

# 9

I was thirteen years old or so when I was fully immersed in the font of street fighting for my long overdue baptism. Not that my skin was itching for it, but for a chivalrous deed I was left with no choice but to accomplish. Well, after all that be-good and always-ready stuff of an *Enfant de Marie* and a Boy Scout, you didn't expect me to be a recreant knight? And don't forget that a residue of Georgie Poppins's famous hero, Shater Hassan, was still breathing in me. What was that chivalrous deed? I came to the rescue of a neighbor-friend, Samir Makzoume, who was like a brother to me.

My brothers and I had grown up with Samir. He lived in the same building where the owner of Joe's Bar lived. Our buildings were juxtaposed at right angle to form an L-shape along Phoenicia Street, which ran from Georges Picot Street on the south, all the way to the sea on the north. A small playground joined our buildings to complete the rectangle, and it was enclosed within two high walls. On the east, the one that separated us from our school's playground, and on the south, from a neighboring lot. Two alleys bordered his building, a narrow one on the south, which led to the playground, and a wide one on the north, which led to our building. (That last one, in time, was converted into a traffic road, passing right under our balcony which gave to the sea.)

If my brothers and I were close with Samir, it wasn't because our living places were in contiguity to each other, but because, through the years, the circumstances of our lives had strengthened our ties in an enduring way. He was family, and my sticking out my neck for him was as natural as helping any of my brothers out of a tight spot.

Samir was a classmate of Georgie, a dear one. He was one year younger than Georgie, and an only son. He was the whole world to his parents, the apple of their eye—meaning he was spoiled rotten, but rotten good. His parents refused him nothing and he took advantage of that fact. Why shouldn't he when it only made them happy? But because of that blind love they carried for him, when it came to his safety, his parents felt it wise to put their foot down, even if it made him unhappy. Which is only normal; that's why parents are parents, after all.

Being over-protective, his parents rarely let him out of his fortified dungeon. Poor Samir Makzoume. As a small boy he had had no choice but to sit and watch us play from his balcony. A balcony is an essential feature in our Lebanese architecture, owing to the salubriousness of our temperate climate. And the longer and wider the balcony, the higher the rent. This was the case with Samir's apartment. His balcony ran alongside the apartment in an L-shape. Samir could see how much fun we had when we played in the playground, which only made it worse for him. So he began to pester his mother to let him join us. He was five or six at the time. Although now and then she reluctantly yielded to his request, she was quick to take him back into his golden cage, so afraid was she that he might hurt himself while playing.

You can't keep a child cooped up in an apartment, even if the balcony is long and wide. The little boy needed friends to be with, not just to watch. So he resorted to heartbreaking tears to force his mother to relent and let him join us on the playing field. She wouldn't budge, she loved him so much. On the other hand, she couldn't let her *pauvre petit chéri* cry all the time. So, instead of sending him downstairs, she invited us upstairs to play with him. Which suited our childhood fancy to a T—T as in toys. For Samir had the best and newest assortment of toys one could

imagine. What's more, he had a marvelous collection of French and Belgian comic books, like *Tintin et Milou*, *Spirou*, *Gaston Lagaffe*, *Lucky Luke*, *Blake et Mortimer* ... to name a few. Oh, his room was replete to surfeit with such treats.

We used to spend hours on end going through them, without ever tiring. We valued them more than the toys, and often borrowed some to read at home. Samir didn't mind. On the contrary, he was very complaisant toward us because he loved our company. And the more we stayed the more attached he got to us. He would end up insisting that we stayed way beyond our bedtime, an arrangement that was sure not to suit our mother. We too were the apples of her eye. And when his mother finally succeeded in bringing him to reason, claiming that we too had a home to go to, it was with great difficulty that he agreed to let us go. He would make us promise to come back the next day, as early as possible.

And so, in a way, we became his escape to the magical world of adventures and fun. Or to be more exact, the toys in his room. But we didn't mind, for Samir was great fun to be with, and he was very considerate toward us. He thought of us as the elder brothers he didn't have, and his mother realized that fact. Which brought her to ask us one day, in a joking tone: "Do you think your father would mind if I adopted one or two of you?" Then, quickly she recanted, saying: "Then again, I'd better not propose it to him. Knowing how much he loves you, I'm sure he'd wind up adopting my son instead." As I've said, Samir became not only a dear friend but also part of the family.

He was nine or ten years old at the time of the incident I'm going to recount.

As I recall, I was coming back from school one afternoon, when I saw a scuffle in progress at the entrance of Samir's apartment building on Phoenicia Street. On second look, I recognized Samir as one of the

two boys in the scuffle. This seemed out of character for him, for I knew him to be pacific and of a guileless bosom.

Samir was in a weak position, meaning that the other boy was beating the daylights out of him, as goes the saying in the street's jargon. So I ran to his help. By the time I got there the other boy was already on top of Samir, hitting him like mad, which really made me mad.

