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Saide Ranero

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Reading and Writing Women of the Middle East: A Story of War and Recovery

Chapter III: It was a Dungeon

SAIDE RANERO



Saide Ranero is a senior majoring in English with a writing concentration. She began writing her

novel *Not a Victim* during the summer of 2011 with funding from an Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant. The story is the voice of a generation that survived the Lebanese Civil War and lived through its aftermath. She would like to thank The Office of Undergraduate Research and Adrian Tinsley Program, specifically Dr. Jenny Shanahan, Ms. Kathy Frederick and Professor Stacy Moskos Nistendirk for their support and patience. She is especially grateful to Dr. Lee Torda for the endless encouragement and mentorship.

After what seemed like the longest walk of my life, we arrived at the shelter. The shelter was a large room built under a showroom gallery for house furniture called Al-Khoury Furniture, owned by George Al-Khoury who was one of my father's friends. After the battle to retain independence during the 40s, and after many town meetings to discuss the matter, every neighborhood in the major cities of Lebanon decided to nominate a space as the best hiding place, the spaces we all came to know as the shelters. As it was by the nature of construction in our city, showrooms were built underground. They made for logical shelters. The original owners of this particular gallery, the Hajj family, some thirty years ago built an additional space in case of another war. It was located in the heart of Byblos, and the neighboring communities chose it, with the delighted approval of the owner, to be the shelter in case of an eruption between the many sects and the long-lived struggle between Sunnis, Shiites, Maronites and Orthodox to coexist.

When we first arrived all the furniture was covered in white sheets and pushed together in the center of the space. The place seemed bigger than I remembered it, but it felt deserted and lonely just the same. Hesitating to go inside, I felt my mother take my hand. She told me that everything was going to be ok. Even then as a little girl I knew she was just trying to comfort me and that everything would not be ok. My first look at the place made it seem to me more like a dungeon than a shelter. The smell of mold and dust filled my nose, and I wondered how I was to survive in a place where the smell of my mother's fresh baked cookies would never be. I realized that not only would I miss my home's smell but my city's smell. Of fresh baked chocolate croissants. Of Mr. Samir's bakery when my mom would take me with her every Sunday to buy the best French breakfast in the neighborhood, a Sunday tradition I loved so much. The smells of my uninterrupted perfect life.

I was going to miss the sound of the metal doors opening at 7:30 every morning at Uncle Najib's dry cleaner and Uncle Anis' grocery store right across from our bedroom window. My mother called it our natural alarm. She never had a problem waking us in the morning to go to school. It was comforting to me to wake up hearing Uncle Anis greeting the arriving neighbors and informing them that he would start the coffee in five minutes, because that means once I'm out of the house I would get my daily licorice-flavored Stimerol gum. Even on Sundays, we would wake up early. We got used to the stores opening

six days a week, all of our lives. I wondered in that first day in the shelter what would wake me up every morning if all the stores were closed, and we were stuck in the shelter for who knows for how long.

After a while, dad came over and told my brother and me that the corner on the left would be the place where we were going to sleep. The shelter was really just a gigantic room without any walls to divide the space. Four poles ran along the middle. A dozen king-size mattresses placed right next to each other were lined up in a row against the back wall. Over to the right I noticed a filthy old sink and a stove; right beside it was an old rusted refrigerator. Beyond what must have been meant to be our kitchen was an old door. To my disbelief and horror, my father told me that this was the door to the bathroom. I couldn't get myself to imagine going in there, never mind taking a shower in a place shared by everybody in the shelter. On the other side of the room there were three big plastic tables and about fifteen plastic chairs. On one of the tables I noticed the old-fashioned radio and the TV my grandmother had given us when she cleaned her house before she and my grandfather moved to a small condo. The look of the TV reminded me of how nice my grandfather was to me in particular.

Everybody in the family had expected me to be the first-born boy in the family, the one that would carry the name of the family. The problem of my being born a girl was considerable. My grandfather was the only one who actually showed me that, secretly, he favored me, and he was happy that I had turned out to be a girl. He used to come over and bring me this pineapple juice called Bonjuis with a Chocoprince chocolate bar, but the most precious gifts he would buy me were the books I cherished. They were my greatest possessions because they were from him, and he thought a great deal about picking each one of them. I was the only girl my age that would spend her time reading. My mom's voice brought me back to the horrid reality of this shelter and told my brother and me to wash up. I did not want to settle in. I wanted to go back home. I wanted to go back to my room, even if it meant working on math homework.

