

# Alexandra Chreiteh

*An Excerpt from the Novel*

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## *Always Coca-Cola*

When my mother was pregnant with me, she had only one craving. That craving was for Coca-Cola. Her burning desire for Coca-Cola was all the more powerful because it was forbidden. In addition to the fact that my father prevented her from buying it – because in his opinion it was inseparable from American policies that he opposed – he also monitored my mother’s food intake with the severity of a school headmaster. He wrote down the foods and drinks forbidden to her and Coca-Cola was at the top of the list. As her pregnancy progressed, the pressure he exerted on her about the particulars of her nutritional intake increased until it had transformed into something of an obsession – he especially used to scrutinize the specific type of water that she would drink; tap water was completely off limits because it was polluted. He was afraid that dirt in the tap water would travel to the foetus in her belly and leave behind a residue, and so he started buying her purified, bottled water from a man who passed through the neighbourhood once a week, even though it was really expensive because this was during the war. He wanted this baby to be born clean and pure – completely flawless – exactly like the water that he paid dearly for.

He had a subconscious philosophy about all of this: pure water guarantees that a baby will be naturally predisposed to cleanliness and this will remain part of the child’s innate nature after birth. The mother’s nourishment profoundly affects the foetus! The months spent in the womb are a decisive period in a human being’s existence! Any error a mother commits during this time affects a child’s psychological and physical constitution forever.

Therefore, my father wanted to ensure that I would have a natural, and permanent, predisposition for cleanliness.

One hot summer’s day, around noon, the sun was beating down on the eastern side of our house and my mother was craving Coca-

[36] Cola. There was an electricity cut and this meant that all of the air conditioners shut off; the intense heat turned my mother's face red and beads of sweat were forming on her upper lip. She was exhausted, nearly at the end of her pregnancy. The heat was unbearable and my mother felt the baby moving inside her with a force she wasn't used to, so she sat down on a low chair, leaning back to relieve the pressure from her belly that was swollen with me. Then she opened her legs, lifting up the hem of her dress to expose her scorching thighs, in an attempt to cool them off, saying to my father with a sigh: 'I want Coca-Cola. Bring me Coca-Cola.'

My father didn't answer because he too was feeling the stifling heat and when she insistently repeated her request, he shouted right in her face: 'Where can I get you a Coke now? Drink water!'

'I'm so thirsty ... Bring me a Coke!'

There's no doubt that the thirst that overtook my mother at that moment was seriously strong. No, there's no doubt that it shook her entire being beyond what she could endure, because this craving of hers left an indelible imprint on me: I was born with a small birthmark that looks like a little Coca-Cola bottle, on my upper back, right between my shoulder blades. My mother sees this birthmark whenever I get undressed in front of her; it is a reminder of her unquenched thirst.

I remembered this incident because I had been searching for a company to take me on as a trainee for a short period of time and my friend Yana volunteered to ask her boyfriend, the manager of the Coca-Cola factory, if he could help. It's really very difficult to get work at this company, but the manager can't refuse any request of hers.

Yana's plan of action was as follows: to visit her boyfriend at his office and then to come to my house and tell me the answer at exactly five in the evening; this was the best time for her to come since no one in my family would be home then, meaning that we could feel free to do as we please. I was really hoping my friend would have the influence to get this job for me because it's one of the prerequisites of my degree and I cannot graduate from university this year without it.

But Yana was very late for our appointment – it got to be five-thirty and she hadn't come yet, which was strange since she's not usually late for her appointments. I started worrying about her, especially after I



called her a bunch of times, first on her mobile phone and then on her landline, and she didn't answer. I wondered what could have made her so late and I started to get anxious.

I decided to occupy myself with something, so I took a cardboard box full of women's magazines out from under my bed, picked one out and started flipping through it. A short article about how important it is for women to use lip balm caught my attention. In it, the writer claimed that fashion models don't ever leave home without using a high-SPF lip balm to protect them from harmful outdoor elements like sun and dust. It's extremely important for models to protect their lips because lips are the most important symbol of a woman's femininity and attractiveness. Lip balm helps them protect their lips from dryness and chafing and thereby also protects their femininity. But reading the article didn't put a stop to my worrying. I had to find something else to do until Yana came, so I decided to pop out to the pharmacy near my house and buy lip balm.

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I left my house, crossed Mar Elias Street and went into the pharmacy right next door to my father's flower shop. The pharmacist knows my father very well and knows that I'm his daughter, so he smiled at me when I entered and sold me the balm at a discount. I put some on my lips and as I left, wondering as I did so whether Yana uses the very same balm to protect her lips.

Outside, a sandstorm had begun to gather speed, but I walked confidently into the dusty wind, believing that my lips were well protected by this balm. But the balm didn't protect my lips, on the contrary, dust started to build up on them! Even worse, I licked my lips in an attempt to remove the dust but it stuck to my tongue, forcing me to swallow it because girls don't spit in the street.

When I returned to my building's entrance, I was surprised to see Yana. She had arrived while I was at the pharmacy and our friend Yasmine was with her. I wondered why Yasmine was there, but Yana sidetracked me by telling me two crucially important pieces of information: the first was that she had lost her passport. And the second was ... that she might be pregnant ... but she's not sure yet.

