

Name: Yara Al Soloh

Grade 12GLS

Beirut Annunciation Orthodox College



*“The Hidden Gardens of Beirut”*

The Dire Escape

I am suffocating. He is much bigger than me, and as he steps forward, he creates a confined den between me and the wall behind me. I am cold. He is much taller than me, and he hides the sunlight that once provided my very blood with the energy to move through my veins. A dark figure with a glistening blade, he has left me in plight. For the last 18 years I have been racing through crowded streets, in between buildings and alleyways; I have been climbing up trees and hiding beneath rocks, all in a desperate attempt at survival. I don't know who this person is, and I am left wondering: “What does he have against me?” He has followed me all my life, yet I have never seen him. He has watched me grow, yet there he stands ready to take everything away from me. Has he no remorse?

I am 6 years old. I've hated being at home since birth. If I stay in one place for too long, the dark figure might find me. My parents are left with but 1 solution: “yalla baba I will take you to a piece of heaven”. What a weird way to say park, I thought. I guess weird sayings come with being Lebanese. Sanayie, Syoufe, Hasan al khrid, Horsh Beirut, different places but one melody. I am greeted with a dull, coarse, heavy gate that weighs the place down to prevent it from flying off to heaven, I'm certain. The trees try racing the wind when they can't even fully move, how silly of them. It almost makes me jealous of the leaves that are floating around; they must be so free. The barks take my hand and pull me deeper in; the trees crown my head with vibrant Bougainville and pieces of twig. I am no longer just a girl but part of something greater. The warm soil invites me to play, so I sit down. My hair is stuck in the trunk of a pine tree and as I pull away, some of it sheds into the soil. I guess I will never be away. Everything within these gates is familiar and secure, and everyone within these gates is euphoric and at ease. Conversations that usually consist of rushed careless interaction become lengthy connections of people with overlapping struggles.

I am 11 years old. If you ask me for a place to be, I will take you to the suburbs of Beirut, into an old road and down a dusty trail to my grandparents' house. “This stone here is the same one used on the national museum; my father built it you know” my Jeddo proudly proclaims. He has taught me everything he knows about making and caring for beautiful green spaces. Green is my favorite color. “Come follow me”. He heads up short rusty stairs, into the balcony where I learned how to build bird nests and grow fruits. Everything is left as it was since the last time I'd been here; a long pathway that leads up to a tiny, thin wooden house he'd built to keep his grandchildren from the sun, scattered red and blue plastic cars and repair equipment, papers

stacked on top of a table with a broken leg, and an excessive number of potted plants and muddy soil. He then pulls a ladder and proceeds to climb onto the roof: "What if you fall?" my screams are left unanswered. As I pull myself up, I am suddenly jolted with shades of colors you only see during that brief moment when the spirit wakes from its slumber and leaves the body to its rest. He hands me a honeysuckle and, as if instinctively, sits under the shade of an old dying Liwan to smoke his cigarette. The dark figure will never find this place, it is awfully too crowded for it.

I am 16 years old. After school, my friends and I patrol the streets of Achrafieh, keeping sight of every antique shop. The sun follows us like a dog on a leash that barks at any sighted movement. We climb up seemingly endless stairs to then walk down steep hills, only to find ourselves back where we began, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Around us, a whisper of sagacity flaunts itself. The plants, the people, the buildings; all seem to have lived through centuries of long-practiced routine. Everything seems to be a testimony; a remembrance of what once was. I am 16 years old; I have been haunted by stories of the civil war, I have experienced August 4, and I have seen this very street crumbled to the ground. I was told life will go on and people will busy themselves with their everyday affairs and eventually forget, but the atmosphere is still rigid and heavy, and no one will ever breathe in the same air that used to flow so smoothly. Between every few buildings, we find a house surrounded by a beautifully polished yard with vibrant cars that could catch a dog's eye. Between every few houses, we see piles of stone, metal, and dust, undoubtedly left behind from tormented citizens. At times, I mistake shadows and stray animals for the dark figure; I fear he has gotten too close to my sanctuaries.

