

BASSEL ATALLAH

MOUHAYA LEARNS TO SKATE

IT WAS DIFFICULT TO LET GO, so Mouhaya didn't. She kept everything the way it was. Even when the television broke down, she replaced it with another of the exact same model, purchased from the same electronics store in Marché Central. She even hoped to find the same salesman who had sold them the television four years before. She remembered him well, short and thin with a thick moustache. He had thought that Mouhaya and Fadi were Greeks, and when they told him they were Syrians, he asked if Syria was in Asia or Africa. She found him still working in the store, and he was able to find the television model Mouhaya wanted from the store's warehouse. This time, he asked Mouhaya if she was Italian. When she told him she was Syrian, he asked if Syria was somewhere in Eastern Europe.

Her daily routine didn't change. Wake up at seven, breakfast of *zaatar* and cheese on toast while listening to Fairuz, a sandwich and fruit for lunch at noon, and a light meal at seven while listening to Radio-Canada to improve her French, followed by either a hockey game or whatever other television show was playing to improve her English.

At nine o'clock she'd sit in the living room with her eyes closed and imagine that Fadi was playing the piano. Fadi used to play the same set every evening, "Fur Elise," "Marche Tourqe," "Comparsita," "Hungarian Dance," and "Blue Danube." Mouhaya would play the piano pieces in her mind. Then her day would be complete.

Mouhaya and Fadi were engaged a week after they met. Six months later, they were married. During those months they had a few phone conversations and exchanged a couple of letters. Their correspondences were always brief, courteous, polite, both doing what they considered to be their duties as fiancés before they married and Mouhaya joined Fadi in Canada. There would be plenty of time to get to know him then, her parents told her, a lifetime in fact.

When her parents had announced that a young man from a good family was visiting the next afternoon to meet her, she said, "Please not another one." He was the third young man that summer. The first was a physician from Beirut. He visited once and didn't call again. The second was an engineer who lived in Dubai. He did call again, but Mouhaya wasn't interested. Both spoke solely about their jobs, their income, and the lifestyle they would provide Mouhaya after marriage. Her parents thought either one would make a fine husband. They were bothered when the physician didn't call and when Mouhaya refused to talk to the engineer.

Fadi was still a student completing his doctorate in physics at McGill University when he came to meet Mouhaya. After he left, Mouhaya overheard her parents talk about him. They didn't like it that he was still in school, that his income must be limited, that he lived in Montreal. Even though he assured them that he was planning on returning to Damascus after completing his studies, it still meant that Mouhaya would be very far away from home for a few years, maybe more. If she married the physician from Beirut or the engineer from Dubai, she wouldn't be so far and they could go visit whenever they missed her. After hearing this, Mouhaya decided that if Fadi proposed she would accept.

They married in December and moved to Montreal the following day. There was a snowstorm when they landed. During the cab ride to Fadi's apartment, Mouhaya couldn't make out anything from the window. It took almost an hour for them to arrive. Fadi told her that on any other day it would take less than twenty minutes.

Fadi was living in a small apartment downtown with one bedroom, a living room and a kitchen. He told Mouhaya that once the lease ended in June they'd move to a larger place. Mouhaya asked what was wrong with the lights, why the apartment was so dim. Fadi said that most downtown apartments were this way.

"How are your neighbours?" Mouhaya asked.

"I don't know," Fadi said. "Most are students, like me."

"Are there any Syrian families in this building?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

Mouhaya didn't sleep that night. Jet lag or insomnia, she didn't know. She looked at Fadi sleeping next to her in bed. She listened to the snowstorm outside. She wondered what she was doing here.

Fadi went to university the next day. Mouhaya walked around the apartment, from the bedroom to the kitchen to the living room, going in

circles, thinking how her parents' living room in Damascus was bigger than this entire apartment. She tried to find more light switches to turn on, then remembered what Fadi had said.

It was still snowing hard outside, and she still couldn't make out anything from the window. She was yet to discover what Montreal looked like. Fadi said she shouldn't go out before they bought her good snow boots and a better jacket than the one she brought with her from Damascus. Looking out the window, Mouhaya didn't want to go out. She wouldn't know where to go. She turned on the television and flipped through the channels. She counted thirty-two, most French, some English. She thought about the Arabic shows her parents must be watching now in Damascus.

It didn't snow the next day. Fadi took Mouhaya to The Bay and bought her boots and a winter coat. They tried walking home but Mouhaya said it was far too cold for her, so they took a cab. "It never gets this cold in Damascus," Mouhaya said. "How do you get used to it?"

