

Lara Cusa left Beirut in the summer of 1975

just a few months after the civil war began. She thought she was leaving for a few weeks, that things would calm down and she would return. But the war only got worse and she enrolled in a film school in Paris. She lived by the radio, listening to news of the war: the hotel wars, Black Saturday, kidnappings and murders. She spent hours trying to call her mother in Beirut. She felt guilty at having left her mother and sister alone. She'd stand by the Ecole Militaire waiting for the bus in the early morning drizzle and think of getting on the next plane to Beirut. But she couldn't bear the idea of the empty plane, the landing at Beirut airport, the questions about her religion, the smoke rising from buildings, and the detours to avoid flying roadblocks from the airport to their house. She'd get on the bus and head for her class where she'd sit, dazed, listening to the rockets falling in her head.

Now, Lara Cusa is sitting in her Le Club seat of an Air France Airbus heading for Nice. She is sipping champagne and looking out the window at the Alps below her. She is thinking about the mountains of her homeland, the rounded mountain tops with their dry shrubs and views of the Mediterranean. The mountains of Lebanon. She can almost smell the fresh milk curd,

the wax and honey. These mountains seem crude, she thinks, unfriendly, almost ferocious in their jaggedness, landlocked hundreds of miles from the sea.

Lara Cusa is used to flying. But lately she's flying Business Class. Her latest film, *Sixteen Years of Dust*, has been invited to the Cannes Film Festival where she is now heading.

As the plane descends into Nice, Lara sees the Mediterranean and sighs. Her heart cramps at the pine forests below, the tiny islands, the blue sea. She had been elated when her sister, Mona, wrote to tell her that she was coming to Paris with Claude to get married. It was January 1976. Lara cleaned her apartment, cooked dinner and then went to the airport to meet Claude and Mona. She watched the passengers disembark. She thought they looked defeated, as if they had lost a loved one, their eyes lowered to the ground, their smiles forced. She waited for three hours and still her sister hadn't shown up. She went home and drank a bottle of Beaujolais and ate a kilo of sauteed endives with roquefort sauce.

After she heard the news of Mona's death by a sniper bullet, Lara vowed never to return to her country of birth. She decided to use the war. She wanted to make money out of it. She wanted to milk the idea that her country was embroiled in civil war. She began making short films for one of the TV stations in Paris. She'd take her camera to Fouquet's, Carette and Le Garage and film the Lebanese women wrapped in fur coats in May, delicately chewing on chocolate éclairs, sipping espresso or dancing to the latest Abba songs. She'd juxtapose these images with footage of the civil war that was sent from Beirut. She was ridiculed by the rich Lebanese community in Paris. But she didn't stop. She'd interview maids that worked for rich Lebanese businessmen. One maid confessed to having been raped several times by her employer. Another said that her employer threatened to kill her when she accidentally stumbled upon a suitcase filled with hashish. The documentary, entitled *Civil War On Ave. Victor Hugo*, was invited to the East German Film Festival in Leipzig where it won third place.

When Lara Cusa walks down the steps at Nice airport and smells the humid air mixed with the salty smell of the sea, she is

overcome by a deep sadness. The air reminds her so much of Beirut. This is what I need, she thinks to herself, warm breezes, palm trees and long walks by the sea.

After collecting her bags, she heads for the festival booth where she is escorted into a brand new Renault 25 with black leather seats. The festival flag flies over the antenna and as the car merges into the fast lane heading to Cannes, Lara opens her window. The warm air makes her hair fly and Lara decides that she will leave Paris very soon and live somewhere warm.

Her film is not scheduled to be shown until the following day but Lara has received several invitations to parties all being held tonight. After checking in at the Carlton and unpacking, she goes through the invitations. A rich Lebanese artist is having a dinner party at his villa in Mougins; a producer from Warner Brothers is having a poolside party at the Martinez; a British director is having an all directors party on his yacht; Madonna's party at the Hotel du Cap; and a distributor for Orion is having a cocktail party at the Palm Beach.

Lara goes out on the balcony overlooking the Croisette and looks down at the throngs of people waiting for a star to appear. She doesn't know what she's doing here. After her first documentary, she had directed commercial films for agriculture companies and automobile manufacturers. Then she had met George, a rich banker who fell in love with her. He sent her flowers and limousines and insisted she fly with him on his private plane to Milan, Geneva or wherever he happened to go. She never liked him. Once as he kissed her toes at the Hotel Byblos in Courchevel she asked him for a million dollars to make her first feature. He accepted. She left him after he signed the check. She promised to return the money once her film was distributed.

