Remembering Syria

Cutch: a Short Story

By Arsheen Devjee

“So there’s this kid in my class that keeps calling me ‘Cutch’.” Sajid announced when he came home from teaching his morning class at Berlitz one day. Irfaan and I were sitting to eat breakfast in our “penthouse” apartment in the chic neighborhood of Jisr al-Abyad. I call it a “penthouse” only because the apartment was on the top (seventh) floor of an apartment building, with no elevator. We had fallen in love with the oversized balcony overlooking the two jewel-studded mountains of Damascus, Mt. Qasioun and Mt. Arbaeen, and much to the warnings of our newly made real estate broker friend, Tarek, we foolheartedly agreed to the overpriced rent, and paying it three months at a time. We were excited to be in Damascus proper, and made no hesitation heading to the “trendiest” street in the city: Share’ al-Hamra, “The Red Street”. Trendy streets came with high prices, but the balcony in this flat was outstanding. The size of a small bedroom, the open terrace was all we really saw and considered before saying “yes.” We did not seriously consider the compact kitchen, bare furniture and the very limited availability of drinking water before agreeing to rent the apartment. Very soon the water availability became a problem. We had access to drinking water daily until noon, and to a tiny hot water tank on the roof that provided water to the shower, toilet and kitchen. The hot water tank often ran out before the day was done which left us in a very uncomfortable situation until we were graced with more water the next morning. But all of these inconveniences were not reason enough to refuse the chance to have such a striking view in our hands. We were sold the moment we saw it.

“What’s ‘Cutch’?” Irfaan asked casually.

“I was hoping you two might know… This kid’s pretty funny though, she called me ‘Cutch’ like four times this class.” Irfaan and I both shrugged. “How old is she?”

“I don’t know. She’s in the kindergarten class, so five maybe.”

“That’s so cute. Maybe ‘Cutch’ is some weird thing little kids say that doesn’t mean anything, you know? Or maybe she’s trying to say a word in English but doesn’t know how to pronounce it clearly.”

We asked our Arabic tutor later that day what “Cutch” was in Arabic. Mahmood flatly denied “Cutch” was an Arabic word. “We don’t have ‘ch’ sound in Arabic!” he said very loudly. Mahmood was a very passionate man, his tone often resembled shouting, but I knew he would have no intention of that sort, he just “spoke loudly”, especially for our “polite and often timid” Canadian interaction styles.

Mahmood was an Iraqi refugee living in Damascus. He would bring us photocopied University of Damascus Arabic textbooks, and we would learn their content with him in our living room. Mahmood spoke pretty good English, but when he occasionally would get stuck on a word, the volume of his voice, a clear representation of his level of frustration, would reach frightening heights, at least for me. My heart would thump extra loud when I could not understand what he was saying and had to ask for further explanation, and if he ever got a whiff of my confusion, his voice would grow louder, which only added to my nervousness. He would shout, “Wadeh! Wadeh!” With eyebrows raised and eyes popping out of his face, I would frantically nod just to satisfy him that I understood so we could move on to the next topic. His shouting would directly inhibit my ability to discern what he meant, and my eyes would glaze over from the intensity of his interrogation, leaving my with questions or a half understanding of a text to
figure out at a later time in solitude. This method worked for me, as I was studious and had developed quite the knack for figuring out the meanings of words and proper conjugations on my own late in the night. Mahmood would use a very traditional pedagogy filled with dictation, rote memorization and regular tests. Being the keen student I was, Mahmood’s teaching methods fulfilled the intense craving I had for Arabic.

Every morning, as Irfaan and I were eating breakfast, Sajid would come home from teaching his morning children’s classes at Berlitz and indulge us with stories about the cute things his students did that morning, especially the student who would call Sajid “Cutch”, and whose name, in our house, soon became Cutch. “I’m teaching my kids the song ‘head and shoulders’, and Cutch has revolutionized the effort it takes to act the song out” Sajid reported one morning after returning from class.

“What do you mean, “revolutionized?”

“Well, all the kids are so cute going up and down touching their knees and then their toes, you know, ‘knees and toes, knees and toes’. But Cutch didn’t want to go up and down”, Sajid recounted with a huge grin across his face.

