Cities On Hills: Seeking the Holy Land

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Cities on hills: seeking the Holy Land

by

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INTRODUCTION

_Cities On Hills: Seeking the Holy Land_ is a collection of thirty-two vignettes and poems that chronicle a month-long cultural exploration and archaeological dig in Israel/Palestine in 2000, the year before 9/11. The stories are told by a narrator ten years after her journey, reflecting back on her nineteen-year-old self and the impact the experience had on her worldview and personal beliefs. The Holy Land itself is a vital character, informing and influencing the behaviors of the narrator and her dig team. Places in and around Jerusalem, Galilee, Bethlehem, as well as moments in Jordan, are pieced together like a loosely-structured photo album, functioning as a whole to offer a glimpse into a culture that many Americans are now reluctant to experience in a post-9/11 mindset.

Thematically, the stories and poems essentially revolve around seeking beauty and truth amidst violence and turmoil of the legendary, historic, and modern Holy Land, from the perspective of a rebellious outsider who desperately wants to be an insider. What constitutes historical truth versus myth? What part does rebellion play in seeking truth? The three parts—Jerusalem, Galilee, and Bethlehem—loosely trace the footsteps of Jesus Christ from resurrection to birth, metaphorical for the narrator’s need to dig past the fairytales of her childhood and uncover their origins. For the most part, the narrator realizes that “truth” must be investigated and actively sought by the individual—that it is, in fact, her responsibility to do so.

The collection ends with a coming-of-age birthday party. Like the narrator’s loss of her safety net, the naivety of the nameless American tourist is about to be wiped away in a
year’s time, with the bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Eyes opened, she
must now learn to live in a bigger, more brutal, more beautiful world.

It should be noted that this travel memoir is a work in progress. Future stories
include two or three additional “rebellion” stories in Galilee that highlight other aspects of
that region, and several stories in Bethlehem, including visiting Dar Al-Kalima Academy,
examples of some of the violence that has since taken place, and touring the tombs beneath
the Church of the Nativity—the location of the 2002 siege.
PART ONE: JERUSALEM

City Above the World
Eyes to the Hills
Etymology
Stations of the Cross
Hezekiah’s Tunnel
Jerusalem Syndrome
Last Supper
Hill of Calvary
Photographing the Dome
Beyond Mount Zion
Masada Dead
Trespasser’s Kaddish
Behold the Man
Mount of Olives
1. City Above the World

I waited for Grace to emerge from the dormitory, drumming my fingers against the chair’s armrest, aching to hit the streets. We planned to explore Jerusalem’s Old City on our own today by walking the Stations of the Cross amid the Easter madness. The brass plaques were positioned across the walled quarters like a breadcrumb trail. They are meant to be a prayer pilgrimage, reflecting upon Christ's suffering and death.

The sisters had opened the convent’s windows. Warm wind poured into the common room from the streets and drove out the stale air, replacing it with spice. Cotton-white curtains billowed about, their quiet snapping mixing with the wail of the Arabic adhan to create music unlike anything I’d heard in a concert hall. It sounded from one, two, and then three mosques, echoing each other as if the entire Old City was an acoustical marvel. Inside, it was pleasant to listen to. Outside, though, it was as clear as a klaxon. The cadence of the city fell silent as their earnest calls rose and fell, echoing in every crevice of the building.

Across the Via Dolorosa was the minaret that blared the call to prayer into the convent. In those sacred fifteen minutes, all stirrings in the shops slowed as the Allah-faithful unfurled rugs and bowed to Mecca. And then, as the last of the lilting adhan faded, they rolled them up and resumed business hawking embroidery and painted dishes and trinkets, as if the interlude had not happened.

Conversation was nearly impossible when the muezzins projected their voices from speakers in their minaret towers. The night before, I’d called my mother and father just as the sun was setting, hoping to catch them at a reasonable time. I found the convent’s payphone, fumbled with my precious international phone card, and dialed. My mother answered.
“Mom?” I sighed with relief, already aching for home. A lone scooter zipped by on the street below and faded into the city.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

The concern in her voice made me tear up. “I miss you!”

“It’s not that bad already, is it?”

“You won’t believe—”

And then the Maghrib—the evening adhan—began. The muezzin’s voice in the neighboring mosque belted through loudspeakers that had to be aimed directly at my roof, directly at me. I could feel the ground shaking, the entire convent rattling. I yelled into the phone, determined to beat the blaring adhan.

“I said, you won’t believe what happened! I was in the market—”

Alllllaaaaaaaaahhh, U AAAk-Bar!!

“—and this guy, kind of cute with wavy black hair and a silk shirt, just out of the blue—”

“What!”? my mother shouted.


“—and he asked me to marry him so he could live—”

Ash-ha-Duu-U-U a-nah Mu-Ha-MAAA-dan!

“—so he could live in the U.S.—”

There was a pause. Then my mother, confused…“Who’s getting married!?”

I sighed. “Forget it! I’ll call you back!”

“WHAT!”

“Bye!”
Just outside the common area was a garden terrace. I left the room and passed down a hallway that opened onto this rooftop, and weaved around the tables and potted plants. There was a wrought iron railing around the edge that served as a barrier between the convent and the surrounding city. I wrapped my fingers around it, enjoying the ambience of this retreat from the bustle below.

I could see in a single sweep the Mount of Olives—tree-flecked contours and white steeple—where Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven. The golden Dome of the Rock, where Mohammed dreamed. The crumbling Western Wall of the ancient Jewish temple. And somewhere at the end of the twisting Via Dolorosa was the Holy Sepulcher—that massive scorched relic of a crusader’s basilica, built over a Byzantine church, built over a garden, built over a Roman temple, built over what once was a cross and an empty tomb, built over Golgotha and Calvary.

I put a hand to my forehead, warding off the sun that already scorched at mid-morning, and gazed over a city bathed in light. In Jerusalem, people do not live inside dark rooms. They live on rooftops. From my perch three stories high, I saw exotic streets pulsing with the rhythms of everyday life. To the left, a veiled woman draped sopping-wet sheets over a wire strung between her house and her neighbor’s. Across the street was a school, its courtyard teeming with uniformed children kicking a soccer ball. The rest of the Old City sprawled over Mount Zion, its rooftops dotted with television antennas, lawn chairs, chicken coops, chapels, convents and friaries mixed among shabby storefronts, domes rising above flat edges, crosses and crescents and stars, creating a geometric panorama that stood brilliantly against the mid-day sky.
And then…the man who had proposed to me (or someone who looked like him) strutted down the street, enthusiastically chatting into a cell phone with grand gestures. My heart flipped foolishly. He stepped around the tourists and glanced up, and winked. Another flip. I loosed a half smile and he clutched his chest, flashed his white teeth, and disappeared into the crowd.

_No flirting or you’ll be in a stew_, I firmly chided. Female overtures in Islamic culture were glaringly obvious, unlike the U.S. They just didn’t happen. I knew better than to respond to the man. But it was hard not to feel flattered. And he _was_ handsome.

Finally, Grace, my roommate back home and on this trip, appeared at my side, saving me from my less-than-pure thoughts. She was dressed in a long khaki skirt and fishing hat, a camera around her neck. We watched a tourist group make their way along the street, snapping photos as they swarmed through the crowds. Grinning, she lifted her own camera and captured them, then turned to me.

“Ready to head down into that?”

“You bet,” I answered, perhaps with a touch more cynicism than I intended. I smoothed my own ankle-length khaki skirt and hung a camera around my neck—the universal badge of the tourist.
2. Eyes to the Hills

_A song of ascents._

_I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth._

--Psalm 121

When I first saw the Holy Land, it was night. My entire body was a mess of rumpled clothes and sluggish limbs, having just stumbled from a plane onto a charter bus. Time was suspended beyond the bus, its forward movement the only sign that seconds ticked by.

Beyond my window, a nighttime limbo. Warm black sky. Vague mounds floated by that had to be hills—sand or grass-covered, impossible to tell. For now, they were simply shadows of the Holy Land, an occasional cement house sinking into their crevices.

_Asalaam Alaikum... Marhabbah... Sabah al khair... Masah al khair... Maasalaamah..._ a guttural mantra, the words silently rolled around in my throat and up over my tongue. _Peace be with you, hello, good morning, good evening, goodbye._ My college roommates had whipped through stacks of flashcards for Grace and me the weeks before our departure, helping us to learn as many basic Arabic phrases as possible before our trip to the Holy Land.

I was going to live in Israel/Palestine for almost five weeks: one week in Jerusalem for holy week, two in Galilee on an archaeological dig, one city-hopping, and the last week in Bethlehem. It struck me that we would be following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ—reversed. Tracing resurrection, to death, to ministry, to childhood, to birth. And the last day of our trip would be my twentieth birthday.
There were eighteen students on the trip, along with a nurse and our professor. We’d been preparing for the trip the entire year, studying the culture of the region, the history, and the tense conflicts spanning thousands of years.

*Shalom. Salaam. Shalom. Salaam.* So important to remember the difference.

In Jordan, wealth and poverty live side by side. Because of their lack of oil, Jordan’s economy is founded on industry and tourism. Fifty years ago, nothing was developed until King Hussein took the reins and changed most everything for the good of the country. Given Jordan’s neighbors to the east—Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—this was a bold move for the king. The people loved him for it. Having only died the previous year, King Hussein was still greatly mourned by his subjects—even as they waited with excitement to see how his son would rule. King Abdullah II was busy reaffirming Jordan’s peace treaty with Israel and its friendship with the United States, which meant that our trip into Israel the next day would most likely not be impeded by checkpoint difficulties as we crossed the border.

