

## The Ghost of Saint George's Bay

Born to be a crown. Completed in 1974, I stood as the tallest, proudest icon in the Levant, dressed in a skin of concrete and covered with gold and glass. A 26-story dream of modern luxury reaching for the Mediterranean clouds. Wearing a rotating halo at my peak, a restaurant that turned slowly, once every hour, offering my guests a 360-degree prayer to the beauty of Beirut.

I remember the scent of my first year. It was a cocktail of expensive perfume, salty sea air, and the fresh wax on my marble lobby floors. I felt the constant vibration of laughter in the hallways, lifts lifting guests above the rest of the world where happiness was the only destination and the clinking of crystal glasses in my ballroom. I thought I was built for eternity, that I would spend my life watching sunrises over the mountains and sunsets over the sea.

But my time at the top was cut short. In 1975, the music didn't just stop; it was scratched out by the scream of lead. The guests who arrived next didn't approach me with leather suitcases or carry-ons, but with rifles. And instead of the gentle weight of heavy luggage, my halls were filled with the cold steel of densely packed weapons. They didn't want my hospitality, they wanted my grace. I became the most valuable prize in the city, and because of my greatness, I suffered endlessly.

They called it the "Battle of the Hotels," as if it were a game. But for me, it was the day my pride turned into my sorrow. Windows, once clear eyes looking out at the horizon, were shattered into a million jagged tears. Velvet curtains shredded to make bandages. The grand lobby, once full of diplomats and movie stars, became a cold, dark bunker smelling of gunpowder and fear.

Thud after thud, were the sandbags piled against my ribs, and tighter and tighter the airways felt. Snipers lived in my suites, staring through telescopes at the city they were tearing apart piece by piece. Every rocket that hit my skin didn't just pierce through my body, but mostly carved into my memory. I learned then that concrete does not forget. It only hardens around the trauma. I became a vertical graveyard, a hollow shell where the wind began to whistle a melody of sadness through my empty elevator shafts.

The war ended, at least that's what they told me. The "Green Line" disappeared, and the city began to stitch itself back together. They tell me the conflict is over. The city started to rebuild itself. But here I stand. I stand a grey skeleton, in a neighborhood of ghosts.

To my left, the bay has been reborn. Yachts gleaming in the sun and the tourists eating at expensive tables, just like they did in 1974. To my right, thin and shiny skyscrapers untouched by history. They look at me like I am an embarrassing burden at a party I was never invited to. While they build their "modern" Beirut, I remain the Beirut they so desperately want to bury.

My revolving restaurant, my charming crown, hasn't moved a centimeter in fifty years. It is stuck, frozen in time, overlooking the sea, desperately hoping for a ship that will never arrive. I am the only one who isn't allowed to move on.

Sometimes, at night, when the city is quiet and the traffic on the corniche dies down, I feel the weight of all the stories trapped inside my walls. I remember the fear of the families who hid in my basement and the pride of the soldiers who died on my roof. I am a library of pain that nobody dares to read.

People drive past and call me an eyesore. But I think I am the most honest wall in this city. I don't hide my bullet holes with glass or paint. But instead, they are on display because a city that hides its scars is a city that is doomed to repeat them.

I am 26 floors of a million unspoken words. I am the witness who cannot close his eyes. I am the ghost of Saint George's Bay, still waiting for the day when I can finally be a Holiday Inn again.

The walls are speaking. Are you finally ready to listen?

**Tia El Sibai**

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