

Senior Study – Fall 2020

Confessions of a Wallflower:

An Autobiographical and Theoretical Account of Trauma Recovery and Sibling Suicide

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Abir Barakat', is placed on a light blue rectangular background.

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### **Abstract**

This study examines a coming-of-age story relaying a traumatic incident that occurred in the author's life. The purpose of the study is to answer three research questions pertaining to young adults who have experienced sibling suicide, a topic elided in creative and critical discussions in the Lebanese literary corpus. First, this study illustrates how writing a autobiographical novella can help a young adult process the resulting shock of sibling suicide. Second, the study examines some aspects of constructing or negotiating a home and explores how revisiting trauma in a past home in a autobiographical novella helps create and accept a revisionist post-traumatic one. Finally, the writing-as-research addresses the question of how a young adult can quell his or her doubts and gain enough confidence to write about sibling suicide. Methodologically, these questions are answered through the autobiographical novella itself and through its concomitant thematic analysis that makes reference to readings about women, grief, and home by Roberta Rubenstein, as well as readings about post-traumatic growth by Davis and McKearney, among others. This study finds that autobiographical writing about sibling suicide encourages self-regulation and growth. Second, this research reveals that the notion of a home materializes upon allowing oneself to engage with the memories of a sibling's suicide, which allows the creation of a space in which one has more agency and power. Finally, the study shows that gaining confidence to write about sibling suicide must come from the traumatized person after the author tries to find meaning in the incident in order to heal.

## The Creative Component

### Confessions of a Wallflower

#### Part 1

##### *Chapter 1 – About Home*

Life always found a way to make her miserable, to discard all she managed to accomplish so far and to remind her of her failures. She wasn't angry. She was used to it. She couldn't remember a time when Misfortune was not her best friend.

When asked of their earliest memories, most people would recount the good times of their childhood. The first time they built a snowman with mom and dad, for example, or the first time they threw a ball and the family dog fetched it. Something sweet, maybe something funny, but something that had truly happened, something that was real.

On the other hand, when people asked her of her earliest memory, she always had to pause to think of which lie to tell. Eventually, she'd spew off one of those generic, happy memories that everyone seemed to share and which she learnt by heart. No one would want to know that her earliest memory was of her arm being pulled out of its socket.

It was a simple event involving a two-year-old, who refused to get out of the building's elevator, and that two-year-old's father, fed up with trying to convince her to get into the house. Finally, in a split second decision, the man resorted to pulling the girl out, thereby dislocating her arm. Looking back on it now, she knew that she was being needlessly stubborn, though she could not remember why.

Her stubbornness reared its head in repeatedly throughout her life, often causing her more trouble than it was worth. She remembered that happening prominently in third grade as her English teacher spoke.

“I want you all to start writing diaries,” the teacher said. “Every day when you go back home, sit down with your diary. Think of your diary as a friend and tell it all you’ve gone through. By the end of the year, you would have written a lot. I want you to bring them to class then. I’ll read them. Whoever writes the best entries wins!”

The girl wasn’t sure about this whole diary thing. She didn’t do much at home. Her entries would all be the same, and it’d be boring to write and read. She looked at her closest friend, Sara, but she saw that what she was feeling was not mirrored in her friend’s eager, bright face.

Despite her misgivings, the girl wanted to win, but without interesting things to write about, how could she? Should she make things up? Would that count as lying? Her mom taught her not to lie. At the same time, she did not want to lose, especially not to *him*... Adam.

It was always a competition between her and Adam. Who got the highest grade on the Math test? She did, but Adam was only one point away. Who did better on the last Science test? Adam did, but she only needed two points to outdo him.

The competition was fun. She loved it, but she hated losing because of one thing. Whenever Adam managed to do better than she did, he always quickly moved his hands in front of his face consecutively, which she didn’t get. She hated not understanding something, yet she didn’t want to ask. That would be admitting that Adam knew something she didn’t know right to his face.

She was not going to lose.

She wrote in her diary diligently, honestly. Her heart was burning with the passion of writing, or maybe she made it so, just for a better chance at winning. Every day, she started with the same words. Dear diary, dear diary, dear diary... It was a call, a plea. Maybe if she wrote

'dear' enough times, her diary would take pity on her and become something beautiful on its own, even though she wrote roughly the same thing on every new page.

As the end of the year finally came around and the girl shuffled through her diary one last time, she noticed that she skipped a few days. That was when she remembered. When she had too much fun, when she and her family went on an outing, the girl got back home and slept, never remembering the pink diary and never writing down what happened that day. It would be considered lying if she wrote what happened yesterday instead of today, wouldn't it? If she were to win, she'd do it right, and she'd be honest the whole way.

She handed her diary in and waited with baited breath for her teacher to finish reading through the class's entries. It took her days, but eventually, the moment came.

"Alright, class. Settle down!" The teacher said with a smile on her face, "Now, I'm sure that you're all excited. You all did a wonderful job!"

The class watched the teacher with varying levels of interest. The girl knew that there were four or five people, who simply did not care about this at all, and that made her inexplicably frustrated.

"But, there can only be one winner... and that person is..." The teacher paused, looked at all their faces, "Adam!"

With that one word, the girl felt her heart deflate. Adam did the thing again, but this time, the girl knew what it was. She looked it up. It was a wrestling thing, something that a person called John Cena did. She thought it was something he did to belittle his enemies.

She hated it.

She also loathed being so stubborn and holding out hope. Otherwise, she probably wouldn't feel disappointment coursing through her veins, and maybe her blood wouldn't feel as cold as ice.

She couldn't even pretend to be happy.

No matter. Even though she lost this time, there was always next time. She'd show Adam. She'd show him.

Except she would never get the chance. That marked her final year in that school. That was her last year in that country, in UAE. Her family decided to move back home to Lebanon. It was funny, with the choice of words. The girl could only think that she was moving away from her home.

