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The Hidden Gardens of Beirut

In the tapestry of existence, there come moments of revelation; moments where the veils of perception part, ushering in realization and appreciation for everything that we have ignored and taken for granted, including the 10,452 km² of pristine land and the 5 million people with whom we live. This ignorance towards Lebanon disappeared after an incident that changed my life forever.

As last Friday's sunset painted the sky with hues of warmth, I found myself drawn to the idea of taking a leisurely stroll through the city. I rarely went on walks, however, that particular time, I felt compelled to take a break from studying and get some fresh air. Meandering through the homey streets of my Gemmayzeh neighborhood, I was greeted by rows of quaint and beautiful houses, as well as streets lined with leafy trees that would rustle gently in the light breeze. Unexpectedly, a sudden interruption caught my attention—a beautiful butterfly gracefully fluttered by my side. Its delicate wings danced in the sunlight, casting ethereal shadows upon the pavement. Mesmerized by its beauty, I found myself irresistibly drawn to follow its flight, heedless of the world around me. Street after street, I pursued its whimsical path, oblivious to my surroundings. Eventually, the butterfly settled upon a radiant flower nestled within a majestic garden, its colors vibrant against the verdant backdrop. It was then, amidst the serenity of that moment, that the realization struck me—I was lost. Panic seized my heart as I scanned the unfamiliar surroundings, my mind struggling to reconcile this foreign landscape with the city I knew so well. With each passing moment, adrenaline surged through my veins, my senses overwhelmed by a mounting sense of disorientation. Then, as if surrendering to the chaos of my thoughts, dizziness crept in, and darkness enveloped me as I succumbed to unconsciousness.

Silence, Blackness, Void... Is this the sensation of confronting death? Is this what death's gentle touch feels like? It is oddly serene, filling my mind with everything and yet nothing. In that moment, my thoughts did not stray to the familiar faces of family or friends, nor did they linger on the accomplishments strewn throughout my life's journey. Instead, the singular thought that consumed my mind was the realization of the serene place in which I was fading away. It was a place of utter peace and tranquillity, where I felt surrounded by a gentle calmness, comforting me in my final moments.

Amidst all, as consciousness ebbed away, my mind wandered not to the embrace of my beloved mother, but rather to the tender caress of the grass beneath me, cradling every fibre of my being. Perhaps it was the essence of Lebanon, resonating with memories of comfort and the nurturing embrace of a mother's love. Here, amidst the gentle sway of blades and the whispered secrets of nature, I found solace in the familiarity of home. In Lebanon's embrace, there exists a sanctuary where the scent of jasmine carries the whispers of a mother's "Hanan", where every breeze echoes the lullabies of childhood. It is in this tranquil haven that the heart finds refuge, where the spirit is embraced by the gentle embrace of belonging.

Despite my initial unease at the thought of insects crawling over my unconscious body, I remembered that they are part of the place I call home. Each tiny being reminded me of the interconnectedness of life, evoking a sense of comfort as I realized they emerged from the very soil that nurtures my land, my home. In their movements, I sensed a connection to Lebanon, a reminder of our shared origins and intertwined existence, welcoming their presence as a comforting sign of belonging.

