

LINDA CHRISTENSEN

Fare, 2017
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ROSE MARY SALUM

The Café

We arrive at the same old place, this frenchified tearoom, my mother and Aunt Zeina's favorite. Today I'm not in the mood to be with them, I feel bad and the cold medicine made me feel worse. It's never been good for me; it either makes me sleepy or it doesn't do anything at all. Moreover, I'm tired of seeing the same thing, the same people, each one searching for his usual table, the identical view, and we with the same people. I'm tired of listening to the same old talk, the jokes, their opinions, the passion invested in judging the dress of some cousin or the real reason some niece decided on the dress with silver brocade when she could have had the one with the gold braid.

I look at the roof of this place, polished fringes stirring in the breeze. The smell of orange blossoms. The espresso machine's clouds of steam. At the end of the café is a big window to the garden. Outside there are some children playing and fighting over the same things. The customers are regulars.

My chest hurts and my nose is stopped up; I can barely breathe. I should have stayed home. The only thing I want is to be in my room at the computer or reading *One Thousand and One Nights*. The waiter comes up and takes our order. His pen is a syringe that injects words onto a blank page. I rub my eyes while the water of this blue calligraphy rushes out. When it is my turn to order my hot chocolate, the page becomes so damp that the words trickle and run over our wooden table. Now it is my aunt's turn. She orders and as she does, the man takes his rag from his pocket and dries the table. Each time he answers Aunt Zeina's questions about the items on the menu and writes down her order, the words liquefy. Untiring, he takes out the rag again to wipe the table. He goes back to the kitchen, leaving a wake of blue water. I rub my eyes again, I yawn, and I rest my head on my arms. My mother leans close and sweetly whispers into my ear that it's bad manners to rest in public. I sit up and look back toward the big window. Outside, the kids go on. One is wearing a white T-shirt and the other a kippah. I watch the kids while my aunt and my mother talk. The one in the T-shirt has a toy and the one in the kippah has another and it seems to me that this is why they're fighting. Or are they fighting? I think they are playing. The boy in the kippah has something in his hands, but the boy in the T-shirt grabs it and hides it in his