

Chapel Talk
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Egypt

Arriving in Cairo is always a sensory shock. Even from the runway, the air looks different outside. Flights usually arrive at night, and the lights at the airport always strike me as strange; they penetrate the darkness as a dissipated orange glow, at once powerful and indistinct. When you step out onto ground, the air seems a foreign medium, thick and sweet, and you can taste the desert in your mouth. A couple of short breaths as your lungs resist, and then your body gives in; it remembers.

Last January, the 5 of us—Mr. Austin, Isabel, Alexander, Maia and I—piled into my brother's Jeep to drive the familiar road back home. Past the 700 year old aqueduct, past the City of the Dead, across the Nile, onto the island of Manial Rhoda, and to the house my brother and I had grown up in until I was 16 and came to St. Andrew's as a Junior.

It didn't take long for the old rhythms of Egyptian life to give shape to our days, just as they had in my childhood. The same morning mist off the Nile, rising up toward the windows of our house. The familiar chant of the old man, wheeling his squeaky cart down our twisty street, with his strange sing-songy mid-morning call for the neighborhood's discarded clothes. Our noon-time family breakfasts in the garden on Fridays: plates and plates of labna, olives, fool, pickled turnips, Taamiyya, and coffee. The same Gezira club playground afternoons, where mothers, fathers, grandparents and friends come to spend a leisurely day, sitting on wicker chairs, sipping their tea or lemonade, eating lunch as their children play around them. The huge dusty mango tree in the garden, whose fruit we watched grow slowly all year, knowing now as we did then that we wouldn't get to taste any of it come August, when the fruit would be ripe, and we would be gone. The same dusky evenings, sitting in the garden with the hovering smell of apple tobacco, watching the bats come swooping out of our mango tree, diving for mosquitoes above our heads. All was as it had been. The same tastes, the same smells, the same traffic, the same slow pace of life woven into my everyday life once more.

Eternal Egypt—Omm el Dunya, as Egyptians say: Mother of the world...

Everything was the same...except that...22 years had gone by. My mother was dead, my father had moved to Beirut, and, I was married with three children. Time had passed and yet it had not. Time had collapsed onto itself to form what felt like a magical bubble outside of time, or so it felt to me.

My days were strangely charged and intense. At night, I would fall into a deep comatose sleep. I am usually a neurotically light sleeper, but during those months nothing could wake me until I would hear the Muezzin's song, the call to prayer at dawn. But I really knew that something was strange when, one day, Mr. Austin turned to me in exasperation (he had clearly tried to bite his tongue for a while, but as many of you might know, such restraint has never been his forte) and said: 'Monica, I am going to have to say this: you are turning into a vapid airhead. All you do is eat, go to the club, and sit around.' And, then, as if producing the incontrovertible proof of my ditsification 'what's the last book you've read in the past two months?' I protested that I was in the midst of a book but that I was finding it heavy going; the plot was confusing. Couldn't tell for sure what was happening, couldn't quite keep track of the characters. In fact, wasn't even sure who was speaking... As I looked up at him, I realized that he had been staring at me, in disbelief—"Listen to yourself--You sound like the English student from hell. What's happening to you?" He was right—I had started at least 5 different books and I would somewhat randomly pick one up at night; I would read a couple of pages, without retaining a word. I'd start over, and then over again, and then, I would be asleep. What was wrong with me?

I wasn't sure. All I knew was that I couldn't read a thing. What was going on?

Well, for starters, there were the friends and family and staff who watched me searchingly those first few weeks, curious about how I was making the transition back— or perhaps I should say they were listening to me searchingly: was there a slight new twang to my French accent? How much of my Arabic could I summon back up? How many of the verbal nuances of Arabic had I retained? Without fail, at some point or another, friends and family members would each come, and, in their own way, volunteer their analysis of how my language skills were or were not measuring up to their expectations. As I quickly realized, this scrutiny wasn't simply about language, of course, but

about sensibility—losing the language, failing to resurrect the verbal distinctions that don't exist in English meant a lot more than just losing the language. It meant a loss in sensibility, a loss of a way of thinking, of feeling, and of seeing the world. I knew this, and so spoke carefully—I could feel the weight of each word I used, its far-reaching resonances, the occasional and miraculous perfect pitch and far more frequent jarring notes. I was intensely aware of how they fell on other ears—and I sensed the underlying question on everyone's mind: had I changed or was I the same old Monica? Had I crossed over that invisible line and turned into a khawagaya (a foreign woman) or was I still one of them?

So I began watching myself too, and became aware that I was seeing everything through multiple prisms simultaneously. I was seeing things as I did when I had lived there last; those impressions remained intact. And, at the same time, I was seeing them through the perspective of my present self. But I was also seeing them through Mr. Austin's eyes, and through my children's eyes, each of whom was going through his and her own set of adjustments to this world.

