My older sister was sent to the private American School in Istanbul the same year my family moved to Şile. Although we were never desperate for food or shelter, the fee for the private school for one daughter (and five years later, for me) was an economic setback for my family. Yet, provision of private education for her daughters served my mother's emotional needs, despite the hole it made in our budget. We were told that my mother "sacrificed" for us, and I am sure she believed in her sacrifice. As an after-though, mothers are conditioned to "sacrifice" which eventually puts a distance between themselves and the daughters they raise, rather than making them closer. In a way, daughters become half-willing pawns to fulfill their mothers' dreams. For them, it becomes a struggle to follow dreams of their own. In my adulthood, I heard my mother say many times that I fulfilled her dreams, as she hugged me with tears in her eyes. She rarely asked me if I fulfilled my own dreams.

The year my sister went to the private school was also the year when I had my very own room. Well, only in practice! There were still two beds in my room, reminding my sister's omnipresence, but she occupied her bed only during holidays and long weekends. She was a boarding student, and I had the experience of being a single child, for a while. More correctly, my parents had me as a child in flesh and blood, and another one as a shadowy, idealized reference point, larger than life. Although the private school arrangement was mostly my mother's doing, she still was the person most hurt from the separation it caused. I saw her shed many tears, sitting on my sister's empty bed, totally oblivious to my own physical presence.

Other than her crushing symbolic presence in her absence, my recollection of my sister in those years is very shady, with some bright spots. I remember her sending me clippings, the ones she herself had cut out from the stacks of "American Magazines" available for that purpose, at her school. These magazines had thick, shiny pages, at a time when paper was rationed in our lives. Our own newspapers were printed on "hay-paper". We did not buy fancy magazines for our homes. At school, we had to use both sides of the pages in our dirty-white notebooks.

My sister's cuts were right on the lines, carefully following the picture's outer boundary, never slashing into the picture, never spilling into the background. I also learned to make cuts like that, from regular newspapers, where the pictures smudged my fingers in order to escape the hay-paper they were trapped in. I learned to always follow the lines. I made it a point for myself to follow my sister's lead, even though in this case, I was not required to do so! After she saw my accomplishment, she let me cut out pictures for her own collection: I was honoured, I was promoted. I spent hours making immaculate cuts around the heads of Rock Hudson (my sister was shattered when she learnt that he was gay, more than three decades after we clipped his head out of magazines). I also beheaded James Dean, smiling, always smiling with his crooked smile and full, sensuous lips. Tony Curtis, Marlon Brando, Cary Grant, Kirk Douglas all got cut out, and filed and allowed to play significant roles in our unmentionable fantasies. I think James Dean triggered my sister's teenage desires the most, after all she was a teenager high on
hormones just at the time he died (or was it that he killed himself?). In his death, he became idealized and reified more than any living, breathing man. Women do not get idealized, dead or alive. James Dean had the edge over the other cut outs, he had the edge of youthful death on his side. My favourite was Tony Curtis, even though I kept my choice mostly to myself. Probably my sister's choice was better, but I still liked Tony, and slided over his pictures whenever I was alone. However, the cut I had given him was no better or worse than the other cuts, they were all perfect. They had to be for me to have continual access to my sister's paper belongings.

The cut outs my sister sent me for my personal collection were different. I guess she didn't imagine that I could secretly fantasize over Tony Curtis at the ripe old age of six! I loved my more age-appropriate cut outs too, but just in a different way. They filled my rainy days, not to mention, my yet to mature fantasies. I had the red-cheeked, short and fat "Campbell's Soup Kids." The multimillion dollar company they represented, I found out about after I started attending the American School myself. I then had access to the American magazines to rummage through, on my own. I cut out cows, smiling, flying, with daisies coming from their mouths, coming from their ears, tied to their tails. They had pink, swollen nipples presumably filled with nutritious milk, but done in fine taste. They never had dung or mud splashed on their legs or tails. They were from Borden Milk commercials, and as American as Campbell's Soup kids.

Our milk was delivered by a farmer who smelled rancid and who wore heavy woollen clothes even when the temperature was capable of cooking a raw egg. His sick-looking donkey carried the milk, in four aluminum jugs, smudged with sticky milk droplets and dirty finger prints. The jugs hung, two on each side of the worn-out saddle. The donkey did not look anything like the Borden Cows, daisies were not attached to his bodily parts. Probably if it ever came close to a daisy, it would have eaten it. The donkey looked starved. It also peed in a large puddle which spread around its not-so-well-manicured hooves; the liquid spread like bubbling industrial waste which eats at the edges of the Niagara river.