Now, standing on the balcony in Cannes, she can hear the music drifting down from the Palais des Festivals. Tomorrow she would be escorted at eight o'clock to the official screening of her film. Her crew would be there and a few of her friends would be flying down from Paris for the occasion. George had called, wanting to escort her, but she refused. She can't face him until her film is bought by a distributor. She wants to write him a

check while he looks on. She will write One million And No cents and blow smoke in his face from her cigar.

After Lara showers, she sees a hair on her chin which she plucks with a tweezer. She notices that the hair on her arms is dark again and she gets out her kit and patiently dabs both her arms with yellow dye. She decides to go to the Orion cocktail party and suck up to the distributor who just might invite her to Los Angeles. Then she will go up to Mougin's to the party of the Beirut artist. She had met the painter a few times and had been intrigued by his detachment from their land of origin. A good sign, thinks Lara as she zips up her black mini-skirt.

Walter Cohen greets her warmly when she enters the cocktail party.

"I've heard so much about your film," he says.

Lara smiles, looks around for the champagne.

"And I hear people in America don't care about Beirut now that the Marines have withdrawn and the hostages are out," Lara says, irritated by the uncolorful mood of the party, irritated at the grey suit that Cohen is wearing. This is Cannes, she wants to tell him, not Burbank at noon. Cohen starts to mumble things about the American public, the recession.

"We at Orion are committed to foreign films, to showing Americans the cream of what is made overseas," he is saying.

A waiter passes with a tray of champagne glasses and Lara takes two.

"The cream?" Lara says. She feels like making an impression tonight. She feels sexy and dangerous and slightly buzzed from all the attention.

"What is your film about, Lara?" asks Cohen, gently taking an empty champagne glass from her hand and handing it to a passing waiter.

"My film is about war immigrants," Lara says. The champagne has gotten to her head and she is enjoying Cohen's eyes on her cleavage. "Hundreds of thousands of people fled the country when the civil war began fifteen years ago. The rich, the poor, the smugglers, the pimps and the whores. But they all have one thing in common. Each of them has had a loved one killed or kidnapped or maimed and all of them carry this around with

them. They can't run away from it, wherever they go. And what has this war accomplished you may ask, Mr. Cohen?"

Cohen nods, stifles a yawn.

"Nothing. Sixteen years of nothing, just the country crumbling to dust." Lara realizes that she is talking too much, that she might lose Cohen's interest. What short concentration spans those Hollywood people have, thinks Lara.

Back in the Renault heading up the hill to Mougins, Lara is thankful that she is going to Nadim's party. She likes to be surrounded by people who know what it is to have civil war ravage a city. Lara feels good. Cohen has given her enough hints that he is willing to distribute her film. They will sign the contract the day after her screening. I can work in Hollywood now, thinks Lara. She flips open her pocket mirror and dabs her lips with red lipstick as the car pulls up to the gates of a hillside mansion.

Nadim and about twelve other people are standing around the barbecue by the swimming pool. Nadim hugs her. She recognizes a few faces – a French actor, a Moroccan director, an Egyptian singer.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Nadim says, holding up his champagne glass, "our one and only Lara Cusa."

"Nadim, stop it," Lara hisses. She's turned red in the face.

Lara notices the cicadas humming in the background, the bougainvillea by the steps, the smell of orange blossoms from the nearby orchard.

"Now Zeinab will dance for us," Nadim says.

A woman dressed in black from head to toe, her face covered gypsy-style with a black shawl, starts belly dancing around the swimming pool.

The swimming pool is lit and there's smoke and the smell of charred meat coming from the stone barbecue. The guests are standing around the swimming pool watching Zeinab dance. Someone is playing the oud. Nadim gets Lara a glass of champagne. He takes out a little vial of white powder and as they stand in the warm evening breeze, the cicadas humming in the background and Zeinab dancing to a sad melody, Nadim snorts some coke and asks Lara if she wants some. She shakes her head,

her eyes on Zeinab, the delicate hand movements, the waist rotating ever so slightly to the music. If only she could dance like that, express her emotions in a movement of a limb or a muscle or a body part. Lara knows that Cohen will treat her well, will probably arrange the financing for her next film. She will stay at the Bel Age on Sunset and invite him for a drink. She will not ask about his wife. She will take him up to the rooftop pool and ask him to show her L.A. She will take out her breasts in the cool breeze on the roof of the Bel Age and ask Cohen if he wants to hold them. She will mold the film to suit his tastes, the tastes of the American public. She's changed in fifteen years. She's learned that survival is the key, not principles or ideals. She wants many things to make up for a lost country, a lost sister. She wants to leave Paris. Sixteen years is a long time. She wants to have her own villa, to throw parties and have her own orange grove. She wants a cook and a driver and a Saab convertible. She wants to hire dancers and throw parties and have parking attendants valet her guests' cars.