In the cradle of this mesmerizing garden, stand immortal trees as guardians of time, their ageless branches reaching skyward in a timeless dance. With each whisper of the wind, accompanied by patches of sunlight and shadow, every branch becomes a brushstroke, painting mosaic-like patterns upon the garden floor. Through the ages, they have weathered storms and witnessed the passage of time, standing as silent witnesses to the ever-changing world around them. And still, they stand tall and proud, their resilience a testament to the indomitable power of Lebanon's beautiful nature. At this point, I couldn't help but think of all Lebanese people who, much like these trees, have stood strong in the face of the challenges that past and present generations have encountered. Here, one thing became clear to me: From the Lebanon of our ancestors to the Lebanon of tomorrow, these timeless trees will continue to stand as beacons of hope and continuity, bridging the past, present, and future with their steadfast presence. In the far distance, I am struck by the sight of mountains standing majestically, their timeless grandeur impossible to ignore. These ancient peaks, with their rugged slopes and snow-capped summits, seem to embody the resilience and strength of the Lebanese people themselves. As I gaze upon them, I am reminded of the lush valleys adorned with terraced vineyards and the rocky cliffs that overlook the vast expanse of the Mediterranean Sea. It's as if these mountains hold within them a rich tapestry of history and culture, silently observing the triumphs and tribulations of generations, standing as enduring witnesses to the passage of time. As I explored the garden further, I was captivated by an array of remarkable rocks and boulders, each telling its own story etched in stone. It sent shivers down my spine to contemplate that some of these geological wonders bore witness to ancient civilizations. That alone was a humbling reminder of the enduring presence of history amidst the tranquility of Lebanese nature. Furthermore, the atmosphere in this magical garden was imbued with the enchanting melodies of birds chirping harmoniously, their sweet tunes resonating through the lush landscape. Amidst this extraordinary chorus, the birds filled the air with their melodious voices, echoing the timeless tunes of Fairuz. However, it felt as if the birds weren't merely singing but also narrating the captivating tales of Lebanese folklore, passing down the rich heritage of their land with each melodious note. Together, they created an atmosphere of serene beauty where nature and culture intertwined in perfect harmony. Without a shadow of a doubt, such a phenomenon, where nature and tradition converge so beautifully, is truly unique to Lebanon. Moreover, as I felt the graceful soar of the birds above me, I couldn't help but reflect on the parallels between their flight and the aspirations of Lebanese people. We, too, must embrace hope and dream boldly. Just as birds navigate through the winds, we must confront challenges as well. Taking all these aspects into consideration, it amazed me how, much like the renowned hospitality of Lebanese people, this garden extended its warmth. It embraced me in every aspect—the grass, the wind, the trees, the mountains, the boulders, the animals—all welcoming me with open arms. This is our essence, our tradition, our way of life! Oh, I am at peace, I am content, for what greater solace is there than to rest in the embrace of my homeland's soil, in the embrace of my beloved Lebanon?

Slowly, as the ambient noises of the street returned, there it was—the distinct rumble of a car navigating its way into the renowned 'Joura', the ubiquitous pits that pepper Lebanese roads. Despite the frustration one might typically feel at encountering such road imperfections, I couldn't help but find a distinct delight in the familiar sound. It was more than just the clattering of metal against uneven pavement; it was a testament to the unique character of Lebanon, where the very name 'Joura' has become synonymous with the

challenge and charm of navigating its streets. That simple sound managed to evoke a subtle smile—a reminder of the quirks and peculiarities that make this place so undeniably special.

Raindrops, one, two, three... gently kissed my face. All of a sudden, a surreal realization washed over me— Was I truly alive? I wanted to disbelieve the thoughts in my mind, but here I was, feeling each droplet slowly tracing its path down my cheek. How can any of this make sense? First the noises, then the rain—how can this be ? No! I refuse to wake up. I refuse to get up and return to my daily chores and tasks. I can't bear to leave behind the bliss of this haven. I can't bear to part with the warmth and comfort this place has given me. After what felt like an eternity, I reluctantly emerged from denial and rose to my feet, only to find myself standing in the heart of a Beirut roundabout, with only a solitary *Tabebuia rosea* tree by my side. I stood there, stunned, as if frozen in disbelief, realizing that the enchanting garden had vanished. With a sense of bewilderment, I turned in circles, desperately trying to comprehend what had transpired. Where had the place that had so profoundly touched my soul disappeared to? Where was the testament to what had deepened my appreciation for my country?

After the initial panic began to ebb, I attempted to connect the dots and rationalize the situation, but my efforts were in vain. Perhaps the reason no one had come to check on my seemingly lifeless body in the grass was because the garden wasn't real. Maybe it existed in another world, another dimension altogether. Maybe it was nothing more than a hallucination. Maybe it was a fever dream. Maybe I'll call it "The Hidden Gardens of Beirut". Maybe, maybe, maybe...

For me, the "Hidden Gardens of Beirut" have been a revelation, awakening me to the wonders that have been right in front of my eyes all along. They have stripped away my ignorance and filled me with a deeper appreciation for the remarkable beauty of Lebanon. Therefore, I address my dear fellow Lebanese, emphasizing the paramount importance of restoring hope within our hearts amidst the challenging times we face. Just as the cedars withstand the fiercest storms by drawing strength from their roots, let us delve into Lebanon's history and confront our present realities, uncovering stories of resilience and triumph that will fuel our optimism for the future. Together, we must reclaim our identity and heritage as sources of strength and resilience, akin to the mighty rivers that flow steadily through Lebanon's landscapes, carving their paths with unwavering determination. Furthermore, I urge you to dare to dream of a Lebanon that transcends present challenges, envisioning a nation where diversity blooms like wildflowers in the Beqaa Valley, each adding to the beauty and richness of the whole.

United, we have the power to shape Lebanon into a nation that reaches for aspirations as high as the peaks of the Lebanese mountains and cherishes values as profound as the depths of the Mediterranean Sea.