I tried to extricate Samir from the lethal punches of the other boy, but the boy wouldn't budge. So I pushed him hard to detach him from Samir, then busied myself in helping Samir up. The boy was approximately my age, which made him older than Samir, and this put the odds in his favor. While I was tending to Samir, asking him what the scuffle was about, the boy suddenly charged at me and hit me without introducing himself first, or indulging me with a valid reason why he felt it requisite to hit me too. I parried some of his flying blows without returning them, all the while bidding him to stop—or else. But he wouldn't listen to reason; he was really itching for the “or else.”

“What's wrong with you?” I finally said to him, now really annoyed. “Why do you want to hurt this boy? What has he done to you?”

“None of your f... business,” retorted the boy angrily, giving me the most inimical gaze he could come up with, while drawing nearer to me. Then, seeing me off guard, he lunged at me suddenly and hit me in the face with his fist. “That should teach you to mind your own business next time, *ya kalb* [you dog you].” In our Arabic culture, to call someone a dog is not an endearing term but a big insult.

If that skirmish of theirs was none of my business two insults ago, that punch of his made it mine now. But I thought some good sense might still cool down the nerves of that feisty little imp. Caution was egging me to use diplomacy as far as it could take me, before resorting to my fists. Why? Well, his accent revealed him to be a Muslim, and an arrogant one at that—most probably because he was from the neighborhood, his fief.

“Listen, I want you no harm,” I said to him with great poise. “So why don't we forget the whole thing, and you be on your way, or you're gonna force me to beat the shit out of you.”

“Oh, yeah?” he said with a grin evincing unmistakable mockery. “*Fargeeny marajlak.*” (Show me how tough you are—Arabic metaphor for Why don’t you put your fists where your big mouth is.)

“That does it,” I thought, and cleared myself for the fight. He was the first to attack, so in a hurry was he to finish me off. Probably another fight was waiting for him in another corner of our famous streets. But I was ready this time to take on his bullying fury, and if a fight was what he was looking for, a fight was what he got.

We fought fiercely. In no time I had the upper hand. I might have been a gazelle, but I turned into a real panther when cornered. But rather than give him the same treatment he had given Samir, I worked on neutralizing him with an armlock I managed to slip past his self-assurance, and I suggested we stop the fight. The last thing I wanted was to see either of us hurt. He yielded reluctantly. He had no choice, and he knew it. So I let him go. But as soon as he was up, and had walked a few paces away from me, he turned back and mocked me, pursing his lips and wagging a menacing finger at me.

“It’s not over yet, *ya akhou-al-sharmootah.* [a derogatory Arabic insult directed at my sister],” he said between his teeth. Since I had no sister, I let it pass. See. Not having a sister can help cool the nerves.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said. “In the meantime, *Fargeeny ard ktefak.*” (Show me how wide your shoulders are—an Arabic metaphor for Scram, or Why don’t you get the hell out of here.)

Aware that he’d be licked should he try his luck again, he decided to leave, but not before giving me an ostensible look that clearly evinced his malevolent intent, which he backed by self-explanatory words. “Mark my words, asshole, you’ll pay for this,” he said. “I know where you live. So we’ll see each other again; you can count on it.”

Someone must have notified Samir’s mother that her son was being aggressed. By the time the fight was over, she was on the street, cuddling her son, checking him for bruises, and lavishing him with soothing words of comfort. “*Qu’est-ce qu’ils t’ont fait ces méchants sauvages, mon pauvre chéri?*” Hey, what about yours truly *chéri*? I’m the one who saved

*son pauvre petit derrière*. But, *peine perdue*, she had tears only for her progeny. It wouldn't have surprised me to know that she actually thought I was the one to have initiated the whole fight. Her son wouldn't hurt a fly, remember?

After a few gingerly applied kisses and motherly hugs, she took him home to pamper him some more. She was so worried about her *pauvre petit chéri* that she didn't even stop to thank me for my chivalry. Get a load of that. *Mais c'est la vie*. You do what you have to do, not for recognition, but for the satisfaction of having done your duty. Were a true Sir Lancelot to be thanked for so heroic a deed, he would indubitably have replied: "To have saved Samir requites itself." Yes, but *un petit merci* would have been *le bienvenu*. But what's the use? Every epoch has its own way of rewarding chivalry. So I went home and forgot about the whole matter.

What about the threat of the boy?

Well, I thought he must have been piqued in his pride to have uttered it. Besides, even if he were to show up again, I was sure I could lick him again, so why worry? I didn't even know who he was or where he came from. I was soon to find out, the hard way, sorry, the street-wise way!

Thursday came, a half-day of school. In the afternoon of that day, the auditorium of our school was transformed into a movie theater—paying, of course. Nothing was free at the La Salle brothers, even prayers; we had to pay for the candles. If nothing else . . . they were good businessmen. But I must admit, their movie theater rendered a good service to the residents of the region. It was conveniently located and provided a clean and congenial atmosphere. Parents felt safe sending their kids there unaccompanied. They didn't have to worry about bad influences or a harmful environment, which was a worry in some movie theaters in town.

