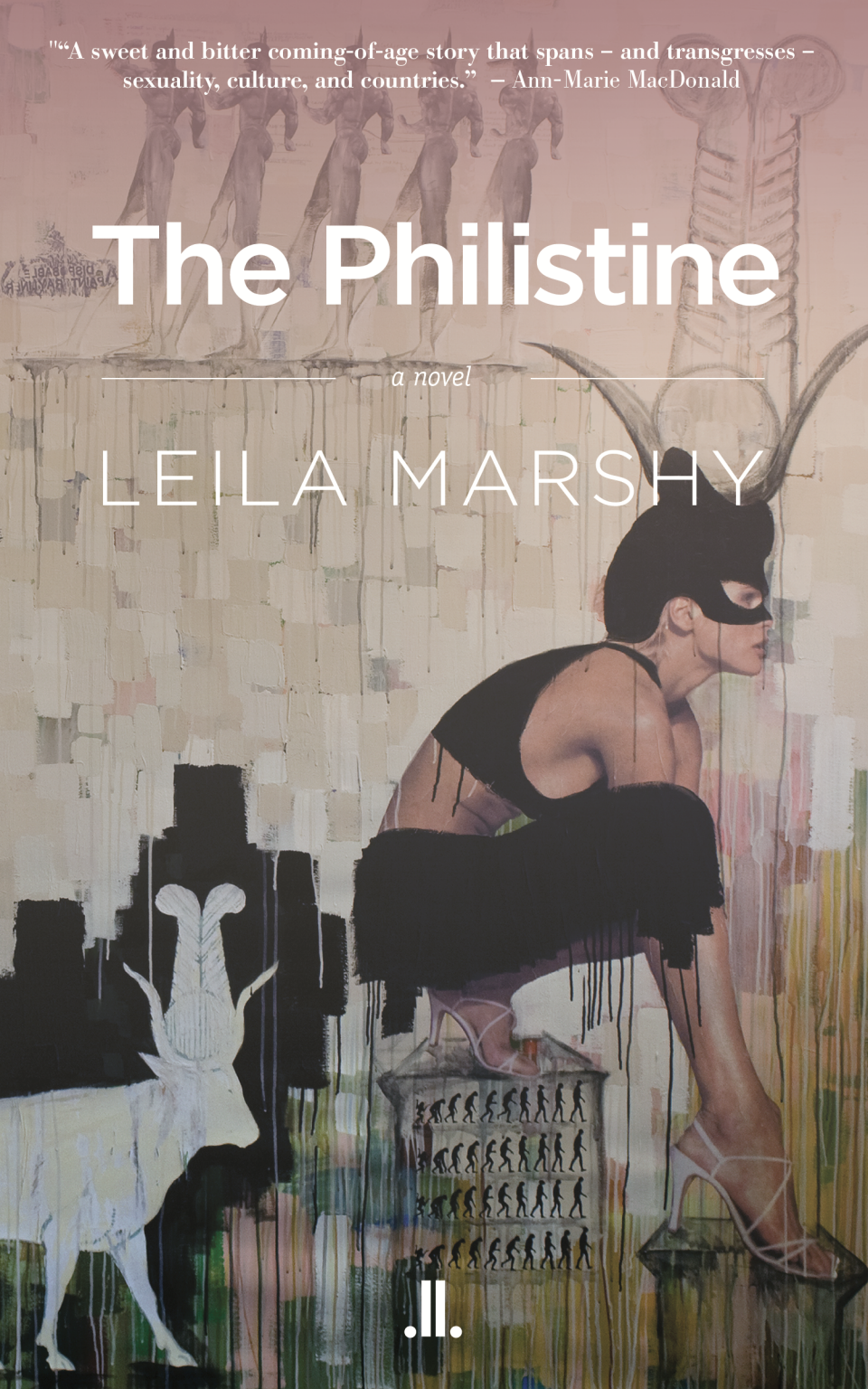


"A sweet and bitter coming-of-age story that spans – and transgresses – sexuality, culture, and countries." – Ann-Marie MacDonald

# The Philistine

*a novel*

LEILA MARSHY



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He gave her a fax machine the day she turned twenty. It was cumbersome and took up almost the entire desk. “Happy birthday, *laziza!* Two decades! You are the future, you are technology. No more envelopes and stamps, no more waiting.” It took some vigorous fiddling—*What this cable? How this fit, how, how?*

“Now, when I want to say hello to my daughter *poof!* the machine will whirl and you will have it in your hands.” Whirl it did. He began his letters—*faxes!*—the same way every time: *Greetings from Egypt!* Next to his signature he wrote the time to the minute, even though the machine date- and time-stamped it along the top. His enthusiasm for the technology never waned. She kept the faxes in a folder, then a second folder, then a third. Until they stopped coming.

