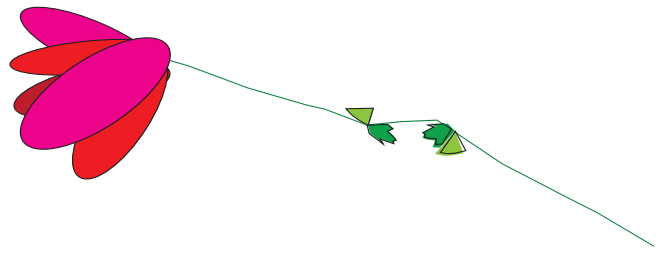


A Series of Short Stories

Claire Bendig



Touch

When I got married, the town was pregnant with life. There was an incubation period where Dearborn, Michigan was turning into my new home. It was foreign.

I moved here when I was only fourteen years old, still a child. Taken away from my Imeh and Il Papa quickly. I was the youngest of twelve and was given the most opportunity. With a kiss and wet eyes, I stepped onto a boat and never saw my family again. Lebanon would become a distant memory only enveloping me at the early hours of the morning or between dreams.

Dearborn was my new home. I was raised into womanhood here - in a cream-colored house at the end of a cul-de-sac. Our neighbors all looked the same, their hair matched the color of corn. All of their eyes were cerulean, cold to change. Imeh and Il Papa arranged my marriage with cousin Antonius, a serious man just like my Amo. He was twenty-three years my senior, but took me into his life without question. Our marriage represented opportunity and new beginnings. Many of the families in my childhood home were faced with exile due to the civil unresent with Lebanon. I was sheltered from this despite the heaviness of my heart.

The first few years we devoid of connection. Out of the streets I was immersed with incomprehensible chatter. My tongue was trapped by, first language, then accent. My tongue felt heavy, like it was stuck to the roof of my mouth, fishing to grasp the attention of others. I practiced English every day, knowing I was going to have to learn or suffer the consequence of solitude.

There were a few people that stopped by our home that spoke my native tongue. Antonius' parents came through Ellis Island a few years before, starting up a grocery business that sold Middle Eastern goods. It was my father's plan to send me to help in the shop and grow a family with Antonius. To start afresh with the Jbara name.

My relationship with Antonius' mother followed the classical mother-in-law trope. We were always distant. A few months after arriving to the United States, I woke up believing death was at my door. When I pushed

back the bed covers, I saw that my undergarments were soaked with blood. I was bleeding out, copper chocking me with fear. I called in desperation, I was dying. Antonius' mother did not tell me this was a simple part of motherhood. In fact, she said nothing at all.

A year later, I was pregnant with my first child. My daily tasks of stocking the grocery shelves became difficult as my pregnant womb swelled with new life. I was fifteen with a shallow understanding of how to take care of others, let alone myself. I was a child raising a child.

Antonius bought us the apartment above the grocery store a month before I gave birth. The apartment was quaint with a mere three bedrooms that housed my first eight children. Life was cyclic. I'd stock the grocery shelves, roll fresh grapeleaves, strip baby lambs to their bones, and birth children. English came to me in the form of paraphrases such as: that will be \$4, thank you for your business, how many ounces of sumac?

My life was devoid of the quiet that first enveloped me when arriving to America all those years ago. My children were loud, English speaking students, soldiers for the American army and nuns of the Catholic church. They were parents to their own hoards of children and I was the grandmother to over thirty grandchildren. My life was rich, but I never ceased to feel the absence of my own Imeh and Il Papa, my siblings that I'd cling to in my sleep. The feeling of coming home to the house on the hill ridge of Hasroun. The yard that was peppered with olive trees, dropping staining the soles of bare feet. Detroit has housed me for all my life, but a piece of me will forever long touch of those who brought me into this world.

Tabbouleh

- 1 CUP FINE BULGHUR
- 2 BUNCHES CURLY PARSLEY
- 12 MINT LEAVES
- 5 SCALLIONS
- 3 MEDIUM TOMATOES
- 1/2 ENGLISH CUCUMBER
- 2 LEMONS, JUICED
- 1/2 CUP OLIVE OIL
- 1 pinch of salt and pepper to taste



Chop ingredients finely, mix and enjoy!

A Friend

When you got married, the town was pregnant with life. There seemed to be an incubation period where Dearborn, Michigan was transforming into something completely new. It was foreign and terrifying. The culture was changing, shifting the heart of the city.