“What do you mean Cutch didn’t want to go up and down?”

“Yeah, Cutch stood on one foot, the other raised in the air so she could reach her knees and toes without bending down, and sang the song standing up the whole time, her hands going from knees to toes, knees and toes, all while balancing on one foot. Brilliant! All the kids were in a line going up and down, and Cutch was in the middle, standing the whole time!” Sajid was beaming. He was so proud of his favorite student for coming up with such an ingenious way to perform “Head and Shoulders”.

Comical situations while teaching English occurred regularly in all of our classes. I always thought the whole situation of me teaching English to adults was a farce in itself as most of my students were much older than I was, and addressed me as “Teacher”, or later on at the Arab International University (AIU), “Doctor” with me calling my students by their first names. I was suffering from an acute case of “imposter syndrome”, my age and inexperience foremost in my mind, coupled with my constant doubting that my “native Western accent” alone was a sufficient qualification to teach as was pointed out to us when we were hired at Berlitz. Although all Syrians, my students at Berlitz came from diverse fields: retired army generals, doctors, PhD students, high ranking civil servants, and even retired professors. At AIU I encountered more diversity with students from all over the Arab world. Acting the part of a confident, qualified and experienced English teacher was often a nerve wracking, theatrical performance to say the least, especially in the face of comical situations.

I was teaching a class of adults at Berlitz and trying to get the students to come up with the word “nervous”. I wasn’t able to bring the correct word out of them and, as per the “Berlitz method”, resorted to giving them the word. As soon as the class heard the word “nervous”, everyone cracked a wide grin and let out a loud moan swearing that it had been on the tip of their tongues this whole time. One student, Radhwan, in the front centre of the class, about my father’s age slowly stood up putting out his hand, our eyes meeting.

The man was short and stout, with silver hair and a silver moustache. He always wore a pressed light blue collared shirt tucked into black slacks with a dark brown belt that artificially separated his torso from his legs. Radhwan was a civil servant who was taking my class as professional development administered by the ministry he worked for. He was a keen student, always asking me for further grammatical explanations, which would often put me in an awkward situation of admitting ignorance and bringing him the answer next class. In Canada, a sign of strength and integrity is when you admit to not knowing something when you really don’t know it; not so in Syria. There, it is better to feign an answer to save
face than to admit to ignorance. I did not know that then, and after a couple of times I brought Radhwan a complex grammatical explanation the following class, he began to mistrust me. We both secretly knew that.

Radhwan’s right arm was stretched out in front of him, his palm facing up and his index finger and thumb meeting to form a circle, as if he was holding a morsel of food in his hand to bring up to my mouth to eat. This was the sign for “patience” or “wait” or “slow down” in the Middle East. The signal required eye contact, and one’s hand had to come down gently and pause in mid-air as eye contact is established. It was a handy signal useful in a variety of different settings; if you wanted to cross a busy intersection and tell a car to stop or slow down to allow you to cross, or if you wanted to interrupt someone, cut in front of a line, say please, or sorry, or to say something in class.

In front of the class, Radhwan stuck out his hand in the motion of patience holding it in mid-air. “Teechar! I think it is nervooos.”

I smiled and calmly corrected him. “No Radhwan, it’s nervous.” The class had gone quiet, all side conversations paused to watch the unfolding confrontation. Radhwan’s arm went up and down again to reinforce the signal, “Teechar, it’s Nervooos!” I took a deep breath, as my insides laughed at this uncanny situation, trying to simultaneously erase the smile off my face as to appear serious. I wanted to end the conversation and move on to the remainder of the lesson. I had wasted a lot of time trying to get the class to come up with the word nervous and we were behind schedule. “Radhwan, the word is pronounced ‘nerv-us’.”

“Teechar! I know it is nervooos.”

“Maybe in French it is pronounced nervoos, but in English we say ‘nerv-us’.”

“Teechar!”

It took all my strength to end that conversation with Radhwan that evening. We ended up agreeing to disagree on the pronunciation. I was glad to get back to the lesson and finish up the class.

……………

For the end of term celebration, Sajid’s kindergarten class held a concert. Our fascination with Cutch and her antics led Sajid to invite Irfaan and I to the concert. “Come and see Cutch for yourself.”

