

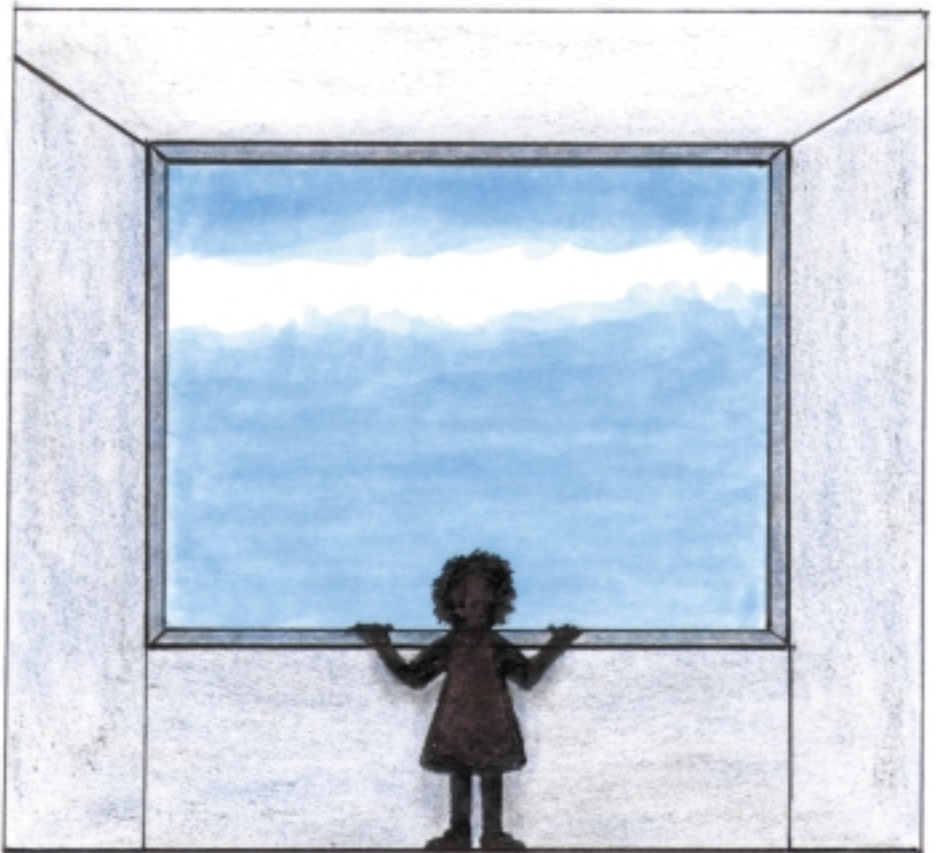
# AN AIRPLANE OVER OUR HOME, My MOTHER...

by SARINE BALIAN

My brother's side of the room is as neat as my side. His single bed tucked in the corner of the room under the long, wide window that reaches from both ends of the wall to the ceiling to my chin when I stand on the floor. The pillow at the head of the bed placed under the beige covers sprinkled with tiny brown daisies and forced tightly into the cracks between the mattress and the wood of the bed. The strongest sea breeze could not unravel this bed. Neither does sitting on it.

Hanging on the wall above the pillow and headboard, there is a colored drawing of a boy with large brown eyes and brown bobbed hair. Pink ballooning cheeks, and knees bent as he looks back at us, embarrassed because his bottom is showing and we've caught him peeing. Across the room, on my side, it looks exactly the same, except I have no window and the drawing above my bed is of a girl that looks just like the boy but she has brown pigtails and wears a red polka-dot dress. She has no reason to be embarrassed as she is fully dressed and simply smiling.

It's always this way. The entire apartment is this way too. My toys are always kept in their place. My three Barbies, one with the chic, short haircut she got at a salon once, are stored in a shopping bag with all the shoes and dresses my mother brought from London for them. Inside the dark closet in the hall closest to the bedrooms, my



mother keeps them at a low level up front by the door so that I can reach them whenever I want to play. Sometimes my father has to fish them out when they get lost in the clutter behind the boxes and other bags.

Today my toys are put away and I'm puttering around my room in silence with only an occasional clang of dishes, the swoosh of the soapy towel hanging over the wooden mop that sways across the marble floors, and the smack of the wire handle on the side of the

plastic bucket full of water and our dirt. Every time my mother bends, kneels, squats, and stands she moans.

I look out our bedroom window to the baby blue sky outside over the water. Not a cloud in sight and the sun is beaming to keep us warm. The breeze is slow and gentle.

A minute ago my brother, the neighbor's boy, and a friend went to the shore to fish. His friend goes fishing a lot but not my brother. Darting in and out of our room

and the blue bathroom next to it he couldn't get washed and dressed fast enough before his friends arrived.

"I'm going to bring home the biggest fish in the water! I'm going to bring the twenty biggest fish in the water! There won't be any fish left in the Mediterranean by the time I'm back! MAAAAMMM! Do you know how to clean fish? We'll be eating fish for weeks! Months!"

This morning he took his pills late and was sneezing like crazy before he left. Every morning he wakes up sneezing and can't stop until he takes his pink pill. It's like he's allergic to the air in Lebanon. He will be relieved of his allergies without pills, we will learn, in America, for reasons we won't understand. For now, he is a sick boy who refuses to take pills. He refuses to be the boy that was very sick as a baby, the baby who came two months too soon. The baby who almost died and took his mother with him. The baby who almost took away my mother before I was born. The baby who grew to be the boy who refused to eat, making our parents welcome his little sister's big appetite as a blessing.

My eyes veer down from the sky and onto the sea below. A shade darker than the sky, the water is still and flat today, except for the small waves slapping the shore. The Navy ships are close to shore today. My father would know why, but I don't. I can see them clearly—everything on the ship is gray, everything! The ships have names that will ring familiar to me when I'm older and in America. Someone will list a few states and I will recognize one of these ships. I will hear grown-ups recite them in conversation—the *New Jersey*, the *Missouri*, and so on.

I see one of them so clearly on the still water that I look for people, curious about what American soldiers look like. Finally, Big America came. Now everything will change, so I hear. We'll all live

differently from now on because Big America came. We will no longer hear the thundering dance of red bombs across the black night. There will be no more checkpoints for us to cross in our green Fiat. The guards, young men with scarf-covered faces, will no longer question where we're headed or where we've been.

"You need the identification for the children? They're just children!" My father protests to these men.

The TV news, our nightly *akhabar*, will no longer recite the number of dead versus the number of wounded and who did it. Soon I will see cities in Lebanon everyone talks about but then says we can't go to because it's too dangerous or say, "No, we can't go there now."

Cities my brother knows but hardly remembers.

"At least he saw them," they say, "but the girl hasn't."

There were other countries that came. A few Italian soldiers made a ripple in our hopes as did some French ones. But they were not as big as Big America. Big America changes everything, everywhere, and everyone listens.

The soldiers on the ship don't know their fate; they are still shiny in their white uniforms. The decks of the ship went from abandoned to overcrowded before my heart could beat a second time; it looks like they're in a hurry, running all over the ship like white ants. The sharp cut of a jet crossing the sky slides through the air and disappears. A moment of silence passes and another tick of my heart beats. Silence and uninterrupted, still sea—maybe I imagined it. A quick cut of speed above returns. The weight of a jet plane pushing its way through nothing but sky, this time louder and closer. If I wait, it will pass, just like before, just planes passing by. Reminding us not to forget where we are.

*End of excerpt*