



Beirut's garden

On the balcony, in the midst of a lovely night, feeling the gentle breeze of the Mediterranean sea, Amal stood alone like a guardian angel observing the nocturnal life of Middle East's pearl; the city of Beirut. The lights from the jazzy streets and the glamorous buildings shined bright, a requiem to those we lost in the stars above delivering a message of peace and tranquility. As the stars in the sky glimmered and her hair kept dancing in the wind, she kept looking from the balcony down to the corners of the streets, simply admiring. She saw the youthful souls dancing lovingly to the melodies played by the guitarists and violinists, as they all inhaled the pink in the night, and exhaled the weight of the country's past.

She saw the bustling atmosphere in the restaurants, filled by masses tasting the sweetness of Beirut, feeling the warmth of her gatherings.

It's not just the parts like "downtown", or "Hamra Street" or the Martyr's square that blossomed with such beautiful sights, but it was all of the capital, and all of the country, that flourished with hope, music, and joy...

Alas the parties were over, as the cerulean blue cut its way through the sky's dark atmosphere, the dancers and singers went back home to their comfortable beds, their feet were cold from dawn's low temperatures, and their stomachs still had a

glint of the well-known warm fuzzy feeling. The shining buildings are now silhouettes within the light blue, awaiting a new bright day that will surely come.

Amal's night shift is over, perhaps it was time for her to rest as well. She returned to her home, the garden of Beirut, at the heart of the city...

She arrived to the front of the white silver gate surrounding her lively garden, a camera appeared from the wall on the side and scanned her eyes, the machine made a joyfully beeping sound, and the gates to the garden of Beirut were open, a robotic loud voice that echoed hundreds of miles from the garden to the outside world told her "Welcome back Amal".

Though she lived here, the sheer sight of this paradise made her heart melt everytime she came to this place, for here, where the laws of space break, lives the soul of Lebanon, its symbol and energy source, the golden fiery phoenix.

A few steps into the lush garden, the bird's chanting roared as it flew towards Amal with its large majestic wings, only to bow to her as a totem of respect for the favors she had done for its very being.

She gently stroked the feathers on the bird's head, and continued walking. The bird watched her go, as it stayed in front of the gate, perhaps waiting to welcome someone else that will come in soon.

The road she walked on was made of white marble, and it pierced through the garden's vibrant greenery, on both of her sides, there were ever so long grass fields with red and yellow flowers pointing towards the sky, and waving.

She inspected the place, its corner, its walls and its floor. It was all, as it should be.

Except for the end of the road, the center of the garden, that was gone completely. A hundred trees and flowers were dead, colorless on the floor, the tree where Amal slept, her room, and the vegetation that beautifully decorated it, are now nothing but a blank space, deleted from the very fabric of reality, leaving grey spears, swords, flags and large crosses piercing through the white soil.

Amal's eyes widened and she immediately rushed to the crime scene. Her heart-rate skyrocketed as she ran as fast as she could.

She arrived to the place looking everywhere, trying to come up with an explanation to such an absurd event. "How could this happen?" she scoffed "Who in the world did this?!"

Silence, not a single answer.

Amal fell to her knees, trying to process what is going on around her. Thoughts ran like wild animals in her head, their howls and growls fighting one on top of the other, until they were all cut down by one quiet sound above her neck that stopped her train of thoughts, a faint, slow breath.

While still on the ground, the girl turned around as she shuddered, there was a man, a dark demon standing next to her. He drew menacing breaths, after each one he quietly repeated the word “shame”.

Then it began to sound like a psychotic crescendo, his breaths grew manically as he growled “shame....shame....SHAME!” as he charged towards her.

And so their chase began.

Within the walls and corridors of Beirut’s garden, a demon kept chasing poor Amal, like a wolf chases a rabbit. As she felt fear alongside her sins crawling on her back. The demon kept screaming his words.

Door after door, room after room, she never stopped running, and she refused to look behind. She stepped on the grass apologizing to the leaves as she stomped them while he kept running after her, crushing the leaves mercilessly.

As adrenaline pumped rapidly in her veins, one thing was keeping her going, one thing made her body immune to the paralysis that fear causes. It was hope, one golden ray of hope. “I will get through this” she hoped “there has to be some way out” she hoped.

But hope shatters against what the cosmos wants.

After all that running, she faced a dead end, a solid white wall that was never there before.

She was paralyzed, there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, it was time to meet her inevitable demise.

“Turn around and face your fear.” The demon ordered.

Amal obeyed, and quietly turned around to face him, he stood three meters in front of her, there was something about his dark figured that gave an impression that he was nothing but a dark silhouette of a greater evil far beyond whatever exists in this world.

His voice sounded eerily beautiful, quiet and breathy when he spoke normally. It was like he transformed from a raging beast to a civilized man.

“It’s such a shame that it must be this way” he declared before chuckling.

She was barely able to catch her breath, stop her tears from falling, and her fear to start showing.

“What...who in the world are you?!” She shouted.

He laughed, a terrifying, sadistic, demonic, laugh.

-I am the one who has been watching you thrive for so long, waiting for you to come face your reality.

She panted and exhaled, time after time before asking confusedly.

“What are you talking about?”

-I knew you wouldn't recognize me, it's such a shame, but oh I assure you, if you dive deep enough within the waters of your happy little mind, I'm sure you'll recognize me.

He looked her deeply in her eyes, and feasted on her fear and confusion. Though she was deeply afraid, he wasn't going to do anything to her. He wanted nothing but to be a nuisance, an itchy part of her life that she couldn't scratch.

Although it was quiet silly of her to do so, but she thought of herself as a person who deserves punishment, it was the only thing that explains why she's facing such an obstacle, while the rest of Beirut slept in a comfortable bed.

His words: “Shame...shame...shame”, she felt them in her stomach as spears of remorse pinned her down.

She finally let out one single tear from her left eye, then confessed “I am sorry” she said as another tear fell down “I have no idea what I did, but I am so sorry” she cried.

“Do you want to know what you did?” he started chuckling “well where do I even start?”

“I'm ready for anything, I will cleanse myself from my mistakes, I will not tolerate the existence of your kind inside the great garden of Beirut.” She said with burning eyes, her soul was shining bright, her heart beating with passion, she was filled with great determination and greater sorrow.

“Then let me recite to you, from the depths of history, the sins of Beirut”.

The sentence alone stroke her soul, beat it down until it crumbled down to ashes, he managed to open inside her a fatal wound that she didn't even know was there.

His voice turned omniscient, powerful, and utterly majestic.

“Lies upon lies, mistakes upon mistakes, shall I sing for you the melancholic hymn of your kind, that even from the garbage takes.

Your kind, oh how you failed to save yourselves, from the seven sins, frowned upon by the forsaken holy books on your shelves.

Let me remind you how your pride against each other made you all choke, how you couldn't breathe, for your wrath polluted the air, and turned it to suffocating smoke. How you got swept away with lust, keeping a blind slothful eye on the higher oppressors. How you built skyscrapers from greed and gluttony, based on top of oceans of senseless envy, to the whole world. I am sure your phoenix will turn cold, grey and crumbly, if it realized that all of these sins were in the name of the country.”

Silence...introspection...upon feeling a storm of knives, falling down on a fragile heart.

Amal stood there motionless, her lips sealed off, her eyes fixated on nothing, her tears completely worn out, her heart stained, with his emptiness and grey.

She tried to make sense of his tragic poetic words, but it was meaningless. What he talked about was in the older days of this country, the days of the revolutions and explosions, the days of the older Lebanon, but somehow, for some odd eerie reason, it all seemed familiar, it all seemed so real that it seemed like it was happening in this very moment. It all sounded like he wasn't talking about Lebanon in the past, but the present.

But, Amal wasn't Beirut's guardian angel for no reason. She alone was the embodiment of hope.

Feeling the satisfaction of popping her optimistic bubble containing her worldview, the demon started walking away from the girl on her knees, his villainous footsteps echoing through the halls.

The garden now was mostly white, empty and soulless.

Losing the warmth of the life within it, a chill in the air scattered across the atmosphere, a chill so cold one can burn down everything one knew just to barely gain warmth against it.

The demon stopped, halfway through the garden, hearing a rebellious, fire-spirited sound he never knew before, the sound of laughter coming from Amal.

He quickly ran back to her, completely bamboozled by her bizarre actions. She was just standing there, laughing peacefully, how did her soul shine again? How did it rise from the ashes?

"You are an utter fool." She declared. "To think that anything in the past, will stop me from moving forward." She then added "Fine, I admit my mistakes, I confess to you about my pride, my lust, my gluttony or whatever, but if you were to stab me a million times with reminders of how I and my brothers and sisters have sinned, we will simply rise back up again to better ourselves, every, single, time. For we are the phoenix, the soul of Lebanese citizens. We will crush down this tainted broken image, feel its shards deeply engraved underneath our working fingertips. If I can't do it alone, we can do it together with our words, and if not with words with our bodies, and if not our bodies with our soul! With my soul, this one beautiful creation, that I use to connect with others, I will scream the words within me to my brothers and sisters. And I know we'll learn! I know we'll sculpt ourselves until we become wonderful works of art! And let me assure you, even if we fall again, we will rise, maybe not immediately, maybe not in minutes or hours or even years, but we *will* do it, sooner or later."

The man, felt something cleansing him from the inside, a golden ray of light, burning his darkness with the wind. His face could be finally seen, smiling to Amal, as his body continues literally melting into the brightness; disappearing. Amal smiled back, and approached his transparent figure, wishing goodbye, with a gentle embrace. He hugged her back tightly, before disappearing into nothing, he only left behind a lovely black-pearled necklace, and the words “I am proud of you, my child, I’ll be watching you from above, as you turn all of Lebanon, into the garden of Beirut, good luck....”

The sun rose, another day started, the new era started, brought by Amal and her little message of peace and love. Above our beloved Beirut, the golden fiery phoenix flew high.

THE END