

Irish Goodbyes and Icy Hellos

My last sunrise in Amman would've brought tears to your eyes. The hills of the city were frozen and silent, gilded in the dawn. My too-heavy duffel bag and I descended from my fourth-floor apartment, each turn of the staircase revealing a new vista through the dust-streaked window. Distant malls and minarets gave way to sandstone apartments, which shrank down to the scrappy trees and potholed lanes of Saeed al-Mufti Street.

I stood on the still-dark sidewalk with Rachel, shivering in the mild wintry breeze and watching my Uber driver grow ever closer on my phone screen. My phone buzzed: Amin was one minute away in a white Mitsubishi. Rachel threw her arms around my neck and I gave her a side hug back.

"Hey!" she objected, "give me a real hug. I *knew* you were gonna try to pull an Irish goodbye."

"I can't help it. It's in my blood—I come from a long line of side-huggers." Still, I let go of my duffel bag and wrapped both arms around her, my best friend in Amman. Amin and his white Mitsubishi pulled up to the curb.

"*Marhaba*," I greeted him, and he began hauling my bags into his trunk. He was shorter than me, and his shoulders stooped with age, but he waved away my offers to help. I turned back to Rachel, standing silently in her pajamas with watery eyes.

"You big baby," I accused, "you can't cry on me now."

"Stop it! You'll call me, right?"

"Of course," I promised her, "we'll call and practice our Arabic together, and you can crack stupid Arabenglish jokes and I'll make fun of your bad pronunciation. I'll come to Chicago

to visit you, I swear. Text me tomorrow when your flight leaves, okay? I’ll miss you and I’ll see you soon, *inshallah*.”

“I’ll see you, *habibti*, my love. Safe travels, and you better call me!” I swung down into the backseat and waved at Rachel through the window. Her eyes were still wet, but she could never stay straight-faced for long. She waved back at me, breaking into a dance with the grace of a drunk toddler.

“Don’t mind her,” I told Amin, “she’s just crazy.” I fell silent and looked out the window, practicing my best passenger behavior, which had earned me an abysmal 4.3 stars on Uber. I couldn’t play the part of the chatty American tourist or the coolly cosmopolitan expatriate, and the Uber drivers of Amman punished these failures with the occasional 1-star rating.

For the last four months, I’d feuded with Amman’s Uber drivers, choked on the city’s smog, and tripped down its tangled streets, and now, it was time to say *ma salama*, bye-bye to it all. Each time I realized that I might never see the city or my friends again, a hollow ache echoed in my chest. Every bit of my life here would fade to memory, sliding through the gaps of my mind, until I couldn’t remember the scent of *mana’eesh* baking or the face of the man I bought it from every day.

None of this would bring tears to my eyes, I resolved. The fiery dawn, the golden city, the last goodbye, none of it would move me. I had ignored the waves of homesickness that swept over me when I arrived in Amman. In college, I’d weathered job rejections and the harshest office-hour critiques with a stony face. Four years ago, I took my parents’ divorce like a champ, refusing to cry for six months after. Like my father, and his father before him, I was a lifelong Stoic, not in the Hellenistic philosopher way, but in the emotionally constipated way. The

knowledge of this inheritance always made my stomach knot. If I had to have stupid, self-destructive tendencies, couldn't they at least be my own?

“So,” Amin met my eyes in the rearview mirror, “what are you doing in Amman?” This was my cue, the start of a skit I'd rehearsed with every chatty stranger in Jordan.

“Studying Arabic and learning about the culture.” He'd spoken in English, but I responded in Arabic.

“Ahh. You speak very good Arabic.” No one ever expected that I could say anything beyond hello, thank you, and goodbye.

“You study at the university?” he asked.

“No, at a program in Swefiyeh. It's small.”

“How do you like Amman?”

“Oh, very much. Beautiful city. And the people are very nice.”

“So, why are you leaving?” Amin asked, going off-script.

“I have to! My semester's done. But I'll come back, *inshallah*.”

“You're going back to America? You're American, right?”

“Yes, but I'm going to Sweden. To visit my dad.”

“Really? I lived in Sweden once. I'm from Palestine, but I've lived lots of places. New York, for a while, Amman now. My daughter lives in Sweden, her husband's from there. Where in Sweden?”

“Malmö, so I'm flying into Copenhagen. Do you know it?”

“Ahh. My daughter lives in Stockholm, but I know Malmö. Lots of Arabs there, actually. They have good Arab markets.”

“Oh, really? Interesting.” We lapsed back into silence, and I turned back to the window, watching the city rise and fall along the highway. The hills were no longer golden, just brown in the growing daylight and bald-headed this far from downtown. The parched earth was speckled with villas, an unexpected IKEA, and clay urns for sale. The roadside pottery display meant we were close to the airport. I’d imagined buying one as an impractical souvenir months ago, when I rode into the city on a bus overflowing with American girls.

