His name is Ahmed; he's my best friend. He is seven years old, just like me. I know that his parents are Muslims, he knows that mine are Jews. On rue Rizkallah, in Beirut, everyone knows that. But you think that's a problem for kids who want to play marbles?

In 1947, I was five. I thought that all children were Jewish. It was very simple—they had a mother and a father like me; they went to school like me; they ate like me; they slept in their bed like me. I thought: they must certainly go to the synagogue like me.

I was bored at the synagogue. I fell asleep while the prayers, chanted by the adults, floated up into the air. To keep me entertained, my father rented rimonim for me, those small cylinders with bells and silver sleeves that ornament the Tablets of the Law. I was proud to show off my bells to my friends who had none. Alas, after ten minutes, the sexton took them back from me. What to do?

Lots of children played in the courtyard of the synagogue. They were violent, pulling each other’s hair or slapping each other. Sometimes, they jumped on top of me, shouting “khabissa!” (“squash!”). They’d throw me on the ground, pummel me with their fists, and pile up on my back with the stern intention of beating me to a pulp. At the Alliance Jewish school, khabissa was the favorite recess game. I was quiet and timid. Off to one side on a bench, I would eat my bread, alone, while they had fun. Yet I wanted to be their friend. Sometimes, I would approach them, get hit, and cry—and that, that was the worst, because they made fun of me.

Ahmed, the baker’s son on my street, never hits me, never pulls out my hair. When my mother says: “Don’t stay glued to my legs, I’m cooking!” I race down the stairs, and when Ahmed sees me he jumps in the air, cries “Whoa!” and, five minutes later, we’re galloping on our horses in the little street in the neighborhood.

One day, I get an idea.
Figure 8. Yves Turquier, who has no photos of himself as a child, is the author of this one, taken from the balcony of the family apartment on rue Rizkallah in Beirut. On the left, a hundred feet away, a bakery.
“Mama, can we take Ahmed to the synagogue?”
My mom, she is very pretty, she’s tall and she loves me. But I must have said something senseless, she makes a strange face.
“So, can we?”
“No, we can’t.”
“Why can’t we?”
“Because Ahmed is Muslim.”
“So what?”
“So what, Muslims don’t go to the synagogue.”
“Where do they go?”
“They go to the mosque.”
“What’s a mosque?”
“It’s a kind of synagogue for Muslims.”
My project had failed. But I never lacked resources.
“So then, can I go with Ahmed to his synagogue?”
“No, you can’t.”
“And why?”
“Because you are Jewish.”
I said: “Oh, ok.”
Now I’m seven, Ahmed is still my best friend, but I have learned about religion. In our street, the shopkeeper Khawaja Farid is Maronite, the grocer Jawad is Muslim, the dry cleaner Ali is Muslim. Angèle Malhamé, our neighbor, is Christian, Madame Raftopoulo and her husband the pharmacist are Christians, the baker is Muslim, the old Russian Olga Limansky who strolls in her beautiful garden, well, she’s a painter.
When my friend isn’t at home, I go look for him at the bakery. His father, Muhammad Ali, is the best baker in the neighborhood. Aromas of warm bread, thyme flatbreads, and meat pizzas waft from the back of the shop. Arab breads, round and flat, are lined up on the long pieces of wood; they are slid onto the burning brick where they quiver, rise, and then blow up like soccer balls. Ahmed piles the cooked bread in wicker baskets. Sometimes he steals one and we eat it together behind the store.
My family lives in Zaituna, very close to the sea. From time to time, my parents chat during meals. They speak of “us” and they speak of “them.” Us, are the Jews, the b’nai emunah, the sons of our people. Them, they are the goyim, the non-Jews. We watch them, we scrutinize their actions, their words. “They can become dangerous,” says my mother. Even though I’m only seven years old, I feel that my parents are afraid.
In our street, the fruit and vegetable sellers, the copper polishers, the mattress carder, and the housecleaners are all Muslims. But you mustn’t say that in front of them; they don’t like that. In this case, we have to use the secret code and speak
French: Muslims become “the Muses.”¹ “They are very kind,” says my mother. “They are generous, but not all the time. Sometimes, they listen to the radio, and then they give us a funny look.” My father says that it’s because of Falasteen.² I don’t really know what that is. One day my parents say to me:

“We’re going to live with your grandparents for a while.”

“Why?”

“Because there are some troubles.”

“What troubles?”

“Go play,” says my mother. “I’m packing the suitcases.”

But why move to my grandmother’s house? Our neighborhood is quiet. I don’t feel in danger. Ahmed is my friend; every morning my mother buys her bread from their bakery. She is welcomed with a smile and the habitual formulas: “Welcome, Ya Madaame, we are at your service, how many today? Eight, as usual? Your wish is our command, would you like something else? Thyme flat-breads? Some pastries? No? Very well, may your morning be brightened . . . Go in peace.”

