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CULTURAL WORK

Churchill: A Short Story of Contemporary Beirut

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Abstract

This fictional story, inspired in part by real-life events, develops an episode in the life of Sarah, who comes from a family of modest means in Beirut's southern suburbs. Sarah weds Ned Khoury, a self-made businessman whose Christian faith invites criticism in Sarah's community. The marriage brings Sarah and her family financial stability, but it soon becomes clear that Ned's interests lie elsewhere. Sarah learns she is a cover for Ned's same-sex inclinations and later meets his lover Rayan, who offers her a feisty parrot—Churchill—as a companion. Ned introduces Sarah to his childhood friend, Dani, who seduces her. Sarah grows close to and later fetishizes Churchill, whose presence becomes essential to her lovemaking rituals. Meanwhile, Ned encourages and guides her as she forms her own network of partners. When Churchill dies, his skull mangled, his beak squashed in the heat of a moment, Sarah experiences a fleeting rapprochement with a slightly chastened Ned, but feels ashamed and no longer expectant when her affections are unreturned.

Keywords

Queer Lives; Double Lives; Lavender Marriages; Cultural Taboos; Beirut

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As a reward for good service, Sarah had bought her parrot a leash. It was a delicate, custom-made Burberry leash her husband's lover Rayan, to whom she owed the idea, had carried back from London. She enjoyed parading the two, bird and leash, in downtown Beirut's Saifi Village where she lived with Ned, her husband. Churchill, an attention seeker himself, had cherished these outings. The soft pastel color palette used on the Village's restored buildings met closely with those on the leash, and the strutting bird, magnificently feathered, preened his gray fluff as passers-by, usually Saifi residents and their husbands, marveled at Churchill who seemed to stand a little taller every time he heard a compliment.

Sarah, back then, had beamed at him, almost as a mother would. Now, staring ahead at the rubble, she still felt proud, even as she was ready to cry. An old man stood a few meters away, gazing behind her at what, two months before, used to be a building block in one of Beirut's southern suburbs.

'My parrot died today,' Sarah said. She still could not believe it.

The old man leaned forward eagerly and squinted at her for a few moments.

'I know you,' he said. His hand raked his sparse but neatly trimmed beard; the grayish, whitish hairs in his nostrils seemed to flare as he spoke. 'I know who you are,' he repeated, his eyes narrowing in memory. Sarah's parents had gained notoriety in the neighborhood when they made it known they consented to her marriage to a Catholic Beiruti.

Sarah was barely aware of the man's presence, but he was not too offended.

'You don't recognize me?' When he spoke, slightly reproachful, it seemed only his mouth and nose moved, while the rest of his trapezoid face remained still.

'I remember you as a girl. I remember most of the children of the neighborhood, everyone who used to play on this street.' The man paused. '*Enti*, you didn't play much,' he said slowly.

The cars on the main street, three flattened buildings farther up the road, were scurrying away from the rubble. They moved, noiselessly, in the direction of a bustling thoroughfare spilling into central Beirut, which, unlike its southern suburbs, was still relatively unscathed.

'No one plays on this street anymore, even on quiet days like today,' the man said. 'Not that there is much of a street left.' His eyes were getting misty as he contemplated the rubble.

'I lived a block away, which is probably why you don't remember me. My youngest sister lived here. You know her. She trained your maids.'

'*Esmi* Faris,' the man went on. 'You don't remember? My sister was Alia Ismail. The concierge's younger wife. The second one. Rayan's mother?'

Sure, she remembered Rayan, Ned's lover. Churchill, her beloved parrot, had been a gift from Rayan three years back. It had belonged to his mother who had always kept pets.

'*My parrot died today*,' Sarah repeated. '*Churchill died*,' she screamed.

This time, old man Faris heard.

'I'm sorry,' he said slowly, questioningly.

'I'm sorry too.' Sarah struggled for composure. 'I didn't know Alia very well,' she said, making a concession. 'I was 21 when we got married, and Ned was taking care of the staff in Saifi. But I respected her,' she added, trying to sound kind, but fighting back tears. 'I haven't had the chance to see my parents' home since the war with Israel started. And today, today…'

"There's not much to see," the man said, waving a hand at the rubble.
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As Sarah drove back to Saifi Village, she allowed herself to cry—the man's presence earlier had stiffened her. Animated blobs of what Churchill had been haunted her sleep when a fitful nap came, and when she awoke, the sapphire shroud of the early summer evening had already swathed the streets. Sarah headed to the kitchen. It was vacant.

