

Cecile Sarruf
Kitchen in Beirut

The sun spills through the kitchen door in the late morning hour. It is meaningful and relentless as it washes the stone floors with its warmth under my bare feet. I set water to boil for Arabic coffee on the stove and I am drawn to the back door, which is a wide open window to the world. Doors and windows in Beirut are perpetually open in the summertime. As I step to the balcony, the sun paints my face with its fierce heat. I breathe in Lebanon's freedom and the reinvention of self after a twenty-year war.

Today is a new today with tomorrow in the making and I finger the clothesline, rusted in spots, strung from one end to the other. Sundries flap happily in the cross breezes without regard for the asphalt five stories below. Risk is part of the human landscape; anything can happen in Beirut; a bombing, an assassination, an invasion. Despite this, life forges ahead with no effort to dredge up the past and sulk in lament. Those sort of tears are left to salt the Mediterranean.

If I close my eyes, the scent of the sea lingers in its coastal breezes. Being in a continual languid state must be a practiced art for Arab women because something still struggles within me to be somewhere at some certain time. A feeling of guilt that ever so slightly suggests I ought to be at the office or sitting behind a desk or punching the clock. In the East, there exists an internal clock, one connected to the movements of the sun and moon across the sky. Perhaps this is the reason I've always disliked wearing a watch. My natural inclination to follow the sun and to recognize place and time in this manner must have been deeply rooted in me by my ancestors. I dare to fall into Beirut's arms like a child to its mother.

The coolness of the kitchen's shadows welcomes me back to the boiling water. I believe my coming to the East was preordained, as if my ancestral people had been calling me to this traditional kitchen, with its stone floors and marble counters. Barefoot girl, this is what I always was all my life. The floors refuse to let go of my feet and I open the cool refrigerator. I retrieve a pound of fresh ground Cardamom Maatouk from the freezer and break open its package; the coffee's aromatic bouquet bursts and fills the entire kitchen with pleasant aroma. This is how grains ought to be, pungent and seductive before coffee making.

It was yesterday, I recall... the kindly old Arab man that had sold this exquisite coffee to me from the shop downstairs around the corner. My



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eyes had been on the numerous open boxes of sweets behind him and I did nothing to conceal my desire to taste one. Somehow, he knew this without asking and before I left, he placed a sweet in my hand to take with me. This is the nature of the Lebanese, to somehow read your heart, read your secret desires and without words, know exactly how to respond to your needs. While crossing the narrow street with my friend in tow, I bit into the nuts and chew, savoring the taste, but before I could take another bite, Mohammed had swiped the delectable morsel out of my fingers and taken it for himself. How dare you, I cried out to a set of deaf ears. He went ahead of me, and I followed, teasingly trying to snatch it back, both of us laughing as we made our way back to the apartment. That moment brought memories of my sisters and my mother and how we would take from each other's hands and eat from each other's plates. It was in our blood to do so, but in America, blood turns to water and customs such as these somehow dissipate.

The water is at a boil and I place three heaping tablespoons of coffee grains that quickly dissolve liquid black, the fire is out. Add a tablespoon of sugar and then let it sit until coffee grains fall to the bottom giving proper definition to "mud" coffee. I place a small saucer over the opening of the rekwe in order to trap the heat, and then I carefully arrange little Turkish coffee cups and saucers on a tray, which I carry out to the living room. It is a quiet morning with the brilliant sun splashing through the open glass off the front balcony.

I think of the women I've found in Beirut so far; the toothless granny expressing every dirty expletive in the book as she waddled down a narrow street to greet my host Mohammed, not a tooth in her skull as she laughed hysterically at seeing him home from the States. Later, he told me that this granny, this wonderful old woman had armed herself with an AK on each shoulder during the civil war. I was shocked. Then there was the mid-aged woman in the last stages of conventional beauty who would sit at her stucco balcony wall a few streets over. We'd come and go and still, I would find her in the same exact position, her head cradled in her hand, arm leaning onto the wall and a far off gaze in her green eyes.

And then there was the much younger woman who completely mystified me. My eyes fell from the dark evening sky one night to a balcony one flight down and across the way. I listened to the city's hum and watched her. On this particular evening, there was an unusual stillness in the air, as if everyone had gone off to the downtown plaza, everyone, except for the young woman. It was there that she paced from one end to the other in the shadows, sometimes disappearing into her well lit living room only to return and start over again. She was pacing endlessly, but why? What was most curious about all this was what she held in her hands. Was it a script? Love letters? And why was she reading and pacing, almost to the point of obsession as the hours walked by. Was she a student? I asked my friend Mohammed, but he only shrugged. Had she been spurned by a lover and lost her mind? Her incessant pacing, which appeared quite natural except for the fact that it went on for hours, disturbed me. In the silence that followed my curiosity, under the starless skies above, I resigned myself to the unknown.

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One early evening, I stood at the back kitchen door. Across the way, on a balcony three floors down, there was a serious card game in progress. Four middle-aged women sat at a card table, passing the hour, smoking argila and cackling among themselves. Above them was one bare bulb illuminating the game at hand. Beside them, sheepskin hung from a clothesline. They smoked; they laughed and passed the time with such ease. I tried to image the women in Los Angeles doing this, my neighbors setting aside their crazy work schedules, PTA meetings and dinner dates to enjoy each other in a simple card game. The idea was utterly foreign. Between my life back home and this life here, there was a great chasm and I knew it very well. I sadly retired back into my host's apartment and longed for the women of the house to return from the south. I yearned for their hands to stir up the spices, kneed the dough, roll the grapeleaves and chop the parsley. Only then would this kitchen find its true meaning in this world.

Cecile Sarruf received her MFA in creative writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles. She writes poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. Her work can be found at levantinecenter.org. She is currently working on her first non-fiction book based on her experiences as an English teacher in a small Islamic school in Los Angeles and her travels abroad to Lebanon. As an Arab American, she brings a unique voice to the page.