

*"Za'atar Croissants" by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Copyright 2018 by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Honorable Mention story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams
Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this
story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.*

Za'atar Croissants

by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan

The scent of thick ocean salt mixed with dust greets us as Papa forces open the door to my Teta's apartment. No one has set foot in it for over a year, since her funeral last winter. I didn't go. Papa shuffles into the living room and struggles to open the large wooden shutters blocking off the balcony.

"Papa, I'll do it," I say, taking his hands off the rotating crank.

He sits on the sofa with a stifled groan and fits a cushion behind his back. His khaki pants ride up around his ankles when he sits and he fiddles with the silver buckle on his watchstrap. I open my mouth to tease him, because he always chastises me for fiddling with anything, but the lines on his forehead seem deeper and his receding curly black hair looks thinner in this light. I turn back to the shutters. There is rust on the crank but I get it to slide open by jiggling the side of the shutter at the same time. A serenade of car horns and throaty, wailing pop singers from the servees taxi radios rushes in. A breeze cuts through the musty apartment, welcome fresh air despite its lingering second hand smoke.

"Ah," Papa says, "Beirut." He looks out onto the balcony, a small cement strip with two faded pink plastic garden chairs and a clay pot filled with dirt and cigarette butts. All my memories from the one summer we spent in Beirut are on this balcony, a small cage of escape from the heat of the apartment, the clanging of small coffee cups and gold bowls filled with spiced nut mixes. I knew Teta only as a pair of hands cracking pistachios and a mouth sucking their salted shells, blowing smoke wherever she looked. Maman sent me to the balcony with a toy truck and I watched the little yellow parakeet chirp in its own cage on the balcony next to ours.

"It's as filthy and overcrowded as I remember." Papa's face wrinkles as if he bit into a rotting apricot and he stomps his shoe on the carpet. A small brown puff shoots out from the knotted fibers. On the wall that faces the couch, a dark oil painting of galloping horses looms. The apartment feels smaller than when we walked in. I wish Papa had a stronger back and Maman did not insist on my accompanying him to help. I reach for my phone to see what my friends from school are doing on their vacation but then I remember the telephone-internet box in our closet back home in Paris, still taped shut. Papa was supposed to set it up for Teta but postponed his trip one too many times.

I sleep on Papa's childhood bed in his childhood room. An identical single mattress lays next to mine, his brother's, who died ten years ago in a car bomb. I didn't know him. I hear Papa's breath whistle through his nose from the master bedroom and drift into the stale blanket from the closet. Outside, a heavy crack explodes like a boulder turned to gravel. I crouch beneath

"Za'atar Croissants" by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Copyright 2018 by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Honorable Mention story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams
Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this
story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

the window and search out, fingers trembling on the cold stone floor. I see nothing but rugs hanging from the balcony above and a few stray cats prowling the unlit sidewalks. Papa grunts as I shake him awake, dismisses my foolishness, it was probably a car backfire. He rolls over and the whistling picks up again. I watch him sleep, part of me aching to crawl into bed like a child and let his whistles keep me safe. I return instead to the stale blanket, trying to think of the night sounds back home in Paris, the dance music from the night shift at the firehouse and our neighbor Simone's beagle whimpering through the open window. I trace the stitches on the side of my blanket until my watch says 6 am.

On our way to buy breakfast, the military guard overlooking the big intersection a block away nods to Papa, his eyes linger a few moments too long on me. I try not to stare at the machine gun in his hands. Papa, oblivious, grips my wrist as we cross the broken sidewalks and enter the French patisserie. A woman with over highlighted hair and pencil-thin eyebrows welcomes us, says she is Joumana. The roundness of her name fills my mouth as Papa orders three za'atar croissants, flaky and overflowing with thyme, sumac, and sesame.

"You have a beautiful daughter," Joumana says as she scribbles a receipt for him. "She must make you very proud. Or is she your wife?" she teases.

Papa tries to laugh—it comes out loud and broken into bits, the same way he used to laugh when Maman invited her boss, Jean-Stéphane, over for dinner. Papa shakes his head. "This girl paints my black hair white, always talking of brushes and watercolors. I'll get her to law school."