“Really? We’ll be allowed?”

“Yes, of course. You are both teachers there. Just come a couple hours early before your afternoon classes, stay for the concert and then we’ll go for lunch before your afternoon classes begin.”

The Berlitz yard was full of parents, all with cameras, pointing and commenting at their very cute kindergarten kids. The class was made of about twelve children in total with Sajid as the teacher. The stage was in the schoolyard. The parents were seated on folding chairs in the yard and teachers and staff standing behind the chairs in the “overflow” space. The children were being led my Sajid onto the stage which was a raised concrete ledge connected to the school. Irfaan and I were standing together behind the chairs, eager to get a glimpse at the infamous Cutch that had captured our hearts over the past couple months.
The students, a good mix of boys and girls, dressed to their finest, the girls wearing colorful, poofy dresses, their hair neatly done up, the boys in dress pants and collared shirts. Where was Cutch? They were all so cute. The music began, and with Sajid’s encouragement, standing in front of the line of students, the children began singing. The lyrics of the “background” song drowned out the children’s voices. Many of the children looked star struck, their eyes glued to what looked like a small sea of parents and teachers cheering the children on, broad smiles with big teeth and eyes popping out of their happy, stretched faces, inadvertently causing temporary amnesia as the song continued, “head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes…” Where was Cutch? Then I saw her, as the children bent down to touch their toes, there was Cutch in the middle of the class in a pink dress with poofy shoulder puffs, her hair done up in a cut little bun, balancing on one leg, her other kicked out to the side, her hand moving from her knees to her toes, a wide grin on her face. “There she is, Irfaan! In the center”, I motioned to him, do you see her? She’s doing ‘knees and toes’ on one foot, you can see her so well, she’s not bending down to touch her toes like the other kids. Do you see her? Do you see her? Irfaan!

I turned to look at him. Irfaan was quiet, just staring.

A moment passed. Irfaan staring at Cutch, me staring at Irfaan.

“Cutch is a girl?” He asked slowly as if in shock.
“Of course Cutch is a girl! You thought she was a boy this whole time? I always thought she was a girl!”

“This changes everything. I thought Cutch was a boy.”

“It’s okay, boy or girl, doesn’t matter, look at her, she’s so cute, balancing on one foot…”

The presentation finished to a loud applause and the crown began to disperse, the kids running into their parents’ arms and conversations began filling the air. “I’m going to go talk to her.” I left Irfaan in the crowd and headed to the front to find Sajid. There was a small crowd of parents gathered around him, thanking him for teaching their children. I spotted Cutch and smiled at her. She was shy and hid behind her dad’s leg. After Sajid and Cutch’s dad finished speaking, Sajid crouched down to speak with Cutch. “You always call me ‘cutch’, what does that mean?”

“Cutch” she said with a shy smile.

“Ma ma’ana cutch?” What does Cutch mean? Sajid tried asking again in Arabic with earnest curiosity.

“You” she said with her finger raised pointing at Sajid, and ran off. My eyes met Sajid’s and we burst out laughing. “Now we’ll never know,” I chuckled.

The end of one term meant the beginning of another. New classes, new students whose trust and respect had to be earned. My new evening class was larger than normal, all refugees from Iraq. A local church who was active in helping the refugees navigate life in Damascus had arranged English classes for them. The students were of all different ages, professions, and skill levels. The only thing they had in common was that they were all over eighteen, from Iraq and refugees. There were twenty students, mostly men with a few (three) women. The women were all extraverts, and their proficiency in English became obvious in the first twenty minutes of the class. The students went around the room introducing themselves by stating their names, what they did, and an interesting thing about them. I soon realized a few of the men were ex-soldiers from Saddam Hussein’s recently defeated regime; my heart rate increased every time each of the veterans introduced himself and mentioned his past occupation. Of course, they didn’t mention they were “soldiers” in “Saddam Hussein’s army”, but being Iraqi refugees who used to work in the “army”, what else could they be alluding to? The group was a jolly bunch, laughing a lot.

