

“Joura”

I was born on June 3rd, 2010, when a mid-sized rock toppled from a large pile being transported by a construction truck. The rock collided with a narrow village road that paved the way to a cemetery in a northern Lebanese village. Anytime a newcomer inquired about the directions to that cemetery, the villagers often replied: “Drive sixty meters across the olive tree field, and when you arrive at the crossroad, take the path on the left. Keep driving until you reach a ragged pothole located on the right side of the path.”

This is the story of how I evolved into an unofficial heritage site. I may not have been a magnificent Phoenician Castle, a holy mural, or a war tank, yet I was a sight recognized by the entire village. The attention fueled the cracks of my soul with infatuation. I was entirely content with my reality as the recognized cemetery guide, until one fated day, the gaunt walls of my reality crumbled under shame. I overheard a widowed husband addressing his late wife at the cemetery with words of profound melancholy. Attempting to transfer a fragile package of words through relentless pelts of tears, he described his beloved’s absence as a deep “joura” in his soul. Instantaneously, I experienced a dreadful epiphany. Maybe, potholes are not of noble quality, after all. Maybe, they are liminal vessels connecting the pure surface with a woeful reality. Thereafter, each gravel of my being pleaded to be clothed with a flat layer of fresh asphalt to conceal my shame and drown the echoes of my harrowing shrieks. The shame resembled that of a naked statue imprisoned within clay that eventually collapses under the weight of the viewers’ piercing gazes.

My suspicions were thoroughly proven to be valid. Gradually, as droplets of rain scoured my surface like a farrier grooming a horse’s hooves, my depth multiplied in parallel with the villagers’ complaints. They referred to me as the “Joura.” Despite sulking in a pool of shame and self-destruction, my wretched heart wondered as to why the villagers had never proceeded to permanently expunge my deformity, despite their distaste.

During holidays, the municipality would allocate construction funds towards purchasing extravagant lights that would line up the length of the road. With their heads held high in the clouds, the villagers failed to notice how the harsh luminescence had created contrast between myself and the rest of the road, accentuating my blotches. When my story was brought forth in multiple instances during council meetings, it was before minutes until the members stripped their sheep wool and gnawed their fangs into the meat of materialism, sectarianism, and favoritism. On rare occasions, the municipality would order my filling with concrete, which would then collapse under the merciless rays of the sun. Why tempt me with the sweetness of protection, knowing I would taste the blood of disappointment incessantly? It was during one of those cursed moments when I had my second epiphany.

The villagers’ failure to fill a pothole was not simply a failure to fill a pothole at all. The problem was wider than the superficial scope. Their affliction consisted of a failure to execute a shared goal into completion. Their confusion was a spinning wheel that drained bouts of energy into futile land. They were cats chasing shadows of barrenness, expecting prey, but winding up with blunt claws. Nevertheless, my precociousness was restless, which enabled me to culminate

to the root of the issue: *pain*. Denying an affliction was rather a defense mechanism against unconscious pain-inducing fear. The expensive holiday ornaments were not merely decorative, but concealers of sorrow disguised under the mask of resilience. Pent-up terror from years of war and unrest did not only induce momentary pain but had crept at the edges of the Lebanese's souls, feeding off slowly and precariously. Long days of smiling followed by restless nights of overthinking, muted the colors of their world.

The Lebanese were in desperate need of the hope and the healing that they deserved. Thankfully, with their silent tears, they watered a youthful generation who *acknowledges* the dread of the past yet chases the potential of the future with solid fists. Consequently, the unyielding past can never be erased. The past is a heritage, the pain is a heritage, the "Joura" is a heritage. This ever-present heritage, although passed on by the elderly, is not subject to the same attitude of learned helplessness, but an attitude of transformation. The pain should not be amended with the patchwork of band-aids but should be utilized as a latent force excreting civilization into new horizons. A pothole, whether filled with concrete or asphalt, is still a pothole in essence, yet a pothole filled with faith is a testament of a changed perspective.

Combining their powers of coexistence and ambition, the youth has saturated my emptiness. They light up the streets of their village with true radiance that is not aimed at the distraction from pain, but as a display of their restorative mindset.

My void, indeed, did not remain hollow.

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