

Barbara Bedway

WHY WE ARE IN THE DAR

Mama made tabouleh, and that took courage. The ladies of the DAR did not know those tastes mixed up together, the crunchy bulghur wheat and the lemony mint dressing. By now Mama can make it just as our Lebanese grandmother taught her to: she so finely chops every bit of parsley and scallions and tomatoes so the red tomato mingles with confettied green and white onions and presto, you've got a Christmas dish, Mama says. But she will not mound the tabouleh in the center of a plate and surround it with torn bread and lettuce leaves for scooping, because to some that would be exotic and primitive and not at all sanitary. To be considerate we've put out white and green mints in a bowl by the tabouleh, because the DAR ladies are not likely to munch on parsley leaves as our grandmother did, to sweeten their onion breath.

A tureen luncheon means we must also cook up those little Swedish meatballs that the ladies love, and the yellow "perfection" salad all Jelloed up with shredded carrots and cabbage and crushed pineapple wiggling within. The ladies will bring covered dishes and a setup of their own, so as not to make too much trouble for the hostess, who is my mother today for the first time and she says God willing the last.

The Christmas decorations are up no thanks to Uncle Bashir, who promised to help now that Papa is away but he's too mad at Aunt Melania to think straight. He has gone and visited the funeral director uptown and warned him for the umpteenth time that when he, Bashir al-Hadiri, is laid out in the Dulkoski Funeral Home, his only sister is not to be allowed in, no matter how pitifully she begs; she *must* be deprived of the final comfort of viewing his mortal remains. And that is her punishment for saying his oldest son, my cousin Assad, should not wear white suits summer and winter, he looks like a blackberry in a glass of milk.

My sister Louise is good at winding ropes of pine along the banister and she makes fancy red bows out of ribbons saved from Christmases before we were even born. There's so much to do Mama has us staying home from school with headaches. But we are not worried on that

account. Mrs. Roth, my fifth grade teacher, says our mother writes the best excuse notes—she said you could excuse or forgive the Hadiri girls absolutely anything, given their mother's perfect penmanship and expressive paragraphs about even the common cold.

Well for God's *sake*, my mother exclaims, setting out the water pitcher on the desk where the Regent will preside, we have no *flag*. The ladies of the DAR salute the flag first thing in their meeting which is after their lunch and usually Mrs. Winston brings the tabletop flag no bigger than my Barbie doll but she will not be here due to diverticulitis. Call Virginia Reberon, Mama instructs Louise, who is bowing everything that can be bowed, she has circled the punch bowl with ropes of pine and draped the chairs and mirrors and doorways and though Mama says it is a bit much I believe it could be in a magazine.

"Look at that snow," Louise points out the window, one last rope of pine hanging across her arms. "This may be the last time we ever see snow," she says cheerfully, and I know she is already planning her complete, year-round Florida wardrobe with pale yellows and pinks to set off her suntanned skin. Mama says she herself is going to live in Bermuda shorts, but if I want to hide my scabby knees and still stay cool, well, I can always settle for pedal pushers.

I am dragging folding chairs up from the basement which is really my father's job but he is in Florida sending us postcards about the job interviews that he has to go on since Mr. Carlsbad the school board president said he should not be rehired as a teacher because he is a direct line to the Pope. Mama says that's a fine way to treat a decorated war veteran of the First Infantry Division, the Big Red One: No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Well. Mama says Mr. Carlsbad can kiss our suntanned behinds; soon we'll be in Florida where the weather is simply too sunny and pleasant for folks to make a fuss about keeping Catholics out of the public school system.

Mrs. Celestia Carlsbad herself is coming after all, how can she have the nerve, Mama says. Last year she was Regent and opened meetings with a gavel that her father, Judge Waldron, used to scare the bejesus out of immigrants like my grandmother, who sold a little Jake's Leg to feed her nine children during the Prohibition. Sent her to jail for a year, which is not so big a shame as you might think. Well God knows people were lucky to have someone like your grandmother to go to,

Mama told us. People came to her because the whiskey was good and if it wasn't the best at least people knew they wouldn't die from it. There were boys went blind from bad whiskey, and what did the Women's Christian Temperance Union and Judge Carlsbad care about *them?*

This is just the place/time to tell that my mother's mama was president of the WCTU, but only for one year.

Still, it hurts my heart to think of my grandmother, we called her Sitti, the Arabic word for grandmother, to think of her way down in Alderson, West Virginia at the federal prison and my nine uncles and aunt, then children like myself, sent off to the county home with only beautiful red-haired Aunt Melania taken in by relatives. Even today I do not like it when someone tells me not to make a federal case out of something because federal anything is a serious matter and will have consequences far beyond the county jail.

Virginia Reberson said she will bring her flag, Louise reports, and I see Louise has changed into her black straight skirt and blue mohair sweater, which so perfectly matches her blue eyes and sets off her perfectly flipped light brown but she says dark blonde, hair, that I feel wounded even looking in her direction. Mama tells me fifth grade was an awkward year for her, too, but I am date-colored like my father, with coal black hair and brown eyes, so I will never have eyes matching a color that I love. Look at Natalie Wood, Mama will always say, but brown eyes are not the first thing I think of when I see Natalie Wood, and her hair, by the way, flips perfectly in *West Side Story*, which Louise and I have seen eleven times in theaters from here to Columbus.