I had been told all of this by my professor, Dr. Fred Strickert, a true voyager. He preferred khakis and fishing hats to suits and ties. Recovering from a fight with cancer, he could still beat all fifteen of us across the Chicago O’Hare terminals without breaking a sweat. An expert in mid-East theology, he also had a solid background in archaeology and history of the bible. He’d been involved with the Bethsaida dig—our Galilee project—for years, serving as an expert in ancient coins. And most recently, Fred had been invited to join an exploratory dig at a recently-opened Qumran cave—the region where the famed Dead Sea scrolls were discovered.
His philosophy was that the Holy Land shouldn’t be experienced from the comfort of a tour service catering to foreigners. Oh no—we would live and learn at the very core of the Jewish and Palestinian cultures—in pilgrim houses, inns, and a kibbutz.

I had yet to experience any of the Middle East myself, save for the bright white tiles of the Amman airport and the giant portraits of King Hussein and King Abdullah II hanging two stories high near the baggage claim. And we wouldn’t see much of Jordan on our middle-east experience until the return trip. Tomorrow, we’d travel to Jerusalem: the City of Peace. The heart of three major religions—and the most warred-over city in the history of the world. Suddenly, the bus didn’t seem sturdy enough to cross that border.

I am a seeker of beauty. I see possibilities in a blanket of snow, the way it eddies and swirls like a ripple on a frozen lake. How, when it mixes with mud and gravel along the roadsides, it becomes a complementary bleakness to jagged branches and shrubs lining the ditches. Out in the country, when I drive home for Christmas break, the late afternoon light hits fields and fields of tundra and they glow ice-blue.

It hadn’t been enough for me—to enjoy the immediate world. I was always counting days until the next adventure began: the Grand Canyon, or the Washington Monument, or Niagara Falls. I had my heart set on traveling overseas someday, far into the future—maybe to England or France. It wasn’t until Grace suggested we register for a May-term
archaeological dig that I even considered traveling in college. I was nineteen and looking for a way to test this newfound, glorious adulthood that didn’t involve sex, drugs, or something else that could potentially screw up my life (or grades). Until recently, I hadn’t truly comprehended that this journey would actually happen. It was a far away adventure saved for the end of the spring semester. I was so engrossed in the frantic flying about of year-end finals, moving out of my dorm room, and dealing with a mentally ill suitemate and romantic entanglements—I hadn’t even packed for the five-week-long trip until the morning we left for Chicago O’Hare.

The possibility that I might be undertaking a pilgrimage finally occurred to me when I was in the air, in the dark of the plane, and had plenty of time to ponder the significance of the trip. Pilgrimages were for antiquates, religious zealots and artists—not Iowa farm girls. And yet a pilgrimage was, simply put, a long journey in search of moral significance. Literally “far afield.” Wasn’t I seeking something of the sort? Moral significance? Beauty? My own faith, own words, not cliché creeds handed to me in my tower of ivory. Adrenaline pulsed its way past exhaustion and knotted in my chest, the unknown mystery land beating with my heart.

I wasn’t afraid to go to the Middle East. This was April 2000—a little more than a year before 9/11. Before Palestinians celebrated in the streets of Jerusalem, firing guns into the air while a world away, New Yorkers tumbled one hundred stories from the burning towers. It was before most Americans knew the difference between a turban or keffiyeh (let alone a black-and-white or red-and-white keffiyeh), between the West Bank and Gaza, and between Palestine and Israel.
In the weeks prior to departure, I googled “Royal Jordanian Airline.” The search engine yielded precious little information, save for several articles about an attempted hijacking and a terror plot to blow up, commandeer, and take hostage passengers en route to and from Amman International. Again, far-away events that should never breach my perfect cushion of safety. Yet for the umpteenth time after receiving my trip itinerary, I had questioned our professor’s sanity in taking a *Jordanian* airline instead of a nice safe flight aboard Northwestern, American, or United.

A cursory glance around me showed my dig team spread out across the bus, pasty-white faces illuminated by Amman’s glow. (The SPF 50+ sunscreen would be flowing freely in the weeks to come as our fair skin baked despite floppy hats and long cotton clothes.) Some of the students slept, others had dug out headphones and swayed to music or drummed fingers on pleather seat cushions. Grace was across the aisle, her eyes sleep-heavy as she too watched the urban landscape skim by. Slipping my own headset over my ears, I let Jamiroquai’s mellow grooves fleetingly take me back to nowhere.

I gazed outside, using my faded college sweatshirt as a cushion between the jolting metal window frame and my head. We were traveling farther into the city now. Just enough light to read the letter from my mother tucked safely in my journal, which I’d carried with me to this far-off place. I didn’t like to read it much, because it reminded me of the hell Deb had put me and my roommates through over the past year—begging her to call the police, adjusting our schedules to keep her from being alone, staying up until five in the morning with her because she was too scared to sleep, always looking over our shoulders for her abusive ex-boyfriend-turned-stalker, Brian. But now, in a place so far away from all of that,
I just wanted my mother. Pulling my journal out of my backpack, I unfolded the letter and held it up to the window:

Dear Sarah,

I called Kim, my friend and prayer partner, when you called that one day last week. When we thought your safety could be at risk—we prayed that God would hold you and your friends in the safety of the palms of His hands. We prayed that he would surround your lives with safe-keeping, that Brian would be found, put in a safe place and that the help he needed would be given to him. God answered our prayers by opening your eyes and giving you the wisdom of seeing what was really going on...

What was really going on. What was really going on was twisted. Brian had been “found” all right—we’d found that there was no Brian.

The flight from Chicago to Amman had been fifteen hours, with one stop in Shannon, Ireland where we weren’t allowed to de-board. There wasn’t a sky cinema on the Royal Jordanian Airlines flight. Only a flight tracker at the front of the cabin with a red digital plane moving almost imperceptibly across the simulated world. Cell phones were utterly useless on this trip, and no one on my dig team had bothered with one. The only markers of time were the cigarettes lit, smoked, and stubbed out piling up in armchair ashtrays. A parade of mediocre airline dinners adorned with wilted green shamrocks, tossed on our trays by burnt-out Irish flight attendants that staffed the stretch. The occasional muffled remarks from the pilot, his thick Arabic words garbled. A screaming toddler. Struggling against his mother’s arms, he flailed about and pushed her away, displacing the headscarf wrapped over her black hair. Her husband was next to her, doing nothing—not lifting a finger to help—as if he was oblivious to his son’s cries. I could feel nothing but annoyance that this child, face streaked with snot, would disturb my sleep.
I could find no beauty in the baby. None. The ear-splitting yowling of the red-faced child was grating to an already taxed tolerance. Once, when I young, I heard a feral cat mewing and howling over a bag of trash in an alley behind our garage. It was nighttime and the noise was fearsomely similar to the cries of an infant—disturbing, a sound that couldn’t be ignored. Unlike the nighttime here, in this peaceful metal enclosure traveling through points of light and white box-buildings.

I opened the letter again:

...I had assumed that Deb would have been put in the hospital where she could be observed and given intense counseling, usually when suicide is even hinted at, that is what happens. I’m shocked that is not the case. I am proud of the leadership role you took and the friendship you shouldered to help Deb.

I wasn’t a leader, or the compassionate person my mother wrote of. After all, I’d been the first to tell the college pastor that I just didn’t have it in me to forgive Deb. The elaborate lies she’d told, researched, written: constructs of an emotional vampire that drained the life from all of us for an entire school year as we fought to keep her safe from her imaginary stalker. Now, reflecting over the past months, I could see that I was horribly naïve in not questioning any of Deb’s extraordinary stories. When a friend confides that they are being abused, stalked, harassed—how could anyone question it? But sometimes, when you are just inches from a painting, you can only see the singular sickness of a pale flower in an entire field of yellow.

I closed my eyes and fell into a pile of thoughts.
I suffer from wanderlust. I first came to this awareness while riding in the back of our family’s van on one of our many trips to Memphis, my forehead welded to the window as landscape passed by like a toy scroll box. At the time I had no clue there was an actual word for what I felt. I just knew that when I saw the road sign for Sainte Genevieve, Missouri, I would have given anything to turn left. The hills of the Mississippi River Valley were fairy tale mountains to my ten-year-old mind. I imagined that beyond their green crests were castles and queens and quaint villages, hidden away, waiting to be happened upon. A town with a beautiful name like Sainte Genevieve had to be just as beautiful. “Genevieve” became my preferred name. My dolls were called Genevieve. My real name was Genevieve. Genevieve embodied everything I quested for, the epitome of a fair lady: beauty, grace, joy, fearlessness, gentleness, intelligence…

Years later, on one of those trips from Memphis when I sulked in the corner of the van, headphones blaring Green Day, we turned at the Sainte Genevieve sign. A short sightseeing detour, my father explained. I was ecstatic, as much as a sulky teenager can be ecstatic on a family vacation. At last, the mysterious Genevieve would reveal herself.

She was an Old World river-town—a three hundred year-old trading post with lovely colonial Bed & Breakfasts, specialty shops, and church steeples. Settled by French Canadians traveling down the Mississippi to New Orleans, Sainte Genevieve was considered to be the “birthplace of the West.” Its first citizens were adventurers and voyagers commissioned to find gold for the French crown. When Lewis and Clarke passed near the town in 1803, William Clarke noted it in his journal: “Set out this morning before sunrise, at 3/4 of a mile passed the mouth of a Small Creek Called Gabia, at the mouth of this Creek is
the landing place for the Trading Boats of Ste. Genevieve…” He mentions that the town was also known as “Misar,” or “Miserre,” because of tragic flooding in 1785.

I discovered that the lady herself was the patron saint of Paris. A nun by the age of fifteen, her charities and prayers are said to have brought about the salvation of the French capitol from Attila the Hun (to the detriment of his target city—Orleans). She died in 511. In 1793, her remains were publicly burned by revolutionaries.

The city of Sainte Genevieve was a charming-enough place. Quaint. Magical…almost. History never ceased to fascinate me, and in the old river town I collected another “pin for my map,” so to speak. Yet I left a part of myself behind—the part that still believed a castle stood high on the hill, lording over cobblestone streets.

