

THE ECHO OF SAND

صدى الرمال

a novel by

Gail Chehab

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Saleh

صالح

Beirut, Lebanon

IN LEBANON, WE SAY ZA'ATAR IS THE SPICE OF LIFE. On my tongue the crushed thyme tastes bittersweet, like my life.

Inside Madame Abdo's bakery on Al-Hamra Street, the brick oven burns the way it did a thousand years ago. The flames devour a wheelbarrow-load of coal, dancing among white hot ashes.

Every Lebanese mother has her own recipe to bake za'atar bread. My brother and I are ten years old, reliable enough for Mama to send us to Madame Abdo's with a special jar of spices.

From the bakery's cedar table I snatch a piece of dough and stretch it over a smooth stone. When the bread has no more lumps, my fingers smother it with our thick paste of olive oil, thyme, sumac, and sesame.

Before I can toss the small pizza-shaped breads onto the long paddle, my brother plays chords on its wooden neck. He hums an Elvis tune while strumming with his right hand.

"Samir, grow up. You're here to bake bread, not play rock-and-roll." Madame Abdo's impatience seeps through her flour-white skin. Everything in the bakery is dusted with the same powder.

Samir switches to a baguette and begins to dance with his breaded microphone.

“Look at Saleh. He came out of your mother’s belly at the same time. Why can’t you be serious like him? Your mother is waiting for her bread.”

Madame Abdo holds my hand steady on the wooden paddle as we pull golden brown croissants out of the brick oven. I breathe in the aroma of fresh-baked bread while sweat drips down my back like melted butter. Madame Abdo removes her steamed glasses and wipes them on her apron. Before she can put them back on, I lick the hot crispy edges from the baked delight. I press my burning tongue against the roof of my mouth.

Just now, the bell over the doorway jingles. It’s Ali the barber.

“Assaalaamu aalaykum.” Abu Ali has the muscles and bones of a Greek god.

“Good morning to you too, Abu Ali.” Madame Abdo’s cheeks turn the color of rose syrup.

Legend has it that every night on Abu Ali’s houseboat he packs a water pipe with pleasure and fills his desires with intoxicating women.

Abu Ali sticks his thumb in the za’atar jar and smudges the black paste on my upper lip. “Look. Now you have a mustache. A real man, ready to visit my houseboat.”

“Stop, Abu Ali. These boys are pure, like the bread we bake.”

“And Saleh is still a virgin like the olive oil.” Samir rolls two balls of dough into the shape of breasts and squeezes them.

I fling a walnut at Samir, just missing his ear.

“So how’s business?” Madame Abdo kneads a massive mound of dough.

“Not good. Everyone’s growing long hair and beards.”

Madame Abdo covers her mouth. She apparently doesn’t want Abu Ali to see her amusement.

“Don’t laugh. Someday I’m going to have the first barber shop for women in West Beirut. And you, Madame, will be my first customer.”

“God willing, our Beirut lasts that long.”

Abu Ali bids us goodbye and disappears into the street with his bag of croissants.

The bakery seems empty without him. I’m bored with baking bread. I prefer something more interesting, like a visit to his houseboat. I rub the skin on my upper lip, hoping for a mustache by age eleven.

Up against the window a veiled woman appears. She presses her face and breasts to the glass.

“She should buy. I can’t make any money when she looks.” Madame Abdo turns away from the window to concentrate on her dough.

Underneath her black chador, the veiled woman has the two biggest breasts I’ve ever seen. She must carry Mount Lebanon on her chest.

“Saleh, the dough. It needs za’atar.”

“He’s busy watching the penguin.”

“Samir.” Madame Abdo puts her finger up to her lips. “She’s got the same Allah as us. She just prays more often.”

I’m grateful for the woman’s veil; covered, she’s not a real person. Unable to see the emotion in her face, I can stare as long as I want at the shape of her breasts without having to see the insult in her face.

“I dare you to squeeze them.” Samir’s teasing words fill his face with pleasure. He shoots me in the head with a marble-sized piece of dough.

“Cut it out or I’ll—”

A powerful jolt rocks the bakery. I hear a sonic boom roll over my head like a wave. My body drops to the ground. I feel as if my knees have cracked. Alongside me is our family spice mixture, ruined in an oily black mud mixed with shattered glass.

There’s another jolt. A small crack in the wall spreads like a vast spider web.

“Away from the oven!” Madame Abdo pushes Samir and me toward the door before clutching the cedar table.

