

The seventh annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2019

‘Café Beirut’

by Tahira Yaqoob

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2019...
Julian Barnes & Tim Hayward



‘Café Beirut’

Welcome, General, welcome. Your usual table, I take it? Let me take you through to the back. Your men are here already and have laid down their arms, ready to enjoy the spoils of our culinary labour. We have had our best linens washed and starched just this morning and have your private table set up with a yellow vase, together with a single white rose, placed at a 45-degree angle from the corner of the table, just as you requested. You were quite right; it really does enhance the table setting and I think you'll agree the blue and white checked tablecloth and vase perfectly complement our decor. We managed to match them to the yellow of the walls and our

lovely blue shutters onto the world and you were absolutely correct in saying they were the colour of sunshine and hope. The shutters, however, which we painted to match the Mediterranean Sea, will remain closed. Beyond them lies the Green Line and the once magnificent horizon visible from our windows is now a mess of burnt-out buildings pockmarked by sniper fire, like the gaping mouth of a giant filled with ugly, broken teeth.

General, will you be so kind as to let me take the liberty of suggesting dishes on the menu for you today? Over the month that you have been coming in every day, at precisely 12.30pm, not a minute later, not a minute earlier, I have deduced you are a creature of habit. Now please, Sir, don't take offence; I do not mean this in any kind of derogatory manner. You are an officer with precious little time and our little restaurant has been graced with the presence of your fine men because they have a need to refuel; as a result, you have ordered shawarmas and a mixed grill every day for a month now. I am not so

arrogant as to assume a man of your discerning tastes and pleasures would not have an array of choices at his disposal as to where to nourish and satisfy his troops and no doubt, with more freedom and flexibility, you would be enlivening your tastebuds in a more refined establishment than ours. But as I say, needs must. There is a war on and time is but a fleeting luxury for us all.

Nevertheless, allow me to select a few choice dishes from our menu, which, if I may be so immodest as to say, showcase the very finest of our national cuisine and a kind of process which speaks of past generations, the like of which you are unlikely to find anywhere else in Lebanon today. These recipes are a fiercely guarded secret and have been passed down in my family through generations, all the way back to my great-grandmother. Her name was Mara Jibril and I was named after her, as was my mother and her mother before her. I never had a daughter and my son – well, that's another story but he is tragically no longer with us. Yes, it is a cruel and terrible war

and the sooner it is over, the better.

So it is settled then; I will order a selection of dishes on your behalf. I promise you will not be left wanting. And we will of course not speak of payment, although fortunately that matter has never arisen in the month that you have been gracing our humble establishment.

Let me begin, then, with a pitcher of lemon and mint juice to quench your parched throats. War is thirsty work; this tittle, made to our own special recipe, will refresh and revive you and prepare you for battle once more. The lemons were picked from my grandmother's orchard in Sidon just yesterday and were bursting with juices, so fragrant and heavy with ripeness, you could smell them from her picket fence. We have fresh apricots, cherries and plums too, swollen by the Mediterranean sun, down in the south where the briny sea air meets the baked earth and produces the most glorious bounty. The most blessed place in God's backyard, or it should be, but even Heaven's gates have been stained by the blood spilled as

Maronite turns on Sunni, Sunni on Shia, Shia on neighbour, countryman on countryman, brother on brother.

Excuse me, General, while I compose myself. This war has made hand-wringing politicians and Cassandras of us all, yet Tiresias himself could not see how or when this will all end. But end it must.

Ah, I see our house speciality has arrived: three whole roasted chickens, cooked three ways. Each has been marinated overnight; we were expecting you, you see, General. This first is prepared with a whole garlic bulb. We crush the cloves with the flat side of a blade, rub them into the bird and massage in a generous helping of olive oil, sea salt and spices. Our second comes with a sumac herb crust. See the rich red colour of scorched earth? It is tangy and zesty and brings out the natural juices of the bird. Our third fine specimen is made with zaatar, crushed with toasted sesame seeds. We stuff the bird with the fragrant thyme and oregano mix and roast it in a firewood oven until the skin forms a

beautiful crisp and the meat cascades off the bone. Breathe in the perfume of the herbs and spices: what really brings out the flavour is the fresh lemon juice we douse each bird with before sliding it in the oven, extracted not by squeezing the life out of the fruit, but by rubbing two halves together until they release their liquid gold.