My forehead was pressed to the window as the bus rumbled through Amman. I gazed on this new world cloaked in darkness, and suddenly dreaded the sun’s rising. Was the Holy Land my next Sainte Genevieve? Like Sainte Genevieve, would the unearthing of so much history force me to relinquish the fantastical fairytales that still captivated me—even at nineteen? The bible stories were more than a two-dimensional flannel board Jesus in pure white robes, hand outstretched, lamb tucked beneath his arm. In my mind, the Holy Land wasn’t just paper palm trees and square yellow houses, floating in the middle of a flat piece of plywood covered in cloth. It was a magical land just over the hill, waiting to be happened upon.

I believed in the stories. I’d never seen the places, yet I knew that they existed. What existed in my mind, though, was most certainly not what existed in reality. By seeing them—Jerusalem, Galilee, Bethlehem—for what they have been, what they are, I would also
see them for what they never were. And so the fairytale Holy Land would be tempered by
the historical Holy Land, as well as the modern Holy Land.

Why was I seeking to destroy this last childhood stronghold? To simply explore a
foreign land and add another pin to the map? And what of my fair lady
Genevieve—the possessor of perfect
beauty, joy, and grace—was she to be destroyed, too?

I glanced across the aisle again to see what my college roommate, Grace, was doing. Ever a sound sleeper, her tiny frame was curled into her seat, blonde wisps of hair escaping from her ponytail.

“Grace,” I whispered.

No answer.

No longer in the mood for the happy funk odyssey blaring in my ears, I took the headphones off. I turned back to my mother’s letter and relived a year I’d just as soon seal up in the annals of history:

I do not know all the details and can not make a judgment call but at this time I feel that you and the others have been betrayed and neglected by Deb, her parents, and the college. I feel that Deb needs professional help and more needs to be done. I wish her parents had stayed a while.

I also feel guilty that I did not know the stress and strain you girls were under. Your Dad and I could have talked with the other parents and approached the college...

My mother felt guilt. I didn’t feel anything except a wretched sensation that had settled into the pit of my stomach and stayed, never really disappearing with time. It was
loss. It was anger. I became cynical, circling the wagons around my heart. Shut down until
beauty, joy, and grace rarely touched me. Until the fair lady was gone.

I would have felt incredibly sad about this loss if I wasn’t so tired. Tears of
exhaustion gathered in the corners of my eyes, partly from the Dramamine and partly from
the trying finals week. I wiped them away and sank further into my seat. A broken spring
dug into my back, nearly driving me over the edge.


The darkness was starting to lift as we moved farther into lighted parts of Amman and
pulled up to the Al Manar Hotel. The hotel was flanked by palms that looked more like the
tiled Mediterranean houses I’d seen in photographs. I squinted into the circle of lamplight on
the curb, watching brown-faced youths in keffiyehs scramble to unload our luggage from the
bus. _I should help them_, I thought instinctively, before recalling from my culture class that it
would be insulting for me to offer a hand.

I lifted the letter from my mother again, scanning the last few lines.

...you have lived and learned a valuable life lesson. I continue to keep
you in my prayers—I’m proud of you. May God bless you with peace, security
and contentment. – Love Mom.

Sighing, I closed my eyes and was taken back to that moment in the car with my
family, in the hills near Sainte Genevieve when I felt a sense of joyful wonder in the
unknown. I’d forgotten that I’d felt security, too. For the first time in months, a little piece
of me relaxed. The muted roar of the bus was the wind, sweeping me away to the castle over
the hill. A hill blanketed not in green, but gold.
In my mind I heard the wailing toddler in the airplane, and I remembered when he had clutched at his mother with plump baby fingers. His smooth face was streaked red from tears, frightened, *beautiful* eyes impossibly dark, fringed with lashes.

Spoiled? Perhaps.

Naïve? Yes.

Loved? *Oh yes*.

And so I set out to seek truth amidst the fairy tales. To become a fair lady. To learn about love. To reclaim the rush of joy that finding beauty brings. In the tiniest details. The farthest places. In people.

Safely ensconced in a bus permeated by stale smoke and sweat, resting on a residential curb in Amman, I chose to be a pilgrim—a seeker.

The Holy Land waited for me. It is a place of conscience.

I stepped off the bus and into this strange, illuminated night.
3. Etymology

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!* (Luke 13:34)

What does Jerusalem mean? The etymology of the name, like the city itself, is ever evolving yet always, ideologically, the same. To the early Egyptians, the city was called *Urušalimum.* To the Greeks, it was *Hierosolyma,* or “holy city.” The ancient Hebrews had *Yeru-Shalem,* literally “founded by He who is perfect.” Jews today call it *Yerushalayim*—“legacy of peace.” And to Arabs it is *Al-Quds,* or “The Holy.” Throughout antiquity, whether David’s city, Caesar’s, or Saladin’s, Jerusalem has born the name of wholeness, of perfect peace.

How odd, then, that a city marked by God should have been destroyed twice…besieged twenty-three times…attacked fifty-two times…captured and recaptured forty-four times.

Jerusalem is one of the oldest cities on the earth that still exists today. From its humble beginnings as a 4th millennium Copper Age monoculture to today’s multi-ethnic legend, Jerusalem has been doomed to cyclical highs of pious pride and lows of human slaughter.

King David first brought Jerusalem to prominence when he made it the shining capitol of his united Judean and Israeli kingdoms, as early as 1007 BC. David’s rule was not without bloodshed. Peace was not meant for him, and he was resigned to it:

> I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it. But God said to me, ‘You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood.' (1 Chronicles 28:2-3)
Since David’s time, Jerusalem has seesawed between a city of great cultural enlightenment and a city of grim destruction—there has been no middle road.

In 586 BC, it was captured by Babylon and the residents, along with the rest of the Hebrew nation, were dragged away in slavery for fifty years. In 70 AD, Jerusalem was burned to the ground by the Romans to quell the Jewish Revolt threatening their sovereignty. The Second Temple was destroyed, a crippling final blow to Judea. Jews who did not burn alive were massacred or enslaved. Those who escaped were banished forever.

During the 1099 siege, Crusaders massacred Muslims, Jews, and even native Christians were killed in the ethnic cleansing to make way for the “Kingdom of Jerusalem.” Anticipating the Crusaders march on Jerusalem, though, the inhabitants poisoned the wells and destroyed the food supplies, effectively killing two-thirds of the Crusade knights with starvation once they’d won Jerusalem. Since then, the city has passed from Hebrew hands, to Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Hasmonean, Roman, Byzantine, Muslim, Crusader, Mameluk, Ottoman, British, and tenuously back to Hebrew hands.

Today, the population of Jerusalem is approximately 662,000 Jews, Muslims, and Christians. As mighty as Jerusalem is, its import in three major religions has also been a thorn in its side. To live in such a sacred place, one must endure the violence of the place. I recalled the missionary Paul’s letter to the Corinthians:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh…For when I am weak, then I am strong.

To Jerusalemites, the thorns of violence seem to make them stronger, more passionate, more resilient. Many would die for every inch of soil gained. What this means
for the peace process, I can only speculate. But I admire those who can live in such a place, in peace, in humility, without fear.
4. Stations of the Cross

“All right,” Grace said. We paused in the narrow street under a sign that read in bold black letters: Stop and Shop at Mike Store. Large squares of cloth fluttered above our heads in whirls of color, some with intricate patterns embroidered within. Mike had good taste.

Grace dug into the tan-colored pouch looped over her neck and pulling out her guidebook, searching for the next station. Her finger skimmed over the page, coming to rest on a block of text. “We’re looking for Four: Jesus meets his mother.”

“Wouldn’t that be on the other side of the Via Dolorosa?” I asked, reading over her shoulder. “Look at the street direction.”

She shook her head. Tides of people pushed against us on either side, but we were oblivious to the jolts and eddies. “It’s supposed to be next to the chapel of the Cyrenian—there’s a sculpture of Jesus and Mary. We’re just looking for a door this time, remember.”

I took the other half of the book, our heads hunched over the pages. “I have no clue which one of these churches is the Cyrenian—they all kind of blend together.” Tracing along the city map, I tilted my head, trying to make out street names.

Though a Catholic tradition, walking the Stations of the Cross was a good way to see the Old City, as well as a sure-fire route to the Holy Sepulcher—our eventual destination. We’d thought to get a better look at the plaques by waiting until the Good Friday pilgrims cleared out. The stations weren’t as crowded as they’d been two days ago, but today was Easter, and the swirling chaos was still sweeping through the streets. Being in the middle of the maelstrom, at its very apex, was exhilarating.
The third station had been simple to locate. We were lodging at the very site—the Ecce Homo Convent—marked by a roman numeral III etched into metal plaque on the street-side. Number Three: *Jesus falls for the first time.*

The Sisters of the Notre Dame de Sion were good hosts to our small group. For twenty dollars a day, we had clean beds and filling breakfasts, which is all one really needs in Jerusalem. That, and a good pair of sandals. Solid walking sandals are essential, especially during the holy week, because Palestinian Christians do not celebrate in the manner that other *less exuberant* Christians do.

From Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, parades of native Jerusalemites stream along the Via Dolorosa toward the Holy Sepulcher. Not the sort of parades with floats, flowers, and marching bands—but just people, some with palm fronds or wooden crosses, and some with drums, pounding out primal rhythms that stir life in those who feel them. Clapping, dancing, waving scarlet streamers, they shout “Alleluia, He is risen!” Choosing to join means being...
caught up in a current of hot, euphoric bodies singing and stomping, blissfully following
down the hill, then up again, then down through the mighty stones of Jerusalem.

Several more people shoved past us, one of them shouting “Yallah, yallah!” over our heads.

Ignoring the commotion, Grace frowned over the cryptic thing. “‘Franciscan chapel at the
corner where the Tyropeon Valley turns toward the Market Road,’” Grace read.

I glanced further up the hill, seeing a picturesque portion of the Via Dolorosa. “It looks like Six isn’t far from here, either—that’s the Greek Catholic church with the flying buttresses on the—”

“Yallah yallah” sounded again, followed by the shrill horn of a cheap Mercedes Benz. Our eyes flew up from the book just in time to see one of those beat-up white compact cars rumbling over the cobblestones toward us, the driver flailing an arm about in anger.

