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Sahar Mandour's *32*

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Arianne Shahvisi

> Is a dead cockroach waiting for me in some corner? […] These creatures make me more anxious than Israeli bombs (27).

Readers approaching Mandour's *32* as a study of life in Beirut may be expecting conflict, anger, and discontent. All three are there in good measure, but the conflict and anger is often between the narrator and herself, or in the drunken brawls and road-rage of others, and the discontent is the loom that weaves the text, shaping even the book's happier moments around invisible forces of trauma and melancholy, whose political nature is never fully revealed but hovers imposingly throughout, like the show-casting skyscrapers Mandour resents.

32 opens with a comical exchange between the narrator and her cleaner, Koko, a Sri Lankan migrant worker with a tumultuous marriage and ambitions of returning to her home country in order to buy a bus, found a business, and raise her child speaking her native tongue. Over cocktails in Hamra's bars, in friends' apartments, and various car journeys, the protagonist examines her life and her writing with a close-knit group of like-minded friends, but somehow the touching bit-part played by Koko remains the pendulum about which all else turns. Koko, whose world lies far beyond Beirut's troubled borders, is the only person untouched by the city's confusion: she looks outwards, rather than in, and is planning a future, however improbable it seems, rather than floundering in the present. It is only in conversation with Koko that the reader finds moments of calm, and it is through the frank, yet awkward friendship between these two women that one sees the narrator reaching outside herself. Yet Koko, as a migrant domestic worker, like so much else in the book, is political.

An explosion in the Raouche area of Beirut punctuates the middle of the book to its sharp focus, the awaited and expected ragged face of the war-torn country making its anticipated entry. There is no shock and horror, but rather, the anxiety and weariness of the narrator and her friends as they establish the safety and whereabouts of their loved ones and then conspire to joke back their tears, collectively producing a gloss of lightness and normality to protect against the knowledge that "any car around us could be a bomb" (48). Into the maelstrom of the scene of the explosion appears a foreigner, an acquaintance from abroad, who appears with a camera at his hip, wishing to interview the family of one of the explosion's victims. This scene (45-47) is reminiscent of so many in Beirut. The overzealous young white-European or North American, armed with expensive equipment, a smattering of Arabic, and a muddled yet uncompromising moral crusade. Beirut is a city full of foreign "documentary-makers" and "journalists" whose raison d'être is to digest Beirut for the world outside: a scarred, complex, captivating seat of relative calm on one of the world's sorest fault lines. The brother of the deceased shouts at the would-be camera-man, a request that he leaves them alone, and the camera-man, presumably not understanding Arabic, or perhaps wilfully ignoring his pleas, "pounces on his prey, camera in hand, assuming the brother is giving in to the lens and not to shock over losing his brother" (47). Having asked him to stop, Mandour and her friends walk away.

There are many such scenes in which the narrator walks away from a potential dispute, yet the suppressed conflict churning within her daily life in Beirut becomes the grist of her inner dialogue, leading to observations and reflections that are at once beautiful and scathing. At one point, in lamenting Beirut's incessant building of high-rise apartment blocks, the narrator describes the occupants of such buildings as "low-quality unfair people who mistreat others" (37), the bluntness of

which does everything the author needs. Her description of people, interactions, and the city are just as cutting and perspicuous, leaving the reader with a heartfelt, visceral, and dizzying romp through one of Beirut's many Daedalian inner-worlds.

It is tempting to tout 32 as a book about Beirut, because on some level it is nothing if not that. I lived there for two years (another foreign-naïf case in point!) and her writing is a stunning, *pointillist* sensory reproduction of the city I loved, told through one woman's cheek-by-jowl dioramas of joy and misery. But that is too narrow a reading of her work. Before that, it is a book about young urban women in times of uncertainty, about the power of friendship and the value of honesty, and more than anything else, it is a book about the spectre of death and chaos. In this sense, she offers a window onto protracted adolescence in the 21st century, the languor and spontaneity of growing up without any guarantees of the sort of world you are growing into, without knowing whether the commitments of that world are worth the trouble, or whether a last-minute trip abroad, or a drink with friends in a comforting space, might just be the thing that makes one day roll manageably into the next. Mandour speaks from within Beirut's "Generation Y," the women for whom there is no template of adulthood—Lebanese or otherwise—which fits well enough to be worth the requisite loss of freedom.

Most ironic of all is Mandour's playful opening adage: "There is something about Beirut that makes the ending obvious from the beginning." What follows underlines the fact that there is nothing about Beirut and its people that makes anything obvious, even less so as she gives us only a fleeting glance at her characters across rapidly moving contexts, including the protagonist, so that the reader is left unable to guess how any of their stories might end. As the book winds to a close, its bildungsroman lesson arrives as the narrator realises that "because of my fear of endings, I've been running away from them. Many stories in my life remained unresolved, without an ending, like the Lebanese civil war" (129). She resolves to overcome this fear, to grow past her pessimism, and her first port of call in doing so are her friends, who remind her that "we have to deal with a lot of things we pretend don't exist here, and so we learn to fear life" (130). And it is this remark that provides the ending that *has* been obvious all along: the practised forgetting and pretending that makes one able to pass suspicious parked cars in the street (and fear cockroaches instead) periodically crumbles, and then we gather to share our fragilities and start all over again.