Waiting in my bedroom closet for me to change into is a red corduroy jumper with a white-yarn poodle on it. Can you imagine Natalie Wood in that?

Maria of *West Side Story* would surely not have been able to get into the DAR, Daughters of the American Revolution, its chapters standing in the same relation to the Mother Society as the Posts of the Grand Army of the Republic stand to the head of the army. It says this in the booklet Mama has sent for, and she has followed directions to track down what is needed for her to join, based on PEDIGREE and PATRIOTISM, the DAR. She has proved lineal descent from a Patriot

of 1776. Today in the membership book she will write the name of the far-back relative who is getting us into the DAR, Mr. Gideon Baruch Eli Wolcott, born 1756, died 1801. She will also write her name, Mrs. Eugenia Lee Wolcott Hadiri, but it is that Hadiri that is the main thing, the name that my mother wants to see inscribed in the membership book of the DAR.

“Honey, go change into your jumper now, and do something with your hair, it looks like you combed it with a fork.” Mama is rushing by in her housecoat with her makeup on, already beautiful but only half dressed. It’s eleven-thirty and at twelve o’clock sharp the ladies will arrive, snow-haired Mrs. Letitia B. Waldron and vicious Mrs. Celestia Carlsbad, Lily Irene Jackson who is not so bad in the talking-to department, she has a granddaughter that babysits us and never once inquires as to what religion we are being raised in, mixed up the way we are. Mrs. Augustus Adams Guild will need a footrest, and when I bring it to her I must refuse the quarter she will offer me and agree that a Catholic in the White House demands vigilance from us all.

Daddy is a Catholic and some people are vigilant about him. The school board will not hire him again, due to his being a direct line to the Pope. Plenty of Presbyterians and Methodists can coach so why bother with someone who takes orders from Rome. Is what the school board says, we hear. Louise and I do not take orders from Rome, because our parents are going to let us decide what religion we want to be when we come of age, which is sometime far in the future, possibly 1969. Still, it is worrisome in summer to watch your friends coming home from Vacation Bible School with coloring books and mimeographed sheets of songs that will help them get into heaven when you yourself have been reading Nancy Drew and listening to *Oklahoma* on the reel to reel.

I wish to God, Mama says, whenever we point this out to her, there were Unitarians somewhere close by.

Oh why now does the phone have to ring, says Mama with a run in her stocking and the nail polish bottle in one hand and that tiny black brush in the other that she’s dabbing on the run behind her leg. “Get it, Phoebe, will you?” and I do and it’s Dad and I shout out about the tabouleh and the ladies but he says I’m beat let me talk to your mother.

Mama unclips one pearl drop earring and leans against the kitchen wall, cradling the phone in her ear. "How's it going, honey?" She is silent for some moments. "Oh, Yusuf, *no*. Stop right there. Don't even consider it." Mama puts one hand over the phone and tells me to run up and get her dress off the bed. But I'm not so fast going up the stairs and I hear her repeat, "Yusuf, we agreed. You cannot work for your brother. It's out of the question. *Out of the question.*"

Louise is half way down the stairs with Mama's sheath across her arms. She puts a finger to her lips and sits down on the stairs. I say not a thing and join her too. My mother is saying, we both hear her clear as day, "Yusuf, Yusuf, listen to me. You're a *teacher*, we're moving so you can *teach*. You don't have to be a gofer for Sheik Bashir. Well, I'm sorry, but you know how he treats you. He'll always put his own son ahead of you. What do you know about the real estate business? Don't. Don't do this."

Louise looks at me, rolls her eyes and shrugs, but I know she cares, her mouth is in a frown. Maybe she's thinking that her dark blonde but really light brown hair will not be lightening in the Florida sun. This year, anyway. Not me. I 'm thinking I just don't want to hear Uncle Bashir asking me another first communion question, or see the Redman sisters down the lane standing at our front door, asking could they look at the A-rab that lives in this house.

Everybody must be so tan in Florida they won't know the difference, tan or Arab.

Mama hangs up the phone with no good-bye that we can hear, and a few seconds later there she is, at the foot of the stairs, mascara in streaks down both her cheeks. She takes her dress from Louise and sinks down on the bottom step with her head against the banister.

"So, girls," she says, "so girls." Her eyes are closed and she is rubbing her forehead, rubbing and rubbing it in circles with the palm of her hand. "Well, now we know, don't we? If we ever doubted. Blood is always thicker than water." Louise nods knowingly, but I don't see the point. Mama could just call up Uncle Bashir and tell him to mind his own damn business. He can't get any madder at her because he's already said that when he's dead he doesn't want her coming to the funeral home or the funeral, since she flat out refuses to convert. I start to remind her of this but we hear the crunch of gravel down the

lane and see Mrs. Waldron's big black Buick pull up with a carload of the ladies, every one of them wearing a wide-brimmed hat.

"You two go help them with their things," Mama says, climbing up the steps to her room. "Tell them I've got the tiniest little headache and I'll be down in a minute."

Her bedroom door shuts softly and here we are. I am still not changed and my hair's not combed but Mama didn't seem to care so I don't either. "Come on," Louise says, sighing in the same way Mama does. She stands up and brushes off her skirt. "I'll write our name in the membership book, if she won't come down." I nod. And if Mrs. Augustus Adams Guild gives me a quarter for her footrest, I'm going to take it and never say a word.