“Shit! Shit!” I yelled.

Grace and I flattened our bodies against the grimy wall of a shop as the car barreled by, its bent mirrors barely squeezing through the narrow street. Several jagged scrapes along the side of the car warned that this driver was not averse to taking out walls or any other object that blocked his path. He flung some garbled Arabic our way. I didn’t have to understand the language to get his meaning. With a final bitter honk he rounded the corner and drove out of sight.

Crowds nonchalantly piled into the streets once again, as if a car plowing through a space narrower than an alley was an everyday occurrence. I was beginning to believe it was. Grace and I stared at each other, dumbfounded.
“How…” she began, looking behind us where the car had traveled. “How’d he drive over the stairs?”

We traced our footsteps back down the hill, noticing for the first time the twin ramps of asphalt that threaded through the stairs, each approximately a foot wide.

“Good Lord,” I murmured, trying to wrap my brain around a place where cars drove up and down stairs. I hadn’t noticed before. I tended to look up instead of down in Jerusalem.

Grace nudged me, pointing to what looked like a concrete shield, weathered with time, sandwiched between a falafel stand and a faded canopy. “There,” she said triumphantly, the car already forgotten. “The fourth station.”

Muslim women are lovely, despite being wrapped from head to toe in cotton. They glide along the streets in billowing fabrics—greens, violets, blacks—some effortlessly balancing baskets on their heads, eyes properly lowered to avoid any unwanted attention. Only a brazen woman dared to meet men’s eyes in the markets. They move with grace, as if the very sand in the air has weathered away coarse gaits and left only smoothness in their strides.

I found myself longing to dress as they did, draping a gauzy striped mendil over my head and securing it with another scarf around my throat. It seemed to offer immense protection from the sand, which on gusty days whipped about in the air and threatened to coat my mouth and nostrils. A headscarf would also allow me to observe Quarter life from the inside, not as a blatant foreigner who swanned about the markets during the day and returned to the hotels at night.
Grace and I ambled along the steep-climbing Via Dolorosa amid a flurry of sound and color. Building after building rose up on either side; many were connected by stone archways that stretched over the expanse of the road. Shopkeepers lining the cobblestone streets sat under canopies outside their small stores, exhibiting hand-painted glassware, books, jewelry, trinkets (even plastic gold Dome of the Rock alarm clocks that sounded the morning adhan), and all manner of vegetables and breads. Some smoked water-pipes—so that was where the smell of spice was coming from. The fragrance of the narghile tobacco hung over the streets like stewing cinnamon sticks and cloves, lending an exotic richness to the air of Jerusalem.

We were beginning to move out of the Muslim quarter and into the Christian, the looming rectangular tower of the Sepulcher drawing closer and closer.

"Do you see the next plaque anywhere?" Grace asked.

"No," I answered, my mind still churning with the strangeness of the quarters.

We wove through the crowd until we found an unpopulated alley where we could catch our breath, this time out of traffic.

"The eighth station should be around here," she explained, gesturing over her head without looking up from the guidebook. ‘Eight: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.’"

I craned my neck around, trying to peer above the sea of heads passing along the Via Dolorosa, looking for an etching with a Latin cross and the Greek words "Jesus-Christ conquers." I had no idea what the Greek actually looked like. At this point, I couldn’t even tell Arabic letters from Hebrew.

A catchy pop song thrummed from what appeared to be a convenience store, given the soft drink coolers and shelves lined with foreign junk food. I began to bob my head to
the music, not so different from techno but with an *oud* lute and *riq* tambourine. Listening, I tried to make out some of the reoccurring words. *Habebe*…I’d have to ask about that one.

“Ah!” Grace exclaimed. “There it is.” She pointed to a round, age-mottled circle on a wall, marked simply with a crumbled cross and an *N-I-something-K-A*. “I can’t believe that Jesus Christ actually walked here,” she breathed.

“Neither can I.” I thought for a moment, reluctant to spoil the flash of awe. “You know, the actual station is underground somewhere—this probably isn’t really where Jesus walked.”

Grace shrugged her shoulders and turned back to her book, studying a map for the next station.

Below the cross, a Palestinian man dressed entirely in black leaned against the wall, watching pilgrims pass along the Via Dolorosa. Even though it was May, a stocking cap was pulled over his head.

Musing over the absurdity of a stocking cap in ninety-degree heat, I once again forgot the dictates of this culture so different from my own, and smiled.

He turned his face away from me.

I blushed, mentally chiding myself for my faux pas. Before we left, the entire Old City would probably think I was a tramp. Covering my embarrassment, I raised my camera to my eyes and snapped a quick picture, then turned back to Grace. “Let’s keep moving,” I said, more than ready to rejoin the crowds.
5. Hezekiah’s Tunnel

If I’d been touched by claustrophobia when I was nineteen as I am today, I wouldn’t have ventured into Hezekiah’s tunnel. Though it had a high ceiling, the 2,700-year-old aqueduct’s walls were so close together, if I’d been much bigger my hips would have brushed the sides as I sloshed through. As it was, I couldn’t stick out my elbows without them hitting slimy, dank rock. A decade ago, this didn’t bother me. Now, the mere memory of walls pressing in on me like the sinister trash bin in Star Wars causes me to panic. Somewhere along my path into adulthood, I’ve shed my immortality disillusionment and exchanged it for the idea that I could, indeed, be squished to death.

We waded single-file through the S-shaped tunnel, water lapping out knees, flashlights bobbing in one hand as the other skimmed along the rough-hewn walls.

Mom-Joanne was near the front, a slight woman with short blonde hair that Fred knew from the local Lutheran church back home. She’d left her husband and kids for a month to travel with us, be our nurse. For college students so far from friends and family, Joanne had quickly become a surrogate mom to us.

Next came the two other Sarahs: Sporty-Sarah, so called for her near-unhealthy enthusiasm for triathlons and competition in general, and Hippie-Sarah, who was not a hippie, but dressed like one, and grew up in Boulder with hippie parents.

Then there was Chris—one of my friend’s boyfriends, Rachel, Scott, quiet Kendra, Mark, Grace. Derek and Joni, a funny little couple engaged to be married. Derek had just bought a new cheap suitcase in the Armenian Quarter. We’d stopped at a lively restaurant called Abu Shanab’s (Father’s Mustache), with big wooden tables, stone walls, and bright framed pictures. Over beer and thick-crusted Arab-style pizza, he’d explained that the
suitcase was for all of Joni’s souvenirs she’d been purchasing. He loudly complained each time she came back with something new, but loved her too much to stop her enthusiastic shopping.

Abigail, Lee, and Tara, the blonde-siren trio, walked behind me, giggleing over something. I silently called them the blonde-siren trio because they were the only ones to pack hair-dryers and curling irons for their perfectly coiffed golden hair, while the rest of us resorted to messy buns and ponytails. Today, the three wore matching pink water shoes.

I’d also packed water sandals specifically for this hour-long trek, but after twenty minutes of adjusting Velcro straps and stubbing toes, I wished I’d been allowed to go barefoot. The currents kicked up by our group, swirling around my feet caused the new shoe to shift sideways. Halting, I leaned against the wall and struggled to secure the back strap of my shoe. Lee, sloshing along behind me, hadn’t noticed I’d stopped and barreled into my back. My arm braced against the wall slipped and I tumbled into the cold spring water.

“Argh!” My cry echoed through the tunnel, followed by splashes as I scrambled to my feet. The others behind Lee stumbled into her, and she lurched forward as I patted beneath the water for my flashlight. I could see the distorted beam bouncing around. Grasping it, I felt Lee’s hand at my elbow as she hauled me up.

“God, are you okay?”

Lee nodded.

Fred, at the front of the line, hadn’t noticed. He continued to tell us about the history of the tunnel while the rest of us strained to hear him. Faint chisel marks could still be seen scattered across the walls, from when King Hezekiah’s workers burrowed through the rock between the Gihon Spring and the Pool of Siloam in 701 BC and carved out a vital water source should the Assyrians lay siege to Jerusalem. An ancient inscription at the Pool of Siloam exit commemorated the construction of the waterway, explaining how the workers made a judgment error and dug in the wrong direction—thus, the “S” shape to correct their work and meet in the middle:

[...when] (the tunnel) was driven through. And this was the way in which it was cut through: While [...] (were) still [...] axe(s), each man toward his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be cut through, [there was heard] the voice of a man calling to his fellows, for there was an overlap in the rock on the right [and on the left]. And when the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed (the rock), each man toward his fellow, axe against axe; and the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir for 1200 cubits, and the height of the rock above the head(s) of the quarrymen was 100 cubits.

The tunnel runs beneath the Arab neighborhood of Silwan, just outside of the Old City wall. To get to the entrance, we had to travel down on a street so steep and worn, the only way to not tumble over at some points was to walk backwards, hands braced on the pavement, or to crouch like a crab and scoot. Like a lot of sites in Jerusalem, the Palestinians owned one tunnel entrance, and the Israelis owned the other. Currently, the Israeli entrance was closed to the public, so once we reached the end of the tunnel, we had to double back.
Even over something as mundane as a historical tunnel, both sides were fiercely stubborn in their struggle for ownership, for control. In the Old City, it was an inch-by-inch battle to stake a claim in the quarters. I couldn’t help but appreciate the symbolism in the ancient diggers’ skewing off course to meet in the middle. As we sloshed through the tunnel back to the Palestinian entrance, I fleetingly wondered if today, in this land, something similar could ever happen on a much bigger stage.
6. Jerusalem Syndrome

At the Cotton Gate near the Wailing Wall, there was a man who I wanted to try to meet before my stay in Jerusalem ended. I wondered if he suffered from an illness called “Jerusalem Syndrome,” which caused him to costume himself from head to toe in robes and a crown, complete with a hand-held lyre. He called himself “King David.” Strumming his lyre, he’d often address the crowds—his subjects—crossing through the gate.

