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My West Bank Education: 1998

The dusty roads that took me from Taybeh to Ramallah and then to Birzeit required fifteen minutes at most, but I found myself crammed into a hot Mercedes taxi, sweating out the wait at the checkpoint every time. These bright yellow taxis, called the *servees*, featured three rows of seats, the second row folding down to allow an unlucky passenger access to the cramped rear. Three seats per row, plus the lucky guy up front with the driver, enjoying the air conditioning that never wafted to the back—that was ten passengers per trip. At a mere three shekels per passenger, no wonder the drivers made you wait up to half an hour for their cabs to fill.

Approaching the checkpoints, where everyone sighed and groaned during the wait, but straightened attentively when the soldier came to the driver's window, was something I knew to expect about my summer. I'd decided to study at Birzeit University for two months; a bonus was Birzeit's close proximity to Taybeh, my parents' village, where my aunt lived. "Nonsense," she'd said upon hearing that I was considering Najah University, in the north. "She'll come here, so she can live with me in Taybeh." When I'd told her I could just rent a car and visit her on weekends, she'd chuckled. "You think this is like America? You just hop in a car and go?"

I didn't want to live in Taybeh itself; I wanted to be relatively on my own, experiencing life with other Palestinians, especially other students. After growing up Arab in the United States, I wanted to interact and connect with people like myself, who ate hummus for breakfast at home rather than as a \$12.95 appetizer in a chic, trendy downtown restaurant.

Ramallah, as it turned out, was best. Geographically, it lay comfortably in the center of extremes—the small village and the university town: like me, it was in-between.

That summer, despite wanting to feel Palestinian, I was undeniably an American.

My primary failing became evident almost immediately upon arrival: as an American, I insisted, subconsciously of course, on being the center of attention. It was early in the morning when my plane drifted down in Ben Gurion airport, inside Israel, and I'd waited two hours for a taxi from the West Bank to arrive and carry me and my three stuffed suitcases to my aunt's house in Taybeh. After an eight-hour flight and a three-hour layover in London, I just wanted to reach Taybeh safely and take an anti-climactic nap.

My aunt, however, had different plans. When the taxi pulled up in front of the house, she and what seemed like half the village stood on the steps, waiting to greet me. Various cousins seized my suitcases, and I felt my body being swept like a piece of driftwood on a smiling Mediterranean tide into the house. I sat sullenly in a corner chair as more people waded into the already packed sitting room, tersely answering their questions about America, Monica Lewinsky, and Michael Jordan, and “the family,” *al-ghaybeen*, those who had left them and crossed not just the sea, but the ocean beyond it. The quieter I became, the more questions they enthusiastically asked: One cousin wanted to know why I’d gained weight, and another aggressively invited me to church that Sunday. “No, I’m not really religious,” I answered, a response that halted all the noise in the room. To fill the void, another aunt hastily announced that everyone was invited to her house later that evening for a welcome dinner, adding, “Susan needs to sleep.”

I did—deeply and soundly. When I awoke, I cringed to think of my behavior and resolved to perform better that night at dinner. I knew better: How many times had my brothers and I seen our weary parents paste on cheerful smiles for unexpected guests? I’d witnessed my mother, on an hour’s notice, make a grand feast magically appear for forty people who insisted they’d dropped in “only for a cup of coffee.” She did it with neither a complaint nor even a glare at my father, who’d felt the pressure of hospitality to extend the invitation: “What else could I do? They said they’re only in town for one night.” But he didn’t even have to explain it, because my mother understood, and so did we: We didn’t complain either when we were pulled away from “The Smurfs” or “He-Man” and sent to dust and vacuum, like a SWAT team descending on the living room to restore order. Hospitality was what we Arabs did best.

Qasr al-Hamra (“The Red Palace”), a grand hotel in the British colonial era, had been converted into a girls’ dormitory for the University, with a strict curfew and a security guard at the front gate. My first day opened with a residents’ meeting, presided over by Haya, the dorm director. She addressed a room of about 25 female summer students: some Palestinian girls and many international students. The faces in the room featured a mix of black hair and black eyes and red, spiky hair or long blonde tresses and green or blue eyes. Haya herself had dark, sharp eyes and ivory-white hands with stubby fingers, but her crisp, white hijab draped gracefully across her shoulders and lent her an air of elegance. She spoke heavily accented English: “*Ya’ani*, put your soot-case in the other room. We have to start meeting, *y’allah*.”

