

Growing up in Lebanese-

Croatian in Australia by Lamis Husseini 10D

The first time I saw my mother's father, he was dead.

I have never been well connected to the Croatian side of my family. When my mother converted from Catholicism to Islam, her father shunned her. Her sisters were more sympathetic to her cause, however there has always been a barrier between my mother's family and I. It was always *us* and *them*.

It happened when I was thirteen. We attended the funeral, my parents and my five siblings, all dressed in colors much more somber than our expressions. My younger siblings and I had never met our grandfather, and we felt no need to spend a day in remembrance of someone who had done nothing for us. My older siblings, however, remembered him well. It was the first time I had seen my second-eldest brother cry.

We spent the rest of the procession in the lobby of the funeral home, because inside the hall the rest of my Croatian family prayed to *their* God. It would be against our beliefs to attend, so we all stood there, not quite outside, but not really *inside* either. When the procession ended, I was introduced to a rush of faces that I had forgotten before I had really seen them- a mixture of cousins and their children, great aunts and uncles, long-time family friends I had to pretend to remember- and by the end of it all I was completely exhausted.

It is my father's family, however, that I know much better. I have never known my father's father, but I do know his mother. She speaks very little English, and I speak very little Arabic, so our interactions have been limited to awkward exchanges usually translated by my father. She used to live with my uncle, his wife, and their three children, but now two of those children have left the house in pursuit of their own lives. It is these people who I have known from before I could walk, my cousins so familiar to me they could be my siblings.

When asked the infamous question, '*Where are you from?*' I answer that I am half Lebanese, half Croatian. For the next thirty seconds, the standard response is a shocked expression, an incredulous, '*Really?*' as though they need to check that I know my heritage. When I confirm it, the next question is, '*Where is Croatia?*' To which I reply '*near Bosnia.*' Some people know where Bosnia is, and some people don't, but both react the same way to

my answer. A nod, a pitiful smile, and a gleam of interest in their eyes that unnerves me, as though I am an object of fascination, a shiny new toy that you lose interest in quickly. Then I am quizzed with numerous questions- *What's your life like? Is your mother a Muslim? Do you speak Arabic? Have you ever gone to Croatia? What does Croatian food taste like?*- and even after partaking in such an exchange many times over, I am still confused as to why culture is so important to some people, and how much priority is placed on it.

Growing up with a Croatian mother and a Lebanese father, I have always been somewhat of an outcast. My skin is far too pale and my hair is far too light to be remotely considered Lebanese, and my religion will always separate me from my Croatian family. I have never defined myself by my culture, nor do I want to. For right now, I am me, and that is enough.