"You don't get used to it," Fadi said. "You just accept it."

He took her to the grocery store the next day. Mouhaya told him that her family had been buying meat from the same butcher and fruit from the same vendor for over twenty years. "Do you trust the meat in this store?" she said.

"Of course," Fadi said. "It wouldn't be on sale if it wasn't good quality."

She returned to the grocery store on her own the morning of Christmas Eve and bought ingredients to make a cinnamon cake. She worked in the kitchen as Fadi studied in the living room. When Mouhaya took the cake out of the oven, Fadi smelled it and said he was allergic to cinnamon.

Mouhaya began to cry. "How was I supposed to know that?" she said.

"It's okay," Fadi said. "No harm done."

"I don't even know your allergies," she said. "And we're married."

"Please stop crying," Fadi said. "It's Christmas."

"I'll throw the cake in the garbage," Mouhaya said. "No one will eat it now."

"Please don't," Fadi said. "And please stop crying."

Mouhaya didn't stop crying. She told Fadi that tonight her parents would be having a big Christmas party as they did each year, and her uncles and aunts and cousins would be there, all of them together while she was here in Montreal on her own. No one would visit and wish her a Merry Christmas tomorrow, and she had no one to visit. It was all her fault, she said, her parents didn't want her to move to a country so far away, but she was tired

of her parents interfering so much with her life that she was willing to leave Damascus just to be far away from them. All she wanted now was to be close to them again, and not in this strange country where the only person she knew was Fadi. And she didn't even know that he was allergic to cinnamon. Each day as Fadi was at work and she was stuck alone in this small, dim, cold apartment, she thought about the mistake she had made.

Fadi listened to all this. He didn't say anything.

It was the last Saturday of January. Fadi said it was warm outside, and maybe they should take advantage and go for a walk.

"Walk where?" Mouhaya said.

"Just around," Fadi said.

They went out and Fadi said, "Let's head east." They walked on Sherbrooke and later stopped outside a building on the corner of Sherbrooke and St. Urbain. "I lived in this building when I first came to Montreal," Fadi said. "I had a small one-room apartment. There wasn't even space for a dining-room table. I had all my meals on my desk. I was there for one year. During the entire winter, the heater wasn't working properly. Every day I complained to my landlord, and every time he told me he'd fix it tomorrow."

They walked another block and Fadi pointed to a convenience store. "For the first few months I bought all my groceries here," he said. "I then discovered the grocery store just around the corner and how prices there are so much better."

They continued walking, and Fadi told her of a movie theatre on St. Catherine that he frequented during his first year in the city, when he didn't know anyone and had little to do when he wasn't working. He'd just go the theatre and select a random movie to watch. "That's the first thing I grew to like about Montreal," Fadi said. "In Damascus I can't go to the cinema on my own. I'm bound to run into people I know, and they're bound to start gossiping about why I was alone in the movies, if it's because I have no friends, if it's because I was supposed to be with a date who didn't show up. Over here I go to the movies on my own and no one will care."

They eventually reached Parc Lafontaine. "I haven't been here for a while," Fadi said. "I used to come here a lot during my first year. Always on my own." They entered the park and Fadi took her to the outdoor skating rink. "I used to often stand here and watch people skate. Each day they play different music around the rink. Today is Saturday, so they're playing disco music. On Friday they play rock 'n' roll. On Sunday they play classical music."

“Did you ever try skating?” Mouhaya asked.

“No,” Fadi said. “I don’t know how. I can learn, but I didn’t want to learn by myself. I think it’s more fun to learn with someone else.”

“I’m with you now,” Mouhaya said. “Let’s try skating together.”

They inquired about renting skates, then took over then minutes to put them on. They slowly made their way from the rental office to the rink, walking on their skates. They stood near the edge of the ice, not sure how to begin. Fadi tried first, looking at how the other skaters were moving their legs and body. He tried imitating them and fell right away, then stood up and walked back to Mouhaya. He tried for over thirty minutes as Mouhaya watched. Then they decided it was enough for one day, but they’d definitely be coming back here again.

Mouhaya would later consider that afternoon to be the moment when their marriage truly began, when she decided to embrace the life she could have with Fadi in the new city. The next weekend, she told Fadi she wanted go watch a movie at the same theatre he used to go to during his first year in this city. “You won’t be alone this time,” she said. When they returned home, they turned on the TV. There was a hockey game on. Fadi told Mouhaya that hockey was very popular here, that he had always heard people talk about it but he was yet to watch a game. “If it’s popular here, let’s try watching it,” Mouhaya said. They watched the game while trying to understand the rules.