So, for instance, an old family friend, Sherif, whose charm I had always felt as a young girl, instantly generated that old warm feeling in me upon seeing him again. But I could also now see how much that easy charm depended on a sense of unquestioned social power that I now found distasteful. Then, in a flash, I would anticipate how quirky and appealing his sense of humor would seem to Mr. Austin; but also how unsettling he would find the cynicism of my friend's political views, something I had never really noticed before. At the same time I would realize how fascinating Sherif would appear to Isabel, who would be mesmerized by his voice and accent and try to imitate it—(hopefully she would wait till after he left). Alexander would love Sherif's worry beads and would almost certainly try to stash them away in his treasure box. Maia would be amused by his strange beard, and a little abashed at his insistent claim on her. All of this would register almost simultaneously in me. And while I had known Sherif well for many years, and he seemed utterly unchanged, it was also as if I was seeing him for the first time, and recognizing aspects of him that I had never noticed before.

And it dawned on me: if the pleasure of reading fiction comes from inhabiting a perspective other than your own, entering someone else's world and seeing it through his or her eyes, no wonder I

couldn't read. I was saturated in layer upon layer of perspectives, often contradictory ones, and I could no longer tell which were mine and which weren't. Or rather, they were all mine. I was 6 people at once, all day long.

All families have their personal myths that they conjure up about themselves, and about the various members within them. In my family, one of these myths is about my ability to slip in and out of cultural groups and languages with relative ease and, with the help of what we might call linguistic camouflage, pass as part of that world. For my brother, this has always been a sore point. Johnny needs a good week of transition time whenever he moves back and forth between east and west. And during that transition week, he is in a foul mood—uncomfortable, dour, irritable, depressed, and generally unbearable to be around. And then, around day 8, he's suddenly fine again. I on the other hand, make the switch quickly. But I realize, now, that the root of this skill is compartmentalization. I have always been able to turn the switch on or off different parts of my life as needed, and pretty successfully keep the various parts and stages of my life separate. None of this is conscious, but I see pretty clearly now that I have avoided, as best I can, those messy moments when different parts of my life make contact, when selves collide, something some of you have perhaps felt before, perhaps as recently as parents weekend...

What do we fear exactly when different parts of our lives come into contact with each other? That, deep down, we are incoherent, contradictory? That perhaps the pieces of who we are don't fit together after all? That the center won't hold—because...there is no center?

No doubt this is a normal fear. We all like clarity. We all want control over what we call our identity. We want to project a compelling and powerful self, and surely, we feel, that must mean a clearly defined self. Even Isabel, our 6 year old, seemed to feel that need for a clearer and cleaner sense of self. One afternoon in Cairo after a long day at school, she asked me what her nationality was. She listened quietly, if a little anxiously, as I launched into a complicated litany: 'well', I told her, 'you are many things: you are part American through dad and through my mother, you're Lebanese because of Giddo in Beirut, and you are part Egyptian because...' 'She cut me off firmly, shaking her head: 'no mom, no – you've forgotten. I'm from St. Andrew's!' and for the next 4

months she pointedly told everyone she could that she hailed from a country called St. Andrew's, and that she would be returning there very soon.

Of course, developing a coherent identity as an Arab-American these days is no easy feat. The Us/Them divide seems to undermine any attempt at a hyphenated identity. Arabs are perhaps the last remaining ethnic group that we still publicly denigrate with impunity. And even the most open minded and best intentioned American can't help but think of the Middle-east as synonymous with violence, instability, hostility, sexism, fanaticism. So I often find myself paralyzed by contradictions: yes, there is violence and instability, and yet... it is also the place in the world I feel safest; it is the most gentle and peaceful culture I know. Yes, it is a sexist culture in many ways and yet... some of the most colorful, dynamic and outspoken women I know are Arabs and have shaped my ideas on feminism. Conversely, I have Arab friends and family who feel that they can no longer in good conscience travel to the U.S, given the havoc we have and continue to wreak in the Arab world. They have stopped coming here. I know that they are right to feel outraged. And yet this place is my home; and, while I share their anger and disillusionment, a part of me can't help but feel, in some basic way, that by turning their backs on the U.S, they are also turning their backs on me.

But that is another subject--I'd like to end with a passage by Edward Said, a professor of mine and Mr. Austin's in graduate school. Some of you have studied him in colonial history with Ms. McGrath, I know, and others of you might know or have heard of him as a literary critic, a historian, and a musician. He was also a Palestinian, born in Palestine, raised in Cairo, and educated in the U.S.

In his memoirs, Said charts the feeling of being 'out of place', a feeling that trailed him all his life. His memoirs are a beautiful meditation on this state of belonging nowhere and therefore everywhere, and of his ability, late in life, to embrace this state of being, discomforts and all, rather than fight it. Instead of compartmentalization, he calls for continuum; instead of an integrated whole, he describes currents of being. This is his last book—he died in New York City two years ago shortly after publishing it--and he closes his memoirs with these words:

“I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are ‘off’ and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is....With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.”