

“Dreaming Lebanon” Contest  
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“And here's to the blues, the real blues — where there's a hint of hope in every cry of desperation.”

— David Mutti Clark

They say trees are symbols of growth, life, and renewal, but those in the picture are silent witnesses to endings for me. This is the garden of a school nestled in the heart of Beirut, the Lycée Abdel Kader. Or so it was. And although that’s how we remember it, the present is not quite the same. It even is the opposite.

Going back to 1885, it is to a mysterious Mr. Mouse that we owe the first seeds. He planted them having no idea they would burgeon later into the verdant haven we know. He would never have guessed that there would be children decades later playing here and there, but though little is known about him, he was the English architect who built the castle not so far from the garden. Pines were his favorite, and his legacy was not only rooted in the soil of the garden, but in the hearts of all who found sanctuary in its embrace. We may not remember the man today, but the branches surely bow in homage to his memory, keeping alive the heritage of a figure as timeless as the garden itself.

Fast forward to 2019. If we could tune in a picture to live the moments it captures, this one would stream the laughter of children echoing through the air, mingled with the rustling of the leaves. With a verdant greenery that made them unified, one should envision the garden as so, as a bond-maker, as a refuge, as a home. It was a small city vibrant with life, hope, and the bright future of its youth. And so was Beirut.

Saplings and kids would rush to grow faster than each other, but all aimed for the skies. Dreams took flight in this garden and were nurtured under the teachers' eyes.

I remember the garden through the seasons as a historian would picture Beirut through its cycles of turmoil and tranquility. In spring (and I wish one to my country), it is a canvas of delicate rebirth. Tender buds coax themselves from the safety of branches, soft petals start unfurling, speaking of fragile beginnings. All is rebuilding from the remnants of the past, like a phoenix would from its ashes, like Beirut has done in history.

In summer, the sun commands a vibrant palette. Children dart through the patches of sunlight that dapple the ground, their carefree shouts piercing the heavy air. In these moments, the garden is pulsing with the same vigor found in Beirut's crowded souks and sun-soaked rooftops.

As the days mellow into autumn, the garden wears a coat of amber and gold. Leaves waltz to the earth in a stately descent, lying scattered like the stories of the generations. And Beirut, too, changes its garb in autumn, in preparation for introspection.

As to winter, and God knows we are in one, the branches stand bare and stark against the leaden sky, like a city pausing to catch its breath. But life clings tenaciously to the hope of spring's return. And so does Beirut stand, often quiet in the aftermath of its own winters, its heartbeat steady under the surface, waiting for the thaw to come.

Through each season, the garden is Beirut in microcosm: rooted, but flowing, glowing, and growing. It holds a mirror to the city's soul — its capacity for sorrow and joy, endings and fresh starts: a constant ebb and flow.

But this is not a mere plot of land. Seeds were sown in this fertile ground both in the soil and in the minds of the children. And it was a city that pulsed with the heartbeat of potential, with age-old Eastern colors and newly found Western hues.

There were seesaws on one side, and slides on the other. But the most famous attraction was the Spider's Web. We'd climb the wall leading to it and then deliberately lie in the trap, unhesitatingly falling between the ropes that made the Web, and right into the love we had for the place. Each silken thread, strong and fierce, represents the myriad connections that link the lives of those within the city. The nodes where the threads meet are the moments of interaction, the crossing paths of strangers, and the embrace of loved ones. These threads are the sinews of society, binding the city's inhabitants in a complex, beautiful web of coexistence. With a diverse plural identity, a *mélange* of religious beliefs and one common string, namely Love, the Web echoes the strength in unity. And even if the ropes stand empty, free of children, their games, and their chuckles, they still hold the memories of those carefree days. The Web waits in anticipation for the return of those who will breathe life back into its structure, for the moment it will once again thrive.

But, you see, now the once-manicured greenery has grown wild, untrimmed branches stretching out like hands trying to shield the eyes from the scars that marred the city's face... A silent mosaic of loss and perhaps of endurance.

Jardin, jardin de jeunesse  
Ton souvenir  
Est un baiser  
Jardin, jardin de mon enfance  
Avons-nous su t'apprivoiser ?

Following the 4th of August 2020 Beirut blast, the playground, and the garden, where the innocent clamor of play once resonated, lay desolate, the laughter absorbed into the void of the past. Shards of glass, remnants of a shattered tranquility, glittered among the leaves, like cruel stars fallen from a once hopeful sky. Tangible reminders of an explosion that not only fractured windows but also the very fabric of our hearts.

Amidst this stark portrait of loss, the garden held on to life, dear life. Trees, older now, stretched their limbs higher; leaves grew thicker, perhaps in an act of defiance, to hide the ugliness of the truth beneath a canopy of enduring green. They even stand a little more stooped, with their branches hanging heavy as if cradling the weight of the city's collective grief. It was nature's way of mourning, of remembering, and perhaps safeguarding the vestiges of what once was. A haunting stillness is carried in the air. Every leaf and twig partook in a silent vigil for the souls lost. The once vibrant playground equipment, now twisted and mute, echoed the lament. The seesaws no longer teetered with the weight of joy, and the slides no longer gleamed under the caress of the sun, their purpose unfulfilled in the stillness that followed the catastrophe.

The modern-day tragedy summons the self-same memories that once warmed our hearts, drifting like specters, ethereal and untouchable, replaying the times when the grass was a carpet for the feet of those who dared to dream. Where the melodic laughter of children had pirouetted between the boughs, now hushed a slithered breeze, carrying with it the whispers of what had been. The garden, in its silence, is now a keeper of stories, guarded behind a veil of somberness. But the Spider's Web shines somehow stronger than before, as a symbol for the interconnectedness of the community, now more than ever bound together in the aftermath of shared tragedy... as if trauma, far from isolating, was reuniting and bringing people closer to each other.

And when all was said and done, the garden will still stand as a living memorial, not only to the school it once complemented but to Beirut itself. It is a living chronicle of the city's enduring saga, a place where every stone and leaf told a tale of survival, a place that held the city's history and its unspoken future with its wounded yet still nurturing bosom.

The garden whispers tales of a past splendor, of children's joy, of knowledge shared under its shade. It stands defiant, a symbol of hope that even in the face of desolation, life persists, beauty endures, and memories, though painful, can carry the promise of the past into the future.

Jardin, jardin de mon enfance  
Ton souvenir  
Est un amour  
Jardin, jardin d'innocence  
Allons-nous nous revoir un jour ?

But we are the survivors, and our eyes reflect the depth of the city's pain yet alight with an unquenchable spark of hope. The garden will not burn, it will not be a mausoleum of memories but a cradle for a new dawn. The school will return, the city will blossom, the trees will be happy, and the children will play again. They will return to the Spider's Web, weaving their laughter into its ropes once more. The seesaws will rise and fall in the rhythm of youthful exuberance, and the slides will shine, polished by the eager descent of a generation undeterred by the shadow of yesterday. This garden, I believe, will once again be a symphony of color and joy, a palette of possibilities for the artists of the future.

Amidst the frayed edges of the city's wounded heart, these visionaries — survivors and soon-to-be saviors — imagine murals adorning the garden walls, depicting tales of valor, unity, and rebirth. They foresee the garden hosting the melodies of musicians, the verses of poets, and the laughter of picnicking families, each note, word, and giggle a stitch in the quilt of the city's restoration.

In this envisioned future, post-calamity, the garden of the Lycée Abdel Kader will stand as a microcosm of Beirut reborn — a mosaic of diversity, a harmony of old and new. It will be a sanctuary where every tree, every bench, every path will narrate the legacy of the city's past, engraved not with sorrow, but with the courage of those who chose to carve out light from the darkness. But what good is it to carve rays when you already embody plenty? What good is it to seek the light when you already are one?

So, here is the tale of a place where the dance between humanity and nature continues, where growth is measured in the height of the trees and the strength of the spirit. The echoes of the past will not fade away but will be the foundation upon which the city will rise, as inevitable and beautiful as the Phoenix. Life will resurge in the very heart of this hallowed space, like the resilience that runs through Beirut's veins.

As the sun sets on the garden, casting long shadows that blend with the encroaching darkness, there is a stillness, a breath held between what was and what will be. In this stillness, a belief stirs — a belief in yesterday. A belief in the glory that was once Beirut's and in the glory that, like the hidden gardens of this city, waits patiently to bloom again, for Beirut was glorious one day, and "I believe in yesterday."

Because even now, in this barren land, I say there is a flower.

Jardin, jardin d'innocence  
Ton souvenir  
Est ma prière  
Jardin, jardin de mon enfance  
Rhabille-toi de ta lumière !