

My Romanticized Ancestry



By Laila Shadid

I had a conversation with my stepmother the other day about Lebanon. I told her how badly I wanted to travel to the country of my heritage and the place it held in my heart. I told her how proud I was to be Lebanese and how important it was to my identity. I told her that being Lebanese is what I am most proud of. “Why?” she asked me.

Why shouldn't I be proud of my heritage? Why shouldn't my Lebanese roots be central to my identity? I repeated this out loud.

But I have come to realize that my Lebanon is not the Lebanon its citizens know. I do not know the Lebanon that fails its citizens, the Lebanon that does not respect anyone under its control. I have learned about Lebanon from my East Coast bubble as a third-generation Lebanese-American born to a white mother. As much as I want it to be, Lebanon is not my home—it is my romanticized ancestry.

Recently, I have asked myself why I care so much about the Middle East and why I want

to follow in my father's footsteps as a journalist in the region. I feel so deeply about the place and people I come from—but why? Why is my Lebanese heritage so important to me?

There are many reasons why I love being Lebanese. I love the food, the hospitality, the craziness, the drama, the beautiful energy. I love being part of a community. But what I love most is being my father's daughter. Lebanon is our connection that endures beyond death.

I am writing this on the nine-year anniversary of his passing. My father died of an asthma attack while reporting in Syria for *The New York Times*. I write and speak this sentence so often that my hands and tongue are numb to its meaning. His existence feels like a fever dream—each scene bookended by heartbreak. I lived in constant fear of him leaving, leaving for the Middle East and then for good. I was 10 years old when he died, on the brink of adolescence and extreme self-awareness, ready to know my father as a



Laila, her father, and her brother,
Marjayoun, Lebanon, 2011

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father's daughter. While I
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person—to ask him the questions I couldn't verbalize before and to receive the answers I was once too young to understand.

My father taught me what it means to be Lebanese. The country is my father's country; the food is my father's food; the people are my father's people. The more Lebanese I am, the closer I feel to him. This is why I've worn my name in Arabic around my neck since I was a child, why I am majoring in Middle Eastern studies, and why, after my father's death, I pushed myself to learn the language of my heritage because it would make him proud.

He lived and died so that I could be proud of my identity. I may have been young, but I remember how he spoke of the people he reported on. It was always about the people, not the wars, or the bombs, or the politics. Lebanon, to me, is fulfilling my father's leg-

acy of humanizing the dehumanized. But being Lebanese does not only mean being my father's daughter. While I hope to fulfill his legacy, I also hope to create my own—one inspired by my own Lebanon, the Lebanon that my father instilled in me but that I must discover on my own terms, through my own lens, and in my own words.

I often read the final page of my father's memoir, *House of Stone*, which reads as an open love letter to his Lebanon and our ancestral home.

“In my mind's eye I saw Laila, suddenly grown, beside these trees and repeating the Arabic words that I would one day teach her, words that would take her back to...where the Litani River runs, over Marjayoun, over what was once our land. This is *bayt* [home]. This is what we imagine.”

This is where my story begins.