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West Bank Contemplations

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West Bank Contemplations

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West Bank Contemplations

Anika Jensen

We could see the flag through the bus windows, a marker atop the mountain more grand and bizarre than any blue stars in Jerusalem, when we were still half an hour away, and it grew with each mile we crawled. I hastened back to thoughts of the “Free Palestine” t-shirts we saw in the Muslim Quarter that morning, green and red and white hung from wire racks between a falafel shop and a coin exchange. Printed on them was the masked face from “V for Vendetta,” I think.

“We want the Israeli settlers to see our colors from their windows every morning,” our tour guide said. “We want them to see us and know that we cannot be ignored.”

We got off the bus. The sun was a pain I had never endured in my mid-Atlantic summers and the heat its arid counterpart, conniving together to buckle my knees and send me begging for water. Into the valley the cliffsides plunged, wrapping around the isolated plateau that held us in its calloused hands. The earth, after five days, continued to mesmerize.

“Come, let’s take a picture below the flag. We can use it on the website.” The tour guide (though I don’t remember his name, the world would simply call him “Arab”) grinned with straight teeth. “Everyone do a thumbs up.”

“This is some heavy propaganda,” a classmate on my left whispered. “I wonder what the college will think of this.”

Our program leader, Israeli born and Israeli to die, was laughing calmly, speaking rapid Arabic through his smile to the tour guide with one tanned arm around the man’s shoulder. The two had lived the wars growing up, one skipping school to buy lollipops as a bomb-watching snack, the other nursing bullet wounds. The wall was their horizon, the rockets shooting stars, but side-by-side, above the conception of a city, they forgot all that.

It was called Rawabi, a white metropolis rising from West Bank stone, and it would house its first residents in July. They served us coffee on our way into the administrative building, where families were choosing bathroom designs, and sat us on opulent upholstered sofas. Mr. Masri, the founder, was plain and thin, but his suit fit him well. He spoke hurriedly.

“They tried to stop it, of course,” he said. His lips barely crested his coffee cup before he took another sip. “They cut off the water. We got it

back.”

There was a vast window to my left with a vision that scanned the metropolis and the sloping of the hills behind it. It was not yet noon, but I began to wonder what the city would look like at night from this vantage point, glowing and full, as Masri’s dream intended. A community of lights below its banner. I recalled, unexplainably, a childhood memory, standing nine years old in a Philadelphia hotel with my nose pressed to the window while the sun stretched its eyelids; I wondered whether a city was more beautiful at dawn or dusk.

“I had a vision,” Masri interrupted my thoughts. “It was so complete; you can’t ignore something like that.”

I put my hand to my chest; beneath my fingers was the familiar six-pointed star that rested each day on my skin. It was weathered with fading color, a birthday present from my mother years ago. I had questioned and regained my faith with the star around my neck, had worn it to services and holidays and memorials and graduations, had tugged on it and chewed on it and tried my best to get the knot out of the silver chain. But it was always present, always tapping gently into my chest to remind me that I had the freedom to choose, and I had chosen Judaism.

I never meant for it to be political, but sitting in front of Bashar Masri and his beautiful city, I shuddered.

We had celebrated Shabbat just a few nights ago in the warmth of tall candles and an open summer door, and the melodic prayers had brought me joy and peace. We had watched the sun dwell above the Western Wall and seen men weep in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and heard the echoing call to prayer bounce from the Mosques to the rooftops with evocative articulation. I could pick up parts of Arabic conversations in the streets and markets, and I could bless the bread and wine in Hebrew; the word for “house” is the same in both languages.

Everyday we were hearing “intifada,” “occupation,” “settlement;” every hour we were debating the two-state solution with another stranger.

Mr. Masri had to run to a meeting, his secretary interrupted, but he was glad he could sit down and talk with us. “Please keep us in mind,” he said, turning to leave. “We’re thinking of hiring interns.”

Before we boarded the bus again, I thanked the tour guide in Arabic and took a final breath beneath the colossal flag. I was the opposite of this city: Jewish, American, cynical. Yet in my brain was growing a belief in its meaning, this ivory metropolis on a mountain backdrop, and for a moment before I blinked and my eyelashes sliced my nirvana I saw Masri’s vision in full: in the streets were children unafraid, men and women in color, homes with running water and stone bathtubs, and coffee shops. A desert oasis beneath green, red, and black.

My mind returned to Rawabi later that day when we struggled through the traffic in Ramallah, the capital, and later the next morning when we looked past the Golan Heights into Syria. I had many allegiances--to my faith, to peace, to equality--but I feared I could not express them. The year had been spent studying Middle Eastern intelligence, and before we left Philadelphia International I was confident that I would leave Israel and Palestine having formed a more comprehensive political ideology. If anything, however, I was more muddled than before. I believed in human rights and in two states; I loved Judaism. I was the great Israeli contradiction.

We talked to a group of Israeli students in a settlement one afternoon, asked about their lives and their schools and their futures. They opposed two states.

“What about the wall?” I asked. It was over a hundred degrees, and I was sweating through my shirt. “What do you think about the wall?”

Without hesitation one of the students, dark and bearded, answered, “I hate it.”

I didn't comprehend and asked him to explain.

“It's ugly,” he continued, cross-legged on a colorful beanbag. “Why should we have such an ugly separation? It's that kind of visual hate that creates violence. I don't fear the Palestinians, you know; I don't love them, but I don't believe in being separated by the wall. This is why there is resentment where there needs to be connection. It's ugly. There can be peace without a wall.”

I wondered on the plane ride back home if there would be peace in Rawabi, if its people could agree not to love its settler neighbors but live without separation. Masri's vision, I realized, was not simply a city; it was unfathomable, deeply desired coexistence.

We drank wine on the beach in Tel Aviv and smoked hookah on Ben Yehuda street; we heard bombs rip through Syria from the Golan heights, and we danced with a bedouin family in the Makhtesh Ramon while the dusk settled into the sand; we passed through the checkpoints and glanced Gaza over a wall, celebrated Shabbat with strangers. We strolled through color and texture in the Shuk, yet nothing was quite as vivid as Rawabi, the stone city.

Since we departed from the airport in Tel Aviv there has been death and terror on both sides and no conclusion. The politicians have debated it mindlessly in their search for alliance instead of peace; my family, my long line of steadfast Jews, has reached no consensus, only its boiling point. The world has not yet decided.

For now, it is my hope that Masri's vision is realized, and that its great flag can fly beside Israel's blue without fear of fire.