself and went

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to my room—sorry, to our room (my brothers and I shared it; that’s the beauty of not having sisters: it obviates the need for an extra room)—before my father started to read my hesitations. Anyway, I didn’t have a stomach for eating anything.

My brothers were already asleep, and I went quickly to bed to sleep off my worries, unaware that there are some worries that cannot be lulled to sleep.

# 7

**I**f you want to sleep off your problems, solve them. That's what I tried to do that night, in the aftermath of my ungraceful attempt at being a man of the world. That's also why I didn't sleep well that night, if I slept at all. I kept ruminating about the whole "fun" I had lived through, and brooding over ways to solve my problems. I was to blame. Hadn't I gone to that party unprepared? If that debacle taught me anything, it was that it's better to be the life of the party than a wet blanket or a stopgap. What made the whole matter even worse, to me, was that the cause of my debacle was not that big a deal to have the hang of. Nonetheless, it did affect me. The way things stood, I had two choices. I could either bury myself in my ineptitude or face it headlong. Yes, but how to face it? After examining my situation, I boiled down the causes of my failure to two things: style and know-how. Both were in dire need of complete overhaul. In other words, I had to bring myself up to the modish manners and going trends at all costs.

Working on my style meant changing the way I looked, the way I behaved, and my attitude toward things in general—that is, if I still wanted to be part of the in-crowd. There were things I could do myself, and others that were in my parents' hands. Like getting rid of those shorts, for one. "I must start wearing long pants. I must," I resolved.

“What about basketball?” All right, except for basketball. “And scouting?” Ah yes, I forgot about that too. All right, everywhere in pants, except those two activities in shorts.

“But what stratagem should I use to secure those damn pants?” Simple. Go to Mother. She was a safer bet when it came to asking anything from Father. Most things that we asked for through her, he let us get away with, as long as they weren’t harmful to us. It was settled, then. Starting from tomorrow, I would work on those pants. Good. Now, to know-how. That was a little trickier. I would have to learn how to do things properly, especially dancing. And not only the slow, but all the other dances too. So what? Others did it, so could I.

“I’ll learn, even if it kills me,” I vowed. “Starting from tomorrow—no, starting from Monday, I’ll put myself to the task.” Oh yes, another thing, I had to change my style too. “But you have no style to begin with.” Better yet. I’ll build one from scratch.

And so went the night, with little Zouzou planning his next moves—a trait he must have picked up from his father, his new role model. What happened, to change me to that extent? Time was when my thoughts were focused on finding ways to be worthy of my little Jesus, and now I was cudgeling my brains to find ways to join the ranks of the vain Croesus. One minute I was only interested in improving my soul, the next I was wondering what to wear, how to dance, and how to look my best. I know, these were harmless indulgences. The harm resided in the fact that they came to the fore in my life, supplanting matters of faith. Was my faith then so weak that it faded so soon? Or was I simply growing up? Why is it that once you enter adulthood you are more interested in maturing materialistically than spiritually? Is faith a hindrance when it comes to growing up in a sound environment?

My experience showed me that when you’re budding to life, your faith is part and parcel of your inheritance from the family and the society you were born into. In time, it becomes a myth that you accept as a way of life because everyone does, until the flaws hit you right between the eyes. You can shut your eyes and keep groping, or you can question the

myth and attempt to rectify your belief. But where is that high ideal on which you can safely build that belief? Suddenly, it is the big unknown. And how prepared are you, when it comes to navigating the choppy sea of that unknown? You flounder in your uncertainties, waiting to be fully grown; you think you will be better equipped to make the right choices then, that the picture will be clearer along the road.

But should you, as a child, lose your innocence in the meantime, how competent can you be to judge what is good or bad for you, purity of heart being the tocsin of the soul? Then again, was innocence the culprit in my debacle? If not, why was it so ineffective in coping with my new priorities; or worse: why did it seem to be of so little importance? Was I so abashed that I let new priorities supersede everything else? Or was it that I didn't know what to do with my innocence anymore, since it was taking me nowhere but away from my friends and those who had my interest at heart, when they were urging me to fit in?