“I’ll ask people at school tomorrow,” Fadi said. “They’ll explain it to me.”

“No,” Mouhaya said. “We’ll try to figure it out by ourselves.”

They explored the city together during the spring. Even though Fadi had lived here for three years, he told Mouhaya that with her he felt he was discovering it for the first time. They spoke only Arabic with each other, but Mouhaya said she wanted to improve her French and English. So she listened to the radio during the day when Fadi was at work. In the evenings they watched television together with the closed-captioning on so that Mouhaya could follow. They often watched hockey games, still trying to understand the rules, sometimes making up their own in order to follow the game and make sense of it.

The following summer they moved to a larger apartment in ville St. Laurent, where Fadi heard they’d find a large Syrian population. Fadi purchased a car, and Mouhaya began preparing for her driving test. Late in the summer Fadi found an ad in the laundry room, saying that someone in the building was selling a piano for an affordable price. Fadi bought it. Not

having played for many years, he struggled before he was able to remember the five pieces that became the set he played for Mouhaya every evening.

Through their neighbours they met more Syrian families in the city and soon Mouhaya and Fadi had a large circle of friends. Together they shared the experiences of their first few months in Montreal and how difficult it had been for all of them before they settled and built their homes away from home. On Christmas Eve Mouhaya and Fadi hosted a party in their apartment. Mouhaya found it hard to believe that it was only a year ago that she and Fadi had celebrated Christmas under very different circumstances.

Fadi was close to completing his doctorate. He told Mouhaya that he could be offered a limited-term position at university, and that would mean staying in Montreal for a few more years. Mouhaya said she was ready for that. They began thinking about having a baby sometime in the next two years. They would give the baby a name that could be easily pronounced in English, French and Arabic. They would teach the child Arabic and make him or her familiar with their Syrian roots but they'd also want the child to play hockey, and do the things Montreal kids did. They had an extra room in their apartment that they had turned into a guest room when Fadi's brother visited last summer, and they could easily turn that into a children's room when the time came.

It seemed to Mouhaya that every day, every month, and every year was better than the previous one. But she always considered the afternoon when they tried skating in Parc LaFontaine to be of great importance. Each winter during the last Saturday of January, Mouhaya and Fadi went to Parc LaFontaine and rented skates. Mouhaya would stand by the edge watching Fadi try to imitate the skaters around them. They would laugh about it on the way to the park and on their way back home, predicting that the day would come when Fadi would finally learn how to skate properly, then he would teach Mouhaya and they'd skate together.

Mouhaya had marked on her calendar all the notable days of their first year together. February 5: they went to watch a movie for the first time together, May 10: they found their new apartment. June 23: they purchased furniture from The Bay. July 3: they moved to their new apartment. August 20: Fadi purchased his piano. Each year, Mouhaya reminded Fadi of those dates and said that they should have an anniversary for all the days that were important for the life they built together.

There were other dates Mouhaya would remember.

On September 18, Fadi complained about stomach problems. Mouhaya told him to take the next day off. On September 20, Fadi went to work. Mouhaya received a phone call at noon. The speaker said she was calling from the hospital. She talked very fast. Mouhaya only got two words: Fadi and hospital. "I don't understand," Mouhaya said. The speaker on the phone still spoke fast. "I don't understand," Mouhaya said. "Do you speak Arabic? Is there anyone there who speaks Arabic?" The speaker spoke again, and this time Mouhaya got two more words: heart attack. "Please, is there anyone who speaks Arabic?" she said.

Mouhaya hung up and went next door to her neighbour Salwa. "The hospital called me and I can't understand anything," Mouhaya said. Her hands were shaking.

They went back to Mouhaya's apartment. The phone was ringing. Salwa picked it up this time. She listened carefully while Mouhaya stood watching, her whole body shaking. Salwa hung up then quickly began calling their neighbours, asking them to come over right away.

Her parents wanted her to return to Damascus. Mouhaya refused.

Every day she looked in her calendar and remembered what she and Fadi had done together on this day during their four years together. On the last Saturday of January, she went to Parc Lafontaine and watched the skaters. She looked at the spot where she used to stand as Fadi tried to skate. She rented a pair of skates, put them on, and stood in that spot as she listened to the disco music, remembering how Fadi was supposed to teach her how to skate after he figured it out himself. She swore that she would come here every year.

On February 5, she went to the movie theatre. On June 23, she went to The Bay and walked around the furniture store, looking at the items that she and Fadi had considered purchasing. On August 20 she looked at the ads posted in her building's laundry room.