Other people from my neighborhood started to arrive at the shelter. A couple of the families I recognized. Uncle George's family was there. His daughter Suzanna was my best friend. We used to spend hours in front of her house with the Barbie house her mother bought her on her birthday. I remembered one time her mother caught us stripping Barbie and Ken naked and trying to make them kiss. She yelled at both of us and took Ken away from us, and we never saw him again. Uncle Majid's family was there as well. He had a boy who was a couple years older than me named Roy. He was my second grade crush. I

used to write his name on the walls in our house, leaving my dad to repaint. I was heartbroken when he told me he liked this other girl, Rania. But I got over him the moment Rania told him she liked Jacob the butcher's son.

Each one of these families did exactly as we did: they had heard the news that the Lebanese Forces and Aoun's supporters from the Lebanese Army started fighting, pulled their kids out of their schools, gathered anything they might need for the journey, and headed to the appointed shelter. I knew that some of the people in the neighborhood were too stubborn to leave their houses; they were willing to die with their homes and their memories. Some of the kids my age were as shocked as I was, and some of them looked like they had been crying. But as I watched the adults ready the shelter, I was surprised at how everyone knew what to do. Later on I realized that all of our parents had actually been preparing for this event to happen. Every family knew automatically where their mattress was. After a while mom came over and told us to go to our mattress and try to get some sleep. She told us that she would give us the chance tomorrow to answer any question we had. Only one question was on my mind: when could we go back home?

Chapter IV

Adam

The shelter didn't permit any sunlight, any natural light at all, so we were constantly asking the adults what time it was. All of us children had questions for our parents, millions of them that they couldn't answer without scaring us to death, and always, always, we asked: when will it be time to go home? I think now it must have hurt them deeply to not be able to answer, but at the time they seemed very ordinarily annoyed with all of us. The adults tried to find distractions, but after being in the shelter for nearly two weeks, there was little to entertain all of us children. Some of the children would spend the day coloring; my brother was one of them. My brother was the featured artist in our home. He was so good at it. My mother displayed his painting all over our walls at home. In the shelter, he used to draw cartoon and Disney characters for all the kids there, and we would all use the crayons we gathered in one big bucket and color. One of his most famous drawings from our shelter days were imitations of Mickey Mouse's head and of Superman. For me, he drew my favorite characters from a comic book I used to be addicted to called Loulou and Tabbouch. We used to sit on the floor beside the laid out mattresses, my brother drawing and the rest of us waiting for him to give us our papers. After all the paintings and coloring was done, our mothers would appear excited and proud of the work we had done, but I saw right through them: it was all an act so we wouldn't feel sad.

They didn't care about our paintings; all they cared about was how long we could be distracted from dwelling on life in the shelter. This activity would distract me for about half an hour, and then I would go back to trying to hear the adults.

I was the only kid in that shelter that was more interested in the news that all the adults gathered around the radio to listen to at six-thirty in the morning. The voice of Free Lebanon was the only station broadcasting at the time, and Fayruz, the most celebrated Lebanese folk singer of our time, seemed to become to everybody the voice of mourning mothers and the bleeding hearts of the people.

After his I Love You Lebanon song, every morning, the news would continue on to more devastating news about casualties and political disappointment. One hundred and twenty people killed in Achrafieh right between Sahat Sesin and Martyr Square; mothers trying to protect their children. A commanding officer at a food pantry in Baabda wouldn't allow more than one loaf of bread per family. A car-bomb set off in a neighborhood where the residents refused to leave their homes, killing seventeen civilians. Most of them were kids. Not all that I heard made a lot of sense at the time, but I still understood the horrible effect of it. The idea of Christians killing each other, even as a child, made my head spin in confusion. My mother was saying to the other women that she heard earlier this morning that some of the older political families are resorting to international help in order to settle the feuds between the Lebanese Forces and Aoun's Followers from the Lebanese Army. I didn't understand at the moment that actions like that would lead the country to another ten years of struggle to get foreign arms out of Lebanon; at the time all I wanted to hear coming out that radio was that the fighting would stop and that I could go back home.