'I'm not sure yet!' she said, with artificial calm.

'Let's go to the pharmacy right now and buy you a pregnancy test,

so that you can be sure,' responded Yasmine, whose face betrayed no sign of shock.

[38] I stopped at the corner of the building's entrance and pretended to be busy tying my shoelace so that they would go to the pharmacy without me. I was afraid that the pharmacist would tell my father that I had bought a pregnancy test, even though the test wasn't for me. I knew my father well enough to know that if he learned about this he would cut my throat with the pregnancy test before he would even let me tell him the whole story. So I couldn't risk going into the pharmacy; instead, I hid myself completely while keeping an eye out for my father, for fear that he would decide to visit his friend the pharmacist at this very moment. If he entered the pharmacy and saw my friends doing what they were doing, it would be me who would feel his anger. Isn't he the one who always says: 'Tell me who your closest friends are, and I will tell you who you are!'

But I felt reassured when I saw him busily putting the flowers displayed outside for sale back inside his shop, afraid that the wind, heavy with dust, would kill them. I also noticed the new sign above the shop's entrance that my father had hung yesterday in place of the old one, which had been eaten by rust, completely obliterating the name of the shop. He rewrote the same old name on the new sign, though I had asked – and even begged – him to change it. He had refused my request, however, insisting on keeping the name that I hate so much!

This name is: Abeer Ward. Fragrant Rose.

My father thought up the name of his shop when he opened it twenty-five years ago and he was so thrilled with it that when I was born he named me Abeer (fragrance), so that the shop and I had the very same name: Abeer Ward – our family name is also Ward (rose). It seems that this name was bestowed on my father's grandfather a long time ago because he sold flowers. This profession was passed down in the family through the generations until it arrived at my father, who transformed it from a profession into a whole life philosophy.

I always ask him: how could you name your only daughter after your shop?

So I don't like my name and I believe that it doesn't suit me in the least. For my whole life, I've been waiting to reach legal age so that



I could change it. But when I finally turned eighteen, I realized that I had neither enough money to cover the full cost of court fees, nor enough patience to undertake all of the required legal proceedings. In all of this, the most important thing is that my father, the moment I let him know about my plan, forbade me unequivocally from changing it because my name is the most beautiful name that a young lady could possibly have, in his opinion.

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And thus I lost hope that I could exchange Abeer Ward, Fragrant Rose, for another name. I surrendered myself to this reality, thinking that whenever I get married I can exchange my family name for my husband's. Then I started constantly wondering, when it happens, what name will be my destiny? Will I turn into Abeer . . . What? Abeer Helou, Sweet Fragrance? Abeer Zaki, Delightful Fragrance?

I don't know and I'm in no rush to get married. It's too soon!

I hadn't realized the extent to which I had surrendered myself to my own thoughts until my friends returned from the pharmacy and Yasmine surprised me with her question: 'Who are you hiding from in the corner?'

But I didn't answer, seeing that Yana was hurrying toward the elevator. She stopped in front of it and pushed the call button – I understood from this that she wanted to do her pregnancy test in my house, of all places! This made me nervous because I knew how dangerous this could be for me: someone from my family could come back unexpectedly, realize what was going on and we would be busted. But before I could formulate an objection and ask Yana to go anyplace other than my house, the elevator came, we got in it and it took us up without one word crossing my lips.

When we arrived at the third floor, where I live, I opened the apartment door reluctantly. Yana ran to the bathroom, slamming the door so loudly that it echoed in my head for a while. Yasmine hurried to follow her but I stopped her saying: 'Oof! Let her breathe a little!'

Yasmine did as I asked and left Yana to sort herself out in the bathroom alone. The two of us sat down on one of the sofas in the living room. With a mechanical movement, Yasmine turned on the television and asked: 'If she's really pregnant, who do you think the baby's father is?'

[40] This question surprised me even though it was relevant – the father could be one of two people: either Yana’s ex-husband, from whom she had been separated for a short time, or her boyfriend, the manager of the Coca-Cola factory. These are the only two men Yana knew in Lebanon.

(Yana never said, ‘Lebanon,’ but rather always referred to the country with the English expression ‘the land flowing with milk and honey,’ because that’s what her illustrated tourist guide calls it.)

Yana is Romanian. She came to Lebanon with her ex-husband, who worked as an employee in a trade corporation that used to send him to Romania from time to time. He met her on one of these visits and they married a few months later and then moved together to Beirut. Yana was really enthusiastic about the move. She had always felt something inside her pulling her toward deserts, palm trees, and mirages and she was sure that she would find all that here. She came expecting to see naked women swaying to eastern melodies, with their heads and faces (except for the eyes) covered in ornamented castles with gold-plated bathrooms, in the depths of which dancing slave girls were hidden. She especially dreamed of her husband the prince’s royal court, where he would sit on pillows made of fine silk and the softest feathers, and she would sit beside him.