When Fred first told us about Jerusalem Syndrome, I thought he was kidding. A mental phenomenon that only strikes when a person visits the holy city? Sure. But he assured us with a completely straight face that it was a real illness, in which pilgrims have been found wandering in the desert wrapped in bed sheets or crouched at the feet of a Virgin Mary shrine in the Sepulcher, waiting to birth baby Jesus.

It manifests in three types:

Type I: A previous psychosis exists, and a visit to Jerusalem simply instigates delusional religious missions. For example, a person who already belongs to a bizarre fringe group might realize that they are John the Baptist upon seeing the River Jordan and try to baptize some poor tourist.

Type II: The patient has never suffered from a mental illness prior to visiting, but has such deep religious convictions that they are driven to act upon them—perhaps by delivering “the end is near” rants from the pinnacle of the Old City wall.

Type III: By far the most complicated and most interesting, Type III, the real Jerusalem Syndrome, will occur in a pilgrim with no history of mental illness, drug abuse, and who arrived as a normal tourist without a preconceived mission in mind. According to
Dr. Yair Bar-El, director of Kfar Shaul Psychiatric Hospital in Jerusalem, Type III is discernable in the following way:

It begins with general anxiety and nervousness, and then the tourist feels an imperative need to visit the holy places. First, he undertakes a series of purification rituals, like shaving all his body hair, cutting his nails and washing himself over and over before he dons white clothes. Most often, he lifts the white sheets from his hotel room. Then he begins to cry or to sing Biblical or religious songs in a very loud voice. The next step is an actual visit to the holy places, most often from the life of Jesus. The afflicted tourist begins to deliver a sermon, demanding that humanity become calmer, purer, and less materialistic.

What is even more uncanny is that everything else about them is normal—they know who they are and are completely cognizant of their actions. After about five days to seven days, they continue on to Greece or Jordan as if nothing had happened.

The most notable case, which the movie “Jerusalem Syndrome” is based, occurred in 1969 when Dennis Rohan, a deranged Australian Christian set fire to the Dome of the Rock.

Then there’s the thirty-eight year old American tourist who jumped off a thirteen-foot walkway at the Poria Hospital in Tiberias. He broke several ribs, one of which punctured a lung, and also smashed a vertebra in his back. Another tourist made a fuss in a hotel because he was giving orders to prepare the last supper.
One woman went to an emergency room, claimed she was having a miscarriage and when the doctors told her she was not pregnant at all, she said she came to Jerusalem to give birth to the new baby Jesus.

Another woman was picked up by the police after she kicked and beat some persons at the side of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, claiming she was “the Prophetess of the Olive Tree” and announced the immediate arrival of Jesus Christ.

According to Dr. Bar-El, sufferers usually believe they are Jesus, Moses, or the Virgin Mary, but several King Davids, John the Baptists, and at least one Mary Magdalene have also been recorded.

In 1999 (the year before my visit), fifty cases of Jerusalem Syndrome were reported, most likely due to the approaching millennium celebration. Dr. Bar-El said that just prior to the year 2000, the belief in the Messiah’s imminent arrival threatened to wreak havoc in the city. But since the millennium, cases dropped when the world didn’t end and religious zealots drifted away.

No one can say for certain what causes Jerusalem Syndrome. Perhaps a pilgrim might have such an intense religious experience, they “catch the fever.” Maybe they suffer incredible let-down upon finding the ancient Jerusalem they desire is fifty feet underground, paved over by centuries of commerce. Or they might simply be pilgrims seeking a perfect city—Ir David, Zion, Ariel. Because the city of peace is anything but peaceful.
7. Last Supper
--On Jerusalem Syndrome, 2000

An upstairs room in Jerusalem: Thirteen foreign emissaries fell down a hole and landed at a table on stage.

Lord’s Party Planner:
Thrown from his hostel dining hall for catering Christ’s last meal.

The Prophetess of the Olive Tree:
Kicked a cop at the Holy Sepulcher while preparing the way for the Lord.

John the Baptist and his head:
Dunked a Jew in the Jordan River when the Prophetess stole his thunder.

Pious Dennis:
Nearly torched the Dome of the Rock then scored a movie deal.

Three King Davids:
Plunked out psalms on plastic lyres for busloads of Dung Gate visitors.

An Angel from America:
A punctured lung, three cracked ribs, still no viable feathers.

Virgin Mary One and Two:
Direct from the hospital waiting room, neither has immaculately conceived.

Virgin Mary’s midwife:
Crouched at the feet of a holy mother shrine, catching the baby Jesus.

Malibu Jesus Christ:
Resplendently wrapped in a white cotton sheet snagged from his hotel bedroom.

And Dr. Delusion:
Leers crazy at his guests while he pours tea and slices cake.
8. Hill of Calvary

“The last four stations are actually in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher,” Grace related, reading from the book that had now become a crucial compass for navigating the Old City.

“Twelve: Jesus dies on the cross. Thirteen: Jesus is taken down from the cross. Fourteen: Jesus is laid in the tomb. And Fifteen: Jesus rises from the dead.”

“Ah…wow. This is it, I think,” I stammered, gaping at what had to be thousands of people swarming around the massive basilica, where the pilgrims streaming down the Via Dolorosa ended their journeys.

From the outside, the church resembled a medieval fort. The great Crusader structure frowned down upon the pilgrim antics sweeping through the crux of its outer courtyard, its imposing façade rising six stories high to meet the yellow sky. Behind the façade were a handful of onion-top towers that seemed to be tacked on as an afterthought. A flag wildly whipped about like a warning signal to all who dared to brave the chaos of the Easter ceremonies.

All thoughts of a gentle sunrise service on the Mount of Olives fled my mind. The church was clamoring with the shouts of thousands, pushing their way through the heavy wooden door to complete their pilgrimage. One mishap—a gun discharge, a thrown punch—would be enough to snap the already tense crowd into riot mode, and we’d be trampled. I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to take that risk, even to see Golgotha.

“Here we go,” Grace said with trepidation. Before I could think about it more, I held my breath and dove into a pool that was two thousand years old. Pushing through limbs and sweat-stained shirts, we steered toward the immense double doors and entered.
Because the church is overseen by six different religious sects, a “status quo” was established to avoid brawls. The status quo divides the church into territories, allowing a shrine to this group, a chapel to the other. It also allotted for strictly observed worship schedules to avoid conflicts, and a “common area”—territory that belongs to all groups. Nothing can be changed in common areas without the approval of each group. For this reason, repairs rarely take place until some statue or structure threatens to collapse if it isn’t attended to.

Typically, the church is a peaceful place. Still, the status quo does not prevent all-out fist-fights, especially on holy days.

One of the more recent fights occurred, according to Reuters, after Armenian worshippers yanked a Greek Orthodox cleric away from a tomb. I’m not sure whose tomb it was—maybe King Baldwin the Leper’s, Godfrey de Bouillon’s, or any of the eight Crusader kings of Jerusalem buried there. A spokesman said he didn’t know the precise cause of the scuffle and no one was seriously injured, but two Armenians were briefly detained. “About 100 Armenians gathered at a Jerusalem police station to protest the detention of the two men but were later dispersed,” the article read.

And then, six months later, another mass brawl broke out between black-clad Greek Orthodox in their cylinder hats and long beards, and red-robed Armenian monks. Dozens of worshippers traded kicks and punches at the shrine, said the BBC. Apparently trouble flared as Armenians prepared to mark the annual Feast of the Cross. The BBC report continued:

Shocked pilgrims looked on as decorations and tapestries were toppled during Sunday's clash. Dressed in the vestments of the Greek Orthodox and Armenian denominations, rival monks threw punches and anything they could lay their hands on…An Armenian clergyman said the Greek clergy had tried
to place one of their monks inside the Edicule, an ancient structure which is said to encase the tomb of Jesus.

"What is happening here is a violation of status quo. The Greeks have tried so many times to put their monk inside the tomb but they don't have the right to when the Armenians are celebrating the feast,” he said.

Grace and I elbowed through the crowd and attached ourselves to a side wall, out of the chaos churning in the common area. Various religious processions wove through the nooks and crypts, cautious not to cross into another sect’s territory lest they challenge the Coptic Orthodox for a chair, or the Syriac clergy for a ladder. Monks processed through on enclave, along a staircase that was covered in hundreds of crosses carved into the wall (graffiti done by medieval pilgrims), narrowly avoiding a line of Ethiopian priests on their way to the roof. In another chapel, the Armenians raised their voices above the din bouncing from wall to wall in the high ceilings of the basilica, scowling at oblivious pilgrims who wandered right through the middle of their mass.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is said to be built atop what in all likelihood was Golgotha, an ancient Aramaic word which, like Calvary, means “Place of the Skull.” It was once a hill overlooking the main road into Jerusalem before the city grew up and around it. In the days of the Romans, criminals were hung here on crosses as a sign of Caesar’s iron authority. A garden—one of many in Jerusalem—bordered Golgotha, and in the garden was a tomb, or a sepulcher, belonging to the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea. It was in this sepulcher that the Christ was buried. And, in three days, was resurrected.

So does the Holy Sepulcher, in all its gaudy glory, truly rest upon Golgotha? Oral tradition says so. In Eusebius’ Life of Constantine, he writes of how this site was particularly venerated by Christians, but was covered with dirt when emperor Hadrian restructured
Jerusalem as his Aelia Capitolina a scant one hundred years after the crucifixion of Christ. Hadrian built—of all things—a temple to Venus over the Christian holy site. In 326 AD, Emperor Constantine I ordered that the temple be razed and Golgotha uncovered to make way for a great Byzantine basilica: the first Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In 614, when Jerusalem was conquered by the Persians, the Sepulcher was horribly damaged by fire. For four hundred years, as Muslim leaders struggled to stifle Easter pilgrimages to the many holy shrines in their lands, the Holy Sepulcher was hacked away at, piece by piece, until the entire structure was nearly destroyed. Only a few portions of walls, massive stone pillars, and the cave tomb remained in 1009. European Christians were horrified by what was done to their basilica. And in this—the destruction of the first Holy Sepulcher and resulting rage—the very beginning of the Crusades can be found. The Crusaders conquered Jerusalem, rebuilt the basilica as only medieval holy men with penchants for wealth can (gold, glitz, and somber-looking statues), and the rest, they say, is history.

