

Where the Soil Embraces the Soul's Journey

In a time when recorded tapes captured the voices of loved ones and letters carried the weight of emotions across oceans, my connection to Lebanon was delicate, a fragile echo of a place I had never seen but had always felt in my bones. Though born far from the land my parents called home, raised among the sprawling eucalyptus trees of Australia, I carried the scent of cedar deep within me. I knew Lebanon through stories fashioned with longing, where the sound of kookaburras gave way to the muezzin's call to prayer. My mother, a Christian, and my father, a Muslim, had left, eloped from the village of Riyaq long before I was born, but it lingered in our home like a distant memory wrapped in love and loss.

In 2004, at 24 years old, I made my first journey to Lebanon, after my graduation, which would transcend any expectation. What began as a naive trip to explore my roots quickly became a pilgrimage of the soul. Pacing myself off the plan and into Beirut airport, I was surrounded by a sea of unfamiliar faces, The big smiles of my uncles, aunties, cousins, and relatives I had never met but who knew me by name, as if my existence had been a part of their lives. Their eyes glowing with emotion, my heart felt full, and I felt a sense of security, it felt as if years of separation, stories spoken across oceans, now melted away into the air around us.

I had never had such a beautiful and uplifting emotional feeling in my life. Before I managed to catch my breath, a caring, warm kiss dropped on my face, followed swiftly by another and then another. Hands came out to hold mine, to draw me close. It was the dance of the traditional three-cheek kiss, left-right-left, a rhythm that pulled me. I did not know who I was kissing, whose faces were brushing against mine, but it did not matter. There was no need for names or introductions in that moment; the love, the sheer joy of reunion, exceeded the need for formalities. I was passed like a shield from one relative to another, my face meeting theirs in a steady flow of warmth, love, and affection.



Each kiss, each hug, felt like stepping into the heart of a memory I did not know I had. I felt wrap up in the scent of home, an earthy mix of traditional flavours and the faint sweetness of rosewater that clung to their clothes. It was the smell of my mother's kitchen, the essences of my childhood in a land far from her own. It was the scent of my father after he had been working in the garden, planting mint leaves, lemon trees, cucumber and coriander, seeds that he had brought with him, to remind him of home, *legally of course*. It was as if, in that moment, I inhaled the very essence of my heritage, a part of me that had always been waiting for this very moment.

The faint murmur of Arabic and the sound of laughing blended together, the words flowing from their lips like melody. Arabic, which I had not spoken in years, suddenly returned to me in that instant, not just in words, but in feelings, as a language my heart remembered. Each phrase and word around me, familiar and reassuring. In a language older than I could understand, it seemed as though my ancestor's voices were calling me home through them. It felt like I was held by generations of family members I had never met but who had always been there, silently waiting, because of the cadence of their speaking and the rhythm of their voices.

The hugs - *oh, the hugs*. They were not cautious or sensitive. They were strong, full-bodied hugs that drew you in so firmly that you thought you would melt away in their warmth. Their embraces were expressions of affection and recognition rather than courteous greetings. Each one was like receiving a piece of myself back, as though they were giving me back aspects of me, I did not realise were gone. It was more than just comfort; it was familiarity, a primordial, ancient feeling, as if I had given these individuals a thousand embraces in a different life at a different time. I could feel my ancestors' rhythm, my family's heartbeat, and the pulse of generations passing through me.

I was no longer an outsider looking in; I was in the centre of it all, surrounded by the flesh and blood of my lineage, by the people who had shaped the very core of who I was. And in the chaos of hugs and kisses, there was peace. I was not lost in the whirlwind of affection. I was found. This was the Lebanon my parents had spoken of in fragments, in late-night stories told over cups of tea. This was the Lebanon I had always known, deep inside, waiting to embrace me as much as I was waiting to embrace it.



Together, we left the airport in a car packed with family, as the other cars filled with family followed, the windows down, the cool night air rushing past, mingling with the constant hum of conversation. Arms and hands reached over me, stroking my hair, hugging me tightly, as though the years of separation could be healed by touch. The car horn blared in a steady beat, an unspoken language of its own, part of the symphony of Lebanon's streets. Here, the road was not just for travel, but a place of connection, where the chaos of movement mirrored the energy of life. No one seemed concerned with seatbelts, as if the safety of the car were built in the love that filled it.