But this prince of hers, in reality, lives in one of those ‘old rental’ apartments on Hamra Street, above none other than Starbucks. Yana didn’t find the desert here, just a lot of dust that she had to wipe up every morning. As for the dancing slave girls, she only saw them in foreign films translated into Arabic. In their place (much to her surprise!), she saw women wearing bikinis at the beach, where she went only once because she found out that the soft, golden sand pictured in her travel guide was actually covered with the glass of broken bottles and used needles. As for the water in whose azure depths she had dreamed of swimming, it was full of jellyfish that looked like plastic bags or plastic bags that looked like jellyfish. To top it all, only minutes after arriving at the beach, a group of young men approached her and asked, in English: ‘How much?’

Angered by this deflated hope, she burned the books of Omar Khayyam, the collections of Mutanabbi’s poetry and the English trans-



lation of the *1001 Nights* – books that had been a gift from her husband when she came to Beirut to live with him there permanently.

That day, Yana realized that she did not love her husband, but merely had been enamoured with the idea of travelling to a faraway country – he had been nothing but a means to help her realize this dream. Their relationship quickly worsened, to the point that Yana was sure that she could no longer stay married to him. So she called a lawyer and asked for a divorce. She and her husband agreed that he would leave her the house and that he would move to another neighbourhood in Beirut – above a restaurant called ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Chickens.’

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Many months had passed since their separation and she had not seen him since then, but she was still legally his wife because the divorce proceedings were not yet completed and were not progressing at the speed that Yana would have desired.

This separation had backed her into a corner, since she had become responsible for supporting herself and had to find work quickly. This was not as easy as she had imagined or hoped, since the heavens do not rain jobs down on Beirut. But the winds of fate were blowing in her direction and landed her on the doorstep of a modelling agency. She walked in and walked out shortly after with a contract in hand. The very next day, the agency called her and said that the Coca-Cola Company had chosen none other than her to appear in one of its advertisements. She met the company’s manager during the shoot for the ad; they clicked at this first meeting just like two pieces of a puzzle that complete each other, in perfect harmony.

That’s what Yana thought, at least.

At that moment, Yana became certain that everything that had happened to her – from her arrival in Lebanon to her marriage and even her divorce – had not one drop of coincidence about it, indeed all of this was ‘written for her’ long before she was even born.

This was her destiny: to cast down her anchor in Lebanon and live here forever.

For it was in Lebanon that she had met her great love, nay, her other half, the person for whom she was born and who was born for her, as she always declares. Her incomplete soul had been lost and miserable

for the entire twenty-four years of her life and finally fate had led her to him, as the winds guide ships at sea.

[42] Yana has never asked me for my opinion about her relationship. But if she ever does, I'll tell her that she needs to break up with him straight away and go back to her husband for sure; marriage is not underwear that you take on and off and change every day! I actually hoped that Yana would be pregnant – but by her husband – because this would perhaps be her last chance to save her marriage. When I related my wish to Yasmine, she replied: 'Who told you she wants that?'

Then she reminded me that Yana has not seen her husband since they separated, that is to say for almost six months, and she never even mentions him; it's as if he wasn't previously a part of her life. On the other hand, she talks about her boyfriend the manager every other minute as though he were the only man she knew!

I interrupted her angrily, saying: 'Let's wait for the results of the test first!'

To change the subject, I asked Yasmine if she knew anything about this pregnancy test and she explained to me how easy it was to use: it consists of a plastic stick about as long and wide as a finger, or a little bit longer. In the middle of this stick there's a white paper rectangle that changes colour when it reacts to the woman's urine, to let her know if she's pregnant or not. If she's not pregnant, the (–) symbol appears on the white paper, and if she is pregnant, a (+) symbol appears.

'It's really easy to use!' Yasmine assured me again and then added: 'But the results are not always accurate.'

I asked myself how she knew all this.

But I didn't dare ask her and she didn't volunteer an explanation, so the two of us stayed sitting silently in front of the television. Suddenly, a commercial for a condom came on and it caught my attention because I had never seen such a thing in all my life. I turned up the volume a little bit to hear it better, but a truck was passing at that same moment and honked its horn, drowning out the television so I didn't hear any of the commercial.

A few minutes later, I left Yasmine alone in the living room and headed toward the bathroom to check on Yana. I found her sitting on the toilet, head bowed, so that her black hair covered her face, like a





hijab. I found the resemblance between hair and hijab quite amusing because it was so incompatible with the sight of her naked legs. I would have laughed had I not been aware that this was no time for laughter.

It was hard for me to believe that things like this could happen in the lives of ordinary people, since I had only seen such things in films... or dreams! Bad dreams, of course. [43]

And I felt like I really was dreaming when the (+) symbol appeared on the paper rectangle, meaning that Yana was indeed pregnant. I felt suddenly nauseated by how strange this all was to me.

Or rather I felt like someone had slapped me hard across the face and roused me from a deluded deep slumber.

Yasmine entered the bathroom and asked about the result of the test. Yana answered that she was pregnant, just as she'd expected, and without anyone asking her, she added: 'I've decided to keep the baby!'

*Translated by Michelle Hartman*