

Enchanting Lebanon of yore
July 26, 2006

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: “My life is torture,” reads the graffiti on the third floor staircase of our building. With the frequent electricity cuts and no elevator to sweep me past it I often have to walk past that dark inking several times a day. Lebanon is at war, again. You cannot turn on the television or open a newspaper without a chilling reminder of that fact. Condoleezza Rice showed up unannounced in Beirut today—because no one had invited her—to reprimand the Lebanese and to remind them that this conflict is entirely their own fault. Condi’s visit aside, life here wasn’t always torturous. But how can I describe to you the Lebanon of my memory? It is so different from the Lebanon of today, so beautiful. I cannot bear to think of it as gone.

This Monday reports from Qana, the site of Israel’s ‘Grapes of Wrath’ operation in 1996 (death toll some 200 civilians), described the town from the reflection of the broken glass lining the streets. The Daily Star’s correspondent reported that “severed electricity cables, lumps of earth, ripped sheet metal from store fronts, stones, and pieces of concrete” are what make up Qana’s landscape after twelve days of constant Israeli shelling. When I was in Qana just 17 days ago, the small houses that lined the streets were covered in World Cup flags “See that house up there? The one with the Brazilian flag?” pointed Mustafa, our formerly Iraqi Baathist taxi driver, “the landlord just told me she hasn’t left her house for days since Brazil lost to France. She just sits on her balcony and wails”. Not Brazil fans, we laughed. The streets by the Qana memorial were covered with rosebushes in bloom. Before we left the memorial built to honor the town’s dead, the gatekeeper plucked three large orange roses and gave them to us, “something to remember Qana by”, he said so that we would not have left with only the images of death and destruction to remind us of the little town of Qana.

Lebanon must be one of the few countries where you don’t hail taxis; they hail you. Pedestrians are besieged by honking taxis “Are you alright?” they yell out their windows, “Can I take you somewhere?” You refuse in Lebanon by shaking your head no, and putting your hand to your heart. “Yis’slamu” you say, “may your hands always be safe”.

Every evening the balconies of urban Lebanon are full of people, sitting out under the night’s stars perhaps smoking an Argeeley or water pipe, drinking coffee, and maybe even playing cards. You’re never alone here. Your landscape is made up of people. Your family on the balcony, your neighbours on theirs, the vendor selling roasted peanuts for 500 Liras downstairs, and the church bells and Muezzine calling the faithful together across the street.

There is not a highway in all of Lebanon from which you cannot see the sea as you drive. The roads and buildings are built looking out onto the water; you’ll never have to turn your back to it. When I asked my brother Zulfikar how he remembers the Lebanon of our childhood he remembered the olive trees.

I remember the banana groves in Sidon.

There is a television channel here that on principle gives Lebanon an audience with Um Kulsoom every night from 11 to midnight. The war has not stopped that. The music has not died.

Fairuz, often called Lebanon's ambassador to the stars, was supposed to sing at a festival in Baalbeck this summer. The festival has been canceled, but no worries say the organisers, Fairuz will sing next year. Yesterday in the car on the way home from some mundane war time errand—buying water for the house, loading up on candles or batteries, a stop at the pharmacy—my mother turned the radio on and we listened to Fairuz's opera on The Days of Fakhreddin. Fakhreddin was a Lebanese prince who fought to liberate his country in the 1800s and once freed toiled to reconstruct the country of his memory and of his dreams. We didn't drive straight home, but wandered Tripoli's almost empty streets just listening to Fairuz.

There is so much more of Lebanon to show you so that you will know why people are staying here to fight and even to die. How do I describe to you the Lebanon of my memory?

The pebble beach at Baarbara where sweet and salty water mixes together, the result of freshwater springs hidden under the rocky terrain of the sea.

The hustle and bustle of downtown Beirut, the corniche where you can buy hot thimbles of Arabic coffee, the surprise when you discover there is valet parking at McDonalds (I swear, it's true).

The falafel sandwiches at Abu Andre's in Tripoli. The baklava at the Hallab Patisserie, in business since 1881.

The winding roads of Byblos.

The caves of Jeita.

The smell of the Cedar forests.

The Lebanese drivers, who when they are not trying to kill you with their stunt-like driving, are stopping to help you with directions.

The palm readers at the beach in Tyre. "Do you want your fortune told?" one of them asked my mother Ghinwa on our last visit to Tyre. "No thank you," she replied. "I like surprises."

Then before the palm reader left "Yis'lamu".

And there is more. There is so much more.

Why would a people who have everything to lose be willing to risk it all?

For me, it is because the Lebanon of my memory is infinitely worth fighting for.