

Echoes of Lebanon in a Distant Heart

By Ali R. Jaber

I was not born in Lebanon, but Lebanon was born in me. It arrived not with a passport stamp or a flight itinerary but with the steam of mint rising from a glass of tea, with the way my father's hands cupped that glass as if it contained a season he was afraid to spill. It came in the hum of Arabic around the dinner table—half-phrases, affectionate interruptions, proverbs delivered with a smile and a raised eyebrow—and in the patience with which my mother measured rice, as though there were a right and merciful way to feed a family. Before I could place the country on a map, I could taste it, hear it, and feel it, like a second heartbeat kept by everyone who loved me.

Where I grew up, the winters were long and the sidewalks were honest with their cold. Through those months, Lebanon lived in our apartment like a generous guest that brought too much food and stayed too late. The radio played Fairuz on Saturday mornings, and even the vacuum cleaner didn't dare argue with her voice. My father planted mint in a plastic bucket near the balcony door because the Michigan sun, when it came, was better than no sun at all. My mother stored spices in old coffee tins; when you opened one, it breathed out a memory—sumac's tang, the deep cedar warmth of cinnamon, the stubborn brightness of za'atar. None of these things could tell me where I came from, but together they made a life that answered, again and again, who I belonged to.

At school I learned what a hyphen feels like. People asked where I was from and then asked again when they didn't like the first answer. I became good at explaining. "American," I would say, and then, if their eyebrows stayed up, "Lebanese too." The hyphen between those two words

was a bridge some days and a rope to balance on other days, but it was never a fence. I was the sum of more than one place, and I learned to claim the fullness of that math. Still, there was a quiet fear I carried like a folded note in my pocket: what if the Lebanon in our kitchen and in our songs was only a story? What if one day I went there and felt nothing but the distance I had been born into?

The first time I flew to Beirut, I sat by the window like a child at a parade. From above, the Mediterranean looked like a hand mirror tilted toward the sun. The city gathered itself at the water's edge, its buildings trading glances with the mountains behind them. When the wheels kissed the runway, I felt the smallest tremor pass through me, as if something old inside me had recognized its name being called. The air in the jet way was warm and busy; it smelled faintly of coffee and cologne and the tired joy of people who had already begun telling their stories before their suitcases made it to the carousel.

Inside the terminal, motion was the common language. People gestured with their whole bodies. An old man leaned across the barrier to bless his grandson on the forehead; two sisters laughed at the exact same moment and then cried for a few seconds in perfect mirror. I saw my family before they saw me: an aunt holding a bouquet that looked slightly surprised to be in an airport, an uncle checking his watch even though time had already arrived, cousins bouncing on their toes as if they were practicing to be waves. Then they did see me, and the distance of years folded like clean laundry. Arms, kisses, hands pressed to cheeks—left, right, left—the choreography of reunion performed without needing to count. I belonged because they claimed me; they claimed me because I belonged.

That first night, the drive from the city toward the south stitched together a geography I had previously only imagined. The road curved like a sentence that wasn't finished yet. Billboards leaned into the darkness like actors waiting for their lines. We passed orange groves that kept their secrets under the leaves and small bakeries whose ovens were brave enough to glow at midnight. When we stopped for coffee at a roadside kiosk, my uncle ordered it strong, short, and

sweet. The cups were thimbles of night with a rind of light on top. I burned my tongue a little and did not complain; you do not talk back to an initiation.

Morning in Nabatieh came with its own grammar. There was the call to prayer, patient and exact, threading through the streets as if sound could open the day like a door. There were church bells further off, not competing, just convening. There was the water truck with its friendly horn, the breadman with a stack of flatbread that looked like a stack of suns, the neighbor calling my aunt's name the way neighbors do when the courtyard still belongs to everyone. I stood on the balcony and looked at houses that were not trying to be beautiful but were beautiful anyway: walls the color of dust and devotion, roofs with plastic chairs sunning themselves, water tanks like tamed planets. A cat crossed the alley with the dignity of a dowager. Somewhere a radio decided it was already time to be cheerful.

The market taught me the vocabulary of color. Tomatoes blushed enough for both of us. Cucumbers wore their green like a promise. Olives gleamed with the certainty of people who know they will be important later. A woman selling parsley asked me where I was from; when I answered, she nodded, untroubled, and said, "Ahlan"—welcome—as if I had just remembered a word I used to know. My Arabic was a door I could not open in one movement, but the hinges still knew their job. I stumbled; others steadied. I learned to ask for half a kilo of this and a little more of that, to say "ma'lish" when I brushed someone's sleeve, to say "yislamo" in gratitude that meant both "thank you" and "may your hands be kept safe for the work they do."

Food was a map and the table was the legend. My aunt pressed dough onto a saj, and the manousheh released its breath into the morning with the confidence of wheat that had always intended to become breakfast. Labneh curled like a white river in a bowl; a gull of olive oil settled in the middle and stayed. Olives wore the taste of the tree and the farmer and the stone that had crushed them. Cucumber sang quietly of shade. Mint believed in itself. My cousin tore bread and held it toward me, and I understood the old lesson again: that the shortest distance between two people is a piece of bread passed from one hand to another.