All these questions led to one sure thing. I had to get rid of my innocence; it was too embarrassing. I guess that's what happens when you keep telling a fallen angel to lighten up. The first thing he is bound to do is clip his wings.

Morning came. It was a Sunday. Everyone at home was still sleeping when I got up—everyone except Mother. She was already in the kitchen. The door was closed, to keep the noise from waking up her still slumbering brood, my father in particular. Mother was an early riser every day of the week—a fact I was well aware of—and that's why I was up in the early hours of the morning that day.

As soon as I was on my feet, I put my plan into action. First, work on my style. And where else to start than from the top. I went to the bathroom, took the brush, and launched an attack on my hair. No more parting on the left; that had to go. I needed a new look. But which one? But of course—how stupid of me—James Dean, *the* rebel without a cause. Forthwith, I brushed my hair to the back. But those miserable tangles kept coming to the fore. There and then I was encountering the

first insubordination in my ranks. It was to be expected: hair is not easy to reason with, especially when it's down pat with the way things are. But I wasn't about to let some recalcitrant hair stop me from bringing about my complete metamorphosis. I gave my anger free hand in taming that hair. I went at it with all kinds of punishment short of cutting it à la Yul Brynner; that zero hairdo wasn't in fashion yet, thank God. After a certain amount of that harsh treatment, my hair was even worse than before. Now I looked like a scared porcupine; every hair was standing on end.

*Mais zut alors!*—I used to swear in French, in those days—those bolting hairs of mine were not going to cooperate. I dashed them with water; it didn't help. Besides, I worried that once the water evaporated, they'd spring up again—not the kind of look I fancied. What I needed was something to keep them put, permanently. It was then that a brilliant idea struck me. Brylcream. My father used the stuff.

I went through his things and found it. I took a big portion from the jar and, splash, plastered it all over my hair. I rubbed it in vigorously with the tip of my fingers to spread it evenly. Yuk. If you think you've see greasy hair before, think again. Nothing compared to mine there and then. I combed it to the back, *et voilà*. Sure, my new hairdo gave me the look of a weirdo, but that's what you get when you revamp a Zouzou. But hey, I had gotten my new style.

This done, I went to the next step: secure those damned pants—meaning a quick visit to Mother dear.

She was preparing lunch (chicken barbecue was on the menu). Naturally the first thing she noticed was “Your hair? Ya Rabbi ... what have you done to your beautiful hair?”

“Nothing. I just changed style.”

“Changed style? But what for? You look awful like that, with ... with ... all that grease. You must have used a ton. Pass me the oil. What's the big idea?”

“Don't worry, you'll get used to it.”

“No, I won't. I like you better with a parting. It's cuter.”

“Believe me, cute is the last thing on my mind right now.”

“What? What got into you? Pass me the pepper. Did you get up from the wrong side of the bed?”

“Here’s the pepper. How could I get up from the wrong side of the bed when there is only one side to get up from, the left.” (I slept on the lower berth of a double-decker that was tucked against the wall, with Chucry in the upper deck.)

“It’s a figure of speech, silly. I was just making a point.”

“I, too. My bed is in a corner, the way I am.”

“What kind of talk is that, huh? Wait till your father hears it. Pass me the knife.”

It’s hard to reason with your mother while she’s wrestling with a chicken—sorry, with a flock of chickens, in view of the many mouths to feed.

“Why, what have I done now?” I protested.

“That’s what I’d like to know. You’re acting a little weird this morning. It must be that party. Some girl must have played with your head.” Here, she stopped wrestling with her chicken, to give me a piece of her mind. “Say, did anything wrong happen there? Did any girl put it in your head that you look better with that ridiculous hairdo?” she said while wagging the knife at me unconsciously.

“No, rest assured, nobody played with my head,” I said, while removing a piece of meat that had landed right on my nose. “Everything went perfectly swell there. Everyone looked his best—everyone that is, except your cute little Zouzou.”