You were raised here, in a cream-colored house at the end of a cul-de-sac. Your neighbors all looked the same, their hair matched the color of corn. All of their eyes were cerulean, cold to change. Ma and Papa arranged your marriage at 20 years old, just six months ago, with a serious man named Arnold. Just like your father, he worked at Ford Motor company, claiming a more important job than you could ever manage. Your father has been working in the auto industry since 1908, five years before you were born. He was pleased to hand you off to live the same life as your placid mother. Each morning, you kiss your husband goodbye through the rolled-down window of his blue A-model Ford. It was a \$430 roadster. You were outraged that Arnold bought a brand new town car a week after you got married.

While he was working, you cleaned the house, cooked dinner and read. When the house was echoing with desolation, you started to write. The writing began as letters to cousins, expanded into journal entries, and by Christmas you were typing stories. Actively dreaming about the same curious woman, meeting curious people in a curious world. You thought she was wonderful.

Arnold worked from 8am to 6pm every day. When he came home at night, you put a warm dish in front of him. The sounds of clinking dishware and Arnold's sucking and chewing disrupted the silence. Sometimes you had to slice into it, relieving the tension mounting in your stomach.

"Did you hear about that Amelia Earhart? She is trying to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Isn't that wonderful?"

"I reckon Lindbergh has already done that." The air almost always hung dead and heavy.

In January 1929, snow coats everything in an unrelenting storm. Arnold took the car and without a goodbye, you were left alone in that dark house. Your hands ached and you didn't care to write. You were hungry and your cupboards were bare. The hope of his return made you nervous about the empty kitchen. So you grabbed your basket and decided to go to that strange grocery store you never dared to enter. It was called Jbara Market and had Arabic scribed above the door. You entered the market, knowing it would be the only store open in the storm.

You walk in and see an inviting woman; she's tremendously stunning in a way you've never seen before. Her accent trapped her tongue, but her bright eyes told you that she is kind. She pokes an olive with a toothpick and handed it over. It was purple and spice-coated. It was succulent and made your tongue fold from its vinegar tang. You had never tasted anything like it.

Dearborn never used to have markets like this, but when you moved in with Arnold you started to see a change. Although you'd never tell him, you loved it. You felt liberated — like you were being broken from a shell of oblivion.

You roamed the grocery, picking up and observing packages of bulgar wheat and rows of exotic spices, bright and vibrant. There were bundles of parsley and mint, stacked on one another. You returned to the deli and saw the woman hunched over the counter, rolling and folding. You stepped closer, curious and hungry for more.

“Have you ever had grape leaves?”

“A what?”

“Grape leaves, from the vine, filled with lamb and rice.” She held up her pinched cigar-like product.

You didn't have anywhere to go. You stepped behind the counter and the woman clapped her hands in excitement, each finger dipped in raw meat. She took a leaf and piled meat and rice inside, bundling it into a tight package and then gave you one to try. She encouraged you and you kept rolling, hoping she wouldn't tell you to go. Time passes and you realize at some point you've missed dinnertime. But it feels safe here, calm.

“Dear, would you like to join my family for dinner? You can treat yourself to all the hard work you've put it. Come, we live just upstairs.”

You didn't want to go back to that empty house with those empty cupboards. You look at this new found friend and feel liberated. Your hip presses against the cold countertop and you realize you're being a curious woman. You turn your back to the street and start walking towards the stairs.

Heart of the House

It is where our family gathers in the good times and the bad times. We gather here to celebrate and to grieve, to announce and to dream. The kitchen has grown with me, moved from city to city. The fridge expanding from one door to two doors, the burners from needing a match to light to the automatic gas of a Viking range.

My kitchen has given me peace. I wander into it when the house smells stale with loneliness. There is a bound book of recipes, methodical ones that pull my mind away from its stresses. They give me detailed instructions that lead me to perfection. My recipes are smeared with oil and mustard stains, dog eared and loved, filling my belly when it is craving nurturing care.

A cutting board engraved with comfort food decorates the counter, thickly rolled grapeleaves wrapping lamb and rice, brings me back to Lebanon. Where Imeh Rose laid heaps of flour-dusted pita bread and succulent olives on the table, warming its surface. Imeh's food curled my hair at my shoulders and matched my cerulean eyes to my uncle's. Without it, I was starving for identity.