Grace and I struggled not to be trampled underfoot by the revelers on every side. Even harder for her—she’s tiny, barely five feet tall. I’m only five-three, so it was impossible to see over the masses queuing up to pass by the pile of incense burners and candelabras circling the “cross.” They jockeyed for a prime place in line to enter the “tomb”—which might have once been an actual tomb, but it was too hard to tell because of the gilded, scaffold-like structure encasing it. Easterners and Westerners alike slammed others into an age-blackened wall five stories high. Grace and I cautiously picked through the crowd, unspeaking because it was too loud to talk. Peering through dank gloom, past bronze censers and tapestries, it was stunning to see the faithful clawing at each other,
fighting to light candles and weep at the feet of a garish-looking figure hanging upon a jewel-encrusted cross.

“Grace,” I breathed, “can you believe this?”

She stood silent next to me, grim, also hanging back. Grace is a minister’s daughter, grew up in a quiet, small-town Lutheran church. I knew she was experiencing what I was: It felt wrong, *blasphemous*, to stand in line to see the relics. They were just *things*—not even natural things that graced the earth, but cold molded metals that held no life and certainly no spirit.

I watched in utter sadness as a priest bodily pulled an old woman in prayer from her knees and pushed her out of the tomb shrine, telling her to move along—there were thousands of people edgily waiting to kneel where she knelt and see what she saw.

So this was Calvary.

A hymn from my childhood flitted to mind—one my mother had sung. *Lest I forget Gethsemane, Lest I forget Thine agony; Lest I forget Thy love for me, Lead me to Calvary.* I struggled to whisper the words but I choked over them.

I’d seen enough. My stomach churned with disappointment. The only true light beating into the murk came from the exit. I pushed my way through the crowds and out the door, slightly conscious of Grace following behind, my eyes burning as the sun hit, sucking in air. Nauseous, I wove into the teeming Via Dolorosa, needing to be embraced with joy by *anyone*, aching to reclaim some tangible euphoria—something real, something to latch on to.
As sacred a place as the Dome of the Rock is, the very spot from which Muhammad began his dreamlike ascension to heaven, the crowds swarming over its blue-tiled grounds were startlingly noisy. I disentangled my skirt hem from my ankles and eased down the marble steps, not wanting to tumble headlong into the Muslim schoolgirls below.

“Try to get the entire thing, not just the dome,” Scott called behind me.

I peered through the camera lens, framing the shot between two clumps of trees, slightly perturbed that a pre-med student was telling me—a photographer—how to take a picture. Several of the schoolgirls passed by the camera window, casually glancing our way. The rest of the group erupted in a chorus of giggles behind us.

I turned around. Scott was crouching over his horribly blistered feet, applying another layer of liquid New-Skin beneath his sandal straps. His new shoes had nearly rubbed his toes and ankles raw, and the dusty streets of Jerusalem had not helped them to heal. Dropping my camera around my neck, I dug through my bag and handed him first aid cream and two of the heavy-duty Band-Aids that had protected my feet those past few weeks while combing the old city.

“Thanks,” he said, smoothing on the bandages then unfolding his lean frame, ready to explore. We took a few meandering steps toward the mosque, but he again stooped over to adjust the Band-Aids, which had already bunched up beneath his sandal. I heard another bout of laughter somewhere behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder to see what the commotion was and found the schoolgirls watching us—no, Scott—with sharp black eyes. Their delicate brown hands fluttered around their faces and grasped at each others’ elbows, skimmed over their white cotton veils and
striped uniforms to smooth them into place. All of this was unseen by Scott, who, in a
complete state of oblivion, was still bending over his blisters.

But I knew why they were laughing. Their giggles and blushes were no different
from junior-high swooning back home. And I could hardly blame them. When I turned off
the friendship filter and looked at Scott with an unbiased schoolgirl eye, I understood. Tall
and tan, hair bleached white by the
sun and even whiter teeth, he
resembled the quintessential
California shaggy, beautiful beach
bum (in this case, the girls focus was
literally “the bum”) that Teen
Magazine loves to splash across their
pages. And while I was ninety-nine percent sure that Palestinian girls didn’t read Teen
Magazine, the appreciation of a golden Adonis is universal. One can recognize gorgeous
specimens anywhere, Arab or American, Muslim or Christian.

The blushing antics of the schoolgirls caught Scott’s attention. Baffled, he asked me
if he committed some cultural faux pas.

“Hardly,” I answered enigmatically, leaving him even more mystified. Then one of the
girls boldly called out “Habebe! Ya albe,“ which we had finally learned roughly translated
to “Beloved! my heart,”—that popular Arabic song forever pulsing through the Muslim
quarter.

Scott’s face flushed red to his roots. At a loss, he gave the girls an embarrassed wave,
which sent them into near hysteric.
While they clustered around Scott, each vying for a photo with their new American friend, I snapped my own pictures, forgetting the dome. I wanted to remember these schoolgirls when I returned home—remember how they were so much like us, with the same desires and heartaches—more than I wanted to remember the Dome of the Rock or the Temple Mount, or even the Holy Sepulcher.

I want to remember them now, more than ever.
10. Beyond Mount Zion

Dark sunglasses shielded my eyes from the too-bright, windowless room. I stuffed Advil and several bottles of water into my hiking bag, frantically forcing my sluggish mind to try and find a clever reason not to go. Of all the horribly idiotic things to do, landing a hangover after a night of imbibing with the wait staff at a Palestinian restaurant ranked up there. And, of course, it had to be the day of a desert climb up Masada in 100-degree heat at an elevation well below sea level.

I had committed quite a few cultural gaffs from the moment our little group arrived in the Holy Land. While I comfort myself with the fact that the largest mistake was not mine (that honor belongs to my roommate, who set out for an early morning run on the streets of Amman in short-shorts and a sports bra, then returned five minutes later after simultaneous propositions and jeers), I had my share.

The tradition of marketplace haggling was a bane the first few days, and my stockpile of shekels remained surprisingly intact. My pride wouldn’t allow me to be taken in or laughed at, so I tried to avoid it. But when I found a beautiful, ancient widow’s mite coin set in a pendant in an upscale shop off of the Jewish Quarter, I risked it. I pathetically struggled along, switching from dollars to shekels and back to dollars, wasting the shopkeeper’s time and angering him so much, he finally flung up his arms and gave me the necklace for what I believe was a ridiculously low price.

When the other females in my dig group caught sight of my find, their eyes brightened with that special ‘I want’ light. And when they discovered the bargain price I had paid, they begged me to tell them where I had found it, then promptly set out to harass the poor shopkeeper even further. He shoved them out of his shop before they entered.
The nuns who kept the pilgrimage house in which I was residing were the warmest, kindest people I had met in Jerusalem thus far, aside from the Al-Cazar proprietor. And his entire wait staff. Actually, at this point in my travels, most anybody in Jerusalem who hadn’t cheated me or proposed to me was the warmest, kindest of people. But the nuns, those delightful women…Not having experienced the rigors of Catholic school, I couldn’t help but see the sisters as a cross between my childhood Sunday school teacher and my grandmother. Perhaps it was the image of my loving, gray-haired Mamaw that had me stumbling, inebriated, into the convent from the back alley instead of the front, up a set of rusted metal stairs so flimsy I wouldn’t dare try them any other time. There couldn’t be anything worse than being caught by your grandmother or Sunday school teacher in a ‘drunk-off-your-ass’ state. Unless it’s being caught by nuns. In a convent. In the holiest city on earth. On the street Jesus Christ carried his cross to save us all from our wretched sins and iniquities. God, I was going to hell.

Determined not to be caught and wind up in hell, I glanced around the empty hallway, promptly ducked around a corner in search of the most secluded, isolated bathroom within the convent walls. Pressing my face to the cool, comforting porcelain, I bowed my head, prostrate with solid, hypocritical guilt.

“Dear God,” I mumbled, vaguely aware of the fact that I truly was praying aloud. I didn’t care. I wanted this drunken stupor gone, and if it took divine intervention for it to happen, I would beg. “I know that I’ve been stupid, but if you just make me stop spinning and help me walk, I will never do this again.” A flash of recollection surfaced, a vision of me and three of my traveling companions dragging our feet down the cobblestones, singing Journey songs rather horribly. I cringed and shut my eyes, begging for forgiveness. “And I
promise that I will never ever sing ‘Lovin’, Touchin’, Squeezin’ on the Via Dolorosa. Ever.”
Dolorosa was a particularly challenging word to form, but I did it. “Amen.” I pulled myself
to my feet, braced my shoulder against the wall and managed to find my way back to my bed.

Earlier that night we had hit the town, Palestinian-style. In comparison to the
splendid lodgings lining the outskirts of Jerusalem’s old city, the Al-Cazar was a modest
affair—more like an inn than a hotel. With its broken tiles, stout rugs, and faded pink divans
that must have once been a rich red, the place had a cozy, on-a-budget feel so unlike the
larger hotels that catered to Americans.

The Al-Cazar was owned by one of Fred’s Palestinian chums, a middle-aged Arab
proprietor as generous in hospitality as in waistline. I think our professor found a sort of
comradeship in the plump, even-tempered man. Fred was laid back—little fazed him.
Likewise, his proprietor friend was not in the least bit startled by a troop of hungry American
students tromping into his hotel dining room after hours. With the grace of a five-star
maitre’d, he ushered us around a long table hastily set with plates and silverware, assuring us
that we were in no way imposing on him or his staff.

“I am so happy that you are visiting the Al-Cazar,” he exclaimed, his genuineness a
refreshing change from the false, cold smiles of the more hardened shopkeepers. “You will
eat with us tonight, I hope.”