It was in that occasional movie theater that I made my first acquaintance with *The Lone Ranger*, *Zorro*, *Superman*, the *Prince Valiant*, *Robin Hood*, and all those heroes who made me dream while watching the

movie, only to make me act weird once I was out. It was located off Phoenicia Street, approximately four hundred meters from where we lived. Its entrance was in a back-alley that led to the auxiliary entrance gate of our school, the main entrance being on the north side, on Georges Picot. During school days, this secondary entrance was left open to facilitate the flow of students coming from Phoenicia Street and Ein-Mreyseh. It was also used as a driveway for school buses. During the holidays, it was kept closed, turning the alley into a dead end. If I mention all this, it is to describe the battlefield of my ensuing fight—and flight.

The movie theater was accessible to all the kids of the area, whether they were in our school or not. Everybody went there, including us, a fact the boy I had the altercation with must have been aware of. He must have seen me there on a previous occasion. Normally, I went there with my brothers or some friends from school. But contrary to the norm, I was alone that day. (Me and my tendency to be alone!)

Once the movie was over, people started to trickle out, and I joined my steps to theirs, heading home. But halfway to Phoenicia Street, I noticed, at the top of the alley, right at its crossing with Phoenicia Street, a face that looked vaguely familiar to me. A few steps closer, I was able to identify the face. It was that little goblin who had promised to teach me a lesson in street civility. And to think that I had completely forgotten about him. But there he was, and, unlike me, he wasn't alone. Two tough-looking boys were standing at his side like the Grim Reapers coming to take the ghost.

I tried to go to the right to avoid them, but two more boys were standing there, eyeing me with that significant baleful look that unmistakably said: "Yes, buddy, we're here for the same purpose."

My heart began to beat at a faster rate.

I looked at once in the opposite direction. Two more boys were standing there with the same kind of ominous determination in their eyes.

That's when my heart skipped a beat.

They were all waiting for me to make a move to begin tightening the noose. A horde of sinister payoffs flashed through my head. What

heightened my fear was to notice that the boy I had fought with was the shortest and youngest of the bunch. What chance did I stand against seven inveterate street-fighters who were more than eager to show me how bright the stars shine after a movie session? Well, *n'en déplaie* to all the Rambos of the world, I sure wasn't so eager to find out.

Shorty must have given them his own version of what had happened the other day and convinced them to tag along, so as to teach me a lesson I was never to forget as long as I lived. I give him this: he was as good as his word. He had said he'd make me pay, and here he was to collect his pay. But did so small an oversight warrant such a large number of dedicated tax collectors?

Furthermore, he gets high marks for the way he planned the whole vendetta. He really had the makings of a street-gang leader, judging from the way he had meticulously protected all his flanks, and his persistence at making you pay whichever way you moved. I may joke about the whole affair now, but believe me, if up to this moment I didn't know what deep fear meant, now I was drowning in it. It is a strange kind of fear, accompanied by sweat that chills the very marrow of your bones and settles deep in your mind to ever remind you that life chooses her own time to be cruel and ugly, and probably when you expect it the least. I shall never forget the feeling of terror I experienced at that moment. But that experience also proved to me that I was capable of keeping a good and cool head on my shoulders when faced with life-threatening situations, and that, when shove comes to scuffle, I do not panic.

Spurred by an instinctive impulse for survival, I summoned enough good sense and courage to retrace my steps to the movie theater in order to think calmly about a way out. They didn't follow me there; mark one for me. Actually, they had every reason not to. First, they knew there was only one way out: through their gantlet. Second, they were waiting for the people to clear the battlefield: the fewer people, the freer their movements—not to mention the fewer eyewitnesses. The auxiliary school gate behind me was closed, otherwise I would have run straight in that direction, entered the school, gone directly to

that famous wall that separated the school's playground from ours, and jumped over it to go safely home. That's what we used to do on normal days when we were too lazy to make a big detour. But, as it were, my goose was cooked; there was no way out but from Phoenicia Street, and those more-than-eager little chefs knew it too well.

People were still coming out of the auditorium, and there was not one familiar face, no one I could turn to for help. Anyway, how could I ask anyone to risk his neck for me? Not to mention that no one was crazy enough to commit himself voluntarily to a majestic beating, however chivalrous he might be. Thus, every way I turned my sticky situation in my head, I came to the same conclusion: I was on my own. Another conclusion flashed also in my worried mind. I knew I mustn't wait till all the people were completely gone. My safety lay, indirectly, in their hands. My only escape was to nip through them till I wedged a way out at the right moment. So after a few seconds of brain-bruising thinking, trying to find the best way to escape their gantlet, I decided to go meet my predicament head on.