My hands clasp in prayer. I plead to Allah that it’s not happening again. I’m too afraid to peek through the window in case a plane has crashed through the sky.

Samir and I bury ourselves in Madame Abdo’s apron, where she’s warm and sweet like her marzipan cookies. Behind the black-reddish flesh of my eyelids, I imagine Beirut before the war, when the only screams outside were those of children playing; when the only thing that burned in the sky was the sun.

“Yallah!” We lift our faces off Madame Abdo’s chest as her words tell us to hurry. She throws her baking hat on the table and points toward the door. “Let’s go. It’s the sky.”

An enormous cloud of black smoke spreads like a canopy over Al-Hamra Street. Men in green Hizbollah headbands run toward us and wave their fists in the air. Their chants grow louder and clearer. *Allahu akbar!*

My brother and I cling to Madame Abdo's apron. She speaks to the men in a scolding tone, "Idiots. Go back to where you came from."

Samir's skin is no longer smooth like a boy. The muscles in his face tighten with worry. "Are we going to the bomb shelter?"

"I don't know, habibe. Let's get you home."

My parents must be full of worry, dreading when we have to scurry beneath the earth like animals. I hope to find them in the comfort of our home.

We dodge a man running with his ashta cart. I can't even think of asking for ice cream now. Our urgent pace quickens into a sprint. The honking cars and people spar with each other, fighting for room to escape. Madame Abdo digs her spikelike nails into my moist palm, determined not to let my hand slip away.

I trip. My knees hit the unforgiving ground.

"Up, up, up!" Before I can dust the dirt off my jeans, Madame Abdo scrapes me off the ground.

"My shoe!"

"Leave it."

Samir covers his nose and mouth with his hand. The air smells like smoke from a match. The sky fills with a thick yellow haze.

Madame Abdo brings my hand up to my mouth. "Don't breathe too deeply or you'll swallow the sulphur—"

Her voice is drowned out by passing sirens. Our path is cut off by throngs of people running in the street. Like us, they flee to the safety of their homes. They leave their errands half finished, coats and shopping bags left behind. A father drags his children, their feet too small to keep up. A woman doesn't bother to fix the headscarf that slides off her hair. A man pedals away on a flat tire.

Watching my brother's face, a reflection. As identical twins, I see not only my eyes, nose, and cheeks, but my fear. Samir uncovers his mouth to allow himself one important question: "Do you think we're going to America now?"

"I don't know. There's no time for such talk." The flour has fallen off Madame Abdo's face and neck. I see her panic.

Baba had told us that if things got worse, Samir and I would be evacuated to America with his boss, Mr. Peterson, president of Core Industries. Baba has been his loyal chauffeur for the past ten years. Mr. Peterson

has no family of his own. That's why Baba refers to him as our American grandfather.

Pop, pop, pop! The crackling of gunfire forces us to turn into a twisting alleyway. All of the souks are boarded shut, including my favorite, the gold souk, which used to be a treasure house of bangles, rings, chains, lockets, and precious stones. An oversized rat feasts outside the spice souk. I watch him ravage a crushed bag of vanilla beans.

A ragtag group of men with unkempt beards appears, chanting and beating their chests: *Death to America!*

We duck into a doorway, not wanting to be trampled by these men. They run past us as if charging into battle.

Once we spot our apartment building, Samir and I break away from Madame Abdo and race each other to the entrance. Samir raises his hands in victory, then jumps up to be the first to hit the top of the doorframe.

I look up to the third floor window. "Mama!"

I can't see her, but I know she's there. She lives behind the windows in a world darkened with blackout paper. She refuses to leave the apartment, afraid of snipers' bullets.

Before she scurries down the street to her own family, Madame Abdo yells to us, "Hurry, go inside."

Upstairs, Mama swallows her screams once she sees our faces. Our noses press against her neck, smelling the safety of her flesh. Her skin is smooth like rose petals. Her hair rolls over the collar of her dress. It reminds me of yarn spun from silk.

On the stairs, I hear Uncle Merwan stomping in his military boots. His face is that of a tough bulldog with fuzz on its jowls. Everyone will tell you that he'd rather hold a rifle than a razor. As a member of the neighborhood militia, he wears his thick olive-colored uniform proudly like a medal.

"What happened?" Beads of sweat on Mama's forehead turn into lines of worry.