Pulling out a chair and plopping down at the table, it soon became apparent that when
he asked us to eat with them, he truly meant eat with them. To our surprised delight, the wait
staff carried out bowl after heaping bowl of vinegar tomatoes and cucumbers, hummus, lamb,
and flatbread, discarded their aprons, and filled the empty seats around us, passing the bowls
from person to person. Most of them spoke some English, so between their gesturing and our
embarrassingly little Arabic, we were able to keep up steady conversations.

“You like my hotel? We are all family here,” said the proprietor, flashing his crooked
white teeth.

“Very much,” I said. “The piano is a nice touch.” I nodded to the old upright in the
corner, where the pianist was playing some sort of Arab melody incongruous to the tinkering
sound of hammers and chords, and several of my fellow travelers were dancing. Rachel was
encouraging them to do a Yiddish wedding hora, herding them like a mother hen into the
circle dance with uncoordinated claps and kicks. I grimaced, glancing around to see if any of
the staff was offended. Hoping to distract my conversation companion, I pounced upon the
piano with embarrassment. “You don’t see many of those in Jerusalem—at least not where
I’ve been.”

“Ah yes, our Roland! It came from Christians—the Scots. You know them?”

I shook my head, not wanting to explain that I didn’t know every Christian in
Jerusalem. The conversation slid into awkward silence. Looking around for something else
to comment on, I honed in on the tasty alcohol-infused mango juice I had steadily sampled
all evening. It had a sort of spicy smoothness to it that eased the bite of the liquor. A brief
thought—something of a warning—flitted across my mind, a memory from my Middle East
cultural classes that Muslims did not take alcohol. Confused, I glanced down the long table,
trying to discern what the rest of the wait staff was drinking. But soon, my head was
becoming light and my lips tingly at a rate of rapidity I was unaccustomed to (I suspected
that the fruity liquor was a lot stronger than I had originally credited it as being), so I let the
thought drop. Smiling at my host, I held up my glass.
“This is good. What is it?” The proprietor rattled off something in Arabic and I smiled again as if I understood exactly what he had said. The pianist struck up another tune, the exotic rhythm of it sneaking across the floor, up the table legs and to my fingers. I drummed them on the table, somehow pulling out the music’s offbeat amid the hazy lagging of my head. The plump man laughed.

“You like to dance?” Before I could reply, he gestured to one of his wait staff, a young smooth-faced Palestinian man who seemed to be close to my age. Rattling off more unintelligible words, the waiter gestured for me to follow him to the tiled floor. My head spun. I pressed my palms to my eyes, struggling to focus as the man showed me how to flick my wrists to the beat of the music. And then I was truly spinning, Scott’s hand on my waist.

As I was swung round and round, laughing with my dance partner, I didn’t mind that my mango-filled mind couldn’t catch up with my feet. I didn’t care that I would have a hell of a hangover the next morning. And I didn’t feel like a tourist. I believed—for the first time since my arrival—that I might belong here, to these people, to this city.

I was reminded of that bright euphoria of acceptance as I dragged myself up the even brighter, hot, steep, treacherous, side of Masada, lungs and limbs aching, repeating like a mantra that last night was worth it.
11. Masada Dead

The Masada plateau rose from the desert, a tombstone at the head of the Dead Sea. The air was hot and reeked of scorched salt, fungi and camel dung. From the ruins of King Herod’s palace high on top of the plateau, blue and gold death stretched as far as the eye could see. Masada ruled this desolate basin. Fourteen-hundred feet below sea level, only desert foxes, jackals, and birds dared to inhabit the jagged cliffs and drink the undrinkable water of the sea. It is a cesspool where the Jordan River empties fresh waters—a waste of a resource so scarce in the lands south of Jerusalem.

I doubled over, my slick hands braced upon me knees as I tried to catch my breath. In the heat and salt-heavy air, I was worn and winded from the steep climb to the highest place in the pit of the Earth. Popping the cap off my thermal water bottle, I poured water into my mouth, down my parched throat. I coughed—the water was already steaming after only one hour of hiking up the snake trail.

In remote antiquity, when the tribes of Israel were still wandering the desert after escaping Egyptian slavery, the land beneath Masada was a wealthy jungle. The Dead Sea’s Jericho—the oldest living city in the world—was “the most fertile spot in Judea,” wrote Flavius Josephus, the Homer of Jewish history. Papyrus and palm trees covered the seacoast. Sugarcane and sycamores were cultivated. Balsam sap was drawn from bark and made into expensive perfumes. Later, after the Egyptian conquest, Cleopatra built cosmetic factories on the ruins of Sodom, Gomorrah, and other cities of the Pentapolis, to harvest Dead Sea mud for Egypt’s cosmetics and mummy embalming.

Above all this, Masada was the fortification of kings—a summer palace and spa where Herod the Great could take refuge in case his people revolted. But Masada became a
refuge for the revolters instead. The Jewish Sicarii, a thousand Zealot men and their families, were driven from Jerusalem because of their brutal terror tactics against the Roman Empire. Pursued by the legion, they fled to Masada and usurped Herod’s palace. For three years they survived on the storerooms and cistern, fending off the legion like cornered animals, picking off any soldier who tried to follow them up the snake trail. Pummeled by cannonball-sized boulders, the Sicarii took shelter in Herod’s blue-tiled spa and indulgent palatial rooms—even built a synagogue and ritual baths—all the while, watching in terror as the Romans built a ramp up Masada, inching closer and closer, using Jewish slaves as shields.

And then the ramp was complete. Despairing, the Zealots vowed never to be slaves to the Romans. They drew lots and slew their wives and children, then each other, down to the last man. Only seven lived to tell the tale—two women and five children that hid in the depleted cistern until the Romans battered down the wall. Remarkably, the way in which the Sicarii died earned respect from the Roman Legion and Josephus. Their Jewish brethren, however, condemned the Zealots—suicide was the ultimate blasphemy, a crime against God.

Now Herod’s palace has been swallowed by the desert, its sand-colored stones camouflaged against its stark landscape. Here and there, I could distinguish the Roman spa’s chiseled water system, blue tiles dusted with sand, the Legion’s ramp straight up the side of Masada. More obvious were the smooth, perfectly round boulders scattered across the courtyard like giant marbles. There were once a thousand bodies here. Once, this very ground soaked up the red blood of the Sicarii Zealots.

Death. Nothing but death, stretching to the sea, meeting the sky for miles and miles and miles. I couldn’t find a logical reason for why this place—the biblical “land of milk and
honey”—was now a wasteland whose only crop is mud. But I could feel why, and it horrified me.

Arid wind swept over the cliffs and through the ruined palace, whipping my skirt and pelting me with sand. I covered my eyes, rubbing them till tears streamed out the corners and washed away the unholy sand.
12. Trespasser’s Kaddish
   --Western Wall, 2000

Prayer scroll between my fingers,
   scribbles for Mid-East peace—
   simple empty words.
   My tourist stop is your graveyard.

Four steps closer cheapens your grief, like attending a funeral
in a khaki hat, smelling flowers and snapping photos

while you wail against the Western stones.

Ima Yekara, I haven’t felt your pain.

Your grandfather’s bones were covered up in a pit of Auschwitz-Birkenau.
My grandfather has slept for twenty years in the dirt of an Iowa cornfield.

Achaya metaya…
   Not my burial kaddish crammed in cracks,
   He who gives life to the dead...
   but your Elohim is still my God.

Four steps to the Wall.
   Your left hand on the stones,
   your right hand grasping mine.
   Show me how to close the gap
13. Behold the Man

A group of holy week pilgrims rattled along the Via Dolorosa just outside of the convent, cutting through the drone of city chatter with shrill voices. They exclaimed in British accents over the first station marker and clamored for a picture of it. A ragged old vendor wandered along the Via Dolorosa trailing the tourists, holding up some small glass object that glinted in the sun.

“Holy dirt!” the fellow cried in surprisingly good English. I flinched, thinking for a moment he meant to be profane. “Take the soil of Yerushalayim with you, only two shekels!”

Faces nervously glanced away and one of them snorted, “All you need to do is take off a sandal and pour out the sand. Don’t waste your shekels.” Ignoring the vendor, the tourists strained towards their guide.

“It is also known as the Ecce Homo convent,” the guide expounded, chewing his words in Queen’s English and scanning his group over the top of his glasses. “For those of you not proficient in Latin, it translates as ‘Behold the Man,’ for obvious reasons.” The man swept a hand through the air, pointing to the convent as he told the story of my temporary home. His khaki-clad group again swooped down upon the marker with their cameras. Behind them, a shop owner rearranged a carousel rack with hundreds of bright postcards, ready for the tourists to peruse.

“The convent is built atop the ruins of an arch,” he continued, “once the gateway to the Roman Fortress of Antonia where the procurator, Pontius Pilate, washed his hands of ‘the messiah affair.’ This archway and several Roman roads, stairways, even cisterns have been excavated underneath.”
So the legend goes, I silently added. His story was close, but not quite accurate. Thirty years ago, archaeologists determined that the infamous Antonia Fortress more than likely was a block south of the convent. The Lithostrotos, the main plaza where Christ had been condemned to death, was probably underneath the Muslim school across the street where cherub-faced children now played. But the third station’s marker still resided on the side of the Ecce Homo Convent, and it was there—not the Muslim school—that pilgrims said their prayers.

Despite this inaccuracy, the excavated ruins underneath the convent were still a compelling, otherworldly place. The sisters had already allowed us a glimpse of ancient Jerusalem the previous night (or what was left of it) hidden away beneath the modern city. A two thousand-year-old arch was the centerpiece of a basement chapel, incongruous amidst white plastered walls, blue Berber carpet, folding chairs and tables. From this utilitarian worship place, the underground opened into a network of stones and streets and arches. Low lights embedded in the ceiling cast the odd circle here and there, almost as if pockets of daylight had wormed their way through cracks between paving stones.