I patted my bags, futilely checking for anything I’d forgotten. I sighed, thinking of my pink razor, still lying on the soap dish in my shower. I’d left little bits of myself strewn throughout the city. My fingerprints adorned door handles and elevator buttons, and coffee cups in trash cans bore the imprint of my lips. The local news briefs in the *Jordan Times* were marked by my edits. My blood stained al-Azizi Street, where I fell while running and tore my palms on the asphalt. My essay held a place of honor in my teacher’s mind, the most grammatically correct she’d ever seen. Even a thousand and one strands of my hair blew through the city, twined into telephone wires, tree branches, and the fur of street cats.

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I flew into Sweden blind. All of northwestern Europe wore a shroud of dark, heavy clouds. I tried to picture the earth below: Copenhagen and Malmö, fleets of fishing boats, rainbow-painted townhouses. My dad hadn’t sent any pictures since he’d moved there in November. He’d been to Malmö before, but all I remembered were gray waters seething in the backgrounds of photos where my dad smiled, his arms slung around a woman and two girls I’d never met.

I wound through the airport terminals, trailing after the people I recognized from my flight—a Swedish mother with her half-Jordanian son and an old woman with a bright hijab and

crochet needles. Each time one of them slipped from my sight, the hollowness in my chest deepened. An official questioned me about the nature of my visit in Danish.

“I only speak English,” I said, “I’m sorry.”

The English words slipped off my tongue easily, but tasted strange, after months of semi-strict adherence to my program’s tyrannically-enforced Arabic language pledge. I speak Arabic, too, I thought, but the only people that might’ve cared were the passengers on my flight. I imagined that people here might speak to me in Swedish and Danish, like I was one of them.

Past the baggage claim and the no-return point, the swarming buzz of a crowd rose from the bottom of the escalator. I lingered here, rearranging my papers, braiding and unbraiding my hair. There was no point in waiting. I let the escalator whisk me down into the throng.

I saw my dad before he saw me. Pinned at the front of the mob, he wore a thick green jacket, his graying eyebrows crinkled as he searched for me. The jacket was new, and must have been expensive. I wondered if Swedish math teachers made more than American math teachers.

“Hi!” I exclaimed when he noticed me. I pulled my lips up into a smile and hugged him with my right arm.

We descended further into the belly of the airport, emerging into the biting underground air of the train station. I jittered and shivered on the platform, poorly dressed in the linen pants I’d bought for the early autumn heat in Jordan.

“If you’re cold, you can borrow my hat or mittens,” he offered, eyebrows furrowed with concern.

“No, it’s alright,” I assured him, tucking my hands up into the sleeves of my too-thin jacket. In the last few years, our conversations had become stiff and clunky, a river choked with ice.

“Is your jacket new?” he asked.

“Sort of. My friend Rachel, from Jordan, gave it to me. She didn’t have room in her suitcase and I borrowed it all the time anyway.”

I carried a million little bits of Jordan with me: the jacket from Rachel and a book from Leah. I wore an evil eye from Malak around my neck. Wisps of Amman smog still lingered in the deepest parts of my lungs, and my back was still scorched pink from the sun over the Dead Sea. Biskrem cookies from the corner store crumbled in my backpack. My hands were still scabbed from my fall on al-Azizi Street. Branches of Red Sea coral rattled in the depths of my pockets. I looked down at my sneakers—red with the sands of Wadi Rum and caked with the dust of Amman.

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Across the Öresund strait, my dad’s gingerbread apartment stood in a cluster of snow-capped Gothic buildings. In his flat, a scraggly Christmas tree stood before the bay window, hung with handmade ornaments. The pictures on the mantel showed two girls with toothy grins and blonde hair. If you blurred your eyes, the girls might’ve been myself and my sister eight years ago. Propped up on the radiator, there was a book I’d made out of construction paper in first grade. It was called “When I Was Young,” and a photo of little me peered out of the cover, surrounded by a flurry of hand-drawn snowflakes. A stranger might’ve thought little me belonged here with the snowy roofs and tow-headed Scandinavians, but I knew she was lost, an ocean away from home.

“So, what do you want to do first?” my dad asked, “you could relax and make yourself at home, or we could have dinner, or go out and see the city.”

“I want to go for a run,” I answered, “my legs are stiff from the plane ride, and I need to get outside.” My dad always said that running was the best way to get to know a place. Maybe if I knew Malmö’s cobblestone lanes and dirt paths, I wouldn’t be a foreigner anymore.

Down on the darkening streets, the last throes of daylight stained the skyline golden. I thought of Amman, already swallowed by dusk. A full day had passed there, and a thousand more would cycle by without me. Still, the city would remember me by the scraps of myself I’d left scattered across its hills. I’d remember Amman too. Even if my memories faded, I’d remember it by the scars on my palms and the phone calls to Rachel and the dust on my shoes. I set off down the sidewalk, discovering a new expanse of snow-covered city and glowing windows around every street corner. I drank in the briny ocean air, and the hollowness in my chest eased a little. My every step tattooed a footprint of Amman dust across the cobblestones.

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