She went to school, and she made friends. Now, she had to say goodbye and start over somewhere else.

She did not know what to expect or how to react. Should she protest? Should she be stubborn? Was it possible that if she were to throw a tantrum enough times, she'd get to stay home?

She looked at her younger brother for inspiration, but he was just as lost as she was. The girl thought that he looked lost because she was lost. He always liked to hang around her, even at school. He had a few friends, but he stayed with her and Sara during breaks.

Neither of them minded. If anything, the girl loved being in charge and knowing that that was one thing she could always count on. No matter what, she knew there was someone who looked up to her; a person she should be strong for.

She smiled reassuringly, and her brother smiled back.

Sara came to say goodbye. She promised to keep in touch, and the girl echoed that promise. Before she left, before the girl saw her friend for what was likely the last time, Sara gave her a green teddy bear. It was new, and it smelled nice.

The girl looked at the bear with determination as they drove to the airport. It was a challenge, a competition. The girl would see it through, and she'd win.

This time for sure.

*Chapter 2 – About Promises*

She lost count of how many times she promised herself something only to break that promise.

Once in Lebanon, the girl spent a year in one school then she was out and had to start over in yet a new one.

She was sick of making friends then letting them go, only to start the whole process again. She promised herself it would be the last time. Deep down, she didn't believe in her vows anymore.

Instead of conquering the challenge of starting over, she found herself retreating. The challenge was dominating her, and she didn't have it in her to fight back any longer.

Gone was the desire to prove herself. How could she when Adam was gone? Whom would she prove herself against? No one was as worthy of a rival as Adam was. She found herself relating more and more to the four or five people who didn't care about the diary competition that their teacher issued what seemed like decades ago. The girl didn't like drawing attention to herself anymore, not for anything. Everyone else could win whatever they wanted to win, and the girl would be happy to not participate in any competition at all.

Gone was her closest friend, Sara. They kept in touch for quite some time. Then, their messages slowly started losing... something. An important component that the girl noticed but could not name. Gradually, the messages got shorter and shorter then disappeared completely. The girl saw Sara's pictures online from time to time. It didn't take her long to figure out that she had been replaced.

The girl found solace in her younger brother. He knew what she was feeling. He knew what she going through. It was something the two agreed on without ever speaking. They both knew that the other would be there, ready to catch each other when they fell.

The girl had to catch her brother far more times than either of them cared to admit. He was smart but too much of a pacifist. He'd let others tease him without ever fighting back.

Nevertheless, the girl could see how much people's words affected him, even though everyone else seemed oblivious to it. Though she promised herself that she wouldn't draw attention to herself anymore, the girl could not stand by and watch as her brother got bullied.

The first time it happened, they were going back home on the bus after the end of another school day. It was crowded noisy, as usual. The girl and her brother sat silently, waiting to get home.

"You two never talk," the oldest boy on the bus, Chadi, said, wiggling his brows.

"Come on. Let's get to know you better. What're your names?" Lamia, a girl Chadi's age and one who always hung out with him, asked.

The girl replied, giving only their names. Chadi and Lamia glanced at each other then back at the siblings.

"Is that a real name?" Chadi asked, looking at her brother, "First time I've heard it."

The girl didn't get the big idea. Her brother's name was a composite one.

"Hey, everyone!" All the other kids on the bus quieted down to listen to Chadi.

"This kid's name is... Let's all say it together so that we won't forget it," Chadi said.

No one on the bus dared defy him. The bus erupted into a chant as everyone continuously called her brother's name. There were fits of giggles and laughter all around. The girl could see that her brother was getting uncomfortable. The girl's skin was crawling.

"What's the matter? If you want us to stop, you should just say so," Chadi taunted.

Her brother said nothing.

The girl's blood boiled, "Just... Shut up. SHUT UP!" she yelled.

Her brother put a hand on her arm and stared at her. If a needle were to have dropped in that bus right then, everyone would have been able to hear it.

“What? You think you’re being cool doing stuff like that? Well, I’ve got news for you. You’re being stupid. So stop it.” The girl felt like a parent telling a child off for misbehaving. In Chadi’s eyes, she could see only surprise.

“Why are you yelling at me? I’m not the only one who was doing it…” Chadi said, trying to sound accusatory and intimidating, but it only sounded like a whine to the girl’s ears.

She could have punched Chadi right in the nose or maybe kicked him where she knew it’d hurt, but she was too well-behaved to do it. She glared at him until he looked away. No one dared say anything until she and her brother got off the bus.

From then on, yelling at other students on her brother’s behalf was the only time that her quiet nature slipped. The girl imagined that people at school called her crazy, and, in fact, she heard them say so a few times. It was a small price to pay for breaking a promise to herself. After all, she had to draw attention to herself for her brother’s sake, despite her initial vow. It wasn’t always bad to do break such promises, she told herself.

*Chapter 3 – About Enemies*

She hated Ali. He was her brother's friend, the first to come over to hang out after school, and she hated him.

There were pieces of white cotton laying innocently on the ground. The green teddy bear, the one her childhood friend, Sara, gave her all these years ago, had a brand new tear on the back of its neck and was a little less full. Po held the bear and watched droplets of water trickle onto the floor.

“I-I tried to stop him...” Her brother murmured.

Ali was a force of nature. She gathered that much ever since she first saw him. Tell him not to do something, and he'd do it even more determinedly and more viciously than if he were told nothing.

Still, he had no business touching her stuff, cutting her bear's neck and submerging it in water.

Despite that, Po couldn't bring herself to get visibly angry. She couldn't show her brother how much she hated his new friend.

Ali came over many times after that. Every time, one of her brother's toys went inexplicably missing. When asked, he'd say that he let Ali borrow them, but none of those toys were ever seen again.

“You know he's a liar,” Po said one day when she and her brother were alone.