With that remark, I got her undivided attention. She put down the knife and gave me a better ear.

“What do you mean?” she asked, sounding a little worried.

“Everyone there was wearing pants,” I told her. “I was the only one with shorts. I looked ridiculous.”

“Is that all? Is that what’s bothering you?”

“Yes. And don’t you tell me it’s nothing. Don’t you think it’s time I wore pants? I’m not a kid anymore, you know.”

“Fine. You’re not a kid anymore, but you’re still acting like one. Pass me that garlic from there. If you feel so strongly about it, why don’t you talk to your father?”

Oh, she knew how to bring me to heel. But I wasn’t about to declare defeat—not as long as I could still rally her to my cause by leaning on her heart.

“No, I’d rather you told him,” I said. “You know better how to talk to him. He listens to you.”

That was a big lie. But hey, if you can’t win through verity, try flattery. Unfortunately, it didn’t work. My mother was well aware of her limitations.

“Hah, I only wish,” she responded. “I’ll talk to him, though. I’m sure he won’t object. But don’t you think you’re too young for pants?”

“No, I’m too old for shorts. Will you please tell him? And try to be convincing, huh. Don’t throw it in just like that, as a mere by-the-way observation.”

“All right, all right. Pass me the salt. Once your father is up, I’ll tell him.”

“Here’s the salt. Ah yes, one other thing.”

“Now what?”

“Could you please stop calling me Zouzou?”

“What?” she exclaimed in total surprise. She almost cut her finger, so taken aback was she by my demand.

“It’s embarrassing,” I persisted. “Especially when you call me from the balcony, with all my friends listening in the school playground.”

“Look at that. Now he’s embarrassed by his own mother. They came out of my womb but to scare me with their boo. What do you want me to call you, huh? Zouzou is your name.”

“No, it’s not. It’s Joseph.”

“But that name is too old for you.”

“What name?” cut in Chucry, who had just stepped into the kitchen.

“Come listen to the crazy talk of your brother. He says he doesn’t want to be called Zouzou anymore.”

“Well, he’s right. He’s too old for that.” Good old Chucry was coming to the rescue.

“Since when? And what do you suggest we call him, huh?”

“How about Abou-el-Zouz?” said Chucry, winking at me.

“Yes, yes. Please.” I was quick to second the motion. “All my classmates call me by that name anyhow.”

“*Metel Ze’ran Al-Basta.*” (Like the hoodlums of Basta, a section in town renowned for its hard-nosed hoodlums.)

“Hoodlums? Who’s like the hoodlums of Basta?” inquired Georgie, in his turn, coming into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes all the while. Once he had had a second look at my greasy hairdo, he was quick to add, “Never mind. I think I have a clue.”

I’ll spare you the rest.

And so it was that, between the oil, the pepper, the knife, the garlic, and the salt, I got rid of my shorts, and my nickname too, for good measure. And, in time, not only was I promoted to Abou-el-Zouz but my mother got to be called Um-el-Shabab (mother of the boys) and my father, Abou-el-Shabab (father of the boys). That’s what’s nice about having only boys; you get quickly promoted to the rank of hoodlums. As to my dancing prowess, it took more time, but, by Jove, I got the hang of it in the end. The way I went about putting myself in step with the many dances du jour, especially rock-and-roll, was: I went to the movies. *Peyton Place* had rid me of my beautiful notion of true love, James Dean gave me a greasy hairdo, and Elvis Presley was to teach me how to twist my hips. Who says movies aren’t educational? Once I had studied Elvis’s avant-garde contortions, I emulated them at home at my own convenience.

I used to spend hours on end in my parents’ bedroom, in front of the tall mirror hanging there. I wiggled and waggled like a water bubble, jumped up and down, screwed myself round and round, till I put myself in shape—and sprained a few joints in the process (all for a good cause). The trickiest part was to get my head to shake and swirl without

feeling dizzy. Of course, I made sure to lock the door first, lest any of my brothers catch me practicing. And never mind if after every one of those sessions I walked like a cowboy with a wryneck, who had ridden his horse for a whole day. The important thing was that I got the hang of it in the end.