She explained that we’d each be assigned a “sleeping mate”, which made the foreign students titter, and that there was a big kitchen downstairs and a bathroom in each room. She emphasized that the

curfew was strict and that we would have to abide by it, and that she intended for the reputation of Qasr al-Hamra to remain “very big and high.”

She paired me with the spiky-haired redhead. Though I’d been hoping to room with a Palestinian to practice my Arabic, I found a wonderful comfort and security in Mia’s American accent.

Along with Sarah, who was from Kansas and rooming next door to us, Mia and I handled our first crisis that very night. After unpacking, we invited some of the Palestinian students to dine at Angelo’s, an Italian-style restaurant in the center of Ramallah. They declined politely, saying they had some reading to do. I felt their refusal personally, and wondered if they felt uncomfortable with the American students, or with me, or had I just breached an unspoken rule?

At Angelo’s, we munched on pizza and sipped Diet Cokes, talking about the States late into the evening. Sarah missed her boyfriend, and shared some of her anxiety about her mother, who had announced a year earlier that she was a lesbian. Her mother was also Jewish, Sarah told us as she looked around the restaurant: “I have a feeling that I should mention neither of these things while I’m here.”

At 28, Mia was older than Sarah and me, and used to living on her own in a foreign country. Her interest in feminism had brought her to the West Bank, “because I really think Arab women need to start a feminist movement here,” she explained, punctuating her statement by opening a pack of Marlboros and lighting one up.

All eyes in the restaurant turned to us, which Sarah and Mia ignored, but of which I remained acutely aware. I did not share my discomfort with them, but instead weakly debated Mia’s statement by mumbling something about there being a century-old Arab women’s movement. Feminism and charity societies, she pointedly informed me, were not the same thing.

When we left, two young Palestinian men followed us out and tried speaking to us. Sarah and Mia engaged in conversation easily, but I was more reluctant. Mia was still smoking and that Sarah was displaying her lovely smile as she chatted in her friendly, open way, but I was glancing around the streets. Ramallah was a city, but not as big and anonymous as West Bankers thought, and having grown up in an Arab American family, I knew how gossip could spread like fire in an oxygenated tank when it was about unmarried girls. Luckily nobody I recognized seemed to be on the street that night, nobody to say “there’s the American girl, who came here to ‘study’ for the summer.”

We got lost a few times trying to find Qasr al-Hamra. When we finally arrived, we found the gates locked.

“What did Haya say about curfew?” I shrieked.

“Ten o’clock?” Sarah replied, checking her watch. “Shit! It’s 10:45!”

We banged on the gate for several minutes, and Mia even hazarded

an attempt to scale it. We hollered for the guard to let us in, but he either couldn't hear us or had left his post. In the distance, I could see some activity on the large, second-floor balcony, and imaged in a group of the Palestinian women sipping hot tea and studying in pajamas and sweaters. I suddenly, desperately, wanted to be up there with them.

Sarah remembered a youth hostel where she'd spent her first two days in Ramallah, which was nearly a mile across town. The taxis did not run this late, so we walked. Twenty minutes later, we negotiated a room for about 70 shekels with a manager who took pity on us and handed us the key.

The room appeared clean until we found a curly black hair on one of the yellowed pillowcases. We fell asleep on top of the sheets, with our purses under our heads, at around 3 a.m., to be awakened at 5:30 by the rough cries of a rooster. I stood and glanced outside, wondering what a rooster would be doing downtown, thinking I was perhaps in Taybeh. Below me, I saw the bustling *hisbeh*, and realized that the hostel was built near Ramallah's produce and meat district, where village women in their embroidered dresses with dusty hems peddled vegetables and young boys stood watch over crates of live chicks for sale, all while taxis honked adamantly in the background and you could, at any moment, plant your foot into a rotten squash or into a pile of blood-clotted feathers.

We rushed back to Qasr al-Hamra, where a wrathful Haya awaited us and where the Palestinian girls seemed relieved that they hadn't dined with the Americans.

Three weeks later, we lost water.

I'm not sure, to this day, how the water was cut off. Theories circulated wildly in Ramallah as soon as the last drop fell from the dry faucets in the majority of the city's homes, apartment buildings, and offices. The Israelis had done it, as one more attempt to force the Palestinians out. The Palestinian Authority had done it, to flex its jurisdictional muscle in preparation for a new tax.