*Every ten years, Kiddo!* He had last taken her to Cairo when she was ten. At twenty she wasn’t expecting a fax machine. It was already a rare trip back to Montreal for him, and he liked his visits to coincide with as much pomp and circumstance as possible: Christmas, birthdays,

celebrations of any sort. She took the oversize box to be a ruse, a puzzle to solve and reveal. As she peeled off the meticulous wrapping she couldn't help but wonder what he had done to make it so heavy and unwieldy. Maybe deep inside she'd find a heavy brick with a weightless plane ticket wrapped around it, a mixed metaphor he would enjoy. She wondered what she'd pack in the small carry-on she stored unused under the bed for when she returned to Egypt with him. The timing was perfect: CEGEP was over and she could easily spare a bit of travel time before looking for a summer job or starting university in the fall. Her chest filled with excitement and courage. She looked around for her mother but she had gone to the kitchen with a handful of dirty plates.

It was a massive fax machine by Okidata.

"Plus extra toner," he said brightly, raising a finger in the air.

He bent over the monstrosity and busied himself with threading the heavy roll of thermal paper through it. The machine impressed him and his Arabic utterances sounded like refrains from Om Kalsoum songs. *Ya allah, ya salam, ya qalbi*. Otherwise, Nadia hardly understood a word. Every brick she had imagined was now in her stomach.

Satisfied, he smiled broadly and pulled a cigarette from a nearby pack. Dinner eaten, gifts dispersed, time for his evening smoke. Nadia followed him out to the balcony with an ashtray. "What the problem? Neighbour complain again?" he laughed. He flung the match to the yard below and winked at her.

“You said every ten years.” Her voice trembled already. She wanted to kick herself.

“What, *ya bint*?” Bint meant girl, she knew. If he had said *binti* it could have meant *my daughter*. But he didn’t add the *i*.

“You said every ten years. It has been ten years. Ten” —she paused, but not for long— “years. Thanks for the fax machine, it’s really great. But I kind of thought a plane ticket... Baba, don’t you want to bring me to Egypt again?”

It struck her that maybe he did not remember his promises at all. She reminded herself to prepare for the worst, to stop being so gullible and stupid, to accept that she had no control over the situation, that he was a busy man. All that music she still could not understand, all those words she still spoke only haltingly, all those dishes she had no idea how to cook, all those stories that remained undeciphered on postcards. The Middle East had nothing to do with her and she had nothing to do with it. She was supposed to be in Montreal and stay in Montreal.

“*Ya-aaaaaa*,” he said wearily. He inhaled deeply on the cigarette, nodded. He took the ashtray and concentrated on grinding out the smoke. She hadn’t inherited his long limbs, nor his tight dark curls. She was stockier, like her mother, lower to the ground. And though she had his curls, hers were looser and not always committed to the task of curling.

“Yes, yes. I said that.” He sat down, put his hands on his knees and talked into the middle distance, as was his

habit. "Nadia, first you must finish your studies. You are starting university, and you must finish university. There is nothing more important than education. You must complete your education. It is the difference between life and no life."

She folded her arms and looked away. He was looking for excuses, as always. "It's not right," she muttered weakly.