It appeared they knew each other outside of Berlitz, which brought a light and friendly atmosphere to the class. Or perhaps the students were feeling that sweet nostalgia of meeting someone from your home country while in a foreign land. The exuberance my students felt filled the classroom air, and I breathed it in with a sense of enjoyment. I began the class by playing some ice breaker games like “Two Truths and a Lie” and “Complete the Sentence”. Despite my reservations and nervousness of some of the students’ backgrounds and my imaginings of their involvement with what I had always perceived as a villainous regime, I was really enjoying my new class. They were talkative, funny and easy to get along with. All of our faces were radiating, the lesson resembling a get together of old friends rather than an English class.

This was a bit of an unusual class in that there were more students than my other classes, which never exceeded more than twelve students and the length of the class was ninety minutes instead of the usual 45, with a ten-minute break after 45 minutes. The class was so much fun, I barely noticed the first half of the class go by.

After the break, my plan was to begin the first lesson. Our lesson was about the family. As the students filed in, I began the Berlitz method of asking questions.
I drew a picture of a family tree on the board, put the word “me” in the middle and began to ask for the appropriate words to fill the chart. Hands were flying in the air to help fill the diagram. I was feeling amazing. It is a teacher’s dream to have a fully participating class, and students whose energy lights one another up. This was going to be an awesome two months. The students filled the immediate and extended family tree quickly. I began to “Berlitz” other words from the class, words like “close friend”, “acquaintance”, “colleague” and “classmate.” We were on a roll!

Then it happened. One of the men in the front row began to hesitantly raise his hand. “Yes, Jawad”, I tried to encourage him to speak. Jawad was a quiet student. He wore a reluctant expression as he raised his hand halfway up, then down again, unsure whether to ask. His face, which was before then in a wide grin had become unsure. “Yes Jawad, it’s okay, you can speak. How can I help you?” The nervousness on his face was making my insides squirm. I hope I didn’t say anything wrong. I started to panic a bit, but at the same time tried to sound calm and inviting so that he would feel comfortable enough to ask his question. Jawad began to speak ever so slowly, “I’m sorry Teechar, I don’t know what you say.”

“You don’t know what I am saying? What do you mean? Am I speaking too fast?”

Jawad looked at Amir beside him, asking him, through facial expressions, to step in. Amir, being put on the spot was looking left and right, thinking fast on what to say. “I’m sorry Jawad and Amir. I didn’t realize you weren’t understanding me. Am I talking too fast? maybe I am enjoying myself too much with you guys!” The void in my stomach filling with regret that I had gotten so comfortable, I was probably speaking very fast.
“No you’re not too fast”, Amir spoke up. “I think it is your Indian accent I cannot understand.”

POW! Amir’s words knocked me hard in the stomach. My Indian accent?

The class was silent. This was beyond embarrassing; was I really being racially profiled by my ESL class? A moment passed. I felt a deep and familiar feeling of sadness inside of me, something that must have been left over from elementary school teasing. I looked down and made an effort to gather strength and composure, took a deep breath and looked up at the class. Jawad and Amir were also short of words, an embarrassed smile crept up on Jawad’s face. Now I understood why he was hesitating to speak up.

I was winded, unable to say anything. What Indian accent? I’ve never stepped foot in India in my life. In fact, my parents laugh at my English accent when I tried to speak Gujarati or Urdu. What was Jawad talking about? My thoughts were racing a mile a minute, rather, a thousand words per second. What do I say? What do I do? This isn’t like any type of racial profiling I had experienced on the street or in school where I can set the culprit straight, not mincing words or not having to worry about meeting them again. How do I play this off?

“Indian accent?” I said with all my strength. Has any of these people ever even been to India? They seriously come from a world without immigration, I guess there were not many non-Iraqis that immigrated to Iraq and lived there for many generations, or had moved around multiple nations and continents, settling in Iraq?

“Indian accent!” I repeated with more volume and an ironic expression. “Who has been to India before?” Amir slowly raised his hand, scanning the class left and right to see if anyone was joining him. All eyes were on Amir. “Where did you travel in India?” He rolled off some names of places in India. Bombay and Agra were the only names I recognized. “How is it in India? You must tell us, none of us have been there before, including me.” Amir was shocked. “It is very nice, teechar.”