In the afternoons, the house cooled. Shadows remembered where to stand. Someone always found coffee in a small pot, its surface a dark, unblinking eye. An uncle would tell a story: about harvesting olives with a canvas sheet and a wooden rake; about walking to school in shoes that forgave the road; about a wedding where the dabke rang the dust like a bell. The stories were not about the past in the way we think of the past; they were about a present so large it could not be contained by one day. I listened the way the walls listened—fully, without interrupting—and learned how memory is less a museum than a garden: cultivated, generous, willing to reseed itself wherever a hand is willing to make a small hole and hope.

Language did not return all at once. It came like shy animals: a noun peeking from behind a verb, an adjective that forgot which noun it loved, a phrase that meant “later” but carried an urgency you could only hear if you had the right ears. I mispronounced things; my cousins laughed and loved me for it. An old shopkeeper corrected my vowels the way a grandfather fixes a crooked picture frame: kindly, firmly, with the confidence of someone who knows what a wall should look like. At night I practiced alone, speaking to the window and its curtains, and the syllables warmed to me the way a chair warms to whoever sits in it long enough.

On Sundays we went visiting, which is a verb and an art. The door opened to the smell of cinnamon and cardamom, to the delight that lives in a tray of small cups with big intentions. I learned that hospitality here is not an act but a worldview: there is always room; there is always a way to make more room. Plates arrived that I did not deserve and yet were mine because they had been prepared with my arrival in mind. Grape leaves held their breath around rice and meat and became the most thoughtful cylinders I have ever met. Kibbeh broke its heart so that I could eat, and I thanked it with silence and a small groan of happiness. The tablecloth watched us like a grandmother who knows you are full but also knows you can do one more bite for the sake of love.

Some evenings we drove to the coast at Tyre, because the sea belongs to everyone and is generous with its memory. The water wore the sky the way a bride wears a veil—both shy and proud. Children ran after a ball that disobeyed physics and parents' rules. Fishermen read the horizon with an expertise that made maps blush. I took off my shoes and let the waves make an argument to my ankles: that all departures have a little return in them, that every shoreline is a conversation between staying and leaving. I found a shell shaped like a comma and kept it, as if to remind myself that my sentences about this place should not end too soon.

Back in Nabatieh, the rooftop became our theater. We dragged plastic chairs into a circle and watched the stars find their places, the way you watch friends enter a room and take their familiar seats. Someone always knew a song on the oud or on a phone brave enough to stand in for an orchestra. The rhythm of dabke began in a heel and finished in a grin. Laughter rose and expanded and then sat down on our shoulders like a shawl. In the quiet that followed, the town breathed. A dog barked twice and changed its mind. A generator across the lane offered a low, apologetic hum. I thought of the old stories of caravans and seas and cedars, and understood that we are not far from our ancestors when we stand under the same sky they once used to measure their hopes.

There were small pilgrimages. To a bakery where the baker had hands like readable books. To a seamstress who measured me with string and poetry. To an olive press where the machinery was a choir and the oil that flowed out was a hymn. To a schoolyard where my father had learned that a friend could be a brother and a teacher could be a door. He touched a wall the way you touch a forehead to check for fever. I watched the gesture and felt something rise in me that was not melancholy and not pride but a sturdier cousin of both.

I learned that resilience here is not a slogan. It is the habit of showing up. The grocer opens even when the morning is tired. The barber knows more about the human soul than a hundred books and cuts hair with a patience that suggests he has made peace with time. The woman at the corner shop remembers which candy I liked three days ago and saves it behind the counter as if

memory were a form of currency. When I asked an elderly neighbor how she had endured so much change, she shrugged in a way that undid me and said, “We plant.” It took me the rest of the afternoon to understand that she did not mean only seeds.

Not every moment was perfect. I got lost three times in the same set of streets that curved as if they had private reasons for doing so. A rooster accused me of something and would not let it go. A taxi driver and I had a conversation in which we understood almost nothing and everything at the same time. But even the awkwardness seemed to vote in favor of belonging. The city tolerated my errors the way a family tolerates an uncle who tells the same joke: with a soft eye and the belief that tomorrow will be better because this is how people learn each other.

Toward the end of my stay, I visited an old olive grove that had survived more than I could imagine. The trees were older than my grandparents and wore their years in spirals you could trace with your fingers. I stood with my palm against a trunk and felt a version of quiet that I had not felt anywhere else—a quiet that was not empty but well-supplied. If you listened long enough, you could hear patience as a sound. A breeze moved and the leaves applauded. I did not cry, though I could have; instead I promised. Not with words out loud, but with that deeper language the heart uses when it swears something to itself and expects to be held accountable later.

