

In the mountains of northern Lebanon, we approach a checkpoint where a soldier motions for us to stop. A boy, really. He carries the standard issue AK-47, a wooden club strapped to his side, but there's still innocence in his eyes. He'd rather be playing Tawli.

Looking me over and nodding to my passenger, the gunner waves us on. My friend Zahra, a mystic from the Chouf, is showing me the way to the Sacred Valley. Zahra grew up during the Big War and has stayed in Lebanon throughout all the smaller wars that followed. She's seen too many corpses. Lost loved ones to landmines and spitzers. And she's the most optimistic person I've ever met.

"I'll take you hiking in the mountains," she said to me yesterday, with a smile. "We'll bring my father's sheep. They can walk in front and trip the mines for us."

Like Zahra, the Lebanese I know can turn the most morbid subjects into jokes. They're survivors. Since the time of their forbearers—the ancient Phoenicians—countless armies have invaded. The Ottoman Empire, the Romans, the French, the Israelis. On and on.

Beyond the checkpoint, our road narrows and climbs higher into the mountains; olive trees give way to cedars. For thousands of years, men have split these trunks, notched them into planks, and built them into ships. The ancestors of these trees tasted salt in every corner of the Mediterranean.

Scuds and mortar reduced many of Lebanon's remaining cedars to ashes. But where we're going today, the woods have been left untouched. Zahra assures me that the Sacred Valley is as pristine in the twenty first century as it was hundreds of years ago.

As we near the pass, the cedars diminish. Wind-stunted and choked by thinning air. We've climbed to nearly 3,000 meters when we crest the shoulder of Mount Mastaba and begin the descent toward our destination. Called Qadisha, it means "holy," and locals know this place as the Sacred

Valley, and as it materializes in the distance I understand why. The Qadisha river cuts a seemingly bottomless gorge into these mountains, and though it's still kilometers away I can see how Maronite Saints would've chosen this as their hideout from the Ottoman Empire.

Descending into these canyon lands we lose sight of our valley and the road narrows to the width of the Toyota. My first time behind the wheel in Lebanon, and I'm not used to the lack of road signs, highway lines or guard rails. That's why Zahra insisted that I drive today. Approaching tight mountain turns, I blare the horn for anyone who might be coming at us from the other direction. But this place is empty.

Dropping back into the thicker, taller stands of cedar, the road gradually levels out, turns to gravel, then dirt, and dead ends at a pile of boulders. Beside the stones a narrow trail disappears into the woods.

Zahra turns to me with a broad smile. "This is it."

The sound of the Qadisha, only a stream this high up in the mountains, filters through the timber, but the undergrowth is too dense for us to see it. Outside the car, I shoulder my pack and follow Zahra down the path into the woods.

It's my first semester teaching creative writing at the American University of Beirut, a few hours south of here. Walking through these remote woods, I have to keep reminding myself that Beirut is part of this country at all. A bustling city, two million strong, it clamors with traffic and construction day and night.

I was an insomniac before moving to Lebanon and trying to sleep in my new downtown apartment is almost impossible. Sometimes, when I do sleep, I see Israeli soldiers marching north. Tanks rolling back through the streets of my neighborhood.

Some Lebanese keep a bag packed—change of clothes, passports and documents—ready at a moment's notice. I knew this before I came a few months ago, but for me the experience of this place is worth the risk.

Along the trail, Zahra and I pick raspberries and she shows me which figs are safe to eat. Plucking the fruit from a tree, she splits one open

to look for worms. When she sees there are none, Zahra hands it to me and I pop it in my mouth.

After a while we come to a crumbling stone house, an ancient woman rocking on the front step. She says something to Zahra in Arabic and smiles at me. Zahra walks over to a tree in front of the house, picks two apples, and hands me one. "The woman said to take these. She has more than she can eat."

A few kilometers later the trail turns upward, zigzagging along the valley's northern slope. Though we stop often for water, it's not long before we reach our destination. Around the final switchback, the forest opens up and Our Lady of Qannoubine towers above us. A triple story stone church with over-arching doors and tall, slender windows, it's crowned with a modest crucifix carved from the rock. Built seamlessly into the cliff walls, it's as if the monastery has always been part of this mountain. Zahra and I climb a staircase of boulders until we reach the top. Yellow and purple flowers bloom from cracks in the walls along the seams where the monastery ends and the mountain begins. Zahra motions for me to follow to the right and we walk along a narrow stone path, hugging the cliff wall, until we come to a cave. This, she tells me, is where Saint Mariam lived.

"Saint Mariam?" I ask.

She nods. "Her mother died giving birth to her, and she was raised by her father a few valleys from here. When she was old enough, her father wanted to give her away in marriage so that he could live as a monk in Qadisha. But Mariam refused. She also wanted an ascetic life."