Some parts of the city quickly regained water, at least intermittently. But at Qasr al-Hamra, Mia and I could neither bathe, nor brush our teeth, nor flush the toilets. The shortage lasted over a week, during which Mia went daily to the Birzeit, to bathe in the apartment of a German student and his African American roommate. Despite my self-disgust, even though both men genuinely and politely offered to leave the apartment while we showered, I did not dare. Especially when many friends of my extended family lived in Birzeit and might see me coming out of the apartment of two single men—and both foreigners. *Allah forgive us...*

On the fourth day, I returned from campus, having just bombed an exam, mostly because I'd kept furiously wondering if my classmates

could smell me. I was greeted, ironically enough, by news of a flood at Qasr al-Hamra. The ancient drains regurgitated brown, gritty water from their bowels; I spent an entire evening, the night before another exam, sponging up the water and squeezing it into shaky, metal buckets. A blouse that had been lying carelessly on the floor was relegated to the trash, along with a notebook and my copy of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*.

Everyone else cleaned up late into the night as well, but I think I was the only one whose skin broke out in an ugly, bitter rash the next morning. The hard bumps were white, encircled in angry, irritated red rings. Not itchy, not scratchy, but terrifying. I imagined some fiendish germ or bacterium that had been lying nascent in the underground pipes of Qasr al-Hamra since the British colonial era, now disturbed from its hibernation by the rumbling of the flood.

I became hyper-sensitive to the appearance of other potential symptoms, and one night, as I bathed by dousing myself with a four-shekel bottle of spring water, I became nauseous. Not wanting to vomit in the toilet, which hadn't been flushed in five days, I relieved my stomach cramps into the sink, then rinsed it with the remains of my water bottle. Then I got dressed, slung a bookbag over my shoulder and hurried out the front gates of Qasr al-Hamra. It was 7:30 p.m., and when Haya, smoking on the balcony, screeched down that the gates would close in a couple of hours, I muttered, "Fuck off," and continued to the taxi station. Soon I was headed back to Taybeh for a long, hot bath.

I didn't return for three days, and instead stayed in bed, throwing up occasionally, sipping hot soup and tea, which my aunt brought in every few hours.

"She couldn't take the water shortage," I heard my aunt joking with her neighbor, who stopped by to check on me. "In America, they don't have these problems. They just call the plumber."

Haya didn't speak to me when I returned to Qasr al-Hamra. I don't remember another conversation with her after that. I found out from Lena, one of the Palestinian girls on my floor, that the director was furious.

"She said you didn't tell her you were leaving for three days."

"I was sick," I explained, munching on the biscuits she offered me. Entering the room of an Arab girl was like visiting her home—she stopped her homework, offered me the best chair, poured a bottle of water into her plastic hot pot to make me tea, and became an attentive and enthusiastic hostess. I felt welcomed, at ease.

"Besides," I added, "nobody can blame me for wanting to have a proper bath."

"But she said it's the second time you broke the curfew."

“Oh, I don’t care,” I said, trying not to get irritated. “I think the whole curfew is ridiculous anyway—they should drop the whole idea. This is not a harem.”

“But, Susan,” she chided me gently, “a lot of our parents would not let us go to school if not for the curfew.” Our conversation continued after an awkward pause, but despite Lena’s politeness, I could tell I’d upset her. As I lay in bed that night, my stomach churned for a different reason: what a stupid thing to say, taking social customs so lightly, just barging in and expecting everything to conform to my needs. Once again, I knew better—this West Bank education was proving to be more of a refresher course, with an extra credit of shame.

At 4 a.m. on the eighth day, I awoke to the screeching of the ancient water pipes. I watched the water flow brown, then clear from the faucet, and wanted to cheer, but Mia was not in the room—she was sleeping at the apartment of the two male students in our program, not caring that she would hear it from Haya.

My Arabic teacher let me retake my exam, and I stayed after class for an extra hour, completing the test while he quietly graded papers. He smiled at me when I handed in the completed test. Mr. Sha’ath was a short man, no taller than 5’5”, with neatly trimmed sandy hair and an equally concise mustache. His eyes were shiny and filled with humor. And kindness.

“How is the water situation at Qasr al-Hamra?” he asked as we walked out of the classroom.

“It came back on two days ago, *al-hamdu’l ’ilah.*”

“Ours too,” he said. “That is our life in the West Bank, my friend.”

I hadn’t known his water was out too. “I’m surprised you didn’t act more upset this week.”

He looked surprised. “How?”

I shrugged. “We are a civilized people,” he said dismissively. “If you lose your civility, under any conditions, there goes the society.”