He looked away for a moment and bit his bottom lip, “He's my friend.”

She wanted to tell him that he wasn't a good friend and that he should consider looking for a real one. Her mouth opened, but her voice refused to cooperate.

It was her fault that her brother had to look for someone new to hang out with, someone who was not her. They had moved to a new school yet again this year. At their new school, she went and made good friends, ones she sat with at recess, and ones who would not understand if her brother stayed with them. They were not Sara.

“Maybe you can teach him to be a better friend. Be a good role model...” Po said with a smile.

Ali never changed, and his lies grew more outlandish, his actions more questionable. Until, one day, she heard nothing more of Ali. Her brother now spoke of Hamza.

The first time Hamza came over, Po noticed a few changes at home. The sliding door that had lost its handle in their room inexplicably gained a new one. It stopped creaking as much too. The tension that always threatened to overwhelm everyone whenever Ali came over was replaced with ease. Hamza and her brother played video games and laughed all day.

Po recognized the feeling that coursed through her veins every time Hamza came over. It was the same one she felt whenever Adam used to do his stupid John Cena thing to belittle her. It was ugly, and she hated herself for it, but she couldn't help it.

She was no longer her brother's only friend, and he no longer looked at her with the same devoted eyes of their childhood. She didn't have to be strong for anyone but herself anymore.

One day, after Hamza had left, Po noticed a change in her green teddy bear. Its neck was all patched up. Due to the cotton loss it had suffered, the teddy bear's neck went farther back than before, and it looked scrunched up. Still, it looked far better than it did before.

“Who fixed it?” Po asked her brother.

“Hamza suggested it, and Dad and I thought it was a good idea.”

Even with that knowledge, Po found it difficult to like Hamza as her brother slipped into a long speech about how great a person and how amazing a friend Hamza was.

*Chapter 4 – About Reality*

Po finally graduated from school. She was now officially a Computer Engineering student. It was not her first choice. In fact, it was not her choice at all. Her parents made it quite clear that majoring in English, as she wanted, would never get her enough money to survive, and that Computer Engineering was all the rage.

She didn't have it in her to argue anymore, not when her decision was so vehemently opposed by everyone around her. She put up with it as she always did.

In the blink of an eye, two years passed, and the girl found herself in her university's other campus to continue her studies. She felt her skin itch and her face flush every time she went to class, but she forced herself to live with her parents' choice.

It was there, in Byblos, where everything changed.

She was in a lab class, getting ready to carry out a new experiment. Her cousin, Jad, who went to the same campus, called her once, twice, thrice. Po hung up on him every time, and the instructor eventually took her phone, as it was distracting her too much, until the end of the session.

When Po had her phone back, she found that Jad had not given up. He had called her many more times. She finally called him back.

"Hey. What's up?" she asked.

"Po. Where are you? Hurry up. I'm waiting for you in front of the dorm."

"What...? Why?" Po questioned, but beeps were her only reply as Jad hung up.

Po headed down from the labs' building all the way to the dorm, where she found Jad waiting by his car.

“We’re going to Beirut. Come on,” Jad said.

Po blinked twice. There was something not right about him, “Do I need to get my stuff?” she asked.

Jad opened the car’s trunk, where her bag and most of her stuff were. “Is that everything?”

The two climbed into the car, where the girl tried to get anything out of Jad. However, every time she spoke, Jad’s answer remained the same.

“You’ll find out when we get home.” He put Qur’an verses through the car’s speaker.

Po unlocked her phone, trying to get her mind distracted by something.

There, she found a few messages. One in particular stood out: a voice note from one of her other cousins. She swallowed in an attempt to wet her suddenly dry throat. Her heart pounded in her chest to the extent that she could barely hear the Qur’an over it.

She glanced at Jad, who focused on the road and pretended not to notice her stare. Well... if he wasn’t going to tell her what was going on, maybe this voice note would. Po refused to remain ignorant for the entire ride down to Beirut.

She played it and put the phone close to her ear. Instantly, her cousin’s voice came through, “Look for a suicide note. There’s no way he did it without leaving one behind. I know it’s hard, but that’s your job now. Look for that note.”

Po played it again. She felt her breath get knocked out of her. It was difficult to think. She didn’t understand. She sent a myriad of messages to her cousin. ‘What are you talking about? Please tell me what’s going on. What happened?’

Po saw the check marks go from colorless to blue. Her cousin’s previous voice note disappeared. Po looked at the words dumbly: ‘This message was deleted.’

She heard only white noise. Her brain tried to make sense of anything over it. She tried to think of who could have done something like that.

“What happened? Who died?” Po found herself asking aloud as her vision started to blur. She saw Jad lick his lips and let out a shaky breath, but no answer came.

Po kept thinking about all the possibilities, all the things that could have happened, anything that could explain this. Finding herself lost, she sent a message to her brother. He usually had his phone with him, and his replies were always swift. ‘What’s going on?’ Even minutes later, no answer came from him either.

Only her thoughts kept her company until they made it home. Po noticed the concierge’s wife looking at her. She had a hand over her mouth, and her eyes were shining with what Po identified as pity.

Po took the elevator to her floor, only to find many police officers standing there. Her father was talking to one of them. Po gathered bits and pieces about what was going on.

Her thoughts became sharp. Her throat felt as though she had been screaming for days. Her heart felt like it had shriveled up and died.

No wonder no one wanted to tell her what was going on. She felt the urge to laugh through her nonexistent tears, but she didn’t want to be seen as mad.

Her brother would never again look her in the eyes. She could no longer talk to him. They would never sit and laugh together again. They would not be able to fight and make up in the span of five minutes.

Po could no longer be strong, and yet, tears refused to fall down her face. Somewhere deep down, she expected her brother to come through the doors and laugh at her for falling for his prank. He would reveal that he had talked the family into playing along. He’d say that he

made his friends, the new college ones she knew nothing about, dress up as policemen. Po was willing to believe that lie. She would laugh it off with him.