So why go live at my grandmother’s house? I finally understand—it’s about the mezuzah.³ The mezuzah is a little wooden cylinder which holds a tiny scroll of the Law. It’s attached to the door frame outside the house. It’s necessary. It’s for divine protection. Except that today my mother doesn’t agree.

“Our mezuzah, clearly visible on the landing, doesn’t protect us at all! It puts us in danger!”

“What are you talking about?” says my father. “It’s not visible from the street.”

“Yes, but ‘they’ can come look for it in the stairwell. And ‘they’ can find us.”

“But there aren’t enough beds at my parents’ place to house five people.”

“You really are oblivious to danger! Carefree and careless! We have a boy and two babies. I’d rather sleep on the floor, but I won’t stay here a minute longer.”

I may only be seven years old, but I already know that my mother always wins. We spend a month at Téta’s and Déda’s. Upon our return, our house hasn’t moved and Ahmed is still there. I missed him. I’m bored when he isn’t around. He asked me: “Where were you?” and I answered that I was at my grandmother’s house. He smiled at me and said, “Me too, sometimes, I sleep at my grandmother’s,” and that’s it. We started to play together again like always. Of course, I didn’t tell him the story of the mezuzah. I know already that you can’t talk about that with “the Muses.”

¹ The French pronunciation of “muses” resembles that of the first syllable of musulman, or Muslim.
² This phonetic spelling is intended to render the pronunciation of the word “Palestine” in Arabic, which has no equivalent of the “p” sound.
³ The word mezuzah itself derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.
One day, my mother says:
“Did you hear an enormous explosion early this morning?”
“No, what happened?”
“Someone put a bomb inside your school. It exploded at seven o’clock. The
school was destroyed. Today, you aren’t going to class.”

I say to myself, “What a break!” I have grammar homework and recitation that
I hadn’t worked on—I’m saved. But is it for certain? The Alliance school is five
minutes from our house; I run. In the street, I come across Ahmed who says to me:
“I heard your school exploded . . . ”
“Yes, I’m going to check it out!”
“I’ll come too!”

Around the enormous crater, the whole neighborhood is there. Neighbors,
friends, classmates, simple passersby have gathered; they gesticulate, get angry,
shout. Others are dazed, despondent, absent. Some men try to contain the crowd;
they yell: “Careful, don’t get any closer, there might be another bomb!” The fire-
fighters’ sirens tear up our eardrums. Helmeted men rush to the scene. They begin
to pick through the rubble; they move the scraps of metal, the wooden planks,
blackened blocks of stone. I hear: “Make way, make way, hurry, they found some-
one!” It’s Abdallah, the school’s concierge. He’s stuck under a girder. Slaloming
through the bystanders, I manage to slip into the front of the crowd. The school
has vanished. In its place, I see a pile of smoking ruins. I look up. What remains of
the old building is our blackboard hanging from a piece of the wall, and the door to
my classroom opens out over a void. Now there is a crowd. My school has become
the neighborhood attraction. Everyone speaks loudly, everyone expresses their
opinion. I hear: “May God curse them, they attack innocents, children. Thank-
fully, the bomb exploded at seven in the morning. At eight, there would have been
500 pupils there.” Who are “they”? No one says it in public, it’s too dangerous. A
big, helmeted firefighter says to us:
“Get out of the way, the ambulance has to come through.”
“Did they find any wounded?” asks a bystander.
“Two, a man and a woman, but they are gravely injured.”

Two stretcher-bearers emerge from the rubble, staggering. Around me, the
exclamations rise:
“Ahh . . . they’re carrying a wounded woman! God save her. Does anyone know
who it is?”
“Not at all, but we’ll find out.”

Waiting for the ambulance, the medics lay down their burden right at my feet.
It’s pure chance, just like that. I open my eyes; I see a sleeping woman. She has blood
on her face like in the cowboy films. She’s sleeping, but I don’t understand, her
eyes are open. Suddenly, I recognize her. It’s our school director, Madame Penso.
She whom I passed every day in the schoolyard. She who came to congratulate
us, she who scolded us when we had done poor work. She whom I dearly loved because she was protective. I was also afraid of her because she was stern.

The crowd was silent, as if petrified. Behind me, an old man murmured:
“She’s dead, that woman. May God have pity on her.”

All of a sudden, I don’t know what’s happening. Like a razor blade, emotion seizes me in the throat, I tremble from head to toe. I can barely breathe. It’s the first time I’ve seen death. I hear myself cry. I don’t want to be there anymore.

Looking up, I see my friend Ahmed. He, too, stares open-mouthed at this unmoving woman. He’s stunned like me. We don’t say anything; this lasts for a while. He asks:
“This woman, you know her?”
“She was the director of the school.”
He doesn’t say anything. He looks at me. His eyes are full of tears.\footnote{The bombing of the AIU school in Beirut took place on January 22, 1950, when Turquier would have been about nine years old.}

—Translated by Robert Watson