I went out of the auditorium again and headed straight toward the threesome in the middle, walking in resigned steps, as though I had decided to entrust my fate to the mercy of their magnanimous better judgment. The two boys on the left stayed put; so did the two on the right. They were confident that the middle section was adequate to handle a *fafsous* (pip-squeak) like me. At four to five paces from the middle three, I stopped, hoping to force them to come to me so as to separate them a bit from each other. And that's what happened; mark two for me.

Luckily, it was Shorty who took the lead; he was the lightest in the pack, and the most eager to lay hold of me. I let him draw closer to me, and just when he raised his hand to grab me, I suddenly pushed him back on the other two, with all my force, then swiftly turned to the right to take care of the two closing in on me from that side. My daring move was so unexpected that it made Shorty stagger a few steps back, then fall to the ground, dragging his two lieutenants with him.

Panic was in the street, as the moviegoers scampered in all directions,

away from the fight, and this left the right flank open to receive me with open arms. That's what the two waiting there for me thought. But I had other plans for them. I charged into them like a bolt from the blue, in the sneak attack of a quarterback dead-set on making a touchdown, and using his whole body as a helmet. Take my word for it, despair gives you Herculean strength. They both keeled over, so effective was my power-sweep tactic—not to mention the violence of the ramming blow. Mark three for me.

Profiting from the confusion of my pursuers, I lost no breath in taking to my heels, with them right behind me. The sound of the soles of their shoes scraping the sidewalk behind me gave me a poignant clue. I put my speed into high gear. Suddenly, I felt as though wings had sprung from my feet. If anyone reported seeing a shooting star in Phoenicia Street that day, it was only I, flying too low. I tell you, folks, that was the shortest time, ever, I ran a four-hundred-meter. They didn't call me gazelle for nothing. As to solitary, with a pack of seven voracious hyenas hounding me to make a quick bite out of me, the last thing on my mind right then was to be alone. And for those who are quick to taunt me with the Byronic jeer of defeat, "Unfit to conquer—we meanly fly," let me counter with a quote from Demosthenes, "For he that flies may fight again, which he can never do that's slain." Or another one of our famous Arabic dictums, "The one who chases the blows is not like the one counting them." Enough said.

I ran with alar leaps, gaining ground with every leap. I knew from the fading sound of their steps that they were getting farther behind the farther I flew. In the blink of an eye, I reached the narrow alley that led to our inner playground. I took it, as a shortcut. One, because it was too narrow, and, should they decide to take it too, they would have to run in line, which would slow down their speed and separate them from each other. Two, I was afraid that Shorty might have positioned more hyenas at the entrance of the other alley, to waylay me. That guy had enough members in his gang to cover all grounds. So, instead of going straight home, I ran to take refuge in the ground floor of some neighbors who

lived in Samir's building, but whose balcony gave onto the playground.

Poor neighbors. Here they were, sitting peacefully on their outside terrace, sipping their afternoon Turkish coffee, enjoying the end-of-a-day's tranquility, without the Chaccour clique raising sand and the devil in the playground, when out of the blue one of these same Chaccours lands smack-dab in their midst, huffing and puffing as though he has just run the marathon. Papa neighbor was quick on his feet to upbraid me in Turkish for my ill breeding, saying, "*Tarbia suss.*" But hardly had he uttered these words when the vindictive posse stormed into view, with fire on their feet and revenge in their eyes.

Seeing the seven of them like that, gave him a pretty good idea what kind of trouble I was in. He turned to me at once and asked me with great concern,

"What's going on, Zouzou?"

"They want to beat me, *Ammo* [Uncle]," I said in a trembling voice I hardly managed to slip between my breath-intakes, so pooped out was I from all that running. "And I've done nothing to them, honest."

As soon as he heard my plea, Papa neighbor went out, now really turned into a Papa bear, and told those seven out-of-breath buccaneers to get the hell out, or they would have to answer to him, personally. He was a big muscular fellow with a brawny frame, and he was Armenian, the very tribe of my mother, on her mother's side; I knew how to choose my side. Mark four for me.

Now, if the streets had taught my pursuers anything, they had taught them never to mess with a nettled Armenian. (How could they tell he was Armenian? Simple: from his Arabic dialect. Armenians in Lebanon tend to mix up the "he" with the "she" when they speak Arabic, since their language is indiscriminate when it comes to gender. Actually, Papa neighbor made more mix-ups than usual that day. Hmm... I wonder if he didn't do it on purpose to better emphasize his roots, thus warning them to think twice before ruining his mood.) The hanging posse sure got the message. They opted to beat a retreat, with Shorty taking the lead, but not before reiterating his menace to me, with more bad blood this time.

“It is not over yet, you son of a bitch,” he shouted. “We’ll catch you, sooner or later. You have my word on it.” And off he ran.

Mark ten for him. For right there and then, it hit me that I could run but not hide forever. I was back to square one as to my sorry plight. But I had more leverage this time, I reckoned, being better aware of how seriously in trouble I was.