One afternoon I heard a bunch of men yelling and preparing to leave the shelter. I got close to hear what the commotion was about, and I heard my father telling Uncle Addel and Uncle Farid to go with him and get Auntie Souad from the front steps of her house. She had been screaming and beating her head with a large black plastic bag in her hands. Auntie Souad was a nice old lady who lived across from our house. She used to babysit my brother and me when our parents would go out for the night. She had a son named Adam who was our Math tutor. He was tall, skinny, with dark brown hair. Adam was always smiling and, when he did, his nose would wrinkle under his eyeglasses. He was the nicest out of the dozen Math tutors my parents had hired. Everybody knew that no force could ever help me pass any sciences; however, he was understanding, and he made the hours of intense studying bearable.

As the men set out, my mother and the rest of the women

watched them go from their circle of plastic chairs. They followed them with their eyes as they sat drinking coffee and smoking, the only entertainment they had. I could see that most of them were petrified. My mom was doing the sign of the cross:

"God help us all" she said, "This is not going to be good news!"

We waited for hours to hear some news about Auntie Souad. Right when I decided to give up the wait, my father and the other men walked in with this lady, someone who looked like the Auntie Souad I knew—but much older. She was covered in blood. I didn't even recognize her. Dad was helping her to walk. She had one arm around his shoulder. She was beside herself with grief, and still with her plastic bag.

At that moment I remembered how sweet she was to us. She used to let us stay up as late as we wanted when she watched us and would let us eat as many chocolate cookies and candy as we could hold. We used to get so hyped up on sugar that sleep was the last thing on our minds. Now, though, she was crying and screaming, going in and out of consciousness. Another lady that I didn't recognize brought her a cup of water with sugar in it and a little bit of rose water. She kept rocking back and forth, beating her fist on her chest and crying out from the top of her lungs:

"They killed him. He's gone. My only child. They ripped him out of my heart. They put him in a garbage bag, like.... One of his arms is missing, I want his arm. I want my baby's arm." And right before she fainted again, she looked up at my dad and pleaded with him to go look for her son's arm.

I couldn't believe what I had just heard. Who killed who? Who was in that bag? Whose arm was missing and who took it? I couldn't put all the pieces of this scene together. Then I saw my dad throwing himself on the plastic chair beside her and crying. The rest of the adults began asking him all sort of questions, but he seemed unable to answer any of them. He looked up.

"He's dead. I couldn't even tell it was him! So much blood. What is left of him. It's in that bag."

The adults looked at Aunt Souad and the black plastic bag, both, in horror.

"He joined the Lebanese Forces. I hoped he would come back to his senses and come home. Souad didn't leave her house for two weeks waiting for him to come back home. And now he's back, in a garbage bag. I heard that he got kidnapped about a week ago. He was the only one left for her in this world."

My father stopped talking, put his head in his hands, and started crying again. It was Adam, my Math tutor, who was in that garbage bag. I remembered that it broke Auntie Souad's heart when he told her he was leaving to join the Lebanese Forces. She couldn't understand why a Math teacher would want anything to do with any militia. How could he replace books with guns, a calculator with a grenade? She stayed with us in the shelter. She kept waking up at night screaming and pleading with whoever was in front of her to go and get her son's missing arm. No one knew what would happen to Souad. And no one knew what to do with Adam's body.

Not long after they brought her to the shelter Auntie Souad died. She didn't get a proper burial. Only the men went and buried her without even a headstone. They buried her beside her son's dismembered body. People said she died of a heart attack. I knew she died of heart break.

I never understood at that time why someone would do something like that to Adam. He was such a nice person. And I didn't understand why he had left Auntie Souad in the first place. Later on in life I understood that it was a matter of honor to him as it was for so many; a matter of defending a Christian identity and the integrity of our region. But if Lebanon was proud of its Christian existence among the Muslim countries, I wondered what these countries under the Islamic regime would be thinking of us now when we were fighting each other. They would think the same thing I was thinking: what a shame. As a child at that time and as an adult later on in life thinking back, I feel embarrassed and ashamed of what we did to our land, people and reputation as the most hospitable country in the Middle East.

Chapter VI

Sunlight?