As my hips became softer, the kitchen's floor became dirty with mashed bananas and pureed carrots tossed around the feet of high chairs. We got a Weimaraner and by the time the high chairs disappeared, the floors were licked clean. The meals changed from soups to purees to brown bagged lunches that left little lips smelling of peanut butter. As my kitchen grew, so did the dinner parties where champagne bubbled and finger foods were called "hors d'oeuvres".

By the time my kitchen returned to its cleanest state, it felt empty. The lunch box hooks now held my aprons and the cigar stash above the sink was gone. There was a musk that always remained, even years after they cleared it away. Luckily, the hands of my children's little ones always snatched up the stash of m&ms. I refilled that bowl to ensure their visits. The pantries were rid of excess sodium and the bigger meals, where all the burners were simmering away with different dishes, were reserved for Sundays.

This kitchen is the place where I can nurture others. I feed them to take away their fear, to take away their grief. I sit them down as I roll out dough, and make them talk about their problems over Turkish coffee. I let them sneak a bite before dinner because the glimmer in their eyes reflects my own. This is the heart of my home.

Lebanese Grapeleaves

2 TABLESPOONS OLIVE OIL

1 POUND GROUND LAMB

1/2 TEASPOON SALT

2 TEASPOONS ALLSPICE

1 1/2 CUPS SHORT GRAIN RICE

1/4 TEASPOON CINNAMON

1 JAR GRAPELEAVES ABOUT 60-70 IN BRINE

2 MEDIUM YUKON GOLD POTATOES SLICED

Prepare Stuffing (Hashweh)

Heat a large pan with olive oil, and cook ground lamb until browned. Season with salt and AllSpice.

Add uncooked rice to the meat, then cinnamon and mix well until everything is incorporated.

To stuff and roll the grape leaves, lay a grape leaf flat on a cutting board, scoop out a heaping teaspoon of the rice mixture into the center of the grape leaf, and carefully fold in the sides and roll it like you would when making a wrap.

The trick is to roll it tightly enough so that it doesn't unravel while cooking, but not too tightly since the rice needs room to expand as it cooks.

Stuff, Wrap and Cook

To stuff and roll the grape leaves, lay a grape leaf flat on a cutting board, scoop out a heaping teaspoon of the rice mixture into the center of the grape leaf, and carefully fold in the sides and roll it like you would when making a wrap. Repeat until all the stuffing has

been used and place the wrapped grape leaves in a tray.

Line the bottom of a large pot with tomatoes and/or potatoes and season with salt and pepper.

Neatly arrange the stuffed and rolled grape leaves in rows, alternating directions, to completely cover the circumference of the pot. Drizzle each layer with olive oil and season with salt and pepper to taste.

Place small round plate on top of grape leaves in the pot to hold them down and prevent floating while they are cooking.

Add 5-6 cups of boiling water to completely cover the grape leaves and the plate, then cover the pot and cook on Medium heat for 30 minutes, until most of the water is absorbed and the rice is cooked.

Add the lemon juice on top of the grape leaves, then cook on low heat for an additional 45 minutes.

Remove from heat and let cool uncovered for 30 minutes. Transfer to a dish. *Enjoy warm!*



Based on True Events

This series of short stories all revolve around the history of my great grandmother, Rose Jbara. As the first story entails. Rose Jbara left Hasaroun, Lebanon at the age of 14 to marry her cousin Antonius Jbara. Antonius arrived the Detroit, Michigan about eight years prior to Rose with his mother and father. The Jbara family opened a Lebanese grocery store where Rose was the butcher. She claimed that the stripping of meat forever ruined her appetite and she never ate meat.

Rose went on to have 16 children, two who died in infancy. The second to youngest child was my grandmother Katherine Meussner. Katherine is current 93 years old and still living in Detroit, Michigan, only a short drive away from the Jbara lebanese market.

I am Katherine Meussner's youngest grandchild, the daughter of Joanne Bendig. As you can imagine, our family is quite large spanning across the United States. There is an up to date family history book that diagrams the entire family for the past handful of generations.

Rose Jbara is a continuous muse and inspiration for me, as she did the unthinkable, leaving her family to never see them again. She faced language and cultural barriers as she transitioned from the Middle east to American culture. Rose passed away with my Grandma Katherine was only 17 years old. Her passing came to a shock to my grandmother, but it seems like the family knew for some time that she was unwell. Rose was a brave, giving and wonderful woman that will be remembered by the lineage of family she and Antonius created.

Rose Jbara 1897-1944





Found in the public records of New York City Library