We were not headed for the bustling streets of Beirut, though. Our destination was the village of Riyaq, nestled in the Bekaa Valley, a place I had only ever imagined. As we left the city behind and wound through the mountains, the landscape began to shift. The noise of Beirut faded into the background, replaced by the stillness of the countryside. The rugged hills softened into wide, open plains, and the horizon stretched out in front of us, cosmic and unbroken.

The Bekaa Valley was a place of contrasts, its fertile plains seemed endless, a patchwork of green fields that stretched like a living quilt beneath the sky. With every mile that went by, I could feel my heart pounding more quickly, a mixture of nervous anticipate and delight. The village



of Riyaq, where my parents had lived before and where their romance had started, was getting closer. I recognised that this was the Lebanon my parents had talked about so much. A place where the soil itself felt alive, breathing, and welcoming, as the mountains towered over the valley like protective arms.

As we got closer to Riyaq, the sky turned a gentle shade of gold and purple, as if the light were setting its spotlight on to this village. Here, the air felt different - *much quieter and cooler* - as though time had slowed down to welcome us. I could see Riyaq lying across the front of me as we turned the last corner. Stone houses huddled together like old friends sharing secrets. Riyaq was coming alive before my eyes, a place that had only existed in the stories of my parents.



Riqa was full of life when we arrived, children ran freely, their laughter bouncing off the stone walls of houses worn by time but held together by love. There was the aroma of ripe fruit and freshly baked bread, and gardens were overflowing with life everywhere I looked. Tomatoes sat heavy on the vine, ready to burst forth with deliciousness, while grapevines migrated over fences. It felt as though the earth itself had come together to reveal to me its beauty, history, and richness.

My relatives, who seemed endless in number, greeted me with the kind of love that transcends time and space. They argued with joy over where I would stay, whose home would cradle me for the night, though I knew that it did not matter. Each house, every stone wall, felt like a part of me, a continuation of my parents' story. With each passing day, I experienced a new home.

Riqa was a village steeped in history, its stone houses standing like sentinels against the passing of time. Some still wore their red-tiled roofs like crowns, reminders of the old ways, while others had aged more gracefully, adapting but never losing their essence. At the heart of the village lay the old train station, a relic of a time when Riqa was a vital connection between Beirut and Damascus.



The trains of Riqa were once the village's lifeblood, their rhythmic clatter on steel tracks echoing through the valley like the pulse of Lebanon itself. Built during the Ottoman Empire and vital during the French Mandate, they carried more than just passengers, they transported the hopes, dreams, and burdens of a nation in transition. Riqa's station, a crossroads for families, merchants, and soldiers, Riqa's station was a hive of activity, with each arrival and departure integrating the village into the larger world. The clatter of wheels and the sound of train whistles formerly filled the now-quiet station. I would hear the echoes of the past as I made my way along the overgrown rails between cousins' homes.



I visualised the steam hissing and the heady smell of coal curling into the morning mist when the station was alive. Once black and shining, the locomotives hummed with vitality as they



transported commodities, stories, and crops throughout Lebanon. Merchants negotiated on the platform, mothers held their children before leaving, and soldiers boarded with guns hanging over their shoulders. The nation's lifeblood, barrels of olive oil, and boxes of fruit were transported by the trains, and with each trip, Riyaq turned into a location where pathways met and then separated.

It all felt different now, though, as I stood among the rusted trains. The once-bright lines were buried under the dense grass, the rails that once buzzed with movement gradually being reclaimed by nature. As though the earth itself were holding them back into its fold, the massive engines, now rusted and motionless, appeared to sleep in the sun with their iron bodies covered in vines.

Time moved differently in Riyaq. It did not stand still, but it did not rush either. The village carried its history not as a burden but as a gift, a testament to resilience and continuity. Here, Christians and Muslims lived side by side, as they had for generations. My parents' love, which had defied the expectations of both their families and the village itself, had blossomed here, among these people. Although the borders separating their faiths had been challenged by their decision to elope, their love had outlasted the uproar in the village. And I was standing there now.