Towards the middle of October 1990, the Syrian army interfered in the Civil War in order to stop the feuds between the army general, Michel Aoun, and the Lebanese Forces leader, Samir Geagea. They entered the Christian area in Beirut and surrounded Aoun in his house. Because of this, the civil war ended, and we could leave the shelter. Aoun managed to flee and take refuge in the French embassy. He was always on good terms with the French, so they protected him and his family. Later I heard from people that he had been exiled to France for fifteen years. A couple of years later on April 24, 1994, the Lebanese forces leader Samir Geagea was arrested for the assassination of another Christian leader that also took place in October of 1990 during the bombing of a church in Jounieh at afternoon mass. He received four life sentences to be served

consecutively. The fate of our nation now lay in the hands of our neighboring country, Syria. Our government would not be able to make any political, economic, even education policy decision without the permission of Syria. No one had forgotten that not less than ten years prior to that we had been fighting with them in an even nastier war.

But everyone in the shelter would care about all of that much later. On this day in 1990, the adults in the shelter cried and embraced at the news that came over the radio. The important thing that I understood was that the long, fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon had finally ended. For the time being everybody was happy; this war was over. All I kept thinking of was that I would be in my bed again, I would go back to my own bathroom. I would soon smell my mother's cooking again. I didn't care about any political decision or the fate of our nation. All I cared about was that I was going home. I wanted to be protected by the walls of my own home, not a shelter underground; protected by my father, not soldiers.

It took a full week to leave the shelter. I was so anxious to go back home, I made my mother angry by nagging at her to stop talking to the other women and to pack. It seemed to me that she was stalling our departure on purpose. Years later she admitted to me that she was scared to face what was waiting for us up there. Finally, on the day we were to leave, everybody started their goodbyes, promising each other to visit as soon as they settled in.

I didn't say goodbye to anybody.

I hated this place. I hated the smell. I hated the mattresses we used to sleep on. I hated the people, everybody crying all the time. I hated the bathroom that always smelled like urine. I even started hating my brother for being so content with his situation. Anger was piling up inside me and hatred towards everything and anyone that forced that life on my family and me.

I felt I had grown apart from my father most of all. I barely saw him during our stay in the shelter. It seemed like he was always talking about politics and that discussing the situation with the men was more important than giving me the kind of attention he used to. I worried that even after we left the shelter things would not be the same. No more French movies and no more freshly squeezed orange juice on Sundays. We were happy once and now I started to wonder if we would ever forget this nightmare and go back to being the dear little family that we were.

Walking out of the shelter was the happiest moment I had felt in a long time. Those dark stairs gave way to the wide open door of the gallery. The second we stepped out, the sun hit my face, giving warmth and comfort. I had tears in my eyes and the smell of the fresh air made me cry harder. My mother came closer to my brother and me, held out her hands, and smiled for the first time in months. Perhaps things would return to normal after all.

We walked for almost ten minutes to get to our house. The front wall of my house was full of bullet holes. It looked like a pasta drainer. The left side of it was bombed to the ground, and I saw on the edge of the road what was left of my brand new bike. I looked over to see my dad, shocked, the color fading from his face. Did he expect to come back and find everything perfect and for life to continue as normal? I was nine, and I knew that wouldn't be the case. After a long while of collective hesitation on all our parts, it was my brother that took the first step towards the front door. We all stood there waiting for him to tell us there was nothing left. He looked inside and back over to our direction:

“The TV is gone!”

That was all he said. We ran over to the house. My mother's new dishwasher, washer, and dryer were all gone. My father's display of old-fashioned weapons was missing, and the big TV and the VCR my father had bought just three months before the war started, all taken. I ran over to my bedroom and realized that all my clothes were stolen along with all my books. I thought to myself: the clothes, I could buy new ones, but my books! Most of them were gifts from my grandfather, and they were irreplaceable.

A couple of days passed. All we did was clean what was left of the house. My father's cousin Jean came over, and within days he had repaired the wall on the side, but he didn't have time to close the hundreds of small holes on the front wall. These we had to live with for another five months.