Our milk-man and his donkey were a far cry from any commercial that I have ever seen. If anything, they could have been a commercial for not drinking milk. My mother said that the milk he sold was watered down. The trouble was that the small town had one milkman. He didn't need to advertise by decorating his donkey, he didn't even need to sell unadulterated milk. I don't want to imagine the state of his cows which produced that milk. However, the puddings my mother made were delicious. And, in the Şile of my childhood, we had a different understanding of the place of dirt in nature.

I had cut outs of pretty devil children, pale pink, not red, and chickens of all kinds and shapes, some sitting in their half shells, already dried-up and fluffy. I did not know what they were advertising, but I liked them. I spent the rainy days classifying and reclassifying these clippings. I sorted them by size, by colour, by shape, by topic, by my preferences of the day. I did not have too many toys, just my clippings and the wonderful, wild and safe outdoors.
My sister gave me two professionally prepared dress-up dolls as a new year's present. They were bought from the American school's gift-shop. One of the dolls was Diana Durbin, the other Virginia Mayo, both equipped with meticulous curls, party dresses and furs. My sister said that Virginia Mayo had a glass eye in real life. My sister had subversive ways of getting sensitive information, she went to a private American school. For all I know, she was like the CIA. However, the glass eye didn't show on the doll, both of her eyes were paper. I liked her the best, my sister liked Diana Durbin. We did not dress or undress men in our games, not with our eyes, not with our minds, and definitely not by force. So we had no right to play with male dress-up dolls, the toy companies did not sell such things either. We only saved male actors' truncated heads in our scrap books.

Yet, I always had a soft spot for men, whether they were my sister's cut-outs of James Dean or Tony Curtis, or whether they were members of the group of aging teenagers my sister hung around with. I was my mother's eyes and ears that she was forced to take along, as a chaperone. After establishing my own existence and friends, I had my own idols to dream about, and rarely to touch or be touched. The bottom line is that there was never an instance in my life where men did not occupy the center stage, in good and in bad, until I reached middle age and burst out as a feminist. Feminists are like peonies, they start as a small little bulb, and explode inside out in brilliant colours! However, it is still a struggle to keep men in perspective, clip their power, empower myself in relation to them, without giving them the upper hand. Men crowd my life, they need to be thinned out and trimmed, like wild bushes. Yet, with the exception of my daughter, who is literally my flesh and blood, people I liked the most passionately and the persons I disliked the most passionately have been men. Women, in many shapes and forms, through different time periods have been of importance, but not of extreme significance in my life.

When I was very young, I had my father as the only man in a family of women. I still believe that my father was the zenith of all men. My father set an example for me, an example of loyalty, dignity, and honesty. I loved him and looked up to him for his unblemished protective love that he so generously bestowed upon me. In the gigantic shadow he cast, the other men I temporarily loved eventually looked like imposters. Maybe that is why I often felt short changed by men who did not/could not measure up to the high standards of my father.

I think that good old Sigmund Freud missed the boat by concentrating on father/son relationships, which of course, revolved around who had the bigger and the better parts and who was most vulnerable to lose his (in Freud's terms: castration). Mothers, in Freud's conceptualization, were mere objects, sexual possessions that both the father and the son desired, but only the father owned. Freud missed the idealization of fathers by their daughters, the protective love the fathers had for their daughters, not at all in a sexualized sense. Sorry good old Sigmund, but the father/daughter bond is more powerful than the identification of the son with the father. The father/daughter love involves feelings of security and protection, not lust. Men, consciously or unconsciously, have turned the world into such a hostile place for women that
they themselves are the only ones who can protect their daughters from possible harm. The daughters know this, know their vulnerability, recognize their protector, and love him for it. Fathers provide the most comfortable security blanket for them and they struggle to replace this blanket, through one or a series of other—less secure—relationships. Alas, there is rarely a compromise, there is no replacement for fathers, mothers hardly fit the bill. Most mothers cannot even protect themselves.

Aside from tangential affairs, which there were many, and situational attractions, my most passionate attachment to a man started when I was seventeen. Aron was a good-looking man, he had lots of blue-black hair, reflecting the light, a beautiful nose, curved up just like North American noses, very light skin which was also covered with blue-black hair. I still have a fetish about chest hair in men. However, he was short, which he felt very conscious about. Men live in a world of size, that they have socially created themselves, and sometimes get victimized by that very same yard-stick. Their world is the world of the big, the strong, the tall, the large, the rich and of course the long!

My infatuation with Aron was total, absolute, loyal and mostly platonic. I thought that he was brilliant, and mostly he was. Aron asked me to be his "girl", and I felt privileged. I naively thought that "belonging" to someone like him was the peak of my accomplishments. Like most women's, my own accomplishments were vicarious, my deviations were small, like eating a small portion of lamb brain, marinated in lemon juice. I was socialized to please others, always deriving pleasure from fulfilling other people's wants, always defining myself in accordance to whom I belonged to, who claimed my ownership. Aron turned into one of the youngest Ph.D's that I ever heard of, but that was after our youthful togetherness. It was also after I got married, and settled into nothingness.... for a while. Then I carefully carved out my own wings, got my own Ph.D and flew out of my cultural chrysalis.

In Turkey, like in most other places, boys of any age, especially boys of Aron's age and economic background have many privileges. I went to my private girl's school then, and was locked up, like my other female peers. We mostly hibernated until the day we were "picked". The only males who were allowed in my all-girl's school were very old, married Americans who had jealous wives. The wives always kept an eye on their husbands, and were always called by their husbands' names. We also had a sixty-year-old gate-keeper with a sharp eye sight and equally sharp body odour, but no humour. In the biology lab, we had Yusuf. Yusuf was a real skeleton, a man of the past, whose bones we studied. We also took him out of his closet hook, and danced with him when the biology lab was left unsupervised. We were desperate, we were full of teenage hormones, and Yusuf was safe. He had his bones carefully preserved, but lacked the parts that could hurt us.

Our homes were stricter than the school, or maybe just as strict. We were allowed quite a bit of flexibility with our female friends, since all our mothers made sure that we were "good" girls. I had two best friends. We all pretended to be "good" no matter whose mother was around.
Mothers passed the message to one another, they were one huge network of eyes and ears. And despite hormonal surges, we were good, very good in relation to the subsequent generations. We only secretly dated, and secretly dreamt about, and secretly desired boys. We also secretly met them and held hands, that is why we thought we were bad, incorrigibly bad, while we were so good.

My two best friends and I devised elaborate stories to spend time with our respective 'loves'. Of course, they were not our lovers, not in the technical sense. I devised schemes to get out of my house, always with my two best female friends, to meet my boyfriend. In a country where there is no sexual freedom, peers act as a buffer for very small discretions. I served the same function for my friends. We had so many things to cover up for one another that we could only have a small number of best friends. These few friends had to be loyal enough to lie for us, friends that we would lie for, although we would never ever lie for any other type of personal gain.

Fushia was one of the two best friends. She looked a lot like Natalie Wood. Her parents were the most lenient, since they were divorced. In my childhood, divorced parents reached the lowest common denominator in strictness. I had difficulty in imagining divorced parents, but we never talked about it. I figured that divorce was an issue which was better left untouched. Fushia lived with her mother, and hated her life. She was a father admirer, just like me. I think, my father deserved my admiration. I don't know if Fushia's father deserved her love, he seemed to be pretty distant, both geographically and emotionally. But who am I to say, he wasn't my father.

Although Fushia had an easier time than the rest of us, in terms of going out, inviting her friends in, or in listening/buying records, occasionally, we still had to cover up her tracks. Fushia had a puppy-love crush on an American sailor, which challenged even her parents' leniency. His name was Jo. Only Jo, no last name, not even like Jo Doe.

The three of us spent days cutting out construction paper which spelled his name (thank God, it was so short). Some letters we cut out were taller than ourselves, and had to be supported on windy days, like the letters of H O L L Y W O O D. Our letters spelled JO. We had pictures taken in front of these Jo creations, with a cheap camera Fushia owned. We fusssed over the colour coordination of our clothes, although the photographs were only in black and white. Fushia kissed the blurry prints, and hid the negatives under the macramé plant hanger in her room. She sent copies to Jo. We all looked dreamy in these pictures, to let the pictures tell Jo that Fushia was dreaming about him. Why were we in the pictures? We didn't know Jo, he didn't know us. We were the best friends of Fushia, and we thought that gave us the right to appear in those pictures. We were right beside Fushia even in her secret love. Maybe we were also her chaperones, having learnt from our mothers, trying out our roles before our own daughters were born: To be ever present in other women's affairs. I don't know what Jo thought of all three of us, best friends, looking dreamy and stupid, posing in front of the cut-out of his name. Three of a kind, three of the same. Whether he liked it or not, he got all three for the price of one, the price
was the letters he wrote to Fushia. Probably, he thought that we were a bunch of retarded kids. Probably he showed us to his sailor friends and made coarse remarks. We were not stupid, we were simply oppressed girls, on our way to be oppressed women and oppressive mothers.