We moved deeper into the Roman city, filing along ramps that faded into the emptiness below, dusty and dirty, seemingly carved directly out of the ground. Descending the stairs was like watching floors slide by from within a glass elevator. Each layer of history—remnants of architecture, pillars and friezes, chisel-marked walls—was sandwiched by an old floor, then an earlier roof, then perhaps a doorway or arch, then an even older floor, an even earlier roof, and so on.

At the base level was what probably had been a gateway into first-century Jerusalem, just north of the fortress. There were three arches, where three roads had met. Massive
squares made up the smooth floor of the room—a room that at one time, I was sure, had been
Hadrian’s marketplace. After the Antonia Fortress was destroyed in 70 AD, its stone walls
were pulled down and recycled as pavement. The room itself resembled a cave more than the
ruins of an ancient shopping district, save for a few ornamental pillar bases and bricked-in
archways. An orangish color, it was streaked with brown that was either the residue of a fire
or muck from the damp air.

Underneath this plaza was the “waterworks” of ancient Jerusalem. The Pool of
Struthion, dating back to the time of Herod, used to be an open-air reservoir, part of a canal
leading to the Jewish temple. Cultivating a water supply system had always been a challenge
in the arid West Bank. Foolishly, when the Romans constructed a rampart to attack the
Antonia Fortress, they made the aqueduct unusable. Destroying the water system, they built a
defensive moat around the fortress. Later, the emperor Hadrian covered the moat to craft a
cistern when he was creating his new glorious city—Aelia Capitolina.

We move deeper and deeper into the ground along a set of original stairs smoothed by
the soles of a thousand sandals, trying not to crowd each other and slip. Cool air, ripe with
must, slinked across our cheeks—a welcome respite from the hot day above-ground.
Struthion was not the small pool I had pictured, but a massive chamber divided into three
compartments, its reservoir the size of an auditorium. The walls slithered with gold and green
reflections as our flashlight beams bounced off of the water’s surface.

I tried to snap a few pictures. Setting my shutter speed slow to avoid a flash and
bracing my elbow against the wall, I steadied my camera. If not detail, at least I could
capture the color. I wouldn’t know how the pictures turned out, or if I picked up any of the
marvelous underground cistern at all, until I developed the film. But just maybe, I might have a memento of this place.

Our voices reverberated throughout the chamber and I wondered if anyone could hear our exclamations of “amazing” and “unreal” fifty feet above, amidst the pulsing Arabic music and retail.

Moving the flashlight beam across the slimy walls, we searched for any clues, signs of life from a long-dead Jerusalem. So still. The only sign of life was the drip…drip…drip on the sides of the cistern. There was nothing but water and walls.

Up on my modern day rooftop, the dark underground disappeared as I blinked against the sun. I watched the group of tourists still clustered around the third station marker. It had been strange, standing in the city of Christ that so many sought when coming to Jerusalem. The British tourists, the pilgrims pushed out of the Holy Sepulcher—cackling bunch of khaki shorts and fanny packs, their eyes still reflecting gaudy relics. The poor vendor was still trying to sell his holy sand for the bargain price of two shekels. Umbrage stirred in me and I popped a piece of gum in my mouth to stifle the rant creeping to the surface. Yet it hovered, just behind my lips.

Was two shekels too much to ask? Yes, the streets are dusty and yes, we all shed a pound of dirt each night after washing. But could these people not see that there is so much more than stone saints and stations and sand? Look up! Throw away your sunglasses, see the world as it is; not through a tour book or a cold metal crucifix or a camera lens, peering past the sea of grimy faces to snap a stagnant memento of a long-dead city. Open your eyes and witness all that is alive here and now, just above you, just beyond the Sepulcher, amid
the honking horns and pulsing pop music. See the man with the hookah offer you a breath of fragrant narghile. See the cluster of veiled girls glance at your yellow hair, then dash between stacks of baskets filled with almonds. See the young man on his cell phone swagger down the street, searching for a female escape route from the city. And see the ragged vendor with his vials of dirt ready to bless you for an honest shekel. What are two shekels to you, who are guests in Yeru-Shalem?

The camera hung heavy around my neck—a sudden reminder.

And then, quietly, soberly, I understood Jerusalem Syndrome.

Up and down the Via Dolorosa they searched for Him with squinting lids. They shoved past the swarm of sticky, thob-clad bodies—this colorful river of humanity—in blindness. On and on they fought against this current, struggling to follow in His footsteps— even though the streets He trod were fifty feet below ground.
14. Mount of Olives

Grace and I traveled out of the Old City and up the steep side of the neighboring Mount of Olives to say goodbye to Jerusalem. I wanted to see the sun rise over the city one more time.

Before dawn, we dragged ourselves out of bed, dressed up as much as we could in our long skirts and sandals, and trudged past closed shops with battered garage doors, curbs that were still garbage-free, through the Lion Gate that only yesterday had teemed with pedestrians. After the Masada climb, I wasn’t sure I’d survive this one. The hike up the steep road made my stiff muscles groan.

When we reached the top we collapsed, breathless, onto the ground near a cluster of olive trees. The sun had taken its time, slowly creeping over the hills in bottomless blues and purples until it broke through the ground with a fury, setting the entire desert on fire. It seeped across the new neighborhoods on the outskirts of Jerusalem, leapt over the Mount of Olives and spilled into the Kidron Valley, sending the Old City up like dried timber. I’d never seen anything so surreal—from our hilltop, I saw a miniature city on a snow-globe pedestal being shaken to life.

“Jerusalem is beautiful from up here, isn’t it?” Grace murmured.

I nodded. “I think it’s also magnificent on the inside, despite the crowds, the dirty streets, and all of the tension and fighting. You have to search harder for beauty, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” she said. Her eyes were fixed on the city.
PART TWO: GALILEE

Cities on the Sea
Army Bunker in a Burnt House
Unearthing Bethsaida
Tell-Tale Sunburns
Gamla
Trust Fall
Tiberias
Bomb Shelter Discotheque
Jordan River
Calming the Storm
15. Cities on the Sea

Galilee. The very name has a mythical ring to it, like Camelot or Atlantis. But Galilee wasn’t mythical. I was slightly bewildered when I started seeing signs along the side of the road for “Kinneret,” which is similar to the Old Testament name for the Sea of Galilee. I wasn’t quite sure what I expected to happen. Something along the lines of jumping into a time machine that transported me onto the pages of my childhood picture bible. Like Jerusalem, Galilee wasn’t what I imagined—the “sea” was really a large lake, and I could see the rolling shadows of the opposite shoreline. But I’d take it over the picture bible in a heartbeat.

After days in the dry shrubs and sand of the West Bank, nothing prepared me for the green. Stretching from the Golan Heights to the Mediterranean Sea, Galilee is a northern paradise of pastures, vineyards, and mountains rounded by weather and time—a hiker’s dream. High rainfall grows lush rhododendrons and big pink peonies, wildflowers, waterfalls, groves of prickly junipers and Lebanese cedars, and a host of birds and animals.

Because of inaccessibility due to the mountains, Galilee is sparsely populated. A little more than a million Jews and Arabs live here, primarily in villages that dot the landscape and are connected by a few rough roads.

Kibbutz Ginosar is one such settlement, situated on the west shore of the Lake Kinneret, just north of Tiberius. A pen of caravan camels greeted us as we pulled through the kibbutz gate, their lanky necks draped in red-and-yellow tasseled harnesses. Grace and I bounced in our seat like exuberant children after hours cooped in the bus.
“Camels! They use camels instead of cars!” I teased, lightly punching Grace in the shoulder. “Now you have to ride one.”

“Funny, how they have parking lots for their camels,” she deadpanned, pointing to the small fleet of cheap Benzes clustered off the drive.

One half of Kibbutz Ginosar consists of a tourist hotel, beach, swimming pool, landscaped walkways, and—joy of joys—a hotel bar and internet access. The other half was more utilitarian: basic bungalows with cold linoleum floors, bunk beds, showers, and plastic patio furniture. The kibbutz workers live on the other half.

We resided in a couple of bungalows and ate in the workers’ cafeteria—a kosher kitchen with meat lunches and dairy suppers. I can’t recall much about the food itself, except that the scrawny chicken still had fine, crispy feathers but was tasty when pulled apart and placed on bread smeared with mayonnaise. Mayonnaise is one of my weaknesses. I could live without a lot of perks, but a sandwich without mayo was difficult. Remarkably, I’d found several dusty jars of Hellmann’s in a Tiberius grocery store on our first trip in. I bought them out and returned to my dig team triumphantly, kill in hand. We kept the jars in our bungalow refrigerator and toted them to our meat lunch after our daily dig, hidden in backpacks.

The kibbutz kitchen also provided breakfasts at our dig site—amazing tasty concoctions of boiled eggs, corn flakes, pita and jelly, chocolaty Nutella, yoghurt and cheese, tomatoes, cucumbers. After being awake and toiling in Bethsaida dirt for four hours, we embraced the food like old friends.
Situated on the kibbutz is the Beit Yigal Allon Museum, a large cylinder-shaped structure that houses artifacts and laboratories for the Bethsaida Excavation Project. For two weeks, our world would revolve around digging up this ancient city, just miles from the kibbutz on the north side of the Sea of Galilee.

The Iron Age port city was once a thriving commerce capital around the time that Israel’s twelve sons, the fathers of the Hebrew nation, were still in diapers. King David visited the city when he married the daughter of the King of Geshur. In Roman times, Jesus Christ’s apostles lived and fished in the then-quiet village. Several of his miracles were performed just strides away—feeding the five thousand, healing a blind man. Bethsaida is mentioned seven times in the New Testament, perhaps most famously in Christ’s condemnation of the city in the books of Matthew and Luke:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you.

In 30 AD, Herod the Great’s son, Phillip, developed an affinity for Bethsaida and propelled it into a great city once again, calling it Julius in honor of Roman Emperor Augustus’ wife, Livia-Julia. Phillip was buried at Julius, though excavators have yet to find his tomb.

After the 67 AD revolt against the Romans, the city faded away. For two thousand years Christians and scientists alike fruitlessly searched for it along the Galilee coastline, finally concