

The Master of Time is Five Minutes Slow

To my utter amazement, I actually like my city. Not, I should explain, through any mechanical sense of duty or inbuilt nationalism which, as Einstein once remarked, is an infantile sickness, the measles of the human race. Although born and bred in Beirut, I – like many a travelling Lebanese I expect – would distance myself from the fatherland and mother of civil wars. For more years than I wish to recall, I would affect a Hungarian accent on the streets of Paris and London and describe to curious strangers the architectural marvels of Budapest, my city – embroidering on a two-day sojourn there with scant regard for accuracy.

Pure, unadulterated goulash of course.

That I could forsake Beirut so remorselessly and adopt another birthplace in 48 hours was a sign of the dark ages: far better, to Western eyes, to be the Magyar fleeing communism than the presumed fanatic from that ‘hostage place’.

Things change with time. Iron curtains fall with a deafening clang, peace treaties are signed, hometowns become endearing.

Over the past few years, in fact ever since the many enclaves were popped and Beirut stopped resembling a collection of Kafkaesque short stories, I have mistaken a genuine growing affection for other, mundane feelings: pleasure with haunts, and deep-seated satisfaction that I am no longer hopelessly lost when I drive the streets. So that it was in a searing moment, with the vivid clarity of shock, that I realized I actually liked Beirut.

It is Saturday, 8 May; and the time is 11:45 a.m. I turn to the chiming clock tower in the Place de l’Etoile and, there and then, as the sun bathes the tower and surrounding houses with a crisp, golden hue, I know that this is indeed my town. Unwarrantably theatrical perhaps, but true nonetheless.

I stand for a while, mesmerized by this sudden revelation, contemplating in one steady sweep the refurbished banks and central post office, and Parliament House’s strangely appealing mix of modern and traditional architecture. Further afield, below a sign of a worker in a yellow hard hat and the words, ‘Safety First’, is another, surprisingly small sign – as if tentative – that reads: ‘Solidere welcomes you to the heart of Beirut.’

A fibrillating heart as yet. I have come to rationalize my fondness for the city and, though as genuine as my pride for Budapest was false, I believe it is akin to a neighborly concern for a sickly, pustule-faced child. Scarred and amputated beyond belief, one waits with the patience of Job for the wounds to heal and limbs to grow anew.

At 11:47 a.m. of said revelation day, my reverie is shattered by a single, tactless remark. A companion at my side has been studying his state-of-the-art watch (newfangled it is, for on an earlier occasion, he had spent 21 minutes and several seconds highlighting the

sophisticated features of his timepiece) and, fixing the clock tower, he pronounces in a smug, can't-fool-me tone: 'You're five minutes slow.'

Actually he says it in French, for he and his wife – whom we shall respectively call Paul and Babette – are tourists from the Midi on a first-ever trip to Lebanon, and I am their fortunate guide during their stay. They are friends of friends and pleasant enough except for one serious, at times nearly offensive blemish. As is so often the case with folk who do not travel often, Paul and Babette have a constant need to refer to home, to gauge all their experiences in relation to the minuscule corner of their household universe. A trip to darkest Africa, say, or to a South American tribe untouched by modern civilization would be so extraordinary an experience for our couple, so other-worldly compared with France, that it might well drive them all but insane. Hence *Nous* to my companions is presumably their hometown which, when they are abroad, extends to encompass France. While *Vous* is the rest of the world and in particular, for a week, Lebanon and Lebanese.

When Paul tells the clock tower in the Place de l'Etoile that it is five minutes slow he is, of course, addressing me as an unwonted representative of Lebanon and not the clock itself. It couldn't care less, and is blissfully unaware that its accuracy is being called into question. It carries on ticking, cheerily anticipating the moment, thirteen minutes away, when it can regale its listeners with its harmonious chime for noon. The sound is strikingly similar if timorous to Big Ben in London. I riposte to exacerbate Paul's anglophobic tendencies partly because the verbal tug-of-war has become customary between us, but especially because he interrupted my vision of a lovable city with such banality.

'Oh dear,' I say, casting a worried glance at the Frenchman's wrist. 'You'll have to correct your watch. Does it do that often?'

Paul is about to complain, about to embark on another speech about the pulsating atoms in his watch that lose a second every trillion years or so. My hand silences him, begins to trace an imaginary line from the clock face down the limestone tower, joining a fictitious underground cable all the way to Parliament House and then up to a dish, through the ether to a stationary satellite. 'Linked by satellite to Greenwich,' I explain. Which is not, as far as I know, the case at all. But I graduated as an engineer and have, therefore, the scientific tools and appropriate jargon to lie convincingly. 'We follow GMT. Three hours ahead in summer. To the very second.'