Zeinab has finished dancing and Lara watches as the dancer takes off the shawl and mask to uncover a thin, manly face. Then Zeinab speaks and Lara realizes that it is a man, a female impersonator, a male belly dancer. Lara looks around for Nadim to ask for more champagne, but he's disappeared. Zeinab or whatever his name is walking up to her all sweaty, his chest heaving from dancing.

"My real name is Walid," he says, holding out his hand, "would you have me in one of your films?"

He is tall and she has to tilt her head slightly upward to look at him. Lara notices again how thin his face is. She tries not to stare.

"Sure, if I make another film," she says looking away, "I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, it might be a flop."

He looks at her and smiles and Lara feels like shouting CUT, to move on to the next scene. He is making her uncomfortable. Why would a man want to belly dance? Why would a woman want to belly dance in public, Lara has always asked herself.

"I'm going to be in Madonna's next music video," he says, "are you going to her party later on?"

Lara notices that the hairs on his arm are blonde. She wants to ask him what he uses, paste or spray? She wants to ask him if he has *le sida*.

"I'm going to bed soon," says Lara taking a few steps backwards, looking away, "I have a big day tomorrow."

"I'll send my resume to your producer in Paris," he says and walks off.

Lara suddenly notices that the music has stopped and the noise of the cicadas is really loud and that she is irritated by that noise. She's irritated by that man, that dancer. He's so comfortable, she thinks, uninhibited. Even at nightclubs Lara cannot dance. She drinks too much and wobbles around. At work, she hides behind the camera, her notepad, her clipboard. Lara Cusa walks slowly around the garden towards the gates where the R25 is parked. The driver is leaning against the front of the car, smoking. She asks him for a cigarette and then gets into the back seat and once again rolls down the window and lets her hair fly as they head down the hill towards Cannes.

Tomorrow is her big day. Lara is nervous. She can feel her stomach tightening, her mouth drying. The day will be long and festive: the short drive from the Carlton in a darkened limo, the cameras flashing as she climbs the stairs of the Palais. She will turn and wave. The applause would be minimal since no one really knows who she is – a third world director with phony blonde hair, an artificially small nose dreaming of Hollywood. Then the projection of her film – she will grimace at every cut, worry about the soundtrack and the color. Then the applause, the kissing, the champagne, the interviews, the photographs. The phone will ring for two days. The flowers and the smiles will slowly diminish when the winning films are selected and hers is not one of them. Then the plane ride back to Paris, to her *deux pièces*, dark and humid and her friends and meetings and talk of another film and waiting for Orion to call. She will move to Los Angeles. She will get nowhere in Paris. In Paris only the stars get to valet park. In Los Angeles anyone with three dollars can valet park. She will sign a contract with a studio to direct a film on

Terry Anderson and the hostages. She will rent a house with a pool, get a dog, maybe send for her mother to come from Beirut for a while, cook for her.

As the car speeds down Boulevard Carnot, Lara thinks that directors are stars only for a day or two a year, when their film is playing in some festival. Today she is a star. She could pull up at the Hotel du Cap and would not be turned away. She could go to Madonna's party, show the material girl her legs in black stockings. Maybe Zeinab could teach her to dance and Madonna would have her direct one of her videos.

Yes, Lara will definitely move to Los Angeles. She will direct a film on the hostages. Maybe in a few years she could make a film on the Marine experience in Beirut, maybe a love story about a young Lebanese girl falling in love with a Marine. The Marine leaves in the end. They always do. And the girl from the Third World would be left to cook for her bearded brothers and cut fresh flowers for her mother's grave. Lara Cusa knows the only way out, the only way to achieve fame and afford a house with a swimming pool would be to use the war. Maybe she would do some acting, she thinks, play the mistress of a Mossad agent.

The traffic is heavy, even at midnight, and the driver has to make a detour to get to the Carlton. Lara is thinking of Mona. Even if Lara moves to Los Angeles she would remember Mona every day.

How many times has she pictured the scene in her mind, shot it from different angles: a crane shot of the car crossing the bridge, cut to an extreme close-up the moment the bullet enters Mona's neck, blood spurting, cut back to the sniper sitting back, reloading his rifle, cut to Mona letting go of the wheel, losing control of the car, cut to external shot of the VW rolling over the Ring Bridge (voice over – Claude moaning), cut to endives with roquefort sauce, a bottle of Beaujolais, Lara sprawled out on her bed, cut to the red VW, under the bridge, crushed, blood dripping from the driver's door into the dust.

Fade to black.