I am 18 years old. I have been 18 for a fragment of a moment, and I can sternly speak as to the burden it has proved to be. I sit on the wet reef between the city lights and the silky ocean. If it were a different season, I would let the waters wash away my worries, but for now, I dwell on waiting. I wait like the fishermen scattered on the shore waiting for their next meal. Like the children waiting for their parents' conversations to end so they can run off to play. Like the man in the bean cart waiting for his next sale. Like the grouped teens waiting to be picked up. Like the elderly man waiting for his long lost wife, like the palm trees waiting to be watered and cut, like the cats waiting to be pet, like the dogs waiting on their owners. I will wait like my grandparents, and then my parents waited on a better future without any incentive to wait. For 18 years, I have been arbitrarily fleeing a dark figure, and now I have the chance to escape for good, yet I find myself paralyzed, unable to run away the way I have been running around Beirut for as long as I can remember. The dark figure has become a part of my being, and regrettably, I have to admit that we share a connectiveness.

I walk back home with a lighter step. Watching everyone go about his or her day opens up one's heart. The buildings in Beirut never fail to capture a venturer's curiosity no matter how many

times they are seen. They continue to tell stories of all kinds; adventures, horror, thrillers, romance, comedy; I could watch them all day, in fact, that is exactly what I proceed to do. I gravitate into corner shops and talk to old folk, and as if with the flick of a wand, time has gone by and the sun has begun to set. For a moment I question weather to stay put and watch it or hurry back home, and at that very moment, I am captured. In front of me, I see an old unpainted building with bullet holes and dust scattered around it, and behind me, a body of a crippling old man, much older than I had ever imagined. His face decorated with a white beard and scars around his cheeks. "Who are you?" I am not afraid nor secure, but simply curious. At this point in time, I am not sure what to make of him, this man has turned from my very nightmare into the object of my wonder and now, at this moment; he seems dull and hacky, somehow weak and powerless. As I get closer, curious to see the elements of his dilapidated face, he holds up his blade and swings it in my direction. I am distant, devoid of real time sensation, I am taken back to my lifelong attempt at evading this very situation, and I am grateful.

Fear is an emotional response to a dangerous situation, and in some cases, it is the driving factor to the trajectory of your life. In a position where you are haunted at every corner, the natural response is to search for earnest soundness, and in my search for earnest soundness, I have come across the most charming places to exist. Truly, however, it was not the dazzling scenery or the precious safety; it was the combined intent to escape from the dark figure that has plagued us all, and to change. We make the claim that Beirut has been destroyed and rebuilt seven times as a monument of the innate magic of the city itself, as if within it exists a special force that joins it together like glue, and that might very well be true. Anyone who has lived in Beirut can attest to its captivity and the wonder of the little discoveries of places that grow in a reciprocate manner to every one of us, but if you ask me Beirut is not a set place; Beirut is everywhere. When I pick a honeysuckle to eat from a tree I am in Beirut. When I sit and play in the soil, I am in Beirut. When I see an aged colorful building, I am in Beirut, and when I watch people go about their lives I am in Beirut. I do not believe the Phoenicians would have built boats and sailed away across continents if Beirut could not be carried along with them. Because to be in Beirut, and in the gardens of Beirut is to be cared for and protected by the very ground you walk on, something no person can give away blindly.

The blade in his hand cannot kill me, I have been in Beirut, but when he swings it, he cuts off a piece of my hair. As it falls onto the concrete ground, it marks my presence and my existence, and it confirms once again that I am a part of Beirut as it is a part of me, and that I owe back what I have received. I walk away, leaving him behind to return to our regular routine of the ongoing game of tag we play. He will continue to exist in the background of this city, haunting it with echoes of its past and threats of its future, undermining its continued being and startling its citizens. I will continue to escape his rustle in the hidden gardens of Beirut, which he cannot reach

because while he may believe that crises and destruction are what constitutes this city, I know its secrets.