Joumana smiles. "Inshallah, you will make a great lawyer. Who could argue with such a face?" She winks and slips me a small chocolate dipped in sea salt while Papa fiddles with the plastic bag.

We turn the apartment inside out. Papa brings thick black trash bags from his suitcase and dumps every knick-knack and crumbling object into them. He doesn't pause except to tell me that if I don't throw more things away the apartment will never sell and we'll have to come back to Beirut again. I have never seen Papa move so quickly. Bulky trash bags pile up by the elevator in the hall and I pick through them, saving the small photos he missed and a set of green silk scarves. I don't recognize any of the faces in the photos but Maman strictly ordered me not to let Papa throw away his memory. In one of the photos, a slender woman smokes a long cigarette and drags a young boy by the hand behind her. He looks at the ruptured sidewalk with one knee bent and both his sandaled feet together, as if the crumbled cement might puncture the soles of his shoes.

"Papa," I bring the photo to him. "Is this you and Teta?"

Papa glances at the photo and the moustache hairs above his lip twitch, curving up just for a second. He swiftly straightens his mouth and ignores the question. He reaches into his wallet and hands me 20,000 Lebanese pounds.

"Za'atar Croissants" by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Copyright 2018 by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Honorable Mention story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams
Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

"We need more trash bags. Go to the store on the corner and ask for Nick. He speaks decent French."

I wrap the photo in a silk scarf and tuck it into my backpack before stepping out. In the store, Nick shows me twelve types of trash bags and I choose the ones that say "STRONG" in red letters. He drops a wrapped caramel into my palm with the change and smiles.

"Shukran," I mutter thanks in my slow Arabic and rush out the door without waiting for a response. An old man sits on a milk crate outside the store and opens his mouth to show off three golden teeth and empty gums around them. I feel his eyes watch the skin on the back of my knees and wish I had listened to Maman when she told me to pack long pants.

Two boys, who look about my age, 17 or maybe one of them is 20, smoke cigarettes outside the apartment building. They wave and beckon me over, but I give them a quick nod and take the stairs. In the apartment, a man in a navy blue sweat suit stands on a creaky ladder and gazes into the air ducts by the ceiling. Papa introduces him as Malak, the concierge of the building.

"I will need my boys to help me," Malak descends from the ladder. "I don't think your daughter should be getting her face soiled in there." I feel my ears warm and stutter incomprehensibly under my breath, but Malak leans out over the balcony. "Brahim, Jaad! Come up here."

The two boys smoking cigarettes pound up the stairs and grin when they see me.

"Mademoiselle," says the one in a t-shirt and keffiyeh, who I learn is Brahim. The other, shorter but with wider eyes, bows in my direction.

"Khalas," Malak chides. "Enough." He swats the backs of their heads and sends them into the air duct. They toss down boxes, suitcases, and purses still filled with long-dried lipsticks and torn wallets, all coated in thick white dust. They, too, emerge swathed in the soot. Malak orders them to go wash up and the shorter one, Jaad, swipes a finger across my forehead on his way out, leaving a smudge of white.

Of course, we visit the graves in the cemetery. Papa searches for a servees while I struggle to latch the heavy iron gate. I sit in the back of the servees and count the number of red lights we pass through. At each intersection, a policeman stands in the middle of the cars, blows a tiny whistle, and waves for the cars stopped at red lights to keep going and for the cars with green lights to stop moving, "ya hmar, yalla," comparing each driver to a different insulting animal. Papa, in the front passenger seat, closes his eyes until a motorcyclist passes and taps on his window with a grin. Papa erupts and shouts, his Arabic more guttural and jagged than the Arabic he speaks with Maman in Paris when they gossip about strangers in public. The words are too close together for me to pick them apart and he rolls down his window to smack the rusting license plate as the motorcyclist escapes. I tuck my chin down so he won't see me laugh in his side mirror.

"Za'atar Croissants" by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
 Copyright 2018 by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
 Honorable Mention story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
 Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams
 Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this
 story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

A padlock closes the chain-link fence to the Christian cemetery. Papa pulls out a small key from his shirt pocket but he can't get it to turn inside the lock. I offer help but he shakes his head and jerks the key harder. Palm trees droop out over the fence and into the road. I take a few steps away from the padlock and see that the fence is torn down just a few yards away.