Yet, even days later, he never came back. It was real. Too real. Po watched helplessly as her world broke into a million pieces.

**Part 2*****Chapter 1 – About Dreams***

Life always managed to remind me of what I could never accomplish. I was not happy, I was not sad. I could not tell whether I was awake or asleep, for the world didn't seem to change either way. However, I could not find it in me to protest or fight back. I could not remember a time when Misfortune was not my best friend.

“Do you still want to study English?” My mother asked a few days after the Incident, “If that's what you want... okay. Change your major. Live your dream.”

The choice of words made my insides turn. I wanted to tell her that it was insensitive to say that to someone who could no longer dream. Nevertheless, by the end of that week, I was no longer a Computer Engineering student.

I forgot what dreams felt like. Did they come with a taste or a smell? Were they black and white or in color? Did they feel as real as the demons running around the room, or were they closer to the ones choking me when I tried to wake up? Did they also scream until their throats were sore? Did they watch me from the edge of my bed as I struggled to clench my fingers, to force my legs to stir?

Every time I woke up in my room, I would find myself surprisingly alone. I knew my living siblings had to go to school and that my parents had to work, but where were the creatures I saw every few minutes before my body could move, before my lungs could draw breath and before my eyes could blink open?

It turned into a game. I wanted to see them, talk to them. Maybe they had seen what happened in this house on that day. I heard them come into my room every day. I felt them caressing my back. I sensed their touch in the shivers running up my spine.

Sometimes, they smirked from a distance, and I could tell because their presence disturbed the air and made it colder, which was a shame because I couldn't move any portion of my body, not even to pull the covers more tightly around me.

Other times, they were on top of me; they put their weights on my neck and screeched into my ears. I was always confused. Why were they screaming? Did their brothers leave them too? Their yells reverberated in my skull. Their words morphed into a long, deep howl. I could not comprehend what they were saying, but I understood their pain. I let them scream, I let them do what I could never do.

The moment my body no longer felt heavy, they dispersed and their screams were cut short, but I knew they'd be back again tomorrow. It was a promise. I knew that some creatures out in the world were better than I was at keeping their word.

Being happy seemed like a daunting task. It was easier to fake it, to smile when asked how things were going. I remembered that time my arm was pulled out of its socket. It was easier to lie when no one knew the truth.

However, it was easy to see that almost everyone knew about the Incident. I could see it in their eyes, and in the way they fidgeted and treaded carefully when I was there. It was clear in how they steered the topic of conversation into trivialities since they did not know how fragile my mind was; they did not know what would set me off or what would break me. I took notice of

the way they tried to make eye contact with me when the word 'suicide' was mentioned in my presence.

They were waiting for the inevitable outburst. They were waiting for tears, and they claimed that tears could help me heal. I didn't know how to reassure them that it would never happen, not in front of them anyway.

Their fears were finally realized when the sound of running water overpowered the soft pitter-patter of my tears. Here, alone, without anyone to see me, not even the demons who watched me wake up every day, my heart threw up the feelings it struggled to keep at bay every day, and my mind spewed the thoughts it had locked up behind a sheen of numbness. My thoughts and emotions flooded my senses, and the tears made them grounded in the present moment, sewed scattered memories together and created a horrendous creature that twisted my present into a horrible imitation of days past.

After that, my eyes always felt dry.

*Chapter 2 – About Friends*

I got lost in the sea of people who whispered about the Incident. I heard them as I walked in the hallways of my university. They didn't know who I was, and so, they kept talking even as I brushed past them on my way to my classes.

The gossip wasn't limited to strangers who knew nothing about my family. The theories and conspiracies kept coming from those whom I considered outsiders and from those I thought were friends and family alike.

With the belief that there ought to be something wrong in my family for my brother to choose to die in this way firmly embedded in their minds, many of my supposed friends pulled away. I knew they didn't want to be associated with someone like me. I couldn't blame them for it. I didn't know what I would do if one of my friends' siblings- No, I couldn't even finish the thought. I would not wish that on anyone, not even my most hated enemies.

I was more surprised when one person, just one, willingly decided to stay by my side. She came every day of the funeral and every day after for weeks, months even. She took me out when she knew I needed it, and she made sure I was never alone. Her name was Hiba; true to her namesake, she was a gift from God.

Her presence became as natural as breathing. I always expected to turn around and find her there. At the same time, and by unspoken word, I would do the same for her. In fact, I had been doing it for years. She always said that I saved her in her moments of need. I just never thought or expected that I would need her there for me in return.

I finally understood what the concept of 'best friends' truly stood for; that spot that was previously (and wrongly) taken by Misfortune.

Hamza kept coming over just as much as he did before. His presence brought pain to me. There would always be someone missing every time I looked at him.

Hamza started doing things, fixing them, perhaps. He never could see something broken and leave it alone. He took my two remaining brothers out to lunch. They went bowling together. He took them to the movies.

Every time, I watched from a distance. I imagined that his hair was a bit shorter, and that his eyes were a bit darker. Sometimes, his glasses disappeared, and his skin tone lightened.

His presence was only less reliable than Hiba's, but only just.

With the two of them around, I felt that the house was a little less empty, and that my smiles were a little less forced.

Despite everything, we were both able to make one friend who would go through hell and back with us, a best friend.

At university, now as an English major, I expected much of the same as when I was still a Computer Engineering student. However, it seemed like the change in major brought a change in the people as well.

They seemed more like people and less like the machines I was learning to program. The strong competition involved in Engineering, the type of competition that reminded me of Adam, was distinctly absent.

Although the concept of competition was still present now as well, it was less of a competition between one another and more of one between the texts' authors and us. Other times, it was an internal competition where we tried to be more creative and more original as we tried to better our former selves.