It is with a rare sense of victory that I look on as Paul turns to the clock tower with newfound respect.

It may seem ironic but I have Paul and Babette to thank for the burgeoning patriotic pride in the bosom. Humans are by nature stubborn and argumentative. And, true to my genetic stock, had my guests spoken only of praise for Lebanon (as gracious guests are supposed to) then I might have countered with any number of a myriad of problems that plague our country: the spread of poverty and illiteracy, the occupied south, fragile peace, chaotic urbanization, infernal traffic jams, and many more besides.

Alas, not so!

A mere 24 hours after landing at our brand-new airport ('OK so it's new – but even our provincial airport is bigger and better organized'), the French couple assured me they would be capable of writing reams on Lebanon's shortcomings. In the Shouf, visiting the abodes of our mountain emirs, they said, 'Very nice. But we would call Beit ed-Din a manor house – not grand enough to be a chateau.' In Tripoli, they turned up their noses at the atmospheric souks, complaining at the filth. Even in Baalbek, holiest of holies, Paul and Babette were far too wary of the peddlers to admire the magnificent temples. Upon Paul's insistence, Babette clutched her handbag for dear life and walked between us. I tried to explain that the bearded men around us meant us no harm: 'They're neither thieves nor terrorists. They just want to sell you some fake coins.'

The more they whined the harder I tried to bring the positive aspects to the fore, driven for some reason to maintain a sense of balance. I would say on the defensive, 'Lebanon is like a beautiful woman hiding behind a veil.' Adding rather lamely: 'You just need to get to know her better.'

'Beauty?' Paul would frown at a hideous vista of apartment blocks. 'Where?'

He has a point of course. Lebanon is one of the messiest places on the face of the planet. Sure we have mountains and a coastline, but so do they. And besides theirs are mostly well-kept: little danger there of hiking in a forest and coming across a heap of garbage, or of stepping on some used toilet paper, or of swimming in a murky sea anxiously avoiding floating plastic bags, rusted cans of tuna, and shards of broken bottles. So why, in their right minds, would tourists care to visit this shabby land? 'Why did you come to Lebanon?' I asked my guests tactlessly, in a bid to stop the whingeing with some hearty bad manners.

Babette answered: 'When we met you in France, you told us so much about the history of Lebanon that we had to see it for ourselves.'

Her words would only sink in the following day at 8:45 a.m. GMT or 11:50 a.m. according to Paul's watch as we three – at the risk of sounding repetitive – stood before Beirut's clock tower. We had just passed one of the future archaeological parks where a team of diggers had sifted through soil, panning for Beirut's past. I explained that relics had been discovered from Neolithic, Sumerian, Phoenician, Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Solomonic, Persian, Macedonian, Roman, Byzantine, Ummayyad, Crusader, Mameluke, Ottoman and Napoleonic times. The buried variety is a measure of the land's downtrodden yet uniquely rich history.

Heading towards Riad el-Solh, I recounted the legend of St George, how we now stepped on the very terrain where a mythical dragon had terrorized Beirutis. Then, an instant before the chime for a quarter to the hour, I described another, far older legend: the story of the foundation of Beirut.

El, the father of Baal and of all Semitic gods, was deemed altogether too divine to be assigned an effigy. The early Canaanites thought of him as an eternal triangle. The Greeks, who later adopted him, named him, Chronos, the faceless master of time. According to the legend, El/Chronos roamed the known world for eons that were like a second, searching

for a perfect site for a new city. On the Levantine coast, he chose a promontory – on the southern side of a perfect bay and backed by a mountain range – that was as triangular as his nature. And there, with a geometer’s pair of compasses, in the heart of the ‘immortal city’, the father of time laid the first chiseled rock.

It was magical. Uncanny even.

My mind was still thinking of the Graeco-Roman ruins between the two St George cathedrals (Greek Orthodox and Maronite), of the sublime early Islamic architecture of the Great Mosque, of the remains of both the Crusader tower overlooking the harbor and, below, of the juxtaposed sewage systems of the three-millennia old Phoenician and sixty year old colonial French.

It was precisely as I finished recounting the tale of El/Chronos that the clock chimed to tell me the time...