Not only did I teach myself rock-and-roll but all the other dances too, including the old ones. Alas. I was soon to find that this dancing business had no end, on account of the many new trends that had kept popping now and then along the years, which made me realize that dancing was a lifetime challenge. I took up the challenge and coped with it with brio.

While I was grasping all trends, Georgie concentrated his know-how on only one, the Limbo. He discovered this hidden skill one day while I was training myself for this dance with two chairs and a long broomstick. Georges caught me in action.

“My, my. And what’s that?” he wondered with a hearty chuckle.

“You can laugh as much as you want, but this is the rage these days.”

“Till a new one comes to dethrone it, I presume. What’s it called, anyway?”

“It’s the Limbo,” I said while passing under the bar with great difficulty. “Haven’t you heard of it? It’s even on TV. There’s a competition.”

“I don’t care if it is on TV; it still looks ridiculous to me, and so simple too.”

Now he had really stepped on a nerve. “Oh yeah? Care to show me how simple it is?” I challenged him.

“By all means. Move over, Houdini.”

And he passed under the bar with such facility, he rendered me speechless.

“Wait a second,” I said a little peeved, “that’s not all. Now you have to try it at a lower height.”

“All right. Lower it as much as you want,” he retorted, taking up the challenge without hesitation.

I lowered the bar. He passed under it as if Limbo were his bread-and-butter business. I lowered it again, and the little devil did it again. He

kept doing it till the bar was approximately twenty-five inches from the floor, and he passed under it with such ease that I stood there, mouth agape, trying to figure out what was happening.

Knowing he was always on the lookout to slip one over on me (mind you, he has mellowed a bit, since then, I think) I asked him,

“Are you sure you’ve never tried this before, Georges?”

“I swear to you, this is the first time. Why?”

“Because you’re good. You’re even better than good. With a little training you’d be able to beat all those jerks on TV who claim to be champions.”

“You’re putting me on.”

“I swear I’m not. Just watch the show this Saturday, and you’ll find out for yourself.”

Saturday came, and we all watched the program on TV and noted the maximum height the best one of them could go under. After the show, Chucry and Saad held a string for Georges, and he passed under the same height with ease.

“Wow, I knew I was good, but I didn’t know I was that good,” exclaimed Georges.

“Hey, why don’t you go on TV and rub the nose of their champion in dust?” proposed Chucry. Saad and I seconded the motion.

“TV? But how?” asked Georges. Then, after letting the idea take a few spins in his head, he said, “Wait a second—Flavio. Yes, sure; I’ll ask Flavio to help.”

Flavio, another risen devil, was an Italian national whose parents had adopted Lebanon as their place of residence. He was a classmate of Georges, and lived in the neighborhood. His father owned an Italian restaurant in Phoenicia Street (Angelo’s Ristorante, the best pizza in town—if it is still there). Flavio was the right person to help Georges get in shape and onto the TV. These two, together, were the famous cartoon pair of our time, Heckle and Jeckle, only Georgie and Flavio did their tricks with more pizzazz.

On Monday Georges briefed Flavio on his intention. Once Flavio saw Georges in action, he took him under his wing. A few training sessions later, Georges had improved his record by some five inches. He could now bend his knees sideways all the way down to the floor while crossing under the fatidic bar, and we all thought the first prize was in the bag.

A trip to the TV station was organized, and lo and behold, Georgie reached the finals. I'll never forget that day. We were watching the program at home, while Flavio was on the set, cheering for his and our champion. A lot of unhappy faces were there that night. They had never expected an interloper like Georgie to spoil their plans, especially at the last episode. The host of the program had a mind to let his own protégé win. Everything was rigged in Lebanon, but not on the back of Georges and Flavio. The two of them succeeded in tilting the audience to their favor. Everyone there started to cheer for Georgie, so good was he—and cute, but this goes without saying. The promoters had no choice but to yield to the public's demand—a golden rule Flavio was well aware of (the customer is always right).

And that's how Georgie came back home with the cup and first prize. Didn't I say that Georges was a natural? It was really unfair. Here I was, putting my body through unimaginable contortions to master the Limbo, and out of the blue came Georgie to steal my thunder and rob fame from under my nose. When I asked him where he had been hiding all this talent, and how he had managed to pull off that tour de force with such gusto, he readily answered me,

*“Entre nous, Joseph, I'm more surprised than you are, but happy, to know that my bones are so malleable. It might come in handy someday.”*

That was an omen for things to come.

The nice thing about my brothers—all of them—was that they always went one better than me, to impress me. And the beauty of having so many brothers is that you keep living from one surprise to another; never a dull moment.

The second embarrassing moment I had in mind to recount is of a different nature. It is an incident that makes me smile whenever I think of it. Here is another example of being caught short. But this time it wasn't so much for lack of preparedness on my part as it was for too much of it, and maybe also for being too complacent for my own good.

The incident took place during the scholastic year that followed my disillusionment at Beit-Mery. As I've already mentioned, before that wrecking experience I held onto clean principles, regardless of whether others were watching me or not, because those principles were a way of life for me. Not so when I returned from my pilgrimage. I felt it would be stupid to still believe in values nobody believed in. What about honor, sincerity, decency, and all that blah-blah-blah? Well, when there are no real values to hold onto—by “real,” I mean spiritual—who is to tell me what is good or bad? My conscience? Oh, by then my conscience was less and less persuasive in convincing me to stick by the principles I had once held onto. And with all the other changes occurring in me, little by little I felt no remorse for cheating, if it meant keeping myself on the list of the fittest.

Which brings me to postulate that the only way to do away with that annoying Mr. Remorse is to let go of your spiritual values.

I think it is safe to say that some kids cheat on their tests, especially when they do not care to study for them, and yours truly was no exception. Mind you, I used not to before my trip to sainthood. What brought a Boy Scout and an *Enfant de Marie* to stoop so low? How about an unchecked *laissez faire*? It is bound to compel you to keep extending the limit of the permissible: different time, different priorities. Suddenly cheating looked more lucrative, if not more expeditious, than studying. To lessen my guilt, let's just say it seemed more rewarding than having to sit for hours memorizing things I hated to begin with, because they made no sense to me at all. In this particular case, it was chemistry.

I think I've already stated that I hated chemistry: I never liked it, and

I probably never will. That's why I could never bring myself to memorize those intricate formulas that meant nothing to me other than the need to secure a passing grade. Oh, the sea of adversities one has to brave through in order to reach the Never shore of Celebrity.

I was in the fourth grade: same system, same complexity. Most of my classmates copied. I know that's no excuse, but in this particular case, it was more than tempting. I was desperate. My classmates used to copy from one another or directly from the books. When it came to the latter, everyone had his system, depending on his ingenuity, or the lack of it. The scope ranged from a furtive peek at a book left open under the desk lid, when the teacher was not watching; to a book squeezed between the tops of one's legs and the bottom of the table; to small papers hidden here and there in one's sleeves and retrieved at the right moment. But all those means looked too archaic to me, not to mention prosaic. What I was looking for was a fail-safe system that would not only be hard to catch but also had class and finesse in its conception.

After a thorough inspection of the battlefield and deep lucubration on the subject, I at length came up with a system of cheating, which, simple as it may seem, struck me as being ingenious—enough so as to be patented.

Our desks were of the old type, with a slanting upper lid that opened and closed on small hinges, conveniently placed about two inches from the upper end of the lid, at both sides. Details, details. I know, but I am being precise in order to show that, had the hinges been of the continuous type (running from end to end), as was the case with some other desks, my system would not have worked. The lid opened onto a box in which we stored our books and other necessary items for our daily use in school. The space between the hinges was a thin, long slot, which offered a great potential to me. I thought that if I could make a sheet of paper go up and down in that small space upon request, I would have devised the most efficient, and least conspicuous, system ever tried.