In the courtyard of what was once my grandparents' home, now my uncle's, there was a fountain. Its water flowed gently, never hurried, a quiet reminder that life, too, could flow with ease. Surrounding the fountain were fruit trees, pomegranate, apricot, and olives. Their roots stretching deep into the earth, their branches heavy with the promise of nourishment. Every meal we ate, was gathered from the garden, the flavours rich and layered, as though the land itself had lent its soul to the food. There was a depth to everything in Riyaq, the food, the people, the stories each one connected to the other, just as the roots of the trees entwined beneath the soil.

One afternoon, we gathered in the courtyard of my uncle's house, sat around the old fountain, its gentle trickle of water providing a soothing backdrop to the conversation. The same garden where my grandparents had once worked, the same fountain they had built with their own hands. And as we sat there, with the fading sunlight casting long shadows across the courtyard, my uncle began to share their story.

He spoke of my grandmother, the pillar of the family, a woman whose strength was as enduring as the stones of the village itself. She had given birth to fourteen children, thirteen sons and one daughter, but not all had survived. Two of her children had passed away young, leaving an indelible sadness in her heart. But my uncle's voice softened when he spoke of how she carried that loss, not with bitterness, but with quiet resilience. She was a woman who never stopped moving, her shoulders always heavy with the weight of baskets filled with bread she baked from scratch, not just for her family but for anyone in the village who needed it. She was known for her generosity, for the way she would knead the dough with hands that had cradled life and death alike, and yet, she never seemed to tire. *"She would wake before the sun,"* my uncle said, his eyes distant as if he could still see her moving about the kitchen. *"You could always smell the bread. It was how we knew it was morning."*

But my grandmother was more than just the heart of her household, she was the village midwife. When she was not having her own children, she was delivering others, bringing new life into the world. My uncle's voice held pride as he spoke of her hands, so skilled in both nurturing and healing. *"She brought half the village into the world,"* he said with a soft laugh, but there was reverence in his words. She had touched so many lives, not just her own children, but the lives of



countless families in Riyaq. He smiled, knowing that I was the only child in the whole family who carried my grandmother's name as my middle name - *Khazma*.

As we sat there, the gentle murmur of the fountain mingling with the rustle of leaves, I could almost see her in that same courtyard, balancing the weight of a basket on her shoulders, her strong, capable hands tending to the dough as if it were the very fabric of her family's life. Her legacy was not just in the bread she baked or the children she raised, it was in the love that radiated from the walls of that home, in the way the earth itself seemed to remember her.

Then my uncle shifted his gaze to the house, the one he now lived in but that had once been the home of my grandparents. His smile widened as he began to speak of my grandfather, a man known not just for his skills as a tailor, but for his charm, his elegance, and his love for dancing. My grandfather was a ballroom dancer, and, as my uncle liked to say, *"very handsome."* The village admired him not only for the precision of his tailoring but for the way he could glide across a dance floor with effortless grace. He would sew garments by day, his hands meticulously stitching beauty into fabric, and by night, he would charm the village with his dancing, often spinning my grandmother around the courtyard in a waltz. *"They were quite the pair,"* my uncle chuckled, his voice carrying the warmth of memory. *"Your grandmother, she didn't know a lot about dancing, but your grandfather, he could make anyone look graceful."*

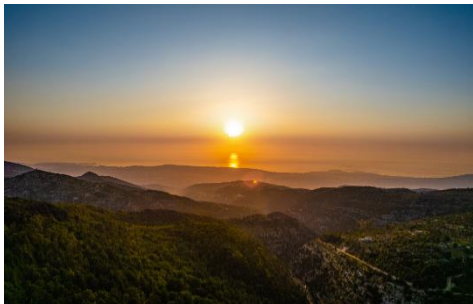
I could picture them now, young, and full of life, twirling together in this very courtyard beneath the stars. My grandfather, the handsome tailor, with his quick wit and infectious laugh, and my grandmother, strong and steady, learning to match his steps. In that dance, they were not just partners on the floor, they were partners in life, balancing work and love, grief, and joy, just as easily as they moved to the rhythm of the music. *"They danced here, you know,"* my uncle added, gesturing to the courtyard where we now sat. *"Right by this fountain."*

As I listened to my uncle's stories, I realised that this place, this courtyard, was more than just a home. It was a testament to their love, to the life they had built together, one that was as steady as my grandmother's hands and as graceful as my grandfather's dancing. The fountain at



the centre of it all was more than just a source of water, it was the heart of the home, a symbol of the life they had nourished, both literally and figuratively.

Sitting there, surrounded by the fruits of their labour, I felt a deep connection to my grandparents, as if their spirits were still present in the rustle of the leaves, in the soft gurgle of the fountain, and in the stories my uncle told. Their love had weathered the seasons, endured the loss of children, and had created a legacy that still pulsed through the veins of our family. Though they had passed, their presence was palpable in every stone of the house, in the very air that filled the courtyard.



As the sun dipped below the horizon and the evening light turned soft and golden, I realised that I was not just hearing the story of my grandparents, I was living it. Their hands had built this life, their love had filled this space. They were more than just figures in stories; they were the very foundation upon which my family had been built.

At night, the village transformed. The air grew cooler, but the warmth of the people remained. We gathered around a table under the stars, the sound of the organ and darbuka filling the night. My cousins began a *Zajal*, an impromptu exchange of poetic songs, where one voice would rise in verse, only to be answered by another. It was a mystical moment, as humour and hard truths mingled in song, the crowd cheering at each clever turn of phrase. There was magic in those nights, a kind of ancient rhythm that stirred something deep within me. It was during one of these nights that I learned more about my parents than I ever had before.

They had fallen in love just after the civil war, a time when Lebanon was still raw, still healing. My father, a Muslim, and my mother, a Christian, had found something in each other that transcended the boundaries of religion. Their love was an act of defiance, one that had shocked the village, but it had also been a beacon of hope. In their quiet moments, under the wide-open sky of the Bekaa Valley, they had built a bond strong enough to challenge tradition. Listening to my uncles and aunts recount their elopement, I felt a deep sense of pride.



Whilst I wandered through the streets of Riyaq in the days that followed, I began to understand why my parents had spoken of this place with such reverence. There was a peace there, a simplicity that stood in stark contrast to the chaos of the world outside. The village had a rhythm all its own, a slower, more deliberate pace that allowed life to unfold as it was meant to. Children played in the streets without fear, the elders sat beneath the shade of trees, and neighbours called out to one another, their voices carrying over the stone walls like a familiar song.

One afternoon, I visited the house where my father grew up. It was a modest stone building, its roof worn by the years, but it stood strong. This was where my father had courted my mother, my mother being best friends with his sister. My mother only lived a block away. I wondered at what corner of these roads the decision was made to elope and build a life far from the judgement of others.

Standing in front of that house, I felt the weight of their decision, the courage it must have taken to defy their families and their village. Their love had not been easy, but it had been strong. And now, as I stood in the place where it all began, I felt that strength flowing through me.



As my time in Riyaq drew to a close, my family gathered for a final meal, a breakfast filled with farewells. On the day I was to depart, my cousin started to play the organ, while another cousin sang and soon the notes of Fayrouz's *"Ana Sar Lazim Wadaakoun"* - "It's Time to Say Goodbye" - filled the air. The song, full of longing, echoed through the courtyard as voices joined together, singing with tears in their eyes. The lyrics spoke of goodbyes, but they also promised return as a village of family all took part in the chorus: *"Tomorrow I will come back and stand with you; if not tomorrow, the day after for sure."* As I listened, the tears fell freely. Saying goodbye in Lebanon felt like saying goodbye forever, as though each departure carried the weight of uncertainty. Would I return? When?



I hugged my relatives tightly, each embrace a promise of return, and as we drove away from Riyaq, the village faded in the rear-view mirror, but it remained imprinted on my heart. This place, where love defied tradition, where history and family intertwined, was where I had found the essence of who I am. Riyaq had given me more than a connection to my roots, it had shown me where my resilience, my strength, my passion, and my compassion came from.

As the village disappeared behind the bend, I realised it had also given me something more, something everlasting. Riyaq had shown me that love, true love, could cross boundaries, outlast generations, and stretch beyond time. It was not just a place where my ancestors had lived; it was where the seed of everything I am, had first taken root, where the spirit of my family still breathed in every kiss, every embrace. In that moment, I knew that the soil of Riyaq had not only held the roots of my ancestors, but also embraced the journey of my soul.

By Rhoda Khazma Chaalan