This new relationship, the one that had competition and yet not, the one where everyone had each other's backs, and the one where each of us challenged him or herself to improve and were encouraged by everyone else... I had a name for it. This was true friendship and camaraderie.

Not only was Misfortune no longer my best friend, but it had disappeared from my friend list entirely.

*Chapter 3 – About Limits*

Ten thousand ideas ran through my head. My thoughts were stuck in an eternal conflict. I wanted to move forward, but I had a million views about how to go about doing that.

It was a small mercy that I was finally an English major, as I wanted. I felt that I had to give back somehow. That way, at least I would feel as though I earned the desirable change. Perhaps I could offer free English classes for the less fortunate.

At the same time, I was hesitant to promise myself anything. I didn't want to break my word, and I had no way to know what the future would hold. What if something happened and I couldn't keep my word? Would I be punished even more severely than I already had been for sticking out when I promised myself that I would keep to the sides? I broke that promise and my brother, the person I stood up for, paid the price... Who would suffer next?

One small relief was the knowledge that breaking promises was not limited to me. The creatures that haunted my sleep no longer showed up every day, despite their previous unspoken vow. Sometimes, they didn't visit me for weeks at a time.

Nevertheless, I was starting to get a new yet familiar feeling. For the first time in a long time, I felt a spark inside of me, the same one I lost back when we first moved to Lebanon.

Sticking to the shadows and keeping away from everyone and everything was not appealing to me anymore. I could only take so much of acting like a wall ornament, one that others would only passingly glance at whenever they happened to come across it, but also one that would be forgotten soon after.

I wanted to stand out. I wanted to get to a new place, a destination I hadn't set in mind yet. Leaving a mark, having people know who I truly was... that never seemed so important before.

I couldn't tell if I should put out my hand and try to grab anything that would get me to those unknown grounds, or if I should wait for the opportunity to come to me somehow.

Was there already a set path that I should follow or was there a road that I should pave? Was there no road at all?

My doubts plagued my mind constantly, not allowing a moment of respite or peace. They hung over me like a dark cloud in my waking hours, and they materialized in my dreams and nightmares alike, blurring the line between my reality and my dreams yet again. The only difference was that, this time, my demonic friends, who used to wait at my bedside or over my body daily, did not visit me at all.

Some days, I was able to talk myself out of thinking about my future. It was too uncertain. Anything could happen at any moment, changing the rules of the game and making every single plan and every single step I tried to take null and void.

Those days, I knew my limits. I could tell exactly how much I could do; those I did just well enough to be acceptable. I also knew what I could never achieve; those I could never bring myself to attempt.

Other days, I talked myself into trying the impossible. I attempted those things I knew were beyond my limits, knowing that I'd fail but wanting to experience it anyway. It wouldn't have been a problem. This way of dealing with things might have even succeeded had my doubts not reared their ugly heads in halfway through any task every time.

My doubts reminded me of my limits and sent me right back to square one. The time I spent on the exciting mountainous roads was at an end, and I hurriedly steered back, trying to find my way back to the already paved road.

It was easy to find the road that everybody used. Its light was visible on even the darkest nights. I knew that it would be harder to tread on the dark, rocky roads. I could not tell which would be better in the end.

My brain told me to keep my limits in mind and not to try to seek that which lay beyond them. It was necessary as to prevent any potential heartbreak.

My heart sang a different song. It tried to convince me that limits were nothing more than concepts that people put on themselves. In reality, there was no such thing. All one had to do was bust through their own illusions.

I still did not know whether my brain or my heart was telling the truth, but I had one thing in mind, one thing that neither could talk me out of: It was time to get everything back together. It was time to shine.

*Chapter 4 – About Hearts*

I wrote about everything and anything. I made up characters and made them live tragedies. I knew what it felt like to be in their shoes, or I thought I did anyway. My characters cried, planned and worked hard. They eventually were not so tragic any longer, and their stories morphed into ones of hope and prosperity.

Then, tragedies were no longer as appealing to me. I wanted something different, but I did not know what it was yet.

In the hopes of figuring it out, I started reimagining life. I wrote about the things that I desired the most. I penned poems and stories alike speaking about the reality of life and how it can be changed into something much more beautiful and something much more precious.

I wrote about Lebanon, hoping that maybe, just maybe I'd like it a bit more if I associated it with a perfect made-up version. Perhaps I would believe my own lie.

As I started writing about Lebanon, the country started to change. It seemed to be fighting back at last. I wanted to believe that Lebanon was trying to prove something to me, though I did not know its goal yet.

The people went down to the streets, singing in unison for revolution. I dared not hope that this place stood a chance at change. I stood by, watching my not-yet-home struggle to become something it wasn't.

Something about the revolution spoke to me directly and resonated deep within my chest. The songs they sung, the words they echoed and the hopes they screamed for... For the first time, Lebanon felt closer to my heart. Therefore, in my writings, I started to focus on the country's strengths. I showed Lebanon that I finally acknowledged it, not knowing that the

jealous Misfortune would turn her head to my country, now that she was not my best friend anymore.

I wrote, 'Lebanon's beauty lies in its nature.' (Then, the fire burned it down. It kept going for days. Its flames rose higher and higher, licking the sky itself in their attempt to reach the sun.)

I wrote, 'Lebanon's people have eyes that sparkle with hopes and dreams for a better tomorrow.' (Then, everyone's eyes went dark with the boom of thunder, which shattered glass and with it everyone's hearts. Debris and bodies, living and dead alike, littered the streets. Lebanon was always one of the best when it came to disasters.)

I wrote, 'Lebanon's residents are looking out to shore, dreaming about restarting their lives anywhere else in the world.' (Then, the borders were closed. The people's eyes focused on the country they were in, yearning for a past that could never be again.)

I stopped writing about Lebanon. I deleted all of my notes about it, hoping that that would save what was left of it. My words were the agents of doom to a country that could take no more.