Zahra is a natural story-teller with an instinct for colorful description, and I wait for her to go on. But she doesn't.

"What else?" I say. "That's it?"

"It's a long story."

I tell her it's okay. I want to hear it.

Zahra peers deeper into the cave. She tells me that after Mariam's father refused her request, she went away in private, found some men's clothing and shaved her head. When she returned and her father saw what she



had done, he had little choice but to bring her with him. He knew she didn't want marriage and, despite the customs of the times, wouldn't force his only daughter into wedlock.

So they moved to Qadisha together, where they lived as monks. After her father died of a heart attack years later, Mariam stayed on at the monastery, and, as usual, no one questioned her. Though she spoke in a high, gentle voice, feminine qualities were not uncommon among the monks of Qannoubine.

One day, the abbot of the monastery sent Mariam, along with two other monks, to Ehden to bless a dying priest. Mariam was by far the youngest in the group, but the abbot thought she would learn a lot from the pilgrimage.

The first night they slept in a remote inn at the foot of Mount Mastaba, where one of the king's soldiers was also staying. Aside from him and the three monks, only the innkeeper and his daughter lodged in the rooming house that night.

The king's soldier, struck by the innkeeper's young daughter, crept into her room after midnight and stole her virginity. Before he left, the soldier made the girl promise that she'd blame the young monk for the transgression. And four months later, when she was visibly and undeniably pregnant, that's exactly what she did.

The furious innkeeper dragged his pregnant daughter to the monastery. Hearing of the atrocity, the abbot punished Mariam, who confessed to the crime, and was cast into solitude.

Zahra clears her throat. "She spent the last few decades of her life alone in this cave."

As I look up at the stalactites overhead, a draft stirs from somewhere toward the back of the cavern, where the shale walls disappear into darkness. I try to imagine spending nearly a lifetime here. But I can't. Beyond the mouth of the grotto, daylight fades as the sun sinks behind the mountains. Zahra tells me how late one night, then an old woman, Saint Mariam's body gave out, and she died here in her sleep.

Later, Zahra says, a fellow monk who was bringing Mariam bread and water, found the body. As the monks prepared Mariam for burial they finally discovered what had been hidden all along.

At her funeral, the monks, the innkeeper and the innkeeper's daughter wept over Mariam's body. One monk, blind in his right eye, kissed the saint's forehead and instantly regained his lost vision.

Zahra looks around the cave. "Gradually," she says, "the legend spread beyond Qadisha, eventually reaching the entire Levant. For hundreds of years pilgrimages were made to Mariam's grave. Illnesses cured simply by praying to her."

The cavern is so silent water drops echo between the dark, jagged walls. Beyond its mouth even the faint light of dusk is blinding. From here the Sacred Valley stretches toward its southern edge: sheer cliff walls and ragged peaks reaching toward the purpling sky.

After a time Zahra and I walk out of the cave, along the narrow, stone path and back through the monastery. I follow her down the rocky steps toward the valley floor, and we hardly speak at all as we head up the trail and back toward the car. In my mind I am watching the dead saint's ancient face. Calm. Peaceful. Even beautiful in her mountainside tomb.

As we pass the crumbling stone house, the old woman's rocking chair sits empty, her last few apples clinging to their branches. Zahra and I drift slowly through the dense forests of northern Lebanon, our shadows and the shadows of cedars dissolving into dusk, each footstep driving us farther from the stillness of the valley and closer to the clamor and buzz of the modern world.

When we reach the pile of stones marking the trailhead, I walk over to Zahra's car, unlock the doors, and set my pack on the back seat. After she climbs into the passenger's side I slide behind the wheel, start the engine and shift into low to begin our ascent back over Mastaba.

On the other side of the mountain we descend toward the coast. But this time the scenery reels by in fast motion, and later I'll remember the

drive as a blur: The shoulder of Mastaba. The cedars. Olive groves. And the checkpoint, this time guarded by a much older gunner.

At the coast highway near Tripoli we turn left and head south for Beirut. It's dark now and a half moon reflects over the Mediterranean. Weaving our way through uninhabited coves, the hulking silhouettes of looming rock piles lurch into the sea, breaking the tumbling waves whose foam and spray glow phosphorescent in the moonlight.

Around a final corner and over a rise there's no mistaking the fuzzy glow of Beirut stretching across the southern horizon. As we shorten the gap between our headlights and the city, the outlines of high rises emerge from the glare. The blinding lights of Beirut. Rushing towards us far too fast.

Soon I'll lie down in my new bed. In a country still as foreign to me as I am to it. Maybe I'll dream of Qadisha tonight. And Saint Mariam's grave.

But I can't control that. All I hope for now is to sleep.

