

## "The Chandelier"

The US-American author Gregory Orfalea is the son of Lebanese-Syrian immigrants. In his short story "The Chandelier" (1984) Orfalea highlights the luxury of food by juxtaposing the abundance of food in the family of the protagonist, Mukhlis, at the end of the 20th century in California with the scarcity of food in Mukhlis' family at the beginning of the 20th century in Mount Lebanon. – Gregory Orfalea, "The Chandelier", *Imagining America. Stories from the Promised Land. A Multicultural Anthology of American Fiction*, ed. Wesley Brown & Amy Ling (New York: Persea Books, 1991), pp. 325–334.

1 Mukhlis drives up Asbury Street in Pasadena and  
brings his green Buick to an easy, slow stop underneath  
the largest flowering eucalyptus in southern California.  
The first door cracked is that of his wife, Wardi, who  
5 gets out as she has every week for the past forty years,  
as if she were with child. She has not been with child  
for many years, but her body at center is like the large  
burl of a cedar and her legs are bowed as an old chair's.  
Mukhlis emerges from the Buick. He looks left and  
10 right for cars – a short, searing look either way. And  
the sun tries to plant its white seed on the center of his  
bald head.

Mukhlis has made a small fortune in real estate. He  
has apartment complexes here and there in the city, and  
15 many of his tenants are black or brown. He himself is  
brown, or rather almond, and his eyes, like those of  
many Lebanese and Syrians, are blue. He owes this  
hue to the Crusaders. A continent man, Mukhlis' eyes  
are the last blue twinkle of a distant lust.

20 What words there are to say, Mukhlis rarely says. His  
eyes and body speak – a body made to withstand. As he  
ascends the steps of his sister's home, the collar of his  
gray suit pulls taut around his neck. And his neck has  
the thickness of a foundation post; it welds his head to  
25 the shoulders. For years it has been bronzed by the sun.



The author's great-uncle Michael Malouf was the inspiration for "The Chandelier". The family photo shows from left to right: Matilda Malouf, Milhem Malouf, Michael Malouf (standing), Abraham Malouf (father), Mary Kfoury Malouf (mother), and little George. Matilda (as "Matile"), Michael (as "Mukhlis") and Mary all appear in the story in fictitious guise.

So tight is the tie and collar around his neck that his  
nape stands up in a welt of muscle. It is not a fat neck  
– nothing about the man is fat, save a slight bulge to his  
belly, brought on, no doubt, by forty years of Wardi's  
30 desserts, among the finest Arabic delights in Los  
Angeles. Mukhlis has learned it is useless to compliment  
her because Wardi (Rose, in English), like most Arabs,  
does not react to compliments; she prefers to go to great  
lengths to pay a compliment, instead. But not Mukhlis.  
35 He says not two crooked words about Wardi's *knafi*, the  
bird's nest whose wafer-like shell must be rolled with  
the patience of Job before it is filled with pistachios as  
green as Mukhlis' Buick – and probably greener – then  
topped with a spoon of rosewater syrup.

Mukhlis kisses his sister, Matile, and booms a  
40 greeting to the air behind her in a robust voice that  
speaks in simple sentences and laughs silently. His  
large head, sapphire eyes, and corded neck all shake  
with his laughter.

And if it is on a summer evening, with a large group  
45 of people chatting on Matile's porch, all will be aware  
of Mukhlis, though he will surely say the least, and  
when his hands come apart after having been clasped  
tightly on his belly for so long, people will take a drag  
on their cigarettes and turn in his direction.  
50

"No one wants to work, and so the devil has his pick  
of the young people."

Wardi, who clasps her hands on a more bulbous belly,  
will nod and sip her coffee from the demitasse.

"Matile, do you have any cream?" Mukhlis asks his  
55 sister.

"Certainly, my honey," she sings. "Anything for you."  
[...]

"Have you got a *ghrabi*?"

"*Ghrabi*?" Matile stands so quickly she leaves her  
60 black shoes. And goes into a litany of food that lasts  
five minutes.

"No, no, no," Mukhlis punctuates each breathless  
pause in her list. "*Ghrabi* – just give me one."

"One!" she cries. "I have a hundred."

"One, please, is all I want."

She brings a dish piled high with the small hoops of  
butter, sugar, and dough, each with a mole or two of  
pistachio.

70 "Eat," she says.

Wardi takes one. Mukhlis shakes his head and breaks off half a *ghrabi*.