Uncle Merwan wipes his boots at the door. "It's the airport. Hizbollah blew up the Marine barracks."

"The Americans?" In a plea to Allah, Mama raises her hands toward the ceiling. "Who will help us now?"

Samir buries his head into the pillow on the couch. His voice is a hopeless mumble. "No one."

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A car screeches outside the window, followed by the sound of Baba's shoes clicking on the stairs. His footsteps are not patient feet. Two, three steps are taken at a time. My father explodes through the door. He doesn't take time for a breath.

"Let's go. It's time." Baba waves his hand in the air like a magician trying to make a bad spell disappear.

Mama pulls the suitcase down from the closet and folds a jacket for myself and sweater for Samir.

"Move! In the car." On Baba's neck a vein bulges thick like the muscles in his arms.

Mama drags the suitcase down the stairs. The open locks bounce up and down.

Mr. Peterson's Mercedes is parked at the curb. It's gold and has leather seat coverings as soft as silk coats. The finest part is its hood ornament. It makes me believe we're part of the better class.

Uncle Merwan hugs Samir and me goodbye. His grip is powerful. I don't doubt he can break thick logs with his hands. I bury my tears in his massive chest. My fingers press into his back. I want to cling to my uncle's bravery. He's a tower of might.

"Merwan, please. We have to go. Your long goodbyes make it harder." Baba wipes his forehead. His grief is still there.

Uncle Merwan helps Mama into the passenger seat. She lets him put the suitcase on her knees. Her nervousness makes the open locks jiggle.

Wearing his shiny black suit, Baba pushes Samir and me in the back-seat.

Uncle Merwan towers over the car like a giant in a fairy tale. His hand rests on Baba's shoulder. "The airport is closed. How do you expect to get the boys to America?"

"Mr. Peterson is waiting on the office roof. There's a helicopter ready to take Saleh and Samir."

America. I have always dreamed of going to the land of Hollywood legends. Now I regret these dreams. I don't want to leave my parents and Uncle Merwan behind.

As we pull onto the street, I savor the last sight of Uncle Merwan on the sidewalk waving goodbye. "How long will we be gone?"

"Enough time to visit Disneyland and then come home." Baba speeds up, passing through a red light.

“Do they speak Arabic in America?”

“No. English. There’re no Muslims there. Only Christians.” Baba turns around. His look is pious like our Imam. “Remember, don’t forget to pray. Five times a day.”

Baba fiddles with the radio. He searches for the news but finds only static.

Mama’s voice is short, her breathing unsteady. “How many Americans died?”

“Probably all of them.”

“That must be hundreds. May Allah let them rest in peace.” She shifts her knees underneath the suitcase. “Do you think the Americans will bomb us back?”

“If not, someone else will put us out of our misery.” Baba honks the horn. The car jumps over a curb.

“Stop it. Don’t talk that way in front of the children.” Mama takes the headscarf out of her pocket and wraps it around her head as we approach a Hizbollah checkpoint.

Baba rubs the worry beads hanging from the rearview mirror. He flips up the sun visor. Through the windshield I see the yellow sulphur clouds hanging low, thick with death. A thunderous sky booms without rain.

We are next in line behind an old Peugeot. Suddenly, a man and his wife are dragged from their rusted car and pushed behind a wall. Their baby still sucks on the mother’s breast. A volley of bullets kills their screams. The last sound is a thump on the ground. I grab my crotch. It’s too late; warm urine flows down my leg.

From behind the wall a man with combat boots walks toward us. His eyes are two pieces of coal. His pupils search for the next kill.

His body is decorated with the essentials of war: a bandoleer of bullets crosses his chest; hand grenades hang from his vest. He points his AK-47 at Baba, signaling for him to roll down the window. My head sinks into my shoulders.

He leans inside. His clothes smell of gunfire.

“Papers.” The Hizbollah’s voice is deep. A scar runs from his eye to his mouth.

He rumples our identity cards as if they’re trash. “Where’re you going?”

Baba wipes the back of his neck. “To the mosque. To pray.”

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“With a suitcase?”

“Of course, there’re lots of people with nothing. At the mosque we give them clothes.”

The Hizbollah lights a cigarette. He bites down hard on the butt. My eyes dart away from his dark gaze. Instead, I stare at the orange glow that burns from his cigarette’s tip.

