

MIDNIGHT OIL

They had a small orchard. Most of the work took place during the spring and summer. Preparation for the next season would bleed into the fall. The lush valley was sectioned off into several farms, owned by different families in the village. Across the couple acres his father and uncle owned, cherry, apple, pear, and plum trees sprouted. The summer harvest was a profitable time. Some farmers would sell their crops on the spot; traders would come in, buy the lot and take it out. Other times, the farmers take it to markets. At that time, everybody knew the prices in Syria were better than those in Lebanon, so they often packed up the season's work and made the trip to Damascus to sell their fruit.

During the frigid winters, the farmers would watch as the temperature dropped. If it fell below freezing, the buds on the flowers would die. Sometimes, the season would be destroyed. Nature took its course. And farmers lost their crops.

One year, a new technique was employed to keep the buds from freezing, aiming to save the season's work.

On a particularly chilly April night, Baba woke to a cone of white light splayed across his bed. His father beckoned him with a flashlight and led him outside. Shivering in his thin clothes, he looked out into the blackness, willing his eyes to register the shapes and greyscale hues of the night. Above, Orion's belt winked at him from his winter post among a smattering of stars. As he followed his dad, descending the hilly streets, he squinted through the dark to see a faint glow emerging from the familiar, dark valley.

As they drew closer, a distinctly acidic smell stung his nostrils. He could see something was on fire. The crisp sky blurred with big, billowing bubbles of smoke. At the base, an angry orange licked at an unidentifiable object. His uncle stood several feet away, his grimace lit momentarily by a spurt of light from the fire.

In the beam of the flashlight, specks of ash and carbon-rich air darted from side to side.

"What are we burning?" Baba asked.

His uncle guided him over to a pile of old rubber tires, some gasoline, and matches. There weren't many, but he explained it was a job that would require four or five people.

Trying not to breathe in the heavy air, he lifted a tire with a cousin, spreading out across the few acres of their orchard. Setting it down at another corner of the field, he looked around in the night behind him.

Striking a match, he held the little flame to the side of the tire, now doused with gasoline. He watched the heat begin to melt a small portion of the tractioned ridges. Soon, a thin wisp of smoke escaped the tire with a small wheeze. He brought the light closer to the surface. A lick of fire quickly materialized. He shook the light from the match as the flames flicked across the trail of gasoline circumventing the wheel.

As the black rubber puffed away, he and his cousins returned to his uncle. They stepped back to watch their work, but the dense smoke rose to their noses and crept down their throats. Trudging back toward the house, deep coughs scratched the bottom of their lungs. Once they had walked high enough into the village on the hill, the smoke thinned, and they could breathe in clear air.

Their precious orchard was enveloped in a plume of angry smoke. The theory was that, if enough was burned, a smoke layer would be created to work as a protective layer. It would trap the heat while it burned, and no frost would grow.

Baba doesn't remember what happened to that year's crop.

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On road trips in California, we have no shortage of agriculture seeded in the rolling hills. Whether he is driving or in the passenger seat, Baba's attention is always captured by fruits or vegetables we pass.

"Do you know what those are?" He quizzes me constantly.

I try to focus my gaze on the leaves, as they shelter their fruit, melding into an earthy blur as we whiz past. I have no idea. Maybe they're—

"Almonds!" He exclaims, looking back to see my reaction.

"I wanted to try and guess, Daddy," my face falling. There was no way I would have been able to guess. "How do you know?"

As the lazy sun eyes our car, speeding across freeways locked between flat orchards, he talks me through the pink and white flowers, the long leaves, and textured trunks.

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One of his chores was to retrieve water from the water source two times a day. One trip in the morning and one in the afternoon. But, if there was laundry to be done, another trip would be necessary.

After fetching the morning container of water, his mother filled up the big tub, soaking the clothes and sheets with soap made from nearby olive groves.

He watched his mother start with his pants, soaking it in the sudsy water, rubbing the fabric against itself. Methodically, she kneaded the soapy water through the cloth. She doused it in the basin again before continuing her scrubbing. Her knuckles worked at a hardened pace. After nearly twenty minutes, she rinsed it. Wringing the excess water, she set it to dry from a string suspended above the yard, smoothing the wrinkles down each pant leg. As she picked up the next piece, the sun began to do its work, drying and stiffening the pants, their dark brown softening to a lighter tan.

Laundry day usually came twice a week, depending on the size of the family. When his sisters were old enough, they helped their mother, while the boys attended school.

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On the rare occasion my mom is gone on a work trip or to visit her brother in Florida, the loose roles in our house flip on their head. Baba claims to know how to do laundry. So, one Saturday morning before I head upstairs to work, I ask if he needs any help.

“Are you going to do one load or two?” I look at his pile of mixed colors.

His eyebrows furrow as he scrunches his nose, calculating.

“You can just do it in one, probably. But make sure—”

“You know I did laundry for many years before meeting your mom. I’m not dumb.” He cuts me off, slightly frustrated.

I’m not convinced that’s entirely true, given my parents met two years into his being in the U.S.. And his many stories of failed laundry, shrunken clothes, and dry cleaner mishaps. Amused, I walk upstairs. I push away the thoughts of gendered roles. After all, everybody has to do laundry.

Several hours later, he prepares lunch as I read at the counter. He flips a pita bread on the stove, toasting the opposite side. Steam escapes the soft interior.

“I did it in cold water. That’s better, right?” He asks.

I nod, smiling as I look back down at my book.

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Maaraboon was effectively a farm community with well-defined gender roles. Men in the fields, women in the houses. There were exceptions, of course, but laundry was generally considered a woman’s role. Baba and his brothers were expected to execute different responsibilities. Fetching water, picking fruits, preparing foods for storage.

Once a month or so, his father would send him to get gas from a border town called Sarrayat, about halfway to the Syrian border. Like most things, it was a cheaper commodity abroad. About a five mile trip atop the donkey, Baba would leave early in the morning. The outing would take all day.

He would prepare a lunch, made from a pocket of pita bread and a chunk of halawi¹, a powdery cake, made from crushed sesame seeds and topped with pistachio. Almost sickeningly sweet alone, the addition of the bread calmed its sugary nuttiness.

Baba and the donkey, saddled with two empty jugs, set out, kicking up dust as they weaved through the other side of the valley, toward Syria.

¹ حلوي