Once the posse had cleared off, I thanked Papa neighbor for his life-saving intervention. He had literally saved *mon petit derrière*. Then I put him in the picture of my ordeal; it was the least I could do to reassure him that he had done the right thing. Of course, I made sure to mention how Shorty had attacked Samir, and that if he and his gang were after my skin, it was because I had had the audacity to meddle in their turf. Which brought all the neighbors present there to laud my courageous deed. I even got a gingerly kiss from Mama neighbor, dipped in lots of sweet terms of endearment, starting with, “*Ah, Yavrem, Yavrem.*” Which stands for, “Oh my poor boy, my poor boy” in Turkish; a language the older generation of Armenians tended to revert to whenever they needed to express deep sorrow. Imagine that, I got more from a distant neighbor than from Samir’s mother. Go figure.

After my heartwarming story, Papa neighbor insisted on seeing me to the entrance of our building, just in case those *Ze’ran* (his euphemism, not mine) had decided to lay for me there. Once home, I uttered not a word to a soul. I just waited for Chucry to come home. Such a desperate situation called for the biceps of my lionhearted Abou-Sh’keir (Chucry’s nom de guerre). Hey, what are older brothers for—especially if they’re gifted with lethal one-twos?

As soon as Chucry arrived home, I whisked him to our room to subtract him from Father’s best listening device—Mother’s ears—then put him in the picture of my troubles, from knock-knock to good-bye. You should have seen how high he pricked his ears once I told him of my swashbuckling adventure. He listened without saying a word, but he was deeply concerned, judging from the kind of look he evinced as I went on with my narration. This matter was more serious than I had

thought. Once I finished relating my troubles, he asked me in a tone of reproach, "And why on earth did you wait this long to tell me about it? Why didn't you come to me the first time you came to blows with this fellow?"

"I didn't know it was that serious, Chucry. I never thought it would come to this. Skirmishes take place in our neighborhood all the time, but they never warrant such a vendetta."

"That's what you think. Believe me, when you're dealing with such people, it often takes much less to give rise to such malicious backlash. Well, now you know better. At least that's a gain. What's his name, anyway?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What do you mean you don't know, Joseph?"

"Well, excuse me. The next time he shows up to crack my skull, I'll make sure to ask his name first."

"Don't be a smart aleck with me, Joseph. If you were that smart, you wouldn't have gotten yourself into this kind of trouble in the first place. You know better than to mess with boys of his caliber."

"How was I to know, Chucry? This is unfair. Besides, I didn't mess with him, remember? He was the one using Samir as a punching bag. What do you suggest I should have done, walk away and let him beat the crap out of Samir?"

"Don't twist my words, Joseph. You know that's not what I meant. You should have shown some restraint when it came to resolving the matter. You should have calmed his nerves rather than given him reason to come after you later on. This is a hard-nosed gang member you're dealing with here, and not one of your tractable classmates."

"But I really tried, Chucry, I swear to you. He only wanted to talk with his fists. I couldn't just stand there and let him beat me too, could I?"

"No, I guess not. Anyway, what's done is done. Let's rather concentrate on how to solve the problem now. Tell me, did you at least see which way he went the first time you had a fight with him?"

"Yes, I saw him take the turn leading to Ein-Mreyseh, the one on Phoenicia Street, right after the Martinez."

“I see. Then he must be from the neighborhood. Can you describe him to me? I know someone who might know him—at least, have heard of him. He’s a big shot in Ein-Mreyseh, and he knows the street well. Most of all, the street listens to him. I’ve seen him training in the club I go to, and more than once we’ve had a friendly chat together. He’s headstrong, but he’s a good person, and I’m sure he’ll help put an end to this mess. He might be there right now. I’ll go talk to him right away.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“What for?”

“To tell him my side of the story before he hears it from the other fellow. I’m sure if he asks him what happened, he’ll only tell him lies, as he did with the other fellows he brought along. He must have convinced them I was the heavy, or worse, that I was the one to draw first blood.”

“And do you really think these fellows who tagged along are the type who need a reason to be included on a fight? All they’re interested in is to have a face to punch—a question of keeping their hands in. Believe me, anyone’s face would do. No, let me handle it my way this time. But don’t say a word to anybody, especially not to Mother.”

“Hey, I know better than that.”

After I had given Chucry a description of Shorty, he went straight to the club, while I waited home on pins and needles.

He returned an hour later. The first thing on my tongue was: “Did you find him?”

“Yes, he was there.”

“And?”

“Well, to start with, he knew nothing of the rumble, but, from the description you gave me of the boy, he thinks he knows him. He’ll ask around to find out what it’s all about and give me an answer by tomorrow this time. He promised to take care of it, and I trust him. I’ve always known him to be a fair person. Yes, he’s an *Abaday*, but a fair one. In the meantime, you had better stick to me like a shadow, till this matter is resolved. Don’t go to school tomorrow on your own, and wait for me at the end of school to see you home. Understood?”