“I’m sure it is beautiful, and I pray we all get a chance to go visit there one day. I do not have an Indian accent. I was born and grew up in Canada. I have a Canadian accent. This may be the first time you are hearing a Canadian accent.” I spoke calmly and very matter of factly. I was hurt. The pizazz and enthusiasm drained out of me. I began to imitate a British accent, “I am sure you have heard British accents before”, purposely omitting the ‘t’ in “British.” I got some smiles from the students that gave me encouragement to keep going. I dove right into my imitation of an Indian accent, “Vat are you talking about, vat Indian accent are you chatting about? I speak perfect Angrezi.” Despite how horrible I am at different accents and imitations, my attempt at an Indian accent got the class laughing out loud. I was laughing too, mainly at how horrible I knew I sounded and felt. The bell rang, and class was officially over.

My thoughts of race and identity were constant in Syria. Every time I would meet someone new, I would be hounded with questions of where I was from and what I was doing in Syria. People were curious. But the questions on where I was from would never be easy to give. My knee-jerk reaction is to say Canada. I was born and raised in Canada. However, saying I was from Canada was always met with further interrogation, “Aslik min wayn?” Where are you really from? It’s complicated. My parents and grandparents were born and raised in East Africa. It was my great grandparents that moved to East Africa from India. Although we eat Indian food, speak the language and enjoy Bollywood films (like the rest of the world), there is no other connection to India, not trips “back home” or even family. But my blood is one hundred percent Indian, and it is my blood that everyone was confused about when I called it Canadian. Over time, Sajid and I found that telling people we were from India was a lot more convenient. We would be understood very quickly and not have to go into our complicated history of
multigenerational continental migration, and we would be quoted cheaper prices. If we said Bangladesh or Pakistan, the prices would drop another notch lower. We had a lot of fun with this.

Until one day, we were met with a follow up question after revealing we were from India. The man we were conversing with asked “shu al mu’adal litahwil ila lira?” – What the conversion rate to lira? I heard his question and immediately my face became red hot. He wanted to know what the conversation rate was between lira and the Indian… what was the currency used in India? Sajid began to stall out loud, “uh uh, ma fahimt, shu su’alak?” – Sorry, I didn’t understand, what are you asking? We were going to be found out, exposed as “fake” Indians! We had been telling the whole country for more than six months that we were from India, and here we were meeting some random man who had actually been to India, and had enough knowledge and interest beyond Bollywood, to ask us a real question about the place, and we didn’t even know which currency was used in India! I was going over all the possibilities I could think of, dinar, dirham, what else? The man mumbled something that started with an ‘r’. What could it be…? Ruble starts with an ‘r’, but it couldn’t be that. My mind was racing, I should know this. I looked at Sajid, his face was as distressed as my thoughts, I made a facial expression telling him I didn’t know, the man was waiting for our answer. The man’s phone began to ring, saved by the bell! What a sense of relief? But we still had to answer his question. “Ruble?” Sajid spoke lightly.

“No it can’t be, I was thinking the same. Dinar? Dirham? But he said something that started with an ‘r’.” Then it came to me: RUPEE! India’s currency: rupee! “It’s rupee, Sajid!”

“What’s the exchange rate?”

“Wallahi ma ba’rif!” – by God I don’t know, I uttered the common expression to claim complete ignorance, waving my hand to dismiss myself from the issue, leaving Sajid on his own to answer the question. The man hung up his phone and looked at Sajid. “Ohh, uhh, al-rupee fi hind, nafs al mu’adal li lira, nafs ashee” – The Indian rupee and the lira is the same value. It is the same.

“Aywa, tamam”- yes, okay, he replied. The man was clearly distracted and whatever news he learnt from the phone call caused him to excuse himself promptly. Our cover as “Indians” was saved, but I did spend some time at the internet café researching a little more about India, just in case I was ever questioned again.

……………………

Back in Berlitz, I met with Sajid and Irfaan to take the bus home together. As we were heading down the front steps of Berlitz, a young man comes running up to Sajid. “Cutch!” he calls him. “Nice to meet you cutch!” The young man shakes Sajid’s hand quickly and runs off. The three of us stopped in silence. “Did he just call you “cutch”? I asked in an ironic voice, smiling so hard it turned to laughter. What was going on? Why did Sajid’s students’ think his name was “cutch”?