The last day arrived like all last days: politely, and then with an insistence that made me wish I had learned to bargain with time. Suitcase, shirts folded with a seriousness that made them heavier; gifts wrapped with enough care to make them sacred. In the kitchen, my aunt packed za’atar and thyme into a jar whose lid did not trust itself and secured it with tape, as if to tie a ribbon around the moment. My uncle hid a small envelope of cash in my backpack even after I told him it wasn’t necessary; necessity is not the only reason people do things. My cousins practiced not looking sad and failed beautifully.

At the airport, the choreography reversed itself with grace. Kisses, left, right, left. Hands holding a little longer than needed. “Don’t forget,” they said, and I understood they did not mean the way to the house or the place we kept the sugar. They meant: don’t forget that you are one of us and we are yours. Don’t forget that the hyphen you live with is not a crack but a seam. Don’t forget that language is not only words but the willingness to carry meaning carefully from one person to another, like tea in a glass you do not want to spill.

When the plane lifted, the city grew small but not less itself. The coastline held steady, like a mouth refusing to frown. The mountains remained, because that is their job. The sea lay there with the patience of history. And I, above it all, felt a steadiness I had not expected. I had answered the folded note I’d carried all those years. The Lebanon of my family’s kitchen, of our songs and proverbs and habits of care, was not a myth. It was this place, and these people, and the work of their hands. The distance I had been born into was real, but so was the bridge.

Back home, ordinary days waited. Traffic lights, grocery lists, an inbox that believed too strongly in itself. Yet nothing was quite the same, because I had carried Lebanon through security and customs and declared it in my chest. Mint grew again on the balcony, wilder this time. On Sundays, I called my aunt and she asked if I was eating enough, which is another way to ask, Are you taking care of the life you have been given? I cooked lentils the way my mother taught me and found that the smell had more meanings now. In the quiet of evening, a phrase of Arabic would arrive unannounced and sit with me for a while, and I learned to trust it the way you trust a friend who remembers your birthday without needing a reminder.

I do not pretend that identity is simple. The hyphen remains. But I have learned to love it for what it allows: a way to stand in two conversations and tell the truth in both. When people ask me where I am from, I still say “American,” and then I say “Lebanese,” and then I tell a small story about bread or olives or the way a city sounds at night when it believes you are listening. Most people are kind; some are curious; a few are learning the difference between a headline and a human being. I try to be patient. After all, patience is one of our family’s best recipes.

If I am asked what Lebanon gave me, I say: a practice of attention. To notice the temperature of a room and be the kind of person who can warm it. To hold a door open long enough for someone's dignity to pass through first. To insist that there is enough, even when the cupboard suggests otherwise. To greet the morning with the same words you would use to welcome a guest. To sit with elders and let time teach you its kind of arithmetic. To plant—always to plant—even if what grows will feed a grandchild you have not met yet.

The truth is, I did not return from Lebanon with a single grand revelation. I returned with a thousand small ones that make an ordinary day radiant. The art of slicing cucumbers thin enough to almost see through them. The way a street can memorize your footsteps after only a week. The secret confidence of a well-packed jar. The sound of a promise kept, which is the sound silence makes when two people understand each other without hurrying the words.

Lebanon is not only the past. It is a grammar for the future that begins with mercy and continues with bread. It is the art of living in a way that makes room for both sorrow and celebration at the same table. It is an invitation to show up—to learn a name, to carry a corner of the load, to make tea and mean it. I am not naïve; I know that countries, like people, are complicated. But I also know this: when I place my hand on a wooden table and feel its grain run under my palm, I remember a courtyard in Nabatieh where stories made the afternoon gentle. When I crack open a jar of za'atar and the air stands up to greet me, I remember a kitchen where love kept arriving even when it was already too much. When I look at the night sky and a star pretends to belong to my street alone, I remember a rooftop where laughter persuaded the darkness to be kind.

I was not born in Lebanon, but Lebanon was born in me. It speaks in my choices, in the kindness I try to practice, in the stubborn hope I carry even on indifferent days. It travels in my pockets like a smooth stone—the sort of stone you reach for in a moment of decision because it reminds you who you are. If I close my eyes, I can hear the Saturday voice of Fairuz and the Sunday

whisper of olive trees. I can see the market's green grammar and the sea's patient conjugations. I can taste mint on my tongue and know that memory is not only what happened, but what we keep making with the ingredients we have: flour and water, time and heat, love and its good work.

So when I am asked where I belong, I answer with a practice rather than a place. I belong wherever I can set a table and make it generous. I belong wherever I can translate, not just words but hungers. I belong wherever I can water what someone else has planted, and plant for someone else to water. If you press me for a country, I will say Lebanon and mean a thousand names: Nabatieh at morning, a street where the bread remembers who it is, a grove where patience has learned how to dress like an olive tree, a rooftop where the sky keeps all its appointments, a kitchen where the salt knows it is blessed.

And if you ask me for one sentence to carry, I will offer it like bread, torn and warm: I was not born in Lebanon, but Lebanon was born in me—and it keeps being born, every time I greet a guest as if they were family, every time I choose hope, every time I plant.