“Yeah, yeah, understood. My God, what a mess I got myself into this time.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it. By the way, this might cheer you up a bit. After I gave him a rundown of what happened, he told me, ‘Kudos to your brother. He must be a hell of a street fighter to have assembled such an army against him.’ He says he likes you already for your guts. What’s more, he wants to meet you to shake hands with you, for the way you gave those bozos the slip. Ha, ha, ha. You should have seen how he burst into laughter when I told him how you went about it. He kept asking me: ‘You’re sure they were seven?’”

“Oh, believe me, I wasn’t laughing when I was running away from them. I think I got lucky this time, that’s all. But it sure gave me a taste of what running for one’s life means, and that’s putting it mildly. I know that such experiences are supposed to make a man out of you, but they tend to shorten your life too, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, don’t dramatize the whole affair, Zouzou. You worry too much. I told you I’ll take care of it, and I will. Don’t I always? So stop worrying.”

On that point Chucry was right. As I said before, he always took good care of us, maybe more than he should, but that’s the way he was, and still is. He’ll give his heart and soul to come to the aid of his brothers, or a dear friend.

Sleep wasn’t my host that night. My ghosts insisted that I take them on a worry-go-round. Time was when wearing shorts or being clumsy on a dance floor had kept me awake the whole night; now I was worrying about how to stay alive—talk about shifting priorities. (And they wonder how come I’ve got premature gray hair. I sure earned every one of these hairs. My childhood’s pillow would vouch for my sleepless nights. But who is complaining? That’s the price you have to pay for adapting.) As it were, I had to spend my time jumping walls, if I was still interested in getting an education, or stick to Chucry’s fists: two alternatives not that thrilling for someone keen on fending for himself. And all this because I did the right thing. Life sure makes it hard on you to do the

right thing, by insisting on putting you in insuperable odds or no-win situations.

The sleepless night passed, with yours truly lost in a cloud of macabre speculations, tossing all kinds of solutions in my head, none of which could satisfy me. I think I dreamed that night of a light at the end of a tunnel. It turned out to be Chucry, holding a flashlight, or was I just dreaming awake? (Oh, sleepless nights, I have had plenty of those. Maybe that's why, in the end, I turned into a night person. I was going to be awake anyway, so why not do something useful instead of just worrying myself sick to sleep.)

Contrary to my anticipation, things went fine the next day. Nothing unusual to report, except that I fell into a doze during the chemistry hour, only to start up suddenly when the door of our class was opened, thinking it was Shorty coming to take his revenge with a bludgeon in his hand. False alert, it was just the changing of the scholastic guards. That should teach me to spend the night revolving doom and gloom scenarios in my head. As for the rest of the day, I stuck to Chucry's instructions, for once, and reached home in one piece. No sign of Shorty & Co.. I figured the guy at the gym must have taken care of things.

Chucry went to see him as previously agreed, and came back with more reassuring news. He informed me that a meeting was set for the four of us on the next day—Saturday, a holiday—to solve the problem once and for all.

“And how do you think he'll solve it?” I asked, a little worried. It was my hide on the line here. But Chucry seemed confident; though he was a little evasive.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said. “He just wants you both to meet tomorrow morning, face to face and on neutral ground. He must have something in mind, but he didn't take me into his confidence. But I have reason to believe it will all be fine.”

“You're sure he won't come with a whole gang armed to the teeth?”

“Whoa. Hold your horses of doom. Where do you ferret out those morbid ideas of yours from?”

“From what I’ve gone through so far, I guess.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t under control then. It’s different now. Trust me.”

Chucry was right. What ensued was far from what I had envisaged. Our pow-wow was to take place in a deserted lot, not far from where we lived. Now, although I was reassured by Chucry’s confidence, still, I couldn’t help wondering why the big guy had chosen a secluded place, if he had in mind to settle the matter amiably. But the further our face-to-face unfolded the clearer became his reason.

The big guy was already there, with Shorty, by the time I arrived with Chucry. At first sight, Shorty seemed not that ready to bury the hatchet and smoke the calumet. He looked as though he had been coerced into coming. The big fellow must have insisted.

As soon as we touched base, Chucry introduced me to the big fellow.

“Haidar, I would like you to meet my brother, Abou-el-Zouz.” I had sure earned my *nom de guerre* by then, and then some.

“Well, well, well ... *Hotta home* [Give me five],” said Haidar, giving me a glad hand. “So, you’re Abou-el-Zouz. I’m sure glad to meet you.”