Forthwith, I put myself to the task.

There were some difficulties, but that didn't keep me from proceeding. They had kept telling me, "Where there's a will, there's a way," that I applied myself with zeal to find a way to put my idea into practice.

First of all, I had to find the right paper for the job. It had to be strong, but supple enough to keep some elasticity. After much trial and error, I chose the one most suited for the purpose. The fact that we lived next to a printing company helped a great deal. Second, the slot in my desk was too tight to allow an easy up-and-down movement of the paper; it needed some widening. No big deal. With the help of my mother's nail file (good old Mamma, she always came to the rescue, even if she wasn't aware of it) I took care of the gap with a few expert strokes. Naturally, I made all these adjustments after school hours, when no one was around. I didn't want my classmates to know about my system lest they copy it.

Next, I stacked a few of my schoolbooks inside the desk right under the slot, just high enough to provide the paper with some leeway to be seen from above the desk. I then slid the piece of paper through the slot till it touched the top of the pile and taped it there, to prevent it from sliding to the bottom and disappearing inside the desk. Thus, when I pushed the paper down, it stayed put because of the tape. When I released it, it bounced back to its previous position, due to the elasticity of the paper. Ingenious, no? I was an architect in the making. (*Mission Impossible* wasn't in existence yet; no one can accuse me of plagiarism.) To check the efficiency of my system, I gave it a few trial runs. It worked like a Swiss clock. I would have patented that superb mode of cheating, had they not changed the format of the desks over the years.

To keep the paper down in the least conspicuous way, I placed an innocent-looking ballpoint pen over the slot. It worked. The pen became my flip-flop switch, and, for good measure, its weight kept the paper down, freeing both my hands to act as normally as possible (under the circumstances, one can never be too careful). When I needed to have a peek at the paper, I moved the pen sideways, and pop, up came the paper. I would copy what I wanted, then push it back down with the

pen. *Ni vu, ni connu*. Everything worked swell. All that was left to do was to fill the paper with those damn formulas, *et le tour est joué*. That's what I thought.

On D-Day, the system worked impeccably. Apart from reducing my chances of surviving future heart attacks, everything went smoothly. To better my odds, I had enrolled the cooperation of the boy sitting in front of me. Why? Well, since the desk of our teacher (Georges Farrah—*eh oui*, another Georges) was on a platform, I was afraid he might be able to see the paper. So I asked the boy in front of me to sit straight and avoid moving sideways as much as possible. And should he, for some reason or another, feel the urge to do so, I asked him to warn me beforehand with a normal cough—as normal as he could fake it, so as not to raise the teacher's suspicion. To entice him to oblige, I bribed him with the promise that I would throw a few formulas his way if he complied.

Now I might have secured the complicity of the boy sitting in front of me, but I completely forgot about the one sitting to my right. He was using a less sophisticated method of copying; he had the whole chemistry book hidden between his legs and the bottom part of his desk. (How gauche could you be?) Farrah was too smart for such a rudimentary trick; we always suspected him of having a hidden eye at the back of his head.

Farrah was a veteran, and he had seen them all. All except mine. That's why it didn't take him long to suspect something fishy going on in our neck of the room. He seemed a little leery of the boy in front of me. The boy's coughs were spurious. Still, Farrah kept quiet for a while. Then, *mine de rien*, he arose from his desk and began his customary round in the aisles, on the pretense of stretching his legs a bit, as he normally did. He went first in a direction opposite to ours, but he kept half an eye pinned in our direction (he wasn't a Georges for nothing). Then, suddenly, he made a U-turn and ran in our direction, charging like a bull in the streets of Pamplona.

My heart was pounding to the crescendo of his approaching hoofs. "I'm doomed," I thought, as I readied myself to absorb the impact of his

horns. But, oh miracle. Instead of coming to me, he went straight to the boy next-cheat. With one strong pull he dragged him out of his seat. Farrah was that strong, the boy that weak, and the book that easy to be spotted, that it fell to the floor. And my heart fell with it.