There was a faint rustle behind the door to the staff's rooms as Shandra, the eldest of the housekeepers, adjusted her uniform and opened the door, just as Sarah was about to peel an orange.

'Madame Sarah,' Shandra said, 'Please, Madame,' indicating that Sarah should leave the task to her. 'Did you have a nice day? A nice nap?'

'Yes,' said Sarah. What else could she say? She gave Shandra and her helpers suggestions, rather than instructions, for supper. Having had no training in running a house and having never lived in a staffed house before marrying Ned, she didn't feel right to patronize them, even after four years of marriage. Often, she left them to their own devices.

Upon arrival, Ned's appraisal was discouraging.

'I can't eat Italian savories,' he said, mindful of his figure. 'I had a quick bite at Alia's house, anyway. She needed to see me.'

'Really? I was in the area too. I would have loved to eat with you, today.'

'You never eat with me. When *do* you eat?'

'I'll eat when I'm dead,' said Ned. The phrase fell flat on Sarah's ears. Besides, it was old. She had heard it before. When he first married her, they used to dine sumptuously. The trio of Sri Lankans who ran the house, Shandra, Tilika, and Tsehai, had been brilliantly tutored by Alia whose culinary abilities in the Dahyieh, as southern Beirut is dubbed, were all but legendary. Rayan would sit with them, naturally, but at least Ned ate. He was certainly less athletic then. She wondered if it wasn't over a meal, like the one her husband had just turned down, that Rayan had first seduced him.

'I am sorry about Churchill,' said Ned, and he was, too.

It was only after he had caught her masturbating with Churchill's assistance that Ned had consented, even suggested, that she take on a lover. When her lovers failed her, Churchill always knew what felt right. George, Michael, Amin, Fadi, Steve, Anwar—they had all come and gone. Churchill stayed. He seemed to be a natural too: he pecked and stroked and tweaked and tickled and caressed, indefatigably, in the right places; he knew what needed to be done.

At first, Sarah was reluctant. Lechery, back home, was a strict non-starter. And her family's reputation had already suffered much after she married Ned: marrying a Catholic did not fit the mold. Her parents had supported her, though, even encouraged her. Ned Khoury's self-made wealth in Solidere, the country's premier land development firm, had been the confirmation they needed that their only daughter would not know want again. Sarah had always been aware of her mother's shame over her inability to meet the community's expectations: people had anticipated sturdy offspring, a bushel of boys, not merely a girl—Sarah was pretty and easily impressible though, and Ned had loved her for that, even as the qualities meant little back home.

Now, in her new home, she gradually got used to a pattern of lechery that she would learn to embrace, buoyed by a determination to make the most of her situation. Her husband helped her, of course, even guided her to a few men, like Dani, he had approved of, but eventually she developed her own network of partners. Ned had the uncanny ability to make this arranged infidelity in their Saifi home seem natural, but it was Dani who first ensured its success.

Dani was Ned's childhood friend and the closest Ned came to having a brother. It was therefore not surprising, to Ned in the least, that his friend would consider it his duty to help him in his quandary. It was

only after Dani moved to Dubai, when his art gallery in Beirut closed down due to the economic crisis, that Ned and Sarah realized they had to assess alternatives. This was not without disappointment, for Sarah had come to enjoy Dani's company, as she would his lovemaking, which, no matter how often they had it, seemed every time like the first. Dani, who was jovial and warm, had cultivated the ability to seem shy, making it work, in general, to his advantage.

Perhaps she was remembering Dani now, the way one remembers the dead, because his induction into her life, and her bed, had followed soon after Churchill's. With much cajoling, followed by a lot of trepidation, they had made love, Dani taking the lead, Sarah timid and inert at first, then still shy but less passive the second time around.

It had been the end of the first day of Ramadan, a particularly breezeless afternoon. The call to prayer from the minaret of the nearby Mohammad Al Amin Mosque in downtown Beirut's Martyr's Square, at walking distance from Ned's house, had seeped through the half-open window of Sarah's room. It had sounded incongruous in the aftermath of sex. At least it seemed so to Dani, and he asked Sarah teasingly what she thought.

'I don't abide by Ramadan-related rules,' she replied. 'I never understood how the children in my neighborhood could hold a fast for so many hours for days on end.' A cloud passed over her face. 'But was that what you meant? It hardly matters anymore, does it, now that I'm married to Ned?'

'No, it doesn't.' Dani sat up in bed. 'Come here,' he said. He stretched his legs, stroking her gently. 'Everything will be alright. You'll see.'

Still, the closest to a grimace as Dani would allow crossed his face. He told her he liked that she was not too religious. 'One should be religious enough and not too much,' he said.

A faint but distinct scrunch of talons on the marble floor heralded Churchill's entry into the room, his posture unmoving as he eyed the couple. Another instant and Churchill was on the bed too. Sarah made space for him and returned his glare with unruffled tenderness.

'*Chou hayda*?' What is this, asked Dani, amused and impressed. The sight of Churchill resting his plumage against Sarah's bare chest and looking at him defiantly was both beautiful and surreal, an almost Renaissance tableau he could envision for his gallery.

'This is my beloved Churchill,' Sarah said, after a while. 'He's not fierce as he looks,' she added, laughing. Dani didn't look convinced.

'Come now,' she said. 'He is harmless, really.'

Still marveling at the sight, he felt rather apprehensive when Sarah arched her torso so that her chin was almost resting on his shoulder, with Churchill pegged between them at a distance that was not uncomfortable. But Sarah was in her element now.

'Thanks for making love to me,' she said. 'I enjoyed it.'

'Would you want me to make love to you again, then?'

Sarah nodded. 'Would you like to sleep with me? Now?'

'Right now?' he asked. 'Yes.' Dani hesitated. 'Yes,' he repeated. It sounded firmer the second time.

Churchill, then, might have joined in fortuitously, perhaps even reproachfully at first, but a pattern was soon established. Churchill knew there were two types of men who visited Sarah's room: those who accepted his presence and subsequently his participation and those who were squeamish, like Dani, and needed coaxing. A tweak on the ass cheek usually did the job.

Of course, there were still times late at night when the two would be alone, when Sarah would talk to Churchill, and he would provide comfort. And yet, what was remarkable then was that in those few hours before dawn, a sort of quiet battle went on within her between the afterglow of sex, the quiescence of the

night, and something dark and disturbing—the silent unease of things, the sense that each week with Churchill was time lost that could not be recovered and a sense of something else she could not name, guilt perhaps, that had lurked between Churchill's beak as though in waiting for the moment when all would end, as it did, with his skull mangled, his beak squashed in the heat of a moment.

Sarah wiped her cheeks with her sleeves—the staff had walked in discretely to clear the table. Ned was still in the room, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

'Alia trained them well,' Sarah said. She looked pensively at the Sri Lankans' retreat; they trod along the corridor, kitchen-bound, laden with supper trays.

'Who?' Ned replied absent-mindedly, trilling the 'who.' He stood to draw the heavy-silk curtain but peered outside the window instead. Saifi's small-scaled, basalt-cobbled streets, aesthetically narrowed by broadened and elevated sidewalks, and aligned with rustic lampposts and flowerbeds, were now all but empty. Active and vibrant in daytime, the village at night enjoyed an exquisite lull that Ned found soothing.

'I love you, Sarah,' he said suddenly, as if offering a statement of guilt, an awareness of everything she had gone through. Still, the moment felt companionable. He tentatively placed his hand on hers.

Perhaps it was because Churchill was no longer there, or because it was a feeling, undefined, that was consuming her, perhaps it was longing even, that made her hopeful and let down her guard.

'*Habibi*, I've missed you too,' Sarah said, lifting her husband's hand to her lips.

His body tautened; he stood up and started pacing the room, his brain racing, trying to put a name to a face or two.

When Ned looked upon her again, Sarah looked away, slightly ashamed, but no longer expectant.