

ECHOES FROM MARS

Dear Family,

I wonder if you still remember the way rain feels on your skin. I try to, but the memory fades a little more each year. Here on Mars, there's no rain. No scent of damp earth after a storm, no sudden downpours that catch you off guard, while you burst from laughing as you run for cover. Instead, we have airlocks, filtered oxygen, and a plain bleak sky that never changes. They call it home, but I still dream of Lebanon. I still dream of you.

Fifteen years. That's how long it's been since I last stood barefoot on real soil, since I last felt the warmth of a sunrise or smelled the sea wind off the Corniche. We've built something here, something efficient, safe. But safety feels cold without the heartbeat of home. Mars is all about survival. But Lebanon... Lebanon was music, it was color, it was breath. It was life.

Do you still wake up to the smell of fresh manakish baking on every corner? I miss it. I miss the sound of people arguing passionately over board games, the sight of children playing in narrow alleyways, the way everything felt unpredictable—messy, yes, but so alive. Here, everything is calculated.

Do you still walk along the Raouché shore, where the waves rise and fall? Do you let the crystal water allure you into their trap while pestering your skin with sweet kisses that leave you giggling and chuckling? I miss that feeling—the soul of the Mediterranean, the unpredictability of the wind in Beirut. Here, everything is controlled. Even the air that fills my lungs has passed through filters before it reaches me. Outside the colony walls, the silence is absolute. Step beyond the safe zone without a suit, and the planet will take you in a single breath.

Life here is... steady. We mark the days by rotations—24 hours and 39 minutes—but time feels different when there are no sunsets behind the sea, just the slow shift of light through the colony's glass. We grow food in labs, and while it nourishes us, it's not the same. The strawberries look perfect but lack the warmth and glow of Lebanese spring.

The tomatoes are red but have no scent whatsoever. I would trade them all for one imperfect apple, crisp and sweet, the way I remember.

And yet, I hear things are changing. I hear that by now, in 2050, Lebanon has started to bloom again. I read about the solar panels in the south lighting up whole towns, the skyline filled with an intriguing fusion of skyscrapers and solar towers, the vibrant green rooftops in Beirut, the young minds who stayed behind and turned a fragmented dream into an outstanding reality. The air, once embedded with remnants and decay, now carries revitalization. I imagine the trains humming from north to south, the schools filled with light and laughter, and the forests slowly convalescing. You've made Lebanon more than it ever was. Not just a country, but a miracle reborn.

They call us the future. The ones who left everything behind to colonize the stars. But the real future, the future I'm proud of, is the one you're building, back home. It's in the people growing vegetables on their rooftops. The engineers designing wind farms. The artists painting the stories of our past with new shades and colors. You've shown the world that resilience can be beautiful—that when you love something enough, you can bring it back from the edge.

Do you still hear birds in the morning? I used to wake up to their songs, to the rustling of leaves in the wind. Now, I wake to the quiet whirr of machines, the rhythmic hiss of oxygen flowing through vents. Some days, I wonder if I made the right choice in coming here. We came seeking a future, but what if we left behind everything that made life worth living? I try not to dwell on it, try not to let the ache of nostalgia turn into regret. But there are moments—when I pass by a holo-screen playing old Lebanon footage, or when I hear a recording of rain—that the longing feels unbearable. What I wouldn't give to feel the pulse of life all around me, to simply exist without thinking about oxygen levels and radiation shields.

And yet, we press on. Because that's what we do. We adapt, we endure, we find meaning even in the empty void. Maybe one day, Mars will feel like home. Maybe we'll be able to look at Lebanon the same way we used to look at the stars—distant yet full of wonder. Even though we are still drowning in the sea of nostalgia and regret, we have no choice but to move forward and force a smile on our stiff faces, hiding the anguish behind glassy eyes.

I think about you every day. I wonder what you're doing at this exact moment—if you're having coffee by the window, gazing as the morning light spills onto the kitchen floor. I wonder if you still take the long way home just to pass by the fields when they're golden and sashaying in the wind. I hope you do. I hope you never stop finding beauty in trivial things because that's what I miss most. Not just Lebanon, but the way it felt to be there. The way life moved around me, effortless and unforced. Here, nothing is effortless. Every moment is calculated.

The other day, I found a photo tucked inside my case—a picture of us at the lake, the sun setting behind us, our faces half-lit by the glow of another day ending, contagious smiles threatening to break free. I don't know why I brought it with me. Maybe I knew, deep down, that there would be nights when I would be desperate to remember what home felt like. I run my fingers over the edges, worn soft from years of handling, and I can almost hear the laughter frozen within it. I hold onto that. I hold onto you.

I hope my words reach you like a whisper across the stars. Tell me, do the rivers still run wild in the north, carving their way through the land? Do the mountains still stand, steady and unmoving? Do you still feel the ground beneath your feet and trust that it will always be there? If you do, promise me one thing: never take it for granted. I love you with every fiber of my being. I won't say goodbye, for this won't be the last time you hear from me.

With love from the red planet,

Salma