I was petrified, shivering like a wet puppy. I was so afraid of being caught too, though my popping paper was in low gear.

Farrah slapped the kid hard—teachers did in those days; they didn't go at it with a soft hand, believe you me. I was worried sick he would come at me next, thinking that the boy was just an appetizer, and I the main course he was leaving to the end to gobble up with more pleasure. My legs were shaking like crazy under my desk. All eyes were now riveted on the poor kid, while mine were on my ballpoint pen, imploring it to stay put. The teacher snatched the exam paper of the doomed boy, who was now a total mess and crying, and showed him the way to the door, but not before telling him what he thought of his near future as a student in our school. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling (he was aiming at heaven), raised his hands like a pope greeting his adoring crowd from his balcony, and uttered his famous pet phrase as a form of defeat on his part:

*“Mon Dieu, bête Vous me l'avez donné; bête je Vous le rends.”* (My Lord, a dumb ass You gave him to me; a dumb ass I give him back to You.)

Of course, this meant a grade of zero on the test. To mark it on the boy's paper, he reached for his pen that would normally be snugly tucked in his upper side-pocket. It wasn't there. He reached mechanically for the nearest one he could find. Mine. Yes, that very one sitting innocently on my desk over the slot, minding its own business of camouflaging my subterfuge. And as soon as he grabbed it, pop, went my paper—and with it my soul.

Imagine the state of fear and embarrassment I was in at that moment. I tell you, folks, God works in mysterious ways, but He sure wasn't working for me that day. Obviously, He doesn't like cheats. I could see it through the dazed eyes of my teacher.

Farrah stood there, my ballpoint pen in his hand, looking back and forth from it to the strange paper that had magically popped out from

my desk, with all those formulas neatly written on it. And I, poor me, I sat there, wondering when the sky was going to fall on my head. I'll never forget the baffled look on his face. He was as though in a quandary whether to laugh, explode, or handle the whole matter with poise. Fortunately, he opted for the third choice. Maybe it was because I showed more sophistication in my manner of cheating. Albeit, had he opted for the second choice, I wouldn't have blamed him. I had it coming—no doubt about it.

After regaining his authoritarian faculty, he showed me to the door and afforded me another pet phrase of his: *“Allez voir si je suis dehors.”* (Go check if I am outside.) This meant I had to wait there for him to come out of the classroom, then accompany him to the higher authority, *Frère Inspecteur* Ferdinand, who would decide my fate, with Farrah making sure I got the punishment I deserved. In our school, “All wrongs led to Ferdinand.” So I sailed quietly out of the classroom, abased and humbled to the dust, and rode at anchor in the corridor, waiting for my sentence to be pronounced, and wondering what kind of life comes after the deluge.

On our way to the hangman, Farrah said nothing to me during several angry looks. Then he excoriated me, saying, “How could you, Chaccour? How could you resort to such a despicable deed? You, of all people. I've always known you to be an honorable boy. What happened to you?”

As a general rule, in moments like these it is highly recommended not to say a word. So I refrained from opening my mouth lest I make my case worse. I took a few more steps in silence, expecting him to shower more remonstrance over my already debilitated person. But he suddenly burst into hearty laughter. My paper must have popped into his mind again (producing the same effect it usually has on me, to this day, each time this incident comes to mind). He couldn't restrain himself.

“Ha, ha, ha. Why, Chaccour, you really came up with a clever system there. Ha, ha, ha. Upon my word, I've never seen such ingenuity before, and believe me, I've seen them all. I've got to hand it to you, it's a very

astute innovation in the art of cheating. Bravo. Chapeau. It's really smart."

I started to smile, thinking that now that he had recovered his usual sense of humor, he might have second thoughts about ruining my future for good. A smart fellow ought to get at least one break. But he was quick to nip that hope right in the bud, with the following admonition: "But tell me, Chaccour, you being so smart and all, why didn't use the same effort in studying instead of cheating? You've always been a model student. Why this sudden change for the worse?"