His whisker-to-whisker smile revealed some of his status-symbol gold front teeth to me. No, not the status of a rich person. It is not tooth decay we are talking about here, but a tough guy who must have had his share of street fights to be decked with so many shiny trophies. He had a bushy and greasy hairdo combed à la James Dean, and wore a colorful shirt with short sleeves, to throw into relief his well-rounded biceps. His shirt was left open down to the last two lower buttons, to set off a hairy chest well endowed with muscles. (Well, when you have it, why not flaunt it?) After giving me a firm handshake, he turned to Shorty and said to both of us—Chucry and me: “This is Abou-el-Abed.”

I know, another Abou. All tough guys have a *nom de guerre* starting with this symbolic prefix, as you must already have noticed. It is a trademark in our part of the world; and the stranger its phonetic sounds, the tougher its owner is supposed to be—the emphasis here is on “supposed.”

Chucry shook hands with Abou-el-Abed. I did not. We were still at swords' points, so we just confined our mutual greetings to mutual darting glances of mistrust, which we exchanged out of the corners of our eyes while waiting for further instructions from the broad-shouldered Haidar. And he came right to the point.

"As I understand it from Abou-el-Abed," he said to me, "you're the one who attacked first."

"What? I certainly did not," I retorted in an indignant tone. "He was beating Samir, our neighbor. I urged him to stop, but he wouldn't listen to me, so—"

"That's a lie," cut in Abou-el-Abed, a little worked up now. "I was—" only to be interrupted by the big guy, in his turn. Obviously the confrontation was not proceeding to his liking.

"Stop it, you two. I want to hear none of it," he said in a loud, authoritative voice. Calm fell suddenly in our midst, as if by magic, and Haidar proceeded. "The way I see it, each of you is going to stick to his own version, and that's fine by me. So, to resolve this matter, I have no recourse but to let you end it the way you've started it, by fighting it out, here and now, with no outsider's help and nothing but your bare hands. Understood? But before you start hitting each other, I want to make one thing clear. After this fight, whatever may be the outcome, if either of you dare touch the other, he will answer to me, personally. And I mean it.

"Damn it, I don't want people of our own neighborhood to fight each other. But if you insist on talking with your fists, it's fine with me. I can always enjoy a good fight, so can Chucry here. So what will it be?"

"Fine with me," I said in a hurry, eager to settle this matter once and for all. "It's his call. I'll go with whatever he decides." I knew I would rather face him there and then, alone, than him & Co. later on.

Now that the odds were even, Abou-el-Abed seemed a little hesitant about his next move. To encourage him to make up his mind, Haidar came back to the charge.

"What will it be, Abou-el-Abed? You wanted so much to teach him

to mind his own business. Here is your chance. But if you want to fight him, it has to be fair and square, like a real man, and not with other men. So, what will it be?”

“I’ll do whatever you want me to,” Abou-el-Abed answered at length, putting the ball in the hand of the big fellow.

“Fine. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear from you,” said Haidar, giving Chucry a furtive wink to let him know that things were now proceeding according to plan. “The way I see it, it takes a stronger man to forgive and forget rather than smash heads. Believe me, I am talking from experience. So, what I’d like you both to do is forget about this whole matter for good, and shake on it. What’s more, I want your solemn word that you’ll never come to blows again. You should both be on the same side, helping each other, not fighting each other. So, how about it?”

“Fine with me,” said Abou-el-Abed, now that Haidar was offering him an honorable way out.

“Fine with me, too,” I said, extending my hand in reconciliation—which he gladly took, and we shook upon it, smiling all the while. It was about time, if you ask me.

Sorry to disappoint you, folks. No more macho fights. Not with Abou-el-Abed, anyway. For those who were counting on another fight to thumb up the manner in which the writer kept the reader on edge till the end of the story, this denouement might be an anticlimax; I know. But don’t blame it on a still-wet-behind-the-ears writer who, I assure you, is licking his chops for a best seller. Blame it on the big guy. Is it my fault if Haidar turned out to be a man of good sense? (I found out later that he went on to work as a firefighter. No wonder. He was so good at putting out fires, and not igniting them.) Believe me, if anyone was surprised at the way he handled the whole situation, it was I. Still, I must give credit where it is due. Not to mention Chucry’s contribution. He said he’d take care of it, and he did, in his own secretive way.

As to those expecting a moral for the story, there is one. Abou-el-Abed turned out to be an honorable fellow, once I had the chance of knowing

him in better days and peaceful terms. Not only was he as good as his word, as the years proved to me in time, he was a decent fellow, and good-hearted, too, across the board. Which brings me to question the reason he was beating Samir. Samir must have said something derogatory to him, thinking he could get away with it as usual, being the spoiled kid that he was. Then again, I may be wrong. I never found out the reason.