Her parents sent her money to help her survive. It wasn't enough to cover rent and food, but she didn't want them to send her more. She knew she had to find another source of income, but she had never worked a day in her life and didn't even know how to begin looking.

Salwa suggested that Mouhaya take in a boarder. Mouhaya rejected the idea. No stranger was coming to live in the home she and Fadi had built for themselves. "It's no stranger," Salwa said. "My cousin's son Phillip is

coming to Montreal for university and he's looking for a place to stay. All you need is to give him your guest room to sleep in. He'll pay part of your rent. He won't bother you one bit."

Mouhaya considered it carefully. The guest room had no memories for Mouhaya. It had no importance in the life she had shared with Fadi. Salwa's cousin's son wouldn't be trespassing on anything important.

Phillip Brady arrived late in August. Salwa brought him over to Mouhaya's apartment.

"How do you do?" Mouhaya asked in Arabic.

"He doesn't speak Arabic," Salwa said.

"Oh," Mouhaya said. "French?"

"A bit," Phillip said.

"I speak a bit of English," Mouhaya said, wishing now that she didn't speak any at all.

Mouhaya assumed that Salwa had told Phillip that he was supposed to stay out of her way, because that was exactly what he did. He prepared breakfast in the kitchen from groceries that he purchased, then left for school and didn't return until late in the evening. He stayed in his room studying until he went to bed. He often had dinner with Salwa and her family. Sometimes he tried starting conversations with Mouhaya. When he spoke English she said she didn't understand, even when she did. When he spoke French she responded as curtly as she could. To her, he was only a tenant, paying rent to help her.

The semester passed and Phillip returned to Toronto for Christmas. Salwa came over one afternoon and told Mouhaya that there was one thing Phillip wanted from Mouhaya but was too shy to ask. "Phillip plays the piano," Salwa said. "And he's wondering if he could use yours. He said it will help him relax after a long day of school."

"It's not my piano," Salwa said. "It's Fadi's."

"Phillip promises that he'll take good care of it."

Mouhaya thought about it for two days, then told Salwa, "He can only play the piano when I'm not home."

Salwa explained the deal to Phillip when he returned in January. On weekend afternoons Mouhaya would tell Phillip that she was going out for groceries and would be back in an hour. He understood that he would be able to play the piano only while Mouhaya was out, but he should stop once she returned.

One time Mouhaya returned home earlier than expected. Before she opened the apartment door, she heard the music. She was about to barge inside and ask Phillip to stop immediately, then realized that he was playing “Fur Elise”, something Fadi used to play. She let go of the door handle and stood outside the apartment. She closed her eyes and remembered how Fadi had played that piece for her.

That evening, Mouhaya knocked on Phillip’s door and asked if he could play the “Fur Elise” now. She sat in the living room and closed her eyes while Phillip played. She continued sitting with her eyes closed long after he finished.

The next day, when Phillip returned from school late in the evening, Mouhaya handed him a list of the five pieces that Fadi had always played.

“Do you know these?” she asked. Phillip looked at the list and said yes. “Do you want me to play them for you now?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “At nine o’clock.”

“It’s almost ten,” Phillip said.

“Nine o’clock tomorrow evening,” Mouhaya said.

Mouhaya was in the living room the next evening, waiting for Phillip to arrive. She didn’t greet him when he entered the door. She just waited for him to go to his room and come back out at nine.

“Please play them in the order I have listed,” she said.

Phillip did. Mouhaya closed her eyes and listened. “Please play them again tomorrow evening,” she said after he was done.

It became part of Mouhaya’s routine. Instead of imagining Fadi’s music, she heard it through Phillip. A thought then struck her: what if Phillip decided to leave and live elsewhere? She had to give him more incentive to continue living with her. She couldn’t lower the rent she charged him; she needed the money. Instead she began cooking for him. She cooked in the morning and gave him food to take to school, and had a hot meal ready when he arrived in the evening. It broke her routine, but she was willing to do that if it meant being able to listen to Fadi’s piano in the evening.

Another thought then struck her: what if Phillip was bothered by how she treated him as a tenant, never having any conversation? What if he decided to leave because of that?

The next evening she prepared his meal and sat down with him for dinner. She asked him about his studies, what courses he was taking, how he found the city. She began having conversations with him every evening, each of them mixing English and French to better understand each other.

Another routine had been changed, but Mouhaya was fine with it as long as Phillip played Fadi's pieces on the piano after dinner.