He looked beyond her into the house, searching for Nadia's mother. He would be wondering how much Clare was behind her pestering and restlessness; whether, yes, she had provoked this to show him up in front of his daughter. But his wife was still in the kitchen cleaning up after the meal. Of the three of them, only Clare had openly expressed disappointment in the trajectory of their lives. His long years studying and putting them in debt, his inability to find a decent job—or, worse, keep one. A baroque moral code coupled with a sliding relativity regarding his own behaviour. And finally, his insistence that taking a "proper" job in Cairo was a good idea. From the outset, there was no question that Clare would follow him to Egypt. Their lives were in Montreal, she told him. Besides, she had her own proper job, *merci beaucoup*. Mostly though, she was adamant that she was not going to raise their daughter in the Middle East. He, on the other hand, thought it was the best place in the world to raise a daughter.

"Then I will bring her with me," he declared.

Nadia had gotten out of bed, nudged her door open a

crack, listened. She was fifteen, an age when all was possible and the only thing getting in the way of adventure and fulfillment was her mother. There was a long silence, the kind Clare cultivated. Then a low hiss, barely decipherable, a bass note upon which the next half-decade played out. "You. Just. Try."

"It is right." The vertical line in his forehead deepened like a scar when he was angry. He scattered his hands through the air as he defended himself. "It is right. I send money, I support you. I have good job. I will pay for your university."

"Half." She remembered his agreement with Clare.

"The best half!"

Nadia couldn't help but smile. Encouraged, he continued. "I tried, *ya Nadia*. Come, they said. Come and learn and we will teach you what you cannot have. I was so excited. *Ya Allah*, Nadia you have no idea, I was so excited. Who knew I would have such opportunity? A scholarship! To Canada!" He knew she loved hearing the story. *Kan ya makan*, he said, allowing himself a smile. Once upon a time. He nodded as if setting the rhythm of a melody.

The fighting was getting worse every year, he began, first little skirmishes then out-and-out battles. People were losing their homes, their lives. First the Turks, then the British had stood in the way of their destiny. Now, the end was in sight, they would have a free Palestine, their land, a land for everyone. But suddenly there was a different enemy, one they didn't see coming because it was the familiar faces of their neighbours. "Such a shock,"

he said. "My best friends were Jewish, and now our fathers were aiming rifles at each other." Usually these clashes settled themselves over a glass of tea. "They were our neighbours! Our friends! How could we hate each other?" But these Jews had different leaders now, strangers from Europe, unfamiliar immigrants who spoke European languages and carried with them a not-so-hidden desire for revenge. "How could we know? Our enemy now was all of history. All of history!" His parents started taking the children to Alexandria for the summer. "My aunt was there and at least my parents knew me and my brother would be safe. Then we would return in September for school. Beautiful Alexandria. Oh the beaches, *ya Nadia*."

"Your brother?" His family, his history, his stories, always confused her. Now he had a brother?

"*La, la*," he corrected, waving it off impatiently. "My friend. We were like brothers. He is... gone, I don't know." He spoke to himself in Arabic. Sometimes Nadia wondered if he lived with his stories like a dog lives with a porcupine's barbs. She could try to help but he growled and ran away.

In September 1948, they were not allowed to leave the ship as it nudged against the Haifa harbour. Stern border guards dismissed their travelling papers and sent them back to Egypt. "The Jews were met with cheers but the Arabs were swept away to drown. They found Israel, we lost Palestine. And that is how I became Egyptian and you became Canadian. But there is no life for a Palestinian in Egypt, *ya bint*, no life. Canada gave me a future until,

*khallas ...*” He shook his head theatrically. “A long line of disappointments, *yanni*.”

*Yanni, yanni*. The multipurpose word here functioned like a curtain in a funeral parlour, closing off the story to further probing or open displays of grief. She had to wonder if she was included in the long line of disappointments.

Five years after the fax machine, a warm November wind was coaxing despondent trees into budding. Nadia left work early and took a small detour through Parc Laurier, while the sky was still orange and clouds were still visible. She regretted not calling Daniel before leaving; he could have met her. It was his favourite thing, to wander around and around a park, around and around talking of anything and everything, his arm around her shoulder like an old scarf. An idea had come to her that she was excited to discuss. On the metro she'd spotted an ad for an EgyptAir seat sale—a flight to Cairo could be had for almost half price. What if, she found herself thinking, what if she just bought a ticket and boarded a plane and took herself to Cairo? She could take extra days over the Christmas holidays. It was incredible, this sudden and massive feeling of possibility. Years of waiting and deferring, dissolved in an instant by the fairy dust of a seat sale. Is that how great things are accomplished, she wondered, through the serendipity of a poster in the metro? She was smiling so hard that she had to stop walking and savour the crystallization of a decision—a sensation, she was forced to admit, she wasn't used to. There was a *decision* to