We make our mint lemonade the same way, coaxing each tantalising drop out of our glorious fruit the same way you might talk to a house plant to persuade it to unfurl its leaves. Can you believe, an entire kilo of lemons goes into every pitcher that we serve here? We finely chop mint leaves so they give up their oils, muddle with sugar syrup and leave to infuse, then blend with orange blossom, spring water and a secret ingredient that gives it that special flavour. I think you'll agree it's quite unlike anything else you will ever taste, General. Everyone has their own lemonade recipe but we have been making ours with lemons from our Sidon orchards for generations.

It's magical when they appear amid the thicket of trees, bright little bursts of sunshine dotted among the waxy, emerald leaves. We pick them when they are the size of your fist, using ladders to reach the highest, warmed by the sun. We start at dawn and heap them in baskets and nets until the Phoenician night sky turns an inky blue and then we haul our treasure inside. Sometimes I will take a bite out of one, like an apple, teeth slicing through hard rind until they tingle with the tart sweetness of the fleshy interior, juice dripping down my chin, and I swallow it whole, even the seeds.

The Chinese say the lemon is symbolic of death but I prefer to think of its healing powers. What do you think, General? If apples were the forbidden fruit, hanging from the tree of knowledge in Heaven but leading to Adam and Eve's fall from grace, surely lemons are their bittersweet understudies, a reminder of the unbounding joy and the excruciating pain? Lately, when I have accidentally nicked myself with a knife in the kitchen, I have taken to rubbing the wound with a cut

lemon. The short, sharp agony is quickly replaced by relief as the sting subsides. Would that life's miseries healed quite as quickly, General?

Sometimes, after slicing lemons, I rub my fingers in my eyes. But it's futile to try to distract oneself from the pain of a burning soul, don't you think, General? Wasn't it Rumi who said: "Men and women turn their faces/ Away from the wall of grief/ And lose their appetite"? I taste nothing. I feel nothing. I am getting tired of being an empty shell, General, like one of your spent cartridges tossed onto the floor. No bullet penetrated my heart but it might as well have.

I died the day they came for my son. Your men, General, found him amid the lemon groves after I sent him for safe keeping to my grandmother's in Sidon. They pushed him up against a tree in the orchard, accused him of collaborating with the militia. He protested his innocence but he didn't stand a chance against these brutes. They tore him limb from limb with their bare hands, General – the same hands that are

tearing apart that chicken now. Like animals, they savaged and defiled my poor son, like so much meat, and left his remains for my grandmother to weep over and gather together. We buried him in the shade of the lemon trees; his lifeblood seeped back into the earth, feeding and watering the lemons you have feasted on today. My grandmother's heart burst from grief two days after we laid him to rest. Would that mine had too.

No, General, there's no need to get up. You're looking pale; you and your men should stay seated. The strychnine will be taking effect soon. They say it tastes bitter like lemon juice; a little sugar syrup no doubt makes it far easier to swallow. It attacks the nervous system first. You might find yourself twitching soon; then the body begins spasming; finally the kidneys begin to fail, you will begin convulsing, your back will arch and you will find it increasingly difficult to breathe. If a heart attack doesn't kill you, your failing organs will. A tiny dose worked wonders on our rat infestation at the back of

Café Beirut. Perhaps it will help clean up our streets and we can all sleep easier at night.

You and I might not live to see the end of the war, General, but what are two lives lost in a sea tainted wine-red by the blood of tens of thousands of innocents? As Gibran said: "Your blood and my blood is naught but the sap that feeds the tree of Heaven." So come, let us both pour a bittersweet glass and toast: to the end of the war and the rebirth of humanity!