Beirut, Lebanon

The Dead-End Alley

Lucien Elia

First, there was that house in a dead-end alley on the edge of the Jewish Quarter, an architectural aberration, a graceless cube of reinforced concrete, a freezer in winter, an oven in summer.

Early every spring, we would hire a Shiite laborer to whitewash the rooftop terrace so as to shield us against the savage rays of the summer sun. When the work was done, he’d climb down from the blazing white rooftop inferno, a wild look in his eyes, crazed, as though drunk. After paying him for the work, Mother would hastily dismiss him—he reeked of sweat—with the words: “God be with you, and we’ll see you next spring.” And off he’d go, in a clamor of clanking buckets and cans, sorry he hadn’t inflated his price a little. Our dreary house overlooked a lush garden surrounded by rusty iron fencing that guarded the home of our Muslim landlords.

The setting—the exuberant vegetation where date palms mixed with citron, orange, and sumac trees, and the landlords’ stately marble house with its hewn stone patio and vibrant red tile roof—contrasted sharply with our ugly, colorless block where we either shivered with cold or marinated in the 80 percent humidity of high summer.

For three decades, a simmering conflict pitted my family against our trio of landlords, a group of pachyderms whose enormous thighs rubbed together as they walked: the eldest, Rachid Behyum, never without his garnet-red fez cocked insolently to one side, and his two sisters Khadija and Aisha, dressed in dull, tent-like robes that concealed the mountains of flesh beneath.¹ Rashid owned several apartment buildings in town, in addition to parking lots and other land holdings.

¹ A fez, also known as a tarboosh, is a felt hat shaped like a cylinder, with a flat top. Fezes are typically red, and indeed the name comes from the Moroccan city of Fez, where the crimson-colored dye was produced.
Figure 7. Birthday portrait of Lucien Elia, age seven. Taken in December 1944 in Mr. Hratch’s Armenian studio. His shoes squeaked as he went back and forth on the set.
Our entire neighborhood belonged to him, in fact, including our putrid alley where a dozen boisterous Jewish families lodged. Screaming children, blaring radios—usually tuned to shows featuring French singers: “This one goes out to Rina from Mimo, and from the Three Musketeers to their cousin Riro. And now, the great André Claveau, singing “Insensiblement”—the clanging of kitchen utensils, cross-balcony conversations: “So Rebecca, what’s for lunch today?” All this came together in a dissonant symphony, punctuated by a chorus of cooing doves over in the landlords’ garden. The tremendous threesome posed an alimentary enigma, for we never once saw them returning from the market with provisions. The most we ever glimpsed was a random rib of celery emerging from the brown paper bag Rashid used when making his rounds to collect rent. We used to imagine that there was a tunnel that snaked under our alley and somehow came out on the main street of the town that led to the marketplace. We also thought there was something strange, almost unseemly, about the three unmarried siblings; we imagined them fornicating to their heart’s content in a monstrous jelly roll of tangle flesh. Who knows. They never had guests over, they never had parties, never celebrated anything, unlike the alley folks, who would prepare a feast for every conceivable occasion: circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, birthdays, religious holidays. And still they grew fatter, oh yes, with every passing year.

The Sunni trio, richer than Croesus, was tightfisted and intolerant beyond all measure, and sprang into action whenever the alley overstepped its boundaries. So we children couldn’t play on the graveled area leading up to our house without the Monuments erupting from their terrace and shouting at us to get off their “territory,” even though it was actually public property. Whether we were playing street soccer, tag, or hide-and-seek behind the perpetually un-rebuilt ruins of their collapsed wall, we would be interrupted by an avalanche of insults, which we thought were hysterically funny: “You trash! You little pimps! Go back home to your stinking mother! You Jews, oh you Jews!” On more than one occasion, our soccer ball would sail over their wrought-iron fence in a perfect arc, the purpose of this deliberate kick being to provide an excuse to go into their garden and recover it, while bringing back as many fallen oranges and citrons as we could gather. For the Three Sea Elephants, this was an unspeakable offense. This was their fruit! The fruit of their trees! For free? How dare we?

Once a year, the Alpha Male would come to our house to collect the rent. He would make his pompous entrance, sneering contemptuously as he settled into a chair in the front room and made himself at home, legs spread, paunch draped over his thighs, his shrewd ears protruding from his thick skull. He would doff his fez, revealing the contrast between the bald whiteness of his scalp and his tanned skin.

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2. Croesus was King of Lydia (an area corresponding to the western provinces of modern-day Turkey) whose legendary wealth is the stuff of Greek and Persian tales. The expression “as rich as Croesus” (used in both English and French) thus refers to this historical figure.
A nervous tic made his ankle switch back and forth, producing a squeak from his patent leather shoe. My mother’s face was a map of absolute reluctance as she offered our guest Turkish coffee and maamoul—little pistachio-stuffed cakes shaped like Aztec pyramids, which the Warthog would decline, no doubt out of fear that she had dipped them in some biblical poison. He and my father would then exchange platitudes about the weather, local politics, and the price of lemons, which had risen again, before the greedy collector—his ankle vibrating even faster at this point—would make some scarcely veiled reference to Israel’s latest moves near its border with Lebanon.

As it happens, in May 1948, date of the creation of the Jewish state, a ragtag horde poured into our alley bellowing a belligerent yet catchy chant, which the Three Ponderal Heavyweights repeated in chorus from up on their terrace: “Palestine is our country, and the Jews are our dogs.” It was funnier in Arabic, since the two lyrics rhymed: Falastine bladna, woul yahoud klabna.

Ten years later, a younger brother turned up from out of the blue and took up residence in the marble house of the Three Ponderous Ones. His kitchenware business in Saudi Arabia having failed, he had come begging for room and board after years of epistolary silence. He must have had some schooling, for on warm nights in late spring, when he would sit on the terrace strumming his guitar, the songs he crooned to the starry sky were always in French. His elder brother would then burst onto the scene and order him back inside: “If you keep this up, I’m going to make kindling out of that instrument of yours.” On some evenings, one of our lady neighbors, Vivy the Vile (El Bich’aa), still unmarried at twenty-five and a huge Edith Piaf fan, would echo back the lyrics of our failed kitchenware salesman in sharp trills punctuated by gasps each time she took a new breath. Her mother would mock: “Get back inside and die in your own bed, you old maid.”

By June, the heat inside our cube was unbearable. Apparently, the whitewashing job on the roof wasn’t doing the trick, despite my mother’s orders to our Shiite painter: “If you give me three layers for the price of one, God will provide . . .” So, we’d head for the mountains. A motley pickup truck would park right at the foot of our staircase, despite strict orders from the Three Fatsos not to do so. The four Muslim movers and a driver that we hired for the trip were able to reason with the Apoplectics: a Sunni accord was quickly reached, whereby we could park for two hours, but not a minute more, by God! Under the withering gaze of the Three Deadweights, who looked on while our private effects paraded by, we quickly loaded our bed frames and mattresses, frying pans, and hastily knotted bundles of clothing. And off we went, our parents squeezed together in the passenger seat, and my sister, my brother, and me in the back, along with the muscle-bound movers, perched atop the pyramid of baggage and furniture. The Blubbers wished us a good trip, in their inimitable way: “Go on, off you go, and may your path be strewn with insurmountable obstacles.” It was a three-month respite in the fresh mountain air. The alley would soon recede into distant memory, though we
couldn’t help but picture the landlords reigning over the deserted neighborhood, adrift in their marble chambers in the Lebanese heatwave, for they were loath to spend good money on a summer house in the mountains, even though two-thirds of the city did just that. We would return in September with the first rains, back to the squabbles over parking, the hubbub of the Alley, the sad ballads of the former kitchenware salesman, and the passionate Piaf impersonator warbling her husbandless blues for all to hear.

When I turned eighteen, a heated family meeting involving a dozen uncles and aunts arrived at the decision that I should somehow be sent to France to attend university. “Why bother? He’ll just skip all his classes and spend his time in cafés, and he’ll come back with a goy in a short skirt who’ll make fun of our cuisine and customs.” But I did leave, in the end. It was an October day, a relentless rain soaking the alley. From their verandah the Three Potbellies, rising above us like evil totems from beneath their vast black umbrellas, audibly expressed their hope that my boat would sink as soon as it had left the bay of Beirut.

I returned thirty years later, just to have a look around.

Seventeen years of intercommunal war had annihilated the alley, leaving not a single trace of the concrete cube or the marble mansion. All that remained was the citron tree that still struggled to bear fruit in the thick shadow of ostentatious apartment buildings, row upon row, gleaming white against the cerulean Mediterranean sky.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

3. In both Hebrew and Yiddish, goy refers to a gentile, or a non-Jew. Although sometimes considered pejorative, the word itself simply means “nation.”