After we got home that night, I stayed awake to get some Arabic homework done before my class with Mahmood the following day. I had to read a story and figure out the meaning, spelling and i’rab (grammatical structure) of all the words and sentences for a dictation test the next day. I was reading slowly, “tashrab at-taairatu al maa-an waadihan”- the bird is drinking the water waadihan. What’s waadihan? I pull out my dictionary and began to look up the very familiar word, repeating it as I flipped through the pages and scanned the different entries, “waadihan, waadihan”. I am not sure whether my eyes fell on the definition first or if my repetitions changed into Mahmood’s shouting voice of “Waadeh! Waadeh!” that the meaning came to me. “Waadeh: clear, lucid, plain, obvious, distinct.”
Waadeh indeed! The bird is drinking clear water, and Mahmood has been asking us if his explanations were clear all this time! I chuckled to myself over how cliché not understanding what waadeh was and I ran to find Sajid and Irfaan to explain to them my discovery.

My next class with the Iraqi refugees was the following day. I spent more time than usual preparing for the class, making sure I would not feel rushed in any way so as not to affect the speed at which I spoke. I was nervous going into class, praying the “Indian accent” thing would not come up again. Although being a lot more reserved than I was in the first class, I made sure to greet the students with smiles and a lot of positive energy. I was being lively for myself more than to make them feel comfortable. I was trying to not wallow in what happened last class. The first lesson moved fast. The students were a bright group. I was consciously speaking slower and paying more attention to Jawad and Amir to make sure they understood. They both definitely noticed my extra attention on them, and they were grateful for that. After the break, a couple of the students began talking about their life in Damascus and how the laws towards refugees prohibited them from holding most jobs. An outspoken student, Ali, was complaining of getting cheated at his construction job where he was being paid a third of what other Syrian workers were being paid. Hearing these stories made my stomach curdle. Driven out of their home country, these men and women were navigating life in a country already overburdened with its own financial and security hardships, trying to find a place of their own.

After the break we started on another lesson, sports. I began “Berlitzing” by acting out different sports moves, pitching a ball, shooting a basketball, shooting a soccer ball, hitting a racket, and having the students yell out the sport I was acting out. This activity went quickly and left me scrambling to write down the names of the sports on the white board as they were being shouted out. Next came positions. I showed them a picture of a soccer team on the field. “What are these players called?” pointing to the defense. “They try to get the ball away from the net.” Students shouted out the answers as I wrote them on the board. “What about the player inside the net? What’s another name for this net?” We had covered all of the positions when Amir raised his hand. My stomach tensed a bit as I saw his hand in the air, “Yes Amir?”

“Who is that?” he asked, pointing to the out edge of the soccer field picture. I looked at the class and asked my favorite question to ask as a teacher, “Can anyone tell me who this is at the side of the field? It looks like he is yelling out to the players.”

“Cutch!” Ali shouted out from the back. “That is the cutch!”

“The what?” I inquired with astonishment. Did I just hear “cutch”? “Could you repeat that Ali. Who is that person on the field?”

“The Cutch. That is the cutch, teechar.”

I buried my head in my hands, the biggest smile overtaking my face, bending down, overwhelmed. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, of course “cutch” is coach! That makes so much sense! I moaned slightly at how obvious the answer was! My students were stunned, all of them looking at me as if I had gone crazy, trying to ascertain whether I was okay or not. I looked at them through the spaces in between my fingers of my hands on my face. A moment of silence passed. I took down my hands, and thanked Ali for his answer. My face muscles were starting to ache I was smiling so hard. Finally, I wrote the word “coach” on the board.

“Coach. It is pronounced coach.”
Arsheen Devjee is a writer of short stories of her many fantastic escapades travelling in the Middle East. She holds an MA from the University of Toronto in Near and Middle Eastern Studies. Arsheen currently lives with her family in Toronto, Canada. More of Arsheen’s stories are available on her Facebook page www.facebook.com/arsheensstories/