She asked him about his family, how long his parents had lived in Toronto. He said both his parents spoke fluent Arabic but decided not to teach the language to their children because they didn't see the need for it. They were never planning on returning to Syria, not even for a visit. He told Mouhaya how his father even changed his family name from Barady to Brady to make it sound more English. He said that he sometimes wished he did speak Arabic, and he'd be very interested in visiting Syria in the future.

She asked him about his favourite meals. He said that his mother didn't cook Arabic food often, but when she did he always enjoyed it, particularly *Mlookieh* and *Mjadara*. Mouhaya prepared both dishes that week. While he was studying in his room at night she prepared tea for him. She told him to let her know if he needed anything.

One time when Mouhaya was returning home, again before opening the apartment door she heard Phillip playing piano inside. It wasn't one of Fadi's five pieces. She entered, and Phillip stopped right away. He apologized and said he hadn't expected Mouhaya to come back until later.

Of course, Mouhaya later thought. Phillip must be tired of playing the same five pieces. He was a talented pianist. She told him he could play other pieces if he wanted, even when she was in the apartment, as long as he continued playing Fadi's set in the evening.

Phillip returned to Toronto for the summer. Mouhaya was back living alone, back to her former routine. She missed Phillip. She missed their conversations during dinner. She missed listening to him play Fadi's set in the evening. She missed listening to him play other piano pieces.

Phillip came back in September. He had a busy semester and often stayed at school late. Mouhaya always had a hot meal ready for him when he arrived. When they had dinner together, he asked if she could teach him some Arabic. Mouhaya said she'd be glad to do so. She started by teaching him the vocabulary of house items: *takht* means bed, *matbakh* means kitchen, *kirsi* means chair. Then she taught him greetings: *sabah el-kheir* means good morning, *massa el-kheir* means good evening, *keefak* means how are you, *ana mneeh* means I'm fine.

They had long conversations during their dinners. Phillip spoke to her about how odd he had always felt knowing that he was a Syrian who wasn't a Syrian, that there was nothing Syrian about him, not even his family name. Sometimes he felt like an outsider in his own home when his parents spoke

Arabic to each other and he didn't understand a word. His parents thought they were doing him a favour, that it was important to break from the past especially when living in a new country. Phillip thought there was a big difference between breaking from the past and losing it altogether.

Mouhaya spoke to him about her life back in Damascus, how sheltered she had always been, so pampered and spoiled by her parents that she wanted to break from that by coming to Canada. But she found that she couldn't, and Fadi then sheltered and took care of her. When he died, she sheltered herself by continuing the routine she had established with him and spending all her time remembering Fadi and thinking about the plans they had made for their future. It was why she didn't return to Damascus after he died. All her memories with Fadi took place in Montreal, not in Damascus where they were strangers to each other.

Phillip asked her questions about Damascus. She showed him pictures of her family, told him about the city, the customs, the traditions. He'd visit Damascus one day, he said, and he would remember all the conversations he'd had with Mouhaya.

One evening Phillip rushed out of his room at ten o'clock and apologized to Mouhaya for not playing the usual piano set at nine. It had completely slipped his mind. Mouhaya hadn't even noticed.

In December Phillip announced to Mouhaya that he wouldn't be renting the room next semester. He and two of his classmates had found a large apartment next to the campus and were planning on moving in together.

"If it's because of the rent I charge you, I'll lower it," Mouhaya said. She was prepared to allow Phillip to stay for free. Phillip told her it had nothing to do with how much she charged. He just didn't want to commute to school anymore; it would be much more convenient for him to live closer to campus. "I will come and visit you regularly," he said. "I promise."

Mouhaya felt his absence from the day he left. Just as it was during the summer, she couldn't handle her old routine anymore. She missed the new routine she had established with Phillip: their conversations, cooking his meals, teaching him Arabic, listening to his music.

She didn't want to continue missing that routine the way she had missed her life with Fadi.

She went to the skating rink in Parc Lafontaine on the Friday rather than the Saturday, in mid-December rather than the last weekend of January. There was rock music playing rather than disco.

She stood outside the rink listening to the rock music. She entered the rink and stood by the edge as she usually did. Then for the first time, she walked slowly, step by step, until she found herself in the middle of the rink. She turned her head and looked at the edge of the rink where she and Fadi stood five years ago.

She began skating, falling, then getting up again and trying, falling, getting up again and trying. She looked at the people skating around her and tried to learn from their moves, fell and tried again. An hour passed, then two hours as Mouhaya kept trying to skate, and she did not plan on leaving anytime soon.