After that, I no longer wanted to write about anything that was grounded in reality. The future was too uncertain. I had no control over what ended up happening to the subjects of my writings. That was fine if the characters I wrote about existed only in my mind. However, once these terrible events happened to subjects that existed in reality, I would feel directly responsible for their fates.

Except it was difficult to write about something different when all of my feelings were invested in my home's current situation. My writings decreased in quality, and I could see it clearly. I was simply uninterested in the topics I tried to force myself to write about, and I knew

it. I needed to write about what I was truly passionate about, but I did not want to curse the object of my writings, so I refrained.

To stop myself from giving in to my desire to write, which provided the ultimate escape from reality, I turned my attention elsewhere. I started playing video games, watching movies and plays, and listening to music. I prohibited myself from reading for that would remind me of the power of the written word, and it would remind me of what I was missing by keeping all of my thoughts to myself, away from the dangerous whiteness of a blank paper. I was sure my will to keep away from writing would weaken, and I would give in to the urge otherwise.

Most would say that I started wasting my time on useless things. I would mostly agree with that notion. However, it was not quite so, and instead, these ‘useless things’ also had the adverse effect on me. Games, movies and songs... they were all creative works of other people. It awakened the need to show my originality as a writer as well.

Instead of shying away from the idea of writing, I tried to find something that would not suffer the moment I wrote about it. Something I was passionate about, yet not something that could get hurt because of being involved in a work I had written.

Then, it hit me. I thought about writing letters to my brother, ones he would never get the chance to read. However, the words got stuck in my head. Perhaps in an attempt to protect me, my brain refused to think about the issue, and the order to type was never delivered to my fingers.

My doubts got the better of me, and I found myself unconsciously being steered back to what my brain thought was ‘safe’ territory, that same lit, paved road that everyone else took.

However, my doubts no longer had that much power over me. How could they when pictures of perseverance surrounded me?

I saw it in the eyes of people, who kept the past in mind yet focused on tomorrow, vowing never to let the horrors of the past happen again. I caught a glimpse of it in the blue skies of Lebanon, the same sky that was invisible behind a shroud of black smoke only months ago. Despite passing through a lot, and despite witnessing the tragedies of all Lebanese people firsthand, Lebanon continued to stand.

I didn't think it was possible for one to learn from an entire country, and yet... here I was. I knew it was time to remain on the mountainous road, the one that no one ever dared to venture through, the one that my country, my home, knew all too well. It was time to prove that I belonged to this land, and that I was my own person at the same time, one who was not ruled by doubts.

And so, I wrote, 'Life always found a way...'

## **The Critical Apparatus**

### **Introduction**

Light and dark, night and day, good and evil... All of these concepts occur together, incapable of existing without the other. Similarly, it is impossible to live without going through joyful and gloomy incidents alike. Furthermore, one can never know what the 'good' is without first experiencing the 'bad'. However, people find it easier to focus on the negative aspects of life. They become fixated on it, unable to move on, which constantly allows their doubts and past memories to rule their lives. In the autobiographical novella, the life of a girl is told in two parts in terms of a trauma that left its mark on her. The autobiographical novella then highlights the girl's efforts to overcome the shock and continue to live. This study aims to answer three research questions through analyzing the autobiographical novella as well as existing theories about women, grief, home and post-traumatic growth and applying them on aspects of this creative work.

### **Background of Project**

This study is of personal meaning to me, as it tells the story of incidents that truly happened in my life and allows me to understand them. I wanted to express myself by writing all of my thoughts on a blank page in the hopes that that would help me cope with the events I had to go through.

### **Literature Review**

Unfortunately, coming-of-age autobiographical novellas are minimal and almost nonexistent in the area of the study in Lebanese Anglophone writing, where we don't have biographical or fictional writings pertaining to the subject of sibling suicide. Therefore, it is difficult to find a story that is similar enough to be compared to this autobiographical novella. My work

contributes to the Lebanese Anglophone canon since the subject of study is underreported and under-researched. Therefore, I chose to write this autobiographical novella about this topic and analyze it in correspondence with some available theories, such as Rubenstein's work on women, grief and home.

### **Research Questions**

This study was concerned with answering the following questions:

1. In what ways can a young adult process the psychological trauma due to a sibling's suicide in biographical writing?
2. How can a young adult revisit past homes in an autobiographical novella to construct and accept a new revisionist post-traumatic home?
3. How can a young adult gain the confidence necessary to write about a sibling's suicide?

### **Findings**

Throughout the novella, there are some prevalent themes that are discussed, and which pertain to the aim of the study.

#### ***The Idea of Growth***

Psychological trauma stands for any event that causes deep internal distress to an individual.

While the cause of the trauma is external more often than not, the person's reaction to it is usually kept within one's mind. This is especially true in Lebanon, where, unfortunately, many people are yet to accept the need to deal with psychological and mental health issues.

As such, while writing alone has not yet been proven as a valid way of self-help, it can be a first step for Lebanese young adults, where the individual would learn to admit what happened first. In fact, writing about a traumatic event in the form of a narrative makes the memory of it

more coherent and organized, allowing the writer to make more sense of it (Smyth & Helm, 2003).

I found this to be true in my autobiographical novella, where writing about the events from an outsider's perspective in the first part then delving deeper into my own thoughts in the second part helped me come to terms with the events as they happened.

However, only writing about the incident is not the key to success, or what is called 'growth' in this case. Here, growth is not an instantaneous state but a process. This concept stems from the efforts to rebuild one's world after understanding that a certain option is no longer available (Davis & McKearney, 2003).

In the autobiographical novella, this process starts after the brother's suicide, at which point the character realizes that he was not coming back.

Her brother would never again look her in the eyes. She could no longer talk to him. They would never sit and laugh together again. They would not be able to fight and make up in the span of five minutes.