Smoke shoots from the Hizbollah’s mouth as he cocks his AK-47. He reaches inside and pulls up the button to unlock Baba’s door. My father closes his eyes to pray. I pray with my eyes open. It may be the last time I see Baba. The Hizbollah opens the door and grabs Baba by the lapel.

The car rocks forward. Black plumes of smoke billow up into the sky.

A man runs toward the car shaking his AK-47 in the air. “Hamid. Come!”

Hamid, the armed stranger whose face is etched in my memory, slams the car door closed. He fires in front of the car. “Go!”

Baba follows his bullet. The force of the car’s acceleration pushes me back into the seat.

The buildings around us bleed a slushy gray ash. The olive trees droop with worry. Mama cries. She digs her fingers into her eyes. “Look at this place. Nothing’s left.”

We turn onto a main avenue thick with people screaming and pushing. We’re caught in a riot in hell. Baba pounds on his horn. “Out. Out of my way. We’ll never make it!”

In the distance, the helicopter hovers over Core’s rooftop. I can’t tell if it’s coming or going.

Baba turns off the engine. “Out of the car.”

“You want us to walk?” Mama peers out the window at the bodies pressing against the door.

“Now! We have no choice.”

I’m scared to move through a mass of people. What if I get separated? I peer down at my once white but now black sock. My toes curl. I wish I had my shoe.

Baba takes the suitcase from Mama and uses it as part shield, part tank to push our way through the crowd.

At the Core building, the helicopter’s blades swoop over the roof’s edges. The noise is deafening, as loud as the Israeli fighter jets that scream across the sky.

At the elevator, Baba bangs the unlit button. "It's broken. Use the stairs."

Mama struggles with the suitcase.

"Leave it!" Baba's anger makes him look meaner than the Hizbollah at the checkpoint.

Mama drops the suitcase and scurries up the stairs after us.

Inside the stairwell, the helicopter sounds like it's directly on top of us. My heartbeat is banging loud in my head. I worry it will break through my skull.

At the top of the stairs, Baba can't open the rusted latch on the rooftop door. He punches at the door, ignoring the blood that drips down to his elbow. He is screaming, but I can't hear his words, only his panic. The helicopter engines accelerates.

The wood begins to splinter. Baba kicks it until he makes a sizeable opening. My father squeezes through to the other side. From the propeller a gale wind blows through the door's opening, and I am forced to squat on the steps. Samir pushes me from behind while Baba pulls me through.

The helicopter intimidates me like a flying battleship. Its power and size are enormous. When I duck my head, my fear crouches alongside me on the ground. Inside, this beast is packed with people. With no one else on the roof, we're the last to leave. Mr. Peterson stands next to the helicopter door. In hysterics, his entire body motions for Samir and me to come.

Dust kicks up from the gravel rooftop. In its place, shells litter the ground. With gunfire whizzing through the air, my eyes turn almost blind with fright. My legs are like stone, unable to run through sniper fire.

A shiny gold cross hangs from Mr. Peterson's neck. I stare at it and hope for its protection. I pray not only to my Allah but to Mr. Peterson's Christian god.

I step back into Baba's body and try to wedge myself behind Samir. A pair of forceful hands pushes me toward the helicopter door. A bullet skims the rubber on my one remaining sneaker. Mr. Peterson grabs me by the seat of my pants and shoves me into the helicopter.

My body lies on the corrugated floor while other passengers are dragged over me. I take comfort knowing that one of them must be Samir.

Bullets strike the metal sides of the helicopter. I turn to discover that Mr. Peterson has been hit in the leg.

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A man pushes me aside and pulls Mr. Peterson inside. "Let's go!"

The door closes. My stomach sinks as the helicopter lifts off the ground.

Outside the window, I see the last of Baba, Mama, and my brother, Samir. I press my nose to the window and scream goodbye. I press my nose harder against the glass and cling to the last sight of my family. They grow smaller like ants, disappearing into the landscape.

Above the city, I can see where the bombs have torn open the sky and made concrete buildings fly like sand on a windy beach day. At the airport, the earth burns with death. The Marine barracks have fallen. The surrounding streets are lined with smoldering cars, all of them the same shade of mustard yellow. The trees have blown away. Electric wires twist around downed street lamps.

I rub the window, trying to erase the dirty sky. Indifferent to whether the sky turns blue again, I'd rather live in a dying city with my family than to leave without them.

The helicopter lifts into a cloud. The city disappears. I press my palm to the window.

"Ma'as salam," I say. With peace, I bid Beirut goodbye.