Offhand, I couldn't think of a good excuse to explain my motivation, and in the process extenuate the heavy punishment I felt coming. So I just told him in a *mea culpa* tone, "I hate chemistry, sir," hoping he'd understand and not think too badly of me. But back in my mind, these words were burning to pop out of my mouth, like my Jack-in-the-box popping paper: "It was easier, sir." I refrained from uttering so blunt a justification—though it was the truth—lest I jeopardize all my chances for a lenient requital.

[In fairness to Farrah, I must admit he was a good teacher. He tried as hard as he could to operate within a lame system of education meant to create robots, rather than human beings able to think and feel for themselves and express their reservations. I remember that much later on, after I had graduated from my architectural studies, he and I happened to bump into each other one day in Georges Picot Street. After the usual warm salutations, he asked me what I had made of myself. Upon learning that I had made it as an architect, he gave me a big proud smile, and said,

"Ah, *mon vieux* Chaccour, I always thought you'd amount to something good in your life. You've always been, hmm ... how shall I put it? Ah, yes ... resourceful."

We both laughed at the remembrance of the good old days. (Why are teachers more human with the people they once taught as kids than when it matters most?) I wish I could tell him now that if there is something I am proud of, it sure is more than that which my profession can offer. As

to my being resourceful, I wonder. Maybe Papa Archangel would like to elaborate on that thought. Knowing what he stands for, I am sure he would readily say,

“Monabeh, my son, I am disappointed. I expected better things from you.”

Easy for him to say. He never told me that my mission had an annoying proviso attached to it: memorizing chemistry formulas.]

How did Ferdinand *Le Terrible* handle the whole affair? Well, since I was still considered One of Them, he simply reprimanded me, mildly and in private, then slapped me with a *retenue* (detention) on Thursday afternoon, which was normally a time off from our obligatory hell. It wasn't so bad. I was expecting much worse. I had to spend a few hours in the general hall, with other troublemakers like myself, and go through hard-labor studies, in view of sitting for another exam on the same subject. Which only made me hate the damned thing even more.

It was the least punishment he could hit me with, without being accused of favoritism. I had expected to be expelled from school, and to have to go through the trouble of explaining to Henry the terrible the reason for my expulsion. Thank God, it didn't reach that point. My father was the last person I cared to mess with in those days, especially if I was in the wrong. So, those few months I spent in the cloister helped in some way after all. Even the boy next-cheat got to profit from it. He, too, received a reduced sentence like mine, to avoid having his parents knock at Ferdinand's door to inquire why their son had been treated more severely than I had. Then again, maybe cheating had become so rampant that it was no longer considered a big dereliction deserving of automatic expulsion.

With my cheating prowess I acquired other kinds of mischievousness. (I swear Georges had nothing to do with it.) I became more and more insurgent, and that's putting it mildly. Yet somehow I got away with it. Did I have such an angelic face as to come out like a hair from dough

from those precarious situations? Better yet, were my deeds that normal that they didn't warrant harsher treatment? Beats me. I just got away with it.

From those early years of mine most of what I remember was related in one way or another to school. I lived more in school than at home, and even if I was at home, school never left my mind, so engrossed was I with its demands. It was as if I couldn't join the world if I didn't pay my dues to school, and pay them with the hardest currency in my possession: the sweetest moments of my life. So it shouldn't be so astonishing that most of my memories of childhood dwell on my school years. At the time, all my life seemed to be spent there, to the point where I often felt it would never end. My brothers and I felt this at one moment or another, and we tried to adapt to the circumstances, and coped with them as we saw fit, according to what we expected out of life. The strange part is that though we lived in the same settings and were given the same chances, every one of us seems to have proceeded along a different road, following his own dreams and his own inner voice. The beauty of it is that we all ended up espousing the same ideal in life. That's something to ponder over, be proud of, and cherish, till death do us part.