Fushia eventually married her childhood friend who was more readily available to her than Jo. They had a son, lost all their passion and all their respect for one another and divorced. She married and divorced other men since then. She still talks about Jo, she still keeps the pictures in front of his cut-out name. They have kept in touch, without us posing like dummies, in front of his name. When we were last together, eating the rich dessert we loved as teenagers but which no longer agreed with us, Fushia confided that Jo wants to live with her, now that he is divorced (or was it that his wife had passed away?) She asked me what she should do, I said "go for it!" I said this because I knew she wanted him, not because he wanted her. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything, I am now a dissident to our once mutual norms.

Julia was our other best friend. Julia was smart, much smarter than the rest. Julia was also very poor. After we graduated, we found out that she had attended our private school on a scholarship. Julia had a heart of gold though, and we didn't care about how she got to our school. As girls, we derived our status through men, not through money.

Julia was going out with a man who was more than twenty years her senior. We covered up for her, for them. We built up schemes which covered most of the day, but coincided with truth at seven pm. That was the curfew each of us followed until we got married, give or take a few very well-orchestrated deviations. Seven pm. was when we didn't turn into pumpkins but when our mothers turned into vampires, ready to draw our blood. Our mothers were probably instructed by our fathers, who thought that we were safe until seven pm., that is, safe from our hormones. They thought that when the clock struck seven, we would lose our virginity, right there and then. Our mothers did not trust us, did not trust men, did not trust the clock. Their mission was to see us through, preserving our original seal of approval, manufacturer's guarantee until we got married. They cried when we got married, I think their tears were of relief. The mission was passed along to the sons-in-law. Their job was to defend their wives from other men as a whole, as a total possession. If they failed, they could always blame their wives. If mothers failed, they had no one to blame, but themselves.

Eventually Julia got married too, had two kids and amazingly, stayed together until she lost her life in a tragic accident. No one else from our generation stayed married to their 1st husbands. We were post war children, but we had our marital wars. The 1st husbands were to jump ship in a culture where we did not have rights over our own bodies. We were the generation who pushed to change the rules, to carve out a little space for ourselves which was different from what confined and enslaved our own mothers. Yet, we did not have the gender consciousness, our worlds were filled with triviality rather than feminist ideology. We were the children of change even in Turkey where most gender norms and values were stagnant, with no role models to follow, with no clear visions to change into. We were the children of restrictions.
Fushia, Julia and I had many sketches, many schemes that we worked with, to keep our mothers off the trail. It was a full-time job, requiring full time loyalty among us. Who was where, when, for what purpose were drilled and redrilled in practice sessions. All three stories had to be perfect. We also secretly smoked, mind you, just mentholated cigarettes. The most potent drug my friends and I ever took were aspirin or laxatives, the latter many still take. Our lives were constipated, our insides were packed like cement. We took pills to relieve our anxieties or else we would have exploded. I think Freud was right in focusing on feces as a barometer of one's quality of life. Fushia, Julia and I didn't eliminate, couldn't eliminate on our own. Our insides were trapped and frozen, just like we were frozen between the rigid gender relations and same-sex controls.

Where did we meet, what time, why, what did we do when we met, where did we separate, when? We spent hours ironing out the incongruencies, stretching the truth in so many ways that our stories became all tangled. Sometimes even we believed what we were saying, because we were so busy remembering the cover-ups. We were best friends, had to be, for all those times we didn't spend with one another. We worked with total concentration, with total mind power. If we had concentrated on splitting the atom instead of creating stories about our whereabouts, we could have done it earlier than the dislocated physicists in the U.S. We were women though, in a world which still restricted women; we did not do things which would make us famous, we did not create things that would explode. Instead, we took laxatives to prevent from exploding ourselves. We created stories to keep our mothers from exploding. We spent all our energies on trivialities, all our energy and our creativity to carve out a breathing space in our otherwise oppressive worlds. We cut out men's heads from magazines, and filed them. Our lives were like a knitted sweater, meticulously completed with three different coloured yarns, one for Fushia, one for Julia one for me. If a single stitch was unravelled, the whole thing would have collapsed. Yet, we kept the stories intact until all of us got safely married, until we released our mothers from being our jailers. By marrying, we finally allowed our mothers to become our friends. Then, both Fushia and I got divorced, and became ourselves.

My generation was the daughters of Turkish women who had gotten the vote. Unlike their Western sisters, our mothers had not fought for their rights, since their rights were given to them. In a way, the rights they enjoyed remained mostly at political levels, without transforming their gender relations. As their daughters, each one of us, in our own ways, had to fight again for our own version of equalities and freedoms. Some of us won, others are still struggling, and a few are trying to ignore the importance of the battle. Thus, women's lives in a men's world are full of loyalties, but also tensions.