Paul and Babette have since returned to France with, I expect, exotic adventures to entertain family and friends and also perhaps with considerable relief to rejoin civilization (as they would put it). As for me, I plan to embark on adventures of my own to rediscover the forgotten jewels that make Lebanon such a feast for the senses. To look at the sites and listen to the people who make our nation a living time machine.

That is not to say that I swell with pride every time Beirut is mentioned – not yet at least. But nor, for the first time in my life, do I cringe and feel compelled to tell Europeans that I come from Budapest.

Next issue: Carthalo tries to leave Beirut by train and misses it by 30 years.

Taking the Next Train to Nowhere

I sit on the only bench of Platform 1, in Beirut’s St Michael’s Station, waiting for the next train. Not that I plan on going anywhere and nor, for that matter, have I chosen the most rational means of transportation. I am patiently waiting for the next train to Aley, conscious that the last train chugged out of the Gare de St Michel 34 years ago. “Aaargh! I’ve just missed the last train.”

Aaargh was almost the only sound my octogenarian landlord could make. He greeted me with an Aaargh! and said, “Aaargh! Aaargh!” when I asked about his health. It is quite astonishing how much one can learn to understand with only tonal stresses and half a body language. Majid, my kind and prosperous landlord, suffered a stroke, which left him in an ignominious state. A veteran of the Second World War – with the allies, he was part of a Lebanese brigade forcing the Vichyists out – Majid remained a fighter. Every so often, his left fist would clench tight and thump the paralyzed right half of his body as a soldier trying

to shake life back into a fallen comrade. And, though he had lost his faculty of speech, he emitted his guttural exclamations with the charisma if not the syntactic precision of an orator. “Aaargh,” said Majid warmly as he squeezed my arm with his left hand. He motioned me to a seat, and enquired, “Aaargh?”

“I’m well, shokran,” I hazarded. Majid managed the briefest of nods before turning to the telly.

Majid’s brother-in-law is acting landlord. He handed me the lease for my apartment, index tapping impatiently at the millions I owe, and said unsympathetically, “You’re late.”

I have difficulties with what I call ‘everyday time’, a kind of temporal dysfunction: I have more problems gauging minutes and hours than I do understanding centuries and eras. I will invariably arrive either half an hour early for an appointment or 30 minutes late; whereas, in a geological timeframe, I have no problems telling you whether it was the diplodocus or the triceratops that arrived first. It is perhaps just as well that I live in a country where being late is not only tolerated but, bayn ashab, the social etiquette. Majid was a friendly sort who had no problems with my tardiness in paying the rent; his brother-in-law is not. “I’ll pay you tomorrow, inshalla,” I said.

“Aaargh!” interjected Majid. He pointed at the screen with visible glee. There was a commercial break on LBC, preceded by the image of trains. Majid made a noise that sounded like, “Chuck-chuck.”

“He likes trains,” explained the brother-in-law, as though talking about a child.

I get the goose bumps for the silliest things. The first commercial was for a watch called Irony, the one with the sprinter clocking in at 19.32 seconds, astronaut bouncing on the moon after a thousand years, starlight reaching a telescope after a thousand light years, etc. The sheer relativity gets my flesh crawling every time and, for 30 seconds, we are elevated from telly addicts to observers of a grander universe than Majid’s sober living room. Faced with the delightful notion that a millisecond and a parsec are close cousins, I caught myself wondering why Majid’s brother-in-law cared if I was a day or a week late in paying my rent. I also wondered why no one had explained to Swatch’s marketing department that just because a watch is made of iron doesn’t make it Irony. But I like the ad anyway and voiced enthusiastically, “Tick-tock.”

“Aaargh,” agreed Majid wistfully, his eyes twinkling at me.

As I prepared to leave, Majid scribbled a barely legible note, which he waved to his relative. The younger man stepped out of the room and returned presently with a faded photograph. “He wants you to have it,” he said, handing me a picture of Beirut’s terminus in the ‘30s. “He used to live in Aley and commuted to work by train.”

I smiled gratefully, and Majid stiffened momentarily to give me his proudest left-handed salute.

In the days of the Switzerland of the Middle East, we had more than just banks: we had mountain chuck-chucks. Stepping onto the platform of St Michel is like entering a time warp. The station is still there; the bench is still usable and as uncomfortable as the day it was manufactured; and the platform clock is more accurate than the Plasticky at my wrist.

My fixation with time is several decades old. I was seven and a bit when I discovered – with as much dismay as can overcome a child – that adult mayflies live for only a day while cedars can last several millennia. It struck me as horribly unfair that, to use an appropriate chore for me then, the cedar could take centuries mulling over a math exercise, while the same homework would have to be completed in minutes by the mayfly for it to have enough time for other, more leisurely pursuits. Armed with the Boys' Book of Knowledge for 7-10 year-olds, I questioned my parents and learnt that humans, being midway between flies and cedars, also have a last second. I am like the housewife who remembers with crystal clarity the very plate she was cleaning the instant she heard of Kennedy's assassination on the radio. Except that the grave news for me was the abrupt understanding that my parents were not immortal as I had previously assumed; and that, rather than seeing innocuous crockery, I am doomed to remember page 47 of an out-of-print book for boys, and its stylized illustrations of an insect and a tree.

Which all goes to explain why I am still waiting for the the next train to Aley. Today is Saturday, 12 June. It is a month since my last meeting with Majid and I have since paid both my rent and my respects for the recently deceased. He clocked out with the last rain, the left half of his body dying as abruptly as the right side.

If I were a giant, or the mass equivalent to a cedar, 60 years would represent only a second or two ago. If I listen carefully enough, I can hear the train, and the shrill whistle of the stationmaster. Among the bustling crowd of travelers who hurry past me, I discern a lean, well-dressed young man striding towards the first carriage. He boards the train, finds a window seat, and looks out one last time as the train starts to move. He sees me sitting on the bench below the clock. His eyes twinkling with childlike excitement, Majid salutes and waves goodbye.

Next issue: Carthalo is accosted by a Pepsi vendor under the arches of a Roman aqueduct.

Bridge over the River Beirut

My latest friend, Ihtan, is quite mad. For a start, he wears a thick sweater and stands in the full glare of a midday sun, quite oblivious to the seasonal heat. Today is Saturday, September 4, and we are in the throes of summer. It is hot and gets progressively more sultry as I descend into the Zoubayda Valley east of Beirut. I see him standing in his garish red jumper and, unexpectedly, catch myself humming Noel Coward's ditty about mad dogs and Englishmen. Though in actual fact Ihtan, as I soon discover, is Syrian, who looks Greek, and behaves like an old Roman. But then my view is rather skewed by the

impressive remains of an aqueduct that almost spans the Beirut River: a fallen Roman giant with its midriff washed to sea.

"Hello," I say.

"Pepsi," he replies.

If not the ludicrous red sweater, and its zip to the sternum that is zipped shut to the neck, it is the man's unusual greeting that convinces me he is moon-struck.

"Hot day today," I try again, civilly.

"Pepsi?" he repeats and, as he sees me scowling, he indicates a cool box behind him as a simple explanation, waving insistently at bottles of soda on the lid. "Or 7 Up?"

I am sweating enough for two people and, nodding, I briefly consider that his sweater might be a clever marketing ploy.

Some of the most memorable encounters in history have occurred near a river: the Orontes, where the exiled Hannibal and Scipio reached a compromise that Alexander was a greater general than either of them; the Jordan, where Saladin and Richard the Lionheart expounded the relative merits of the scimitar and broadsword, finally agreeing that both were fairly efficient weapons of destruction.

I soon realize that our own exchange will not be as historically memorable. Handing me my drink, the man points at the aqueduct and says almost conspiratorially, "Take lots of pictures. It will all change next year."

There is graffiti in the arch above the man's head that reads, 'Forever.' And indeed, having lasted two thousand years in fairly good condition, the aqueduct appears as if it might burn up another two millennia with little difficulties. I am disconcerted by the idea that the graffittist might be wrong. "Change? Why?" I ask with rising disbelief. I prepare myself to wince, expecting a conspiracy theory about a construction plan to turn the entire valley into a shopping center.

"Tourists."

"Ah."

"So many you won't see the bridge for the people." He nods with conviction. "Would have come this year but for the Israeli bombing." He asks expectantly, "You saw the new sign for Zoubayda didn't you?"

Indeed I did. Of the sweeping changes across the land brought on by last year's municipal elections, perhaps the most striking - certainly the most tangible - are the road signs which have sprouted everywhere like mushrooms after the rain. Not that anyone particularly cares about speed limits or 'Stop' signs, but still they are pleasant enough roadside decorations that break the monotony of a journey.

The sign Ihtan refers to is a shining blue arrow indicating the way to the Zoubayda Aqueduct. So that now, although this historically interesting site still has fewer sightseers than travelers to the North Pole, at least it is not due to a lack of road signs.

Clearly Ihtan is always prepared for those abrupt changes in life. He wears his sweater in anticipation of a sudden blizzard in September; and he is well stocked up on Pepsi Cola in the firm belief that, any minute now, tourists will come swarming to his stand like tsetse flies.

I ask for a second 7 Up and am rewarded with both a happy grin and a tale of ambitions.

Ihtan, as it turns out, is a chip off the old block. His father had a humble beginning selling soda to foreigners outside the Crac des Chevaliers in Syria. From a makeshift stand comparable to his son's, he sold countless bottles of local pop until the day he was able to afford his own snack bar. If you happen to visit the Crac, chances are you'll eat at Abou Ihtan's who, insists his son, has the best restaurant in the vicinity of the castle.

Ihtan casts a wistful glance at his cool box. "I'm a painter during the week," he says. "I'm only here on week-ends." This is perhaps just as well, for in the hour that we've spent together, I've been his only customer - though admittedly I must count for two. "But you'll see." His voice becomes defiant, and his eyes have a faraway look. "Come next year, you'll see."

Of course he is mad. Mad to think the aqueduct will ever become like the Crac or like Baalbek; and seriously deranged for even proposing to ruin such a tranquil spot with soulless commercialism.

And yet, when I follow his almost proprietorial gaze to a stretch by the river shaded by the millennial aqueduct, I see what he sees: thousands of tourists waiting for their shawarmas and falafels. "You'll see," he repeats.

"Inshalla," I say with genuine feeling.

East is east, and west is west; and never the twain shall meet - unless, that is, there happens to be a bridge handy. Quite freakishly, Ihtan's insanity becomes the legendary Horatius: the hero who stands alone on the bridge as the hungry Etruscan army gathers to attack Rome. Even his nose, aquiline in the westering sun, is downright Roman as the aqueduct.

I turn to leave, and as he reverts into a barely perceptible red blob standing awkwardly by the fallen giant, I can't help but think, "Now who will stand and keep the bridge with him?"

Next issue: Carthalo leaves his mark by the river called Dog.

The 18th Rock from the River

There's nothing quite like beauty to turn one to crime. I came across Antoinette and Tina during a walk by the Dog – that is by the river called Dog, a name that is almost as amusing as the neighborhood in Greater Beirut called 'Elephant's Tusk'. The girls are perhaps 12 years old. One of them has a pad open, and they both stare at the graven image of an old king, for a while unaware that I am spying on them. The king in question is Assyrian and his features are far too idealised and eroded to be called attractive. And, in spite of the cuteness of their youth, one of the girls is far too plump, and the other wears glasses a tad too thick, for either of them to be considered lovely. So the beauty is more intellectual - mentally deranged, that is - has more to do with the uncommon contrast in the situation than with any physical appearance. But then, if you have been following Past time, you will already know my freakish nature, and the frequent references to giants who, unlike ants, have an unstinting memory of deep, geological time.

Before me are two young girls and a man so old even his bones have withered to dust: two mayflies resting briefly on a cedar's branch, fresh and ancient sharing a moment's space.

It is there and then that are sown the seeds for my crime, and my hand reaches into my pocket to feel for the Swiss Army knife. Rest assured, my crime will be relatively petty: choosing a remote spot far from the stelae and the Roman bridge, I plan to make my mark in the rock-face.

Of course the girls cannot be blamed for this caddish, hooligan urge. But nor, I rationalise, am I the real culprit. The blame rests squarely on an Egyptian pharaoh. I am a vandal because of Ramses II.

Mount Lebanon, running parallel to the Mediterranean coastline, has an impressive outcrop by the Dog River where mountain used to collide abruptly with sea – the collision is less spectacular these days due to the new coastal motorway. The mountain range is a giant resting on his right side with the top of his head inclined towards Asia Minor, his feet lying on the burning sand of the south western extremity of the Syrian desert; his left arm reposes on the hip adding altitude to his considerable girth, his right arm is outstretched with fingers idle in the Mediterranean pond. He looks a fallen martyr; and the Dog River flows across the arm, from a wound in the giant's neck.

The first recorded large-scale invasion of the Levant was by Ramses II. The Egyptian conqueror captured the Phoenician cities, crossing not from east to west, as later Assyrian conquerors, but from south to north. Even on this more accessible geological route, the pharaoh had to ford the Dog River at the treacherous pass, his lightning progress halted by the giant's arm. When the Egyptian army crossed the river, it represented such a remarkable feat that Ramses had a stela erected to mark the event. Unwittingly, he started a trend.

The conquering road from the north to south or south to north involved marching across the narrow pass, and every invader would feel the irresistible urge to leave his mark on the imposing rock face by the Dog River. From Asserhaddoun the Assyrian, to Alexander the Macedonian, on their expeditions to Tyre and Egypt, to the Romans, to the Umayyads, to the Crusaders, to Napoleon III, to the Australians sent halfway across the world to fight the Ottomans, to the British and Free French invading the French Vichyists.

Historical interest aside, the rock face by Dog River resembles a wall in a public lavatory: I was here conjugated in a host of scripts and languages both living and dead.

The girls spot me and start to giggle nervously. “Are you going to take pictures of us?” asks the shorter, bespectacled girl as she points at my camera.

“Maybe just one.” The words have barely left my mouth when the girls start to walk like Egyptians, each trying to outperform the other in a Cleopatra pose.

My camera is now focusing on the millennial Assyrian who looks solidly unimpressed. “How many of those rocky things are there?” asks Antoinette.

Unfortunately there is no other word for those inscribed slabs; one must use the archaeological term, stela. But I daresay ‘rocky things’ can work just as well. “There are 17 rocky things.”

Wordlessly, Tina picks up her pad and scribbles my answer as her sister asks, “And which was the first?” I tell them of Ramses. “And the last?” Antoinette grins impishly. She asks a few more questions about the site, all of which I answer, pleased by such an interest in history. The quiet Tina duly notes all my answers.

Antoinette doesn’t know what she wants to be when she grows up. But Tina has her heart set on becoming a history teacher. Not, as I am disappointed to discover, for the noble reasons I immediately supposed. My shy friend wants to teach history as a backlash to her schoolmistress. Tina believes she will be a kinder, gentler teacher than Mademoiselle Ashkar. “I would never give my students too much homework,” says Tina. “Especially not on a weekend.”

“Homework?” I notice that Antoinette’s grin has returned, and that Tina, the budding history professor, has studiously closed her pad.

“Will you send us the picture?” they plead sweetly. “Please.”

“Maybe.” I think I will send them that picture though I feel I have been conned by a couple of schoolgirls. But at any rate I had already planned on something more durable than a picture.

It is as we part company that I look for my spot, well off the beaten track, where I may add my graffiti: an 18th rocky thing. It is Saturday, Dec. 5, or two and a half millennia after the Assyrian king paused to contemplate his rock-hewn image, and 3,300 years since Ramses II commissioned the first stela. Antoinette, Tina and I were here today and, as I flick open my penknife, I consider that it would be fun to return to Dog River in a 1000 years to see if ‘CAT’ will still be there.

Next issue: Carthalo is tempted by an old sewing machine in the Saida souk.

Of Hookers and Sewing Machines

Stepping into the chaotic confines of my living room you soon notice my rather deranged taste for the fraudulent. On display, in an order that is as random as the disposition of the furniture, is a collection of Ancient Greek tetradrachm coins, counterfeits to the last drachm; a copy of a replica of the Rosetta Stone, where the hieroglyphs are so faded and haphazard that it would take nothing short of a miracle to decipher them; and a photocopied edition of a complete Coptic-Latin dictionary which, in terms of marrying tongues, is about as winning a combination as honeymoon night for nonagenarian newlyweds.

The one, bona fide antique (our Coptic readers will forgive me if I don't look up bona fide) is a 1907 Singer sewing machine, taking pride of place next to a miniature Phoenician sarcophagus, which the smallest of rodents would have difficulty squeezing into. It was my grandmother's machine, and her mother's before that. Where other families pass down watches and rings as heirlooms, we lumber our offspring with sewing machines.

My Singer lies implacably, its bowed iron frame like a worshipper, waiting to outlive me. A marvel of turn of the century machinery, its gears are still capable of spinning to plunge a needle in and out of knitwear as though the intervening 92 years since the date of its manufacture were only 92 minutes away. It is absolutely charming. Which leads directly - in a spirit of contrariety, that is - to Mohsen Mazloum.

His surname, meaning oppressed, does him justice. He has the air of the downtrodden about him, the temperament of a bullmule, a unique hybrid whose mood swings violently from raging to stubborn, and the looks of a hippowhale. But Mohsen has the particularity of owning a store in the Saida souk that mostly sells antique sewing machines which, in his case, is almost a saving grace: obnoxious and obese as he is, at least his collection of Singers and Huqsvanas is impressive.

And so you may imagine my excitement, my unbridled joy, when I happened upon his store, in the heart of the old town, by the Khan el Franj.

"So," said Mohsen gruffly, "You want to buy something or what?"

Lebanon must be one of the few places in the world where browsing is frowned upon. Even in the National Museum, pausing by the exhibit of real Greek tetradrachm coins, one of the guards came up to me and stood solidly and wordlessly by my side in the conviction, perhaps, that loitering at one display for more than two minutes betrayed a criminal intent.

"Just looking," I said airily to Mohsen, opting not to tell him that, of all my earthly possessions, all else could burn so long as I had my 1907 Singer.

When I complimented him on his store, and on his unusual merchandise, Mohsen relaxed somewhat and became conversational. He told me that the store had been his mother's, and her mother's before that, in a Mazloum tradition that stretched back to a time when the Franj had operated the Khan el Franj. In Mohsen's matriarchal family, the women had all been seamstresses who, as it transpired, worked especially on clothes for foreign merchants

in Saida. Mohsen inherited the shop but not the taste for needle and thread which explains the stock of antiquated sewing machines that he needs to sell.

Just then, our conversation was interrupted by a muezzin's call to prayer. Mohsen seemed bothered.

"Do you want to pray?" I asked him politely, offering to leave his premises.

"Do I look like I want to pray?" replied Mohsen with a vehemence that surprised me. "No," he added, "I never want to pray."

Tempted though I was by his merchandise, I couldn't buy a sewing machine: Mohsen is proof that there is only so much weight that one's progeny will endure. I bowed unnecessarily as I exited his store and thought I heard Mohsen swear under his breath.

Fidei is a freak coincidence, one of those rare words in the evolution of tongues that purports to link a dead with a living language, Indo-European with Semitic. In contemporary Arabic, fidei is translated as sacrificing oneself for a cause; in classical Latin, it is the genitive case of fides and means, 'of the faith'. It is therefore coincidental that the Roman root offers itself for service in the Middle East.

Of course, Mohsen is not much of a fidei; not in the Arabic, Latin, Coptic nor any other contrived sense of the word. He is just bored.

But his story about the seamstresses working for foreign merchants did remind me of another linguistic crossbreed.

To the European 17th and 18th century adventurers, the local girls were charming, or charmante in French, the lingua franca of the foreigners. A mite too charmante, in fact, for the ladies offered the men skills that moved beyond mere stitching and sewing. This particular form of feminine charm was not new in Saida - as is to be expected of the world's oldest profession in one of the world's oldest cities. What was new was the term used. The local population took to the euphemism as, well, a Frenchman takes to unattached sex, giving rise to a new word in the Lebanese vocabulary.

As an aside, it's worth mentioning that 'prostitute' comes from the Latin prostituere, or 'offer for sale'. Our Arabic etymological root is far more graceful. And as for Mohsen, I suspect he's a son of a charming seamstress.

Next issue: Carthalo visits 'Cedartown' where the forester believes he is the human ambassador to the cedars.

The Emir of Cedartown

Milad Gibran is not related to the famous Lebanese poet and mystic, Khalil Gibran. But he pretends to be. Both were born in Mount Lebanon, and both have written poetry: the latter with great success, the former with none. Milad is a full-time forester in the Cedars, yet he still tells the visitor to the cedar forest that he is above all a poet, whose soul is sustained by the same Gibran blood that courses through his veins, though, in truth, he has not written a line of verse in over a decade. So he stretches the truth whenever he tells anyone who asks that he lives among the cedars for inspiration. Instead of poetry, he possesses a large logbook in which he scribbles the odd sentence as private maxims to keep up the pretence that he is a writer. However with his meagre wage as the forester, his wild emaciated features and of course his name, he plays a credible role of mystic genius especially with wide-eyed foreigners.

‘Wow, Mr. Gibran,’ enthusiastic foreign tourists say, ‘Could you read us some of your poetry?’

‘It is Arabic,’ Milad declines ruefully in his broken English.

It is especially Americans who are interested because his cousin had written fluently in both Arabic and English and had spent the latter half of his life exiled in the States. A few tourists, undying aficionados of the poet’s writings, have even visited the cedars not so much to wonder at the oldest living trees but to wander with the late Khalil on the mountains of his birth.