make. It felt so adult, and at twenty-five that is what she barely was. She found a picnic table and sat down. Not far away a thin woman wrestled with a mean-looking dog that pulled violently against its leash in the direction of squirrels and pigeons. Nadia moved to the other side, putting a few planks of wood between her and the animal. Just in case. Two teenage boys squatting on skateboards passed a joint back and forth, the sweet aroma getting her attention. Rush-hour traffic inched around the perimeter of the park, containing and restricting her, leaving streaks of light as the sky abruptly went grey. The sounds of the city shifted to a new register, the key of nighttime. She was shivering and bloodless when she finally stood up and headed for home.

Bishara tried to inject some humanity, as he put it, into the “other side.” A few articles, letters to the editor, speeches at local churches, mosques, and even two or three synagogues. He didn’t fit most people’s preconceptions of what a Palestinian looked like. He wasn’t hijacking a plane, for one, nor was he Muslim. But the phone calls started. After a while, the menacing escalated to bomb, fire, and even kidnapping threats. The most ridiculous was when an irate woman got Clare on the phone and damned her with the worst thing she could think of: “Go fuck an Arab!” Clare gave as good as she got, but Nadia knew the calls were getting under her mother’s skin. The arguing between her parents increased and her name was invoked as much as any outlawed organization. *You’re*

*putting our daughter in danger. No, the real danger is she lose her birthright. You don't need to be so outspoken. Why you? Why me? Because if I am silent then I agree with Golda Meir: there is no Palestinian people, there is no such thing as Palestine, a land without people for a people without land. What are you going on about?*

“Where is Goldie, Baba?”

He tried to ignore her but Nadia was pulling at his arm. There was a neighbourhood dog named Goldie but it had been lost for weeks. Did he find the dog? “Where is Goldie, Baba?”

“She means the dog,” her mother said wearily.

“Shall we go look for her, *ya Nadia*? Yalla.” He took her hand and led her outside where they roamed the streets until sunset calling *Goldie! Goldie! Goldie!* Sometimes he laughed and gave it a last name: *Goldie Meir! Goldie Meir!*

Whether it was Clare's impatience or his own inability to secure a stable life from which he could risk politics, he eventually stopped taking Nadia to his speaking events, and stopped urging her to read this book or that article. His friends from the old country stopped coming around. Om Kalsoum and Warda disappeared from the record player. Sliced white bread replaced pita—finally. He even seemed to stop speaking Arabic in the house. Palestine was a ghost and her father did not want to be haunted. In the news and all around them, there was consensus: the Palestinians were an affront to the civilized world and the safe passage of the chosen people. Then one day Nadia woke up and he was gone. “He thinks he can go to Palestine,” her mother scoffed. “To some parallel universe

where politics is more important than his family. Who knows, maybe in forty days he'll cross the Sinai and actually get there."

Next spring would be another five-year mark, a half-decade, a half anniversary, a reminder of her half-present parent. The decades sliced her in half measures. She was almost afraid to wait for it, to head to that half-open gate and face the loneliness of being always half alone.

When she walked in the door, Daniel had dinner ready and a long story about work. He might be a thief, he said.

"Who?"

"Serge. *Je t'ai dit*. Are you listening?"

"Yes, sorry," she said into her food.

"He has friends who 'buy things' then return them."

"What about the receipts?"

"He makes those up too!" He pushed his plate away. Daniel ate quickly, methodically, and always finished first. He proceeded to tell her about cash registers and receipts, buttons with hidden functions, simmering resentments between managers, head offices that drank away the afternoons, and an ever-widening circle of friends who cultivated winks and nudges and discounts that translated into beer and pizza. Daniel was doing his masters in business and working part-time at a hardware store. Everything transactional made a kind of beautiful sense to him. He was ethical, however. No matter what, she had to always give him that much. He finished the story and bounced into another one, with a plot so twisted she stopped trying to follow it. She decided to not tell him about Cairo.