"Isn't that delicious?" Matile asks, preempting the compliment. Mukhlis chews. "You look real good today," she smiles with a brightened face, disregarding his nodding. Mukhlis turns to the young man.

"And so, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for work," says the great-nephew, a dark, slender fellow with broad shoulders. These eyes of his, Mukhlis thinks, have a dark sparkle. He's cried and laughed too much for his age; his laugh is a cry and his cry is a laugh.

"It's time for you to get serious and stop this wandering and get a good job in business," Mukhlis says rather loudly.

"You are playing with your life. When are you going to get married?"

Mukhlis gleams his crocodile smile and laughs silently. Then he becomes solemn, and touches the pistachio on a *ghrabi* with a thick forefinger, taps it several times, then removes it.

"Aren't you ever really hungry, Uncle Mukhlis?"

The old realtor looks out past the stanchions of the porch, past the thickened apricots.

95 "Boy, have you ever seen a person eat an orange peel?"

"I've eaten them myself. They're quite good."

"No, no, boy. I mean rotten orange peels, with mud and dung on them. Have you had that?"

100 The great-nephew purses his lips.

"Well, I want to tell you a story. I want to tell you about hunger, and I want to tell you about disgrace." [...]

105 "I was the oldest of us in Lebanon when we lived in the mountain, but when World War I started I was still a young boy. They cut off Beirut harbor in 1914. You see, the Germans were allied with the Turks who had hold over all the Arab lands. And so the Germans become our masters for a time. When it was all we could do to steer clear of the Turks! The Allies blockaded Beirut harbor, and for four years there was no food to be had in Mount Lebanon."

At this moment Matile puts a heap of grapes in front of him.

115 "Nothing like this purple grape, I can assure you! These were treacherous times of human brutality. People were hungry and hunger is the beginning of cruelty. The Turks themselves would tolerate no funny business. If people refused to cooperate with them they would take it out on the children." [...]

120 "Food was so scarce people would pick up horse dung, wash it, and eat the grains of hay left. It was common to go days without eating or drinking, because the Nahr Ibrahim and the Bardowni Rivers were contaminated by dead bodies. The Germans and the

Turks would throw traitors into the river ... then there was the chandelier." [...]

"I could tell you a story," Matile puts her eyes up to the stucco ceiling of the porch and shakes her hands. "Thoobs! A crust of bread was so rare it was like communion. My mother, she had to go away for days to trade everything we had for food on the other side of the mountain –"

"Matile, I..."

– she give [sic] us a slice of bread before she leaves and she shake her finger at us and say – Matile, Mukhlis, Milhem – you don't take this all at once. Each day you cut one piece of the bread. One piece! No more. And you cut this piece into four pieces – three for you, and then you break the last one for the infants. You understand? Like one cracker a day for each of us. Little Milhem and Leila, they cry all day. They want more. They too little to understand, and the baby ... ah!" [...]

Mukhlis clears his throat loudly. "My mother gave me the last piastres we had and told me to go through the snow over the mountain to the village in the dry land, to fetch milk and bread. I was not as strong as my mother but I was strong, and so I tried. But the first day out I was shot by a highwayman, a robber. I hid behind a rock: still he found me and stripped off my jacket and took the piastres. I was glad he did not kill me. But what was I to do? I could not go home. I continued walking until I came to the monastery. I thought I would ask the monks for some milk. They were not there."

"They die."

"Matile, please. They were not there. Perhaps they went to Greece. They were Greek monks. The place was empty. The door to the chapel opening with the wind that moved it back and forth. Inside the candles were snuffed. And the candlesticks were cold, and all the pews were covered with frost. It was winter, inside and out. Up above was a ..."

"Chandelier!"

"Yes, Matile, a huge crystal chandelier. [...] I fall with it. I fall with it and I fall directly on my rump. This is why I walk slowly to this day, young man. Because of the chandelier. That chandelier had to become milk. It was going to save my life, our lives. What did my bones mean? Nothing. But I was a tough young fellow – not like you soft people today – and not one teardrop of that crystal was scratched. I got up, and my hip was partially cracked. But I got up, I carried the chandelier to the entrance of the church. No one was around. No one saw me do it."

"God finally let go?" the great-nephew asks, with a smirk.

"God never lets go. I yanked it out of His hands. But I could not carry the chandelier far – it weighed a ton. In the vestibule of the chapel was a small Oriental rug. I placed the chandelier on top of that, took the cord of