

## Return

The majestic Oak stood wistfully in the village courtyard, as it had done for more than two centuries, a proud sentinel protecting my family's ancestral church. The church courtyard, shaded by the expanse of the Great Oak's green foliage, acted as the sparsely populated hamlet's meeting place for community gatherings, religious festivals, weddings and funerals, the latter being the last time I stood in this place. On that occasion, I led the funeral procession as my father, affectionately known as the Sheikh, was ritually laid to his final rest in the burial monument of my great grandfather, the Beik, less than ten metres from where I currently stood.

I couldn't help but recall the stifling summer heat of that day. Clad in a black suit, the mandatory uniform for the celebration of human life, which only acted to constrain me to the point that I felt I would suffocate. I recalled standing in silent reverence while a hundred or so villagers and members of my extended family, whom I barely knew, paid their respects. Surrounded by a throng of strangers, I felt completely alone in my grief and yet it dawned on me, there was something undeniably comforting in their expression of shared sorrow. It was these cultural nuances that continued to draw me away from the land of my birth and back to the land of my ancestors.

This time though, I was completely alone, not another village inhabitant in sight, which was uncharacteristic given that the majority of inhabitants spent their summers in the village. It was as if I was the last man left alive, a lone soul surrounded by the exquisite earthly beauty of a place that I barely knew, but that had wrapped me in its welcoming embrace. I was grateful for the solitude, the type of gratitude that one feels when they enter the sanctity of their home, only to close the door to the chaos of the world behind them.

The expanse of the Oak's angelic, wing-like branches traversed the entire length and breadth of the courtyard of the village's understated stone place of worship, offering a functional canopy to take refuge. The Oak's thick verdure filtered the blistering rays of the Levantine summer sun, providing welcome shade from the relentless heat. I was indebted to this majestic tree for the relief it provided. I felt the refreshing sea breeze, which travelled up the valley from the Mediterranean miles below, as it gently kissed my face. The beckoning breeze pulled the symphonic strings attached to the Oak's branches, performing a delicate dance of light and shade across the black bitumen of the courtyard. I revelled in the ethereal performance, a divine distraction from the summer heat.

I spent the entire morning traversing across the eastern ridgeline towards the northern end of Mount Lebanon, following the blazes of the Lebanese Mountain Trail (LMT). It had long been a dream of mine to hike all four hundred and sixty kilometres of the LMT and experience the hospitality of the twenty-six mountain villages and their people along the trail. Yet on this occasion, I had to be content with a few days of hiking, particularly as I had other more pressing concerns that required my attention back in Beirut. Awaking before dawn, I bid farewell to Sister Rafka, the Maronite Nun who had graciously opened the doors of her convent in Tannourine el Fawka, providing me with a bed and an abundance of fresh fruit, vegetables, cheese and honey, and set my compass due north and towards my ancestral village.

As the sun rose over the eastern ridgeline of Mount Lebanon, I stood at a plateau and basked in its life-giving glory, momentarily fixated, as the radiant orb ascended above the mountainside, casting its luminous light across the heavenly landscape. In that moment, I began to comprehend how my Canaanite ancestors came to worship Malakbel, the sun God, as one of the most important deities in their religious pantheon. Without warning, an unexplainable intrinsic feeling of joy washed over me. It was not the type of extrinsic

happiness one feels as a byproduct of achieving some long-held goal, but an indescribable and relentless sensation of deified delight, almost transcendent. As I stood fixated on the grandeur of the canvas on which the Creator's brush cast his colours, I could not remove the smile from my face. My gratitude for the moment was palpable.

Once the magnitude of the moment had passed, I continued my journey passing through the Cedar forests of Tannourine and Hadath El Jibbeh, stopping briefly at a rustic cafe in the Hadath to sample a traditional breakfast of eggs and awarma cooked in a terracotta clay pot, washed down with freshly made pomegranate juice, before making my way through the pine groves above my ancestral village and down into in a picturesque valley in which it sat. It was stunningly beautiful terrain, made up of wooded forests of oak, cedar and pine, stepped terraces of ancient olive groves and delicious apple trees, bubbling brooks of chilled, pure spring water, originating from pristine underground mountain aquifers, brought to life by the exquisite melody of migrating birds making their summer homes amongst the vegetation.

This tiny Levantine nation truly was gloriously abundant. It had the capacity to provide for all of its inhabitants, yet its bounty was consistently misappropriated and mismanaged. My travels, across the highest peaks and the lowest valleys of Mount Lebanon over the last few days, had provided me with a newfound appreciation for the land of my forebears. The beauty of the countryside was indescribable, while the hospitality of its people was without limit. Throughout my sojourn across this splendid terrain, I was repeatedly reminded of Gibran Khalil Gibran's words that regardless of the machiavellian machinations and the dilemmas of the political elite who had sold out the country to the *'men of the West and the men of the East'*, that my Lebanon was a *'flock of birds fluttering in the early morning as shepherds lead their sheep into the meadow and rising in the evening as farmers return from their fields and vineyards.'*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf, M. L, Ferris, A. R. and Sherfan, A. D. *The Treasured Writings of Kahlil Gibran*. Castle Books. <http://4umi.com/gibran/lebanon/> accessed 30/09/2022

The only detraction that came to my mind throughout this journey was the permeating heat of the Levantine summer. I had not factored in the effect the elevated summer temperatures would have on me, particularly as I inaccurately believed being thousands of metres above sea level would alleviate the often excruciating humidity of the Levantine coast. It was a different kind of heat, for at that altitude above the treeline, one was often offered very little shade. Although I had not run into many people along my travels across the mountains thus far, those I had come into contact with perceived me to be quite mad for daring to hike the mountains at this time of the year, given the intensity of the summer heat. While their perceptions had merit, I genuinely paid them no mind for I was fulfilling a long-held dream.

I was energised by my ever-growing love and passion for this ancient land, the same land that the prophets, the disciples and the Master had traversed as they spread the good word and performed miracles. The same land that saw Zeus transform himself into a Bull coercing Europa to climb on his back and stealing her away to the continent that now carries her name. The same land from which the Cannanites launched thousands of ships, laden with the most valuable cargo, into the four winds, taking with them limitless knowledge and wealth of goods that would come to influence language, philosophy, sociology and sciences, commerce.

Removing my backpack, I placed it against the thick trunk of the centuries old Oak. I detached my bottle and took a gluttonous gulp of life-giving water. I began to feel a little unsteady on my feet so I instinctively placed my hand on the trunk of the Oak to steady myself. The coarseness of the bark felt so tactile, so authentic. This stoic tree remained steadfast and immovable as generation after generation of my family had come and gone. In that moment, I felt a surge of dynamism pass through my body, as though the collective quintessence of my ancestors instantaneously passed through me. Instinctively, I looked left and saw my ancestral burial ground a few feet away. Generations of my family whom I never

met were buried less than a few metres from where I stood, and while they felt so distant and foreign, now more than ever I felt like I was amongst them. “Perhaps,” I mused, “the roots of this magnificent tree have spread so far that they are nourished by the spirits of my ancestors?”

Turning back to face the stonework of the Church of Mar Doumit, I took a few steps towards a sheltered position of the stoop and gingerly took a seat placing my back against the stone wall. Through my sweat-stained shirt I felt the welcoming coolness of the stones on my back. Closing my eyes, I sat in quiet contemplation. In an instant, my mind’s eye transported me back to a bygone era. I envisioned my ancestors standing assembled together under the branches of the Oak, resplendent in their Sunday finery, having just celebrated Mass. I pictured a gathered assembly of Sheikhs and Sheikhas standing in the Church courtyard at the conclusion of the mass, proudly boasting of their descendants' past achievements and their present vanities in an effort to outdo one another. They loved to boast. Like stubbornness, pride was a family trait that seemed to be passed on generation after generation, yet ultimately led to their downfall. Unlike other noble families that occupied Lebanon, my family had failed to recognise the fortune that they had inherited for their forebears.

Shiekh Assad, the patriarch of the family, had been a warrior in the service of the “Emir” in the late seventeen-hundreds and had distinguished himself for his military prowess. He had won this village in battle with its previous inhabitants and with it, authority over forty-six other villages in the region. Situated in the shadow of “Jabal Niha”, a large rocky projection that jutted into the northern Lebanese horizon to the East. Entering the village, one could not help but be struck by the impressive villa, which had once belonged to my Great-Grandfather, Hanna Beik and which now stood as a reminder of the lost grandeur that was once characteristic of the family’s status. Time and neglect had taken its toll on this once resplendent building, yet one could still appreciate visions of its former splendour. Individual

dwellings were sparsely constructed throughout the village, intermixed between large plots of arable land stepped into the hillside. The village was known for its plentiful produce including grapes, olives, apples, pomegranates, plums, apricots and tomatoes.

Following Assad's victory, the village, originally known as "Mazaraat Hajj Hassan", had been cleansed of its troublesome inhabitants, subsequently christened and a church built in the geographical centre to complete its transformation. The Emir anointed the family as the "Sheikhs" of this area and transformed their family name from "Abou Sleiman" to "Abi-Saab" or "the fathers of difficulty". This was done to reflect the way in which his forebear had conducted himself in battle. This title was most apt considering the family's difficult nature. Difficulty, it seemed, was an inherited trait passed on generation after generation.

As a result of their aggression, it was said that the people they displaced cursed the land, and all of my forebears and their descendants for their deeds. Legend had it that the Abi-Saabs would never be able to find peace in this place, and history proved the legends correct. Few of my family remained in the village. The voices that once contentedly filled this courtyard, the homes and the gardens, had long abandoned this place. They either sold, gambled or gave away their inheritance with little regard for ensuing generations.

They did not appreciate the value of the land for it had been taken by force and effortlessly inherited. The land, which should have provided them with wealth and unified them as a family, became a focal point of covetousness. They personified the adage that wealth gained in one generation will be lost by the third. Through improvidence they had dissolved the ties that bound them, subsequently casting their descendants into the four winds. While the village still carried their name, the place was no longer theirs. Perhaps they truly were cursed.

Sitting there, in the presence of the essence of the multitude of generations that had come before me, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I only knew this place in the nostalgic

fables of my father. I had been born a world away, yet I was motivated by an unexplained urge to return to this place. A place I had so frequently experienced in my mind's eye. Like my countrymen, the Druze, I had come to believe that perhaps reincarnation was real and that I had lived a life here before. My return was a welcome homecoming, yet there was no fanfare, no waiting family to greet me. The silence was euphoric. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, I was completely alone.

My return to the village had been almost three-quarters of a century in the making. At the age of nineteen, my father had departed this place, leaving behind his family and friends in search of a more accomplished life over the seas. He was one of the tens of millions, who left the old world and its often-stifling centuries old traditions, to find fortune in the new. Having accomplished his goal, the family's pride once again overwhelmed him and in his sixty-fifth year he lost his entire fortune, leaving him demoralised and his young family almost destitute. With his loss, my world as I knew it spiralled out of my control. All of the certainties of my youth were washed away in an instant. The old man's loss became the young man's burden.

Out of a sense of cultural obligation and unlike my new world friends, I laboured intensely to make good the sins of my father and support my family. I lived under the uncertainty that perhaps there was some celestial vendetta being enacted upon me and my family for my ancestor's transgressions, particularly as I had repeatedly been told the fables of the curses that had been placed on Assad and his descendents. How else could I reconcile myself with what had happened to my family and to me? It was a spectacular demise, from the dizzying heights of prominence and wealth to the guttural lows of dishonour, destitution, illness, depression and death.

While I often lamented my obligations and responsibilities to my family, particularly as personal freedom seemed to consistently elude me, I had been raised to believe that family comes first above all other things and in the time of my family's greatest need, I was adamant

that I wanted to prove that I was worthy of that responsibility. While I had the pleasure of experiencing another cultural experience growing up, I came to celebrate the centuries of tradition, particularly the passionate love for family, which made the Lebanese culture so rich and the Lebanese people so resiliently adaptable in the face of so much hardship.

In a moment of bravery, I made a decision to leave behind my turbulent life in the new world and answer the call that my motherland had been whispering in my ear for the duration of my life. I resigned from my employment, purchased a one-way ticket to Beirut and reentered my village to the triumphant sound of silence. Lebanon, its mountains, its natural beauty, its people, their hospitality and culture and most importantly, my village would be my salvation.

Seated opposite the majestic Oak in the Church courtyard, I drew my first real breath since my arrival in Lebanon. In reality, it felt like my first real breath in an eternity. I gasped for life giving oxygen and filled my lungs with the mountain air. Repositioning myself on the stoop, the rays of the sun washed over me and I bathed in its welcoming warmth. In that moment, I made a decision. It did not matter whether my family had truly been cursed. What mattered is that the chaos and discord of the past had to end. I resolved that never again would I allow the transgressions of my family's past to impose the shackles of bondage on my present or on the future of any of my forthcoming descendants. I knew why this place had called me to return, why I had to undertake such an arduous journey to reach this destination.

Standing, I walked silently towards his ancestral graveyard. At its entrance stood the burial memorial of my Great Grandfather "Hanna Beik." That was also the resting place of my grandmother and most recently my father. Extending my arm, I placed my hand on the stone of the crypt and knelt. Composing himself, I made the Sign of the Cross and clasped my hands together in the way I had been taught as a child. I closed his eyes, opened my heart, unconstrained my soul and said a silent prayer for forgiveness and peace.

Instantly, a metaphorical weight lifted off my shoulders. Postured with a renewed sense of purpose, I turned and walked towards the Oak, picked up my backpack, slinging it over my shoulders and adjusted the straps. I bid farewell to this place and began walking towards my next destination. I was ready to embrace and accept all that made me who I was: my new-world upbringing, my old-world heritage and culture, ready to create a legacy for the generations to come after me who will celebrate all of it in its complexity, richness and beauty.