

PATRICIA ST JOHN

NOTHING
ELSE MATTERS



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Introduction

This story is set in 1980s Lebanon, a land tragically affected by events in neighbouring Palestine. For many years the people of Lebanon were divided roughly into two communities, of almost equal size – half Christian, half Moslem – who had lived peacefully together, and had shared in the nation's prosperity and in the government of the country. But the emergence of the Jewish State to the south, and the resulting bitter conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, spilled over into Lebanon. The refugee camps were set up by the United Nations organisations and the Palestine Liberation Organisation movement grew within these camps. They then established military training centres for commando activity.

In the end fighting broke out in 1918 and again in 1975 between the two parties, 'Christian' and 'Moslem', often described as 'right wing' and 'left wing' respectively. This led to an exceptionally cruel civil war, only partially halted by the coming of the so-called Peace Force at the end of 1976. The labels 'Christian' and 'Moslem' could be misleading, for each party included those who did not take their religion seriously or who had a very limited idea of what it meant. Politics were at the root of the struggle, but the religious factor made the conflict especially bitter and hard to resolve.

At the time the book is set, the majority of the Christians in Lebanon – including the principal characters in this book – belonged to the Maronite Church, which was led by its own patriarch but was in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The Maronites were also a very strong political party, pledged to maintain the independence of Lebanon. They had their own militia and formed the backbone of the resistance to other national and foreign forces which for years had been involved in the fighting in Lebanon.

In this book, the story of Moomi is fictitious, although many babies were found alive under their mothers' bodies and some were happily adopted. Nearly all the other incidents are taken from the historical records of those months, or based on the true experiences of those who survived.

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'Lamia, where is your brother?'

Sixteen-year-old Lamia started, for her father, always rather an aloof figure, had spoken more sharply than usual. He stood in the doorway, smartly dressed, briefcase in hand, and he wanted an answer at once.

Lamia laid down the basin of yogurt she was eating and looked her father straight in the face.

'I don't know, Father,' she replied quietly. 'Maybe he went out early.'

'Nonsense! His bed has not been slept in and don't lie to me, for I know that you know.'

'No, Father, I do not know where he is. But if he wasn't at home last night, then I think he would have slept in Hanni's house.'

'I see! Then they're both in it, are they? And you too!' His eyes flashed with anger. 'Fools, all of you! Throwing away your lives for a few hours of excitement! Have you no thought for your mother? If you see him, tell him I have something to say to him – and don't be late for school.' He turned on his heel and was gone. A moment later Lamia heard him slam the door of his Mercedes and drive out of the courtyard.

Eleven-year-old Sami and 8-year-old Huda looked curiously at their sister whose face had gone rather pale. They were sitting together having breakfast on the veranda under the great trellised vine which would soon sprout into leaf. They were eating yogurt and olives and

hot flaky bread, while the sun rose over the dip between the mountain peaks, bathing them in warmth and light.

'Where is Amin?' asked Sami bluntly. 'We know that you know and we want to know too. Has he gone fighting? Tell us!'

'If he's gone fighting it is better that you do not know, my son,' said their mother's voice behind them. She carried a tray of cups of coffee, and sat down beside them. 'Ai! Ai!' she mourned. 'And he so young and fine! At the sound of the gun they are like horses pawing for battle, these young men. War is in his blood; he will not obey us and all for a fishermen's quarrel! We live in evil days.'

'No, Mother, not for a fishermen's quarrel! It's far, far greater than that. Every young man should be ready. But in any case, I am not fighting; I am only training.' Amin, too, had come through the house unnoticed and now stood in front of them. His face was weary and streaked with dirt, his arms stained with grease, but he laughed as he sat down and placed his arm round his mother's waist. She laughed too, for this bright young son of hers was irresistible, and she could not spoil this moment with her displeasure.

'Go and wash at once,' she said, trying to speak sternly and not succeeding. 'You have just time to eat before the school bus arrives!' And she bustled off into the kitchen and poured all the love of her heart and a few tears into the omelette and coffee she prepared for him.

The little ones scampered off to collect their books and put on their overalls, but Lamia sat on, her dark eyes very grave, staring out over the mountain. It was early April and the terraces rising from the town were a foam of blossom washed by the silver-grey of the olive trees, with white villas rising above the luxuriance, tier upon tier all the way up the mountain. What a beautiful country it is,

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she thought. It's all very well for fishermen to fight for their rights and refugees to fire guns, but it could never touch us. We are rich and safe and happy! And she turned to smile at her brother who had come back, clean and ready for school, and was now wolfing down his breakfast. They were alone and both very conscious of that oneness of spirit that exists between twins.

'I don't think it will be long,' said Amin suddenly, as though his thoughts had been hers, 'and I must be ready. When it comes, our heritage, our citizenship, and our Christian faith will all be at stake. Can't you make our parents understand? We shall all have a part to play.'

'Mother understands,' replied Lamia, 'but not Father. He wants you for the business and, besides, he thinks you are too young.'

'There will be no business unless we hold on. There are younger boys than me in the Moslem and Palestinian parties, training and in uniform. My friend Kamal, who lives on the edge of the camp has a gun and knows how to use it.'

'A gun? Do you have a gun, Amin?'

He laughed. 'Of course I have, little sister, or how should I train to fight? But it need not be mentioned. I leave it and my uniform at Hanni's house down the road. I had a few hours' sleep there this morning. I can see our bus coming. Is Sami ready?'

He picked up his school bag, went into the kitchen to kiss Rosa, his mother, and strode down the garden path with Sami trotting behind. A few minutes later Lamia and Huda raced for the next bus, turning for a moment at the gate to wave.

They were gone, the four of them, out into this new threatening world, and their mother stood at the railing staring after them. She could not follow them even in