Po could no longer be strong, and yet, tears refused to fall down her face. Somewhere deep down, she expected her brother to come through the doors and laugh at her for falling for his prank. He would reveal that he had talked the family into playing along. He'd say that he made his friends, the new college ones she knew nothing about, dress up as policemen. Po was willing to believe that lie. She would laugh it off with him.

Yet, even days later, he never came back. It was real. Too real. Po watched helplessly as her world broke into a million pieces (Part 1, Chapter 4).

This gave rise to the attempt at creating a new world in the second part, and in so doing, constructing a new understanding of the character's psyche.

Sticking to the shadows and keeping away from everyone and everything were not appealing to me anymore. I could only take so much of acting like a wall ornament, one that others would only passingly glance at whenever they happened to come across it, but also one that would be forgotten soon after.

I wanted to stand out. I wanted to get to a new place, a destination I hadn't set in mind yet. Leaving a mark, having people know who I truly was... that never seemed so important before (Part 2, Chapter 3).

In order to continue this growth process, one must make use of one of the best aspects of writing, which is that it allows one to express his or her deepest thoughts without any inhibitions. Through conveying one's emotions throughout the incident, he or she gains a higher understanding of and control over his or her emotional reactions, allowing one to have better self-regulation (King & Miner, 2000).

In the autobiographical novella, the first part is told in the third person point of view, hinting at a more detached, uninvolved tone than in the second part, which is told in the first person point of view, and where there is more focus on being directly physically and emotionally involved in the events rather than being an outsider looking in. The shift in point of view signals the start of the process of taking back control over life by the protagonist and gives the protagonist a sense of agency. This starts immediately at the very beginning of the second part, where the protagonist regains the freedom of choice, which is clear in her being given the option to change majors from one she hated to one she loved. In addition, by making use of both perspectives, the character was able to not only better understand the world she was a part of before the climax but also make sense of the events that happened and the emotions that she felt because of it, which encouraged self-regulation.

At some point, the writer might attempt to defend his or her self-view, self-worth and worldview, and this attempt is very important for growth since, by affirming one's importance, one may pave the road for a transformed, more elaborate and positive view of oneself and the world (Davis & McKearney, 2003).

This is something that the protagonist struggles to achieve in the story, as she was constantly plagued by her doubts and fears.

My doubts plagued my mind constantly, not allowing a moment of respite or peace. They hung over me like a dark cloud in my waking hours, and they materialized in my dreams and nightmares alike, blurring the line between my reality and my dreams yet again. The only difference was that, this time, my demonic friends, who used to wait at my bedside or over my body daily, did not visit me at all (Part 2, Chapter 3).

### ***The Concept of Home***

The character was ultimately able to grow through realizing what it meant to be 'home' and what such a concept constituted of. In the novella, 'home' is extremely important, where it is the last puzzle piece that allows the character to grow.

At first, home is a concept that the protagonist struggles to understand and accept, but that is not out of a refusal to accept the notion of a new home but due to the displacement and lack of a sense of belonging (Ahmed, 1999).

Through her recollection of the past, the protagonist appears not to actually miss the country she was in previously or even the people who she used to know. Throughout the first part, the narrator delves into her relationship with her brother, shedding light primarily on that relationship. It is safe to assume that the narrator misses her childhood because her brother's in

it. Her childhood and her brother become part of her past, lost forever, and only capable of being revived via imagination (Rubenstein, 2001).

Moreover, because of her displacement, throughout the first part, the character never feels safe or secure. She keeps looking back to the past, remembering people from her previous home and trying to decide where she stood without them in her life anymore.

Gone was the desire to prove herself. How could she when Adam was gone?

Whom would she prove herself against? No one was as worthy of a rival as Adam was. She found herself relating more and more to the four or five people who didn't care about the diary competition that their teacher issued what seemed like decades ago. The girl didn't like drawing attention to herself anymore, not for anything. Everyone else could win whatever they wanted to win, and the girl would be happy to not participate in any competition at all.

Gone was her closest friend, Sara. They kept in touch for quite some time. Then, their messages slowly started losing... something. An important component that the girl noticed but could not name. Gradually, the messages got shorter and shorter then disappeared completely. The girl saw Sara's pictures online from time to time. It didn't take her long to figure out that she had been replaced (Part 1, Chapter 2).

However, her efforts fail, and the character ends up feeling estranged from her surroundings. She becomes incapable of setting a clear goal, where she even lets her parents decide her course of study in college, and she lives the days as they come.

Po finally graduated from school. She was now officially a Computer Engineering student. It was not her first choice. In fact, it was not her choice at all. Her parents made it quite clear that majoring in English, as she wanted, would never get her enough money

to survive, and that Computer Engineering was all the rage.

She didn't have it in her to argue anymore, not when her decision was so vehemently opposed by everyone around her. She put up with it as she always did (Part 1, Chapter 4).

In the second part, on the other hand, the character's ideals and opinions start to change. Her act of remembering the past is helpful since revisiting or fixing traumatizing past homes through acts of remembrance and through a coming-of-age, autobiographical novella allows the construction of a new home where a person would be more in control (Rubenstein, 2001). Therefore, though unintentionally through delving deeper into her memories and through starting to accept her current situation, the character starts to discover the concept of a 'home'.

I saw it in the eyes of people, who kept the past in mind yet focused on tomorrow, vowing never to let the horrors of the past happen again. I caught a glimpse of it in the blue skies of Lebanon, the same sky that was invisible behind a shroud of black smoke only months ago. Despite passing through a lot, and despite witnessing the tragedies of all Lebanese people firsthand, Lebanon continued to stand.

I didn't think it was possible for one to learn from an entire country, and yet... here I was. I knew it was time to remain on the mountainous road, the one that no one ever dared to venture through, the one that my country, my home, knew all too well. It was time to prove that I belonged to this land, and that I was my own person at the same time, one who was not ruled by doubts (Part 2, Chapter 4).