Milad Gibran is poor: There are two forms of carbon - graphite and diamond, and only one writes on paper. He is single: A wife envies the intellect and the intellect envies the wife - each sulks the other. And he is secretly miserable.

If foreign tourists find his company interesting - albeit in the small dose that the duration of their stay will permit - and ask him to pose for their cameras next to the trees like a statue by Greek columns, the local population shuns him. Young girls are not allowed to stray alone into the forest lest the presumed dirty forester accost them. In truth, Milad has not ravished a living soul; but the townsfolk of Bsharreh are convinced that such a hermit who has abandoned the cloth - he was a monk in his youth - and with only trees for friends, will be sexually frustrated to the point of committing a crime. Girls are hidden from him on the rare occasions he goes to town, and toddlers cry when they see him on account of his wild beard and glass eye in the left cavity that stares everywhere and nowhere at the same time as the lifeless gaze from a painted portrait. Upbeat about his handicap, he writes: I am fortunate that I see only half the cruelty in the world.

Given that picnics are strictly forbidden in the vicinity of the cedars, the local population rarely visits the forest; only couples from the town, teenagers and young adults, can be seen ambling hand in hand on the paths. These, Milad fixes warily, his right eye darting at them. For a start, lovers are the worst litterlouts, discarding tissues everywhere and, come the warmer summer evenings, the odd used prophylactic. More shamefully though, some of the Romeos immortalise their ephemeral flings by carving their initials into the bark of trees. Whenever the forester discovers such vandalism, he flies into a fit of rage. He had once roared and duly recorded: In a thousand years, when the cedars still carry the scars,

who will give a damn about the vandals? They will all be in hell, and their bodies won't interest even the smallest microbe.

Milad Gibran genuinely loves his trees. They have their own names and their own personalities. The perimeter wall around the forest, built in 1874 by the English, is a city wall, a fortification that keeps the humans at bay. Within the walls are housed the sheikh, his immediate family, his bodyguards, and the arboreal citizens. Milad sees his own role within Cedartown as human ambassador, living in the midst of trees and explaining to them mankind's policies.

He has some favourite characters among the timbered folk. There is the-Whore, a slender cedar with a large orifice in her trunk - an act of vandalism caused not by amorous humans but by wood-pecking owls that hoot from this nest every night with the distinctive cry of their species that sounds like excited moans. There is the head bodyguard: a tree that has recovered from an illness but whose lowest boughs are still defoliated and resemble a dozen arms levelling a thousand wooden spears at an enemy. The priest in Cedartown, Holy-Trinity, is so called because the trunk is buried underground, covered perhaps in a freak subsidence down the ages, and that the three main branches, thick as trunks themselves, look like three trees growing oddly vertical and then flat.

And there is the Grand Emir-Bashir, the uncontested ruler of Cedartown. He is the oldest cedar in Lebanon, at the centre of the oldest group of trees, a grandfatherly figure, as wizened as he is regal, his significant paunch concealing over three thousand rings. Of the Emir, Milad wrote, A cedar's age is in its rings; its honour is in the ripples of its skin.

A cedar grows to its optimum height in two centuries, during which time the youngster resembles any regular pine. At the two hundred-year mark, the adolescent tree begins its characteristic horizontal expansion: flattening of the boughs, swelling of the trunk, in a process that only ends with the tree's death. When a cedar dies, a significant part of history dies with it.

It was during one of his customary rounds of the forest that Milad came across and almost stepped on a new birth. Rising insignificantly beside the sheikh, appearing like an ant that stands foolishly by an elephant's toenail, was a new shoot. Milad's expression softened, his left eye took in the Emir-Bashir; his left eye fixed the sapling with interest. "New blood," he said with delight. "Hope for the future."

He breathed in the fragrant and distinctive cedar sap that pervades the entire forest and, reaching down, he unearthed the cedarling, digging carefully around the young roots. "Baby," he spoke gently to the shoot, "You'll have a name when you return in five years' time."

Transporting the new cedar in a sawn-off bottle of mineral water, Milad Gibran drove down to the nursery of trees in Bsharreh where a total of 50,000 saplings – of which 30,000 are cedarlings – are being cared for. With a backward glance at Baby and at the rows of cedar saplings, he uttered, "Go, my young ones, on your millennial voyage. Sink your roots together as brothers." Later that evening, thinking of the 30,001 cedarlings, Milad recorded

in his logbook: Shout as a thousand snow storms that your wood is strong as iron; and whisper as a thousand summer breezes that your fruit is life itself.
