

The Yellowed Cards

Leila shuffled the worn-out playing cards with a practiced precision, whilst an old church service recording that she had heard too many times to count faintly echoed in the background. The musty scent that lingered in the air had become something she eagerly anticipated, akin to a child on Christmas Eve.

Sat across from her was her granddaughter. The cards were dealt. A mischievous grin formed on both of their faces. Silence enveloped the room as the game commenced, the only exceptions being the occasional hum of a church hymn or the rhythmic purring of the neighbour's cat.

The church responsible for the ethereal hymns, she realised, was Saint Charbel. She could no longer physically go to mass. Her body wouldn't let her. And so, she listened and listened as church after church recording played in the background, willing her soul to be nourished.

Her patron saint was everywhere. In the carefully placed statues scattered around her home. In church recordings. In coffee cup readings. He was at the forefront of her intentions in the morning, and in the prayers she said at night. He was her connection to Lebanon. So much so that when she closed her eyes, she heard the crowing of roosters in the morning. She pictured the sun emerging from its slumber and kissing the mountain peaks good morning. There was a sacred silence that came before the inevitable hustle and bustle would filter through the rest of the day. It was at this time she'd venture down the steep cobble stone path and run her fingers along the weathered stones that formed a wall between her and the stand of trees. Lush green moss filled the cracks of the make-shift wall; the contrast so enticing she'd tentatively stretch her arm out before feeling the cold dampness.

Upon reaching the end of the uneven path, the quaint church would stand proudly before her. It embraced her in a hug, allowing her to appreciate the masonry vault made with carefully

placed limestones and a blood red carpet which separated the wooden pews and trailed all the way up the feet of the alter. The myrrh incense no longer caused her nose to wrinkle. Instead, she focused on the arched stained-glass windows which cast colourful rays of light on the floor. Above the alter, a chandelier hung, extending its luminous arms towards the framed painting of St Charbel that rested perfectly symmetrical in the midst of the space.

Her granddaughter was the first to place a card down. Leila watched as youthful hands meticulously handled the yellowed cards, careful as not to damage them. Queen of hearts. She vividly remembered the Saturday nights when her husband and kids would visit family friends who had also fled Lebanon. The kitchen table would transform into the designated 'Adult's only card table' with the swift drape of a blanket. The women would get to work in the kitchen, preparing the mezza and alcohol, which they would serve to the men, before too sitting down. Arabic music was a given on nights similar to this, providing the spectators – some youthful and some old – with something to sing and dance to. Eventually she'd light up a cigar, watching the children laugh and play outside while conversing in their mother tongue.

"Tayta." A slight nudge on her arm was enough to resume the card game. Leila smiled, her gaze lingering on the queen of hearts. As the game continued, she marvelled at the skill her granddaughter had developed over the years. Each movement was deliberate, every decision well thought out. Her heart expanded at the sight.

Her granddaughter, who had been focusing on her hand of cards, met her gaze instinctively. No words were spoken, yet in their shared features conveyed a silent conversation that only the two of them understood.

Each card placed down shared another story of Leila's past, of their Lebanese heritage.

Conjured another smile, followed by a laugh. Late Saturday nights continued in the space of

her home, with her granddaughter and her staying up to two in the morning, pulling faces and humming along to church hymns whilst bonding over their shared love of the yellowed cards.