The character comprehends that home is not a physical place, but a place where a person feels like he or she has a destination or a future (Ahmed, 1999). The shared feelings between the character and the Lebanese people and the dogged determination to persevere on the Lebanese

people's part appeal to the character, and she finally feels as if she belongs among the myriads of people struggling to survive in Lebanon. The Lebanese people do not only represent the group she belongs with, but they also give her the strength and encouragement necessary to move on, permitting her to open doors that were previously locked. This allows her to have room for endless possibilities concerning her future, compelling her next destination to exist even though she doesn't know exactly where that would take her.

The character realizes that a home is a place where she can accept herself as she is, where she has friends who see her for who she is, and where she can follow her dreams and work for her future. This leads the character to try to be as courageous and confident as those in her new home are and to prove to herself and everyone else that it was 'time to shine.'

### *The Notion of Identity and Society*

Identity, on the other hand, is something that predictably keeps changing as the character's perception of herself shifts from a good student who is always at the center of attention to a wallflower who is incapable of seeing her goals through.

In the beginning, the character sees herself in a teddy bear that she received from a childhood friend. From then on, the teddy bear serves as a representation of Po's fixation on her old home and Po herself. Over the years, the teddy bear becomes misshapen, with its body compressed and its neck forced into an unnatural position due to outside circumstances, similar to Po's situation. That teddy bear only appears in the first part of the story, yet it is nonexistent in the second part. This is most likely because the character is finally able to move on from her fixation on her old home and is finally ready to accept a new one.

Interestingly, in the second part of the story, the mother is introduced. That character, who is absent in the entirety of the first part of the story, makes a sudden entrance, not only

introducing the emotionally important figure associated with home, that of the mother, (Rubenstein 2001) but also returning the right to choose to the protagonist and giving her agency over her life.

At this point, the narrator recognizes that outside circumstances should not be allowed to rule over her and that she should be the one to take action, where she focuses on the importance of writing and having her thoughts heard, unlike the teddy bear, which represents her in the first part and which does not have thoughts and is incapable of action.

Furthermore, there is also social criticism in this piece, where the character mentions how society judges people and events that happen without knowing the entire story.

However, it was easy to see that almost everyone knew about the Incident. I could see it in their eyes, and in the way they fidgeted and treaded carefully when I was there. It was clear in how they steered the topic of conversation into trivialities since they did not know how fragile my mind was; they did not know what would set me off or what would break me. I took notice of the way they tried to make eye contact with me when the word ‘suicide’ was mentioned in my presence.

They were waiting for the inevitable outburst. They were waiting for tears, and they claimed that tears could help me heal. I didn’t know how to reassure them that it would never happen, not in front of them anyway (Part 2, Chapter 1).

Moreover, there seems to be an underlying social belief that a traumatized person must ‘deal’ with his or her trauma quickly and without garnering too much attention. As such, the character tries to resist through remaining passive on the outside; however, she channels her feelings and thoughts onto the figures she sees while under the effects of sleep paralysis, where

these nonexistent figures scream and screech in pain when the character herself cannot do the same.

Other times, they were on top of me; they put their weights on my neck and screeched into my ears. I was always confused. Why were they screaming? Did their brothers leave them too? Their yells reverberated in my skull. Their words morphed into a long, deep howl. I could not comprehend what they were saying, but I understood their pain. I let them scream, I let them do what I could never do (Part 2, Chapter 1).

### *The Idea of Self-expression*

Despite being in the process of ‘growth’, the character still shows that it is often difficult to write or type one’s thoughts. People learn to hide grief since they are very little (Demi & Howell, 1991), and the protagonist is no different in this regard, where her doubts constantly get in the way of her trying to articulate how she feels or describe the traumatic incident. This also prevents the protagonist from continuing the growth process (Demi & Howell, 1991).

Other days, I talked myself into trying the impossible. I attempted those things I knew were beyond my limits, knowing that I’d fail but wanting to experience it anyway. It wouldn’t have been a problem. This way of dealing with things might have even succeeded had my doubts not reared their ugly heads in halfway through any task every time.

My doubts reminded me of my limits and sent me right back to square one. The time I spent on the exciting mountainous roads was at an end, and I hurriedly steered back, trying to find my way back to the already paved road (Part 2, Chapter 3).

However, she realizes the importance of expressing herself and getting her thoughts out in the open. In fact, a study by Demi and Howell in 1991 suggests that expressing one’s thoughts

and feelings and sharing them after a sibling's suicide helps in healing the pain. Nevertheless, the decision to gain the confidence to write about a traumatic incident must come from the person and nothing can force him or her to do it. Ultimately, the protagonist makes that decision and starts to type, with the final words of the autobiographical novella echoing those in the beginning, signifying that the character herself was writing that novella and that she has come full circle and matured. In the end, she empowers herself and her life in the present as a writer by naming and accepting the phantoms that shaped her past, which allows her to 'fix' it (Rubenstein, 2001), or at the very least, accept it. Most importantly, the character recognizes the importance of trying to find meaning in the incident and ends the autobiographical novella on a hopeful, positive note, which is important for healing and coping with trauma (King & Miner, 2000)

And so, I wrote, 'Life always found a way...' (Part 2, Chapter 4).

## **Conclusion**

Through accepting a new home and working for a new identity, the character manages to take back control of her life regardless of the trauma she suffered. Her new home is not a location, but a place where she belongs as she is. My experience supports already existing research, which said that writing about a traumatic incident appeared to be beneficial for people of different cultures, backgrounds, languages, education and socioeconomic status (Smyth & Helm, 2003). After writing this novella, I believe that writing narratives can be considered a form of self-help after suffering from psychological trauma. However, more research is needed in order to determine the degree to which writing helps in such cases.

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