"Papa," I call. "Someone knew our key wouldn't work."

Papa does not pick up on my amusement. "This city was never fixed after the civil war. Everywhere, they put a lock on the upstairs window but leave the back door wide open. When will they get a proper government, not just money guzzlers drunk on arak?"

Inside the cemetery, Teta is buried in the same plot as Jiddo, my grandfather, who died before I was born. My uncle's grave is just beside theirs. We do not stand in the cemetery for more than two minutes before Papa grumbles about giving the grounds crew a lecture and wanders off to find someone. I don't think he'll have any luck, but I am grateful for the time without his nose in my spine. I trace the Arabic script on the other gravestones. My family's are all written in English.

Papa appears behind me as I try to decipher what looks like a poem on a gravestone. He leans over with his hands on his knees, his eyes as wide as the time I asked if I could have a boyfriend at age fourteen.

"Yalla, habibti, what are you doing, you want to learn Arabic, don't waste your time. Let's go, they're insane, come on," he pants and turns to the fence.

"Papa, what did you do?" I ask, still by the gravestone. He holds the torn flap of the chain-link fence open and waves his hand in a big circle.

"Yalla, Leila, come on!"

I pick up my bag from the grass. A short man in jeans in and a grey cap walks towards us.

"Majnun!" he shouts after us, "Crazy!" Papa ignores him and ushers me into a servees. In the car, his breath slows and he fidgets with the string of prayer beads hanging from the head rest in front of him. I plead with him to tell me what on earth he could have said to the man but he shakes his head and retreats into the master bedroom as soon as we return to the apartment. There is a bag of mana'eesh from the street vendor in the kitchen so I eat one for dinner and watch the cartoon channel with subtitles until I fall asleep. In the morning, Papa sends me to the patisserie without him, the long days of cleaning caught up with his weak back.

"Ah, he let you out alone this time. Don't listen to that crazy Baba of yours," Joumana says. "Go to your art school. A beauty like you will be successful anywhere." She hands me an extra za'atar croissant. "And then you come right back here and marry my son, he's handsome and very tall!" I laugh and thank her for the pastries.

Outside the apartment Brahim and Jaad drop their cigarettes when I arrive. I smile at them.

"We'll take you out for dinner," Brahim says.

"Za'atar Croissants" by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Copyright 2018 by Zeena Yasmine Fuleihan
Honorable Mention story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams
Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this
story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

"Our friend has a live music show on Hamra Street," Jaad adds. "It's the best part of Beirut, you have to come see it without your cranky Baba."

"I don't think my Papa will let me," I say.

"We'll bring our sister," Jaad insists. "She's 27, married."

Papa argues. "Let's just get all this out of here and go back to Paris," he grumbles. "Beirut is too stifling. You can't go out with those boys."

I plead with him, point that there's nothing left in the apartment but the beds, tell him of their sister. He chuckles. "Amal?" I say yes even though I do not know her name. "I remember her as a little baby." With this news, Joumana's extra za'atar croissant, and a dusty can of Pepsi I found in the fridge, Papa agrees as long as I am back before the sun sets.

Brahim waves down a servees while Jaad introduces me to Amal. Her face radiates elegance, with slender gold earrings draping down to her collarbone and large eyes that curve at the corners. The servees smells of cigarettes, oil, and mint leaves. Brahim, in the front, chats with our driver in a quick Arabic that I cannot decipher, so I watch out the window as we pass the beaches, the university campus, and hollowed buildings still splattered with bullet holes from the war. We turn up a hill on a narrow road and an aggressive car horn confronts us. Our driver honks back, shouts, and soon Brahim and Jaad join in. Amal looks at me and rolls her eyes, settles back in her seat. The two cars, going opposite directions on a street too small for a single large SUV, fume nose to nose and refuse to budge. I smile to myself and listen to the men compete for the louder car horn.

"So, you're ready to go back to Paris now?" Amal asks. "Beirut, the mess—Paris must be heaven compared."

"No," I say. Amal's eyebrows lift. "I don't know why anyone would leave."