It took weeks getting used to real life again—showering at eight every night, bed time at nine, chores. We learned all over again how to play on the best playground in the world: the streets of our hometown. The Old Roman Street, Souk El Atii, was the most wonderful maze a kid could have. Stores were starting to open again (it was nice to see some of the old merchants, Uncle Anis, Uncle Najib). The cars were our obstacle courses and the stores were our labyrinths. We were out of the shelter and school hadn't started yet. We would play outside until my mother had to come looking for us. We would just come home to eat. None of us kids, after being trapped in that shelter for

so long, wanted to stay indoors. We all needed to be outdoors and play in the sun as long as we could.

At night, all the people in the neighborhood would gather in our house to watch TV on the small black and white set that was my grandmother's, the one that had been with us in the shelter. Dad hooked it up to his red Mercedes' battery because the electricity was still out, and we all watched a new Mexican soap opera dubbed into Arabic: *You or No One Else*. The Mercedes had survived the war unharmed. Dad said it was a miracle. It got destroyed a couple of summers after the war when dad was picking me up from my aunt's house in the village. Some road contractors were blowing up rocks in the valley across from the road where my father was driving. Small rocks started hitting the car and my father almost crashed, thinking that someone was shooting at him, still paranoid from the war he had just survived. He finally made it to my Aunt's house, but the car didn't.

All the adults were so attached to this soap opera they never missed an episode. They would sit and analyze it for hours after it was done. They all found an escape from the surrounding madness in the love triangle between Raquel, Antonio, and his evil stepbrother Maximiliano. In the story, Antonio inherits his father's millions only to have it stolen from him by his scheming brother, who has secretly married a young woman of low birth named Raquel. But, of course, Raquel thinks that Maximiliano is actually Antonio (because Max told her as much). Then Max blows up the plane that Antonio is on, presumably killing him, making it possible for Raquel to inherit his father's fortune. There was more. Maximiliano threatens to tell the authorities about Raquel's father's illegal business dealings if she refuses to stay married to him. Antonio returns, and believing he does not remember marrying Raquel because of the plane crash, falls in love with his wife. And she with him. And then Max falls in love with Raquel as well. The stories went on and on, each one more ridiculous and complicated than the one before.

These issues were easier to talk about than the real issues that were facing us in Lebanon, and analyzing Max's psychological problems seemed more reasonable than analyzing the life our people were facing every day. The foreign presence of the Syrian army was everywhere we went. It was our country, and they were controlling every aspect of it. For years they had checkpoints all over the country. In front of every entry to a new town or city they had one. We had to stop and show identification whenever they pleased to ask us. We had to answer their questions, like where were we going and why, and with the little bit of dignity that we had left we had to answer the soldiers with respect or they would search our cars and keep us sitting on the side of the road for as long as they wanted.

And they would take whatever they wanted.

Once my father wanted to take us visit St. Charbel's chapel in a village called Annaya. Right before we got to the main road to the town, we were met with a Syrian check point. My father had instructed us to never answer anything and to keep our heads down. My father stopped in front of the Syrian soldier, rolled down his window and said:

"Good afternoon, officer."

The officer walked around our car and came back to my father's window: "Where are you heading? Do you have any weapons in your trunk?"

My father automatically replied that we were going to the mountains and that he didn't carry any weapons.

"Pop your trunk open," he commanded. My father never questioned his orders. He simply opened the trunk for him, and the soldier took about fifteen minutes to search our trunk for weapons. He returned to my father's window.

"You go ahead and don't think of looking back." We drove off in silence. We never talked about it, but we encountered the same situation almost every time we left the house.

One day not long after we left the shelter I went outside early in the morning on a sunny Sunday with my dad to buy fresh bread from the bakery down the street. I took a look at the great historic buildings in front of us. The once beautiful and ancient city in Lebanon was hurt. All the buildings had holes in them like the front of our house. It had given a great fight. It seemed to me like the buildings were looking down, ready to bend and give up out of exhaustion. The streets were so quiet this early in the morning, yet I could still hear the soft cry of my city. We survived the wars with the Syrians, the Israelis, the Palestinians, and the French. We even survived the Ottoman Empire, but how were we going to survive our hatred for each other: Christians fighting Christians and Muslims fighting Muslims. What had the fight for power and supremacy done to my beautiful city? There was a time when I thought I would love this city with an unconditional love. But now I didn't think, even as a nine-year-old girl, that I could ever forgive my country or forget this war.