As to Abou-el-Abed's word, I was certain he'd keep it; not because he was afraid of the repercussions from the big fellow, but because it was a point of honor with him. If there's a person you can count on to keep his word, it is a man of the street when bound by his code of honor. How come they never do when they become members of Parliament in our country, since the greatest part of them end up, inevitably, doing politics anyway? Do you suppose there might be a remote chance—a very remote one, mind you—that once they have brushed elbows with the high echelon of our sophisticated society they realize how big nincompoops they would be were they to abide by the same good old standards of the streets? That is, if they are still interested in furthering their career in the political arena. Then again, what do I know? I am the one who lived on top of a bar; the fumes from downstairs must have gone to my head and impaired my judgment. (Do you suppose there might be an indirect health hazard to a secondhand drinker as is the case for a secondhand smoker? If that were true, it might explain many, many things.)

If Abou-el-Abed and I had any animosity toward each other in the beginning, we seem to have lived it down over the years. In time, we became good silent-friends—silent, as in silent partners. The street brought us to blows, and the street brought us closer and closer as the years went by. We often bumped into each other—how could we not, when we lived in the same neighborhood? In the beginning, our hello was confined to a well-bred nod, and as the days went by, it gave way to a well-meaning smile. Now and then we managed to slip a benign along-

the-road chat between smiles—a question of keeping track of each other's lot and checking if life was being fair to both of us.

Abou-el-Abed and I grew up separate from each other and in different milieus, yet our friendship was genuine. Though it was passive, I felt it to be strong, since we were both ready to help each other, should the need arise. But the need never arose. Maybe we both became street-wise and started to behave, the further we grew. We never broached the subject of the fight in our occasional conversations. The more I knew him the less interested I became to know what had brought him to beat up Samir. And I reckoned it to be improper to ask him to elaborate on what he had had in store for me the day he came to meet me with his willing lieutenants. It was all water under the bridge.

They say that a friend in need is a friend indeed, and Abou-el-Abed proved that dictum to be true when it mattered most. I say this because when the civil war broke out in Lebanon, being that Ein-Mreyseh was predominantly Muslim, most of the Christians started to flee the area, fearing the reprisals of the blind fanatics or the backlash of a situation run amok. I came across him once on Phoenicia Street during that critical period. He accosted me all surprised, and greeted me with excessive warmth, definitely more than his usual. He was so pleased to see me that I thought he would never be done wringing my hand. It was as if he had given up on seeing me again in the neighborhood. Upon knowing that we weren't even considering leaving the area, as many other Christians did, he was very happy and proud of that friendship of ours that had survived the vicissitudes of time, against all odds.

However, he did express to me his concerns about the future, now that the same friendship was confronted with the fanaticism of a country gone crazy. I assured him that nothing would change me in that regard, because my beliefs were alien to the craziness that had split our country in so sorry and shameful way. I didn't elaborate much on that, but I think he took my words for their real worth, and it was then that he did

something that won him a place in my Hall of Fame of fond memories. He took out a piece of paper and wrote down two numbers, then handed the paper to me, saying,

“These are the two numbers where I can be reached, day and night. I want you to call me any time you see the need—any time, you hear? And I mean it. Whatever may be the hour of the night or the reason, I will come to you. Swear to me that you will act upon it, should the need come?”

There’s nothing like a civil war to bring out in the open the good, or evil, ensconced deep inside us; it is the real test of hearts. And right then Abou-el-Abed was speaking from the heart. But at the time, I was already in good hands, in Doctor Dahesh’s hands to be exact, and Abou-el-Abed knew nothing of that fact. He knew nothing about me or my whereabouts. To him I was just a boy he had fought in the street one day of his childhood, whom he came to like and respect, not for what he represented but for what he was.

The same was true for me. But that didn’t stop me from being surprised at the way he acted, since nothing in our relations had ever indicated to me that such would be his line of conduct in dire times, especially when it meant risking his life to help me. I just took the numbers, thanked him, and said to him not to worry about me, because my fate was neither in the hands of the Christians nor in the hands of the Muslims, but in the hands of God—an observation that seemed to tally well with him. For he presently took my hand and shook it more strongly than ever, then gave me a bear hug, for good-old-time’s sake, in which he placed the warmest feelings and wishes. And that was the last time I saw Abou-el-Abed. I wonder if our civil war was good to him, as it was to me.

To say that war was good for me may seem a little odd, coming from someone who was bereft of everything he owned, thanks to that heartless civil war—his home, his job, and all his belongings. But it is true. For in spite of all the misfortunes that befell me, I came out of it a new man, stronger and richer than ever before, as my story will show. I am what you might call a war profiteer: I made my fortune during the civil

war—my spiritual fortune that is. Strange. It is as though my old me died with my beautiful street; say rather with my beautiful country. But I wish that civil war had laid me bare of my identity too. But no, that was left as a stigma on my brow, as a going-away present, so that wherever I went they would point the finger at me and whisper: “Watch out for this one, he’s Lebanese.”

But that’s another story.

Right now the streets are still calling me for some more adventures. For alas, I often let them have the upper hand in my upbringing, which led to unpleasant situations. Many incidents come to mind, but I will content myself with one. It is a kind of incident wherein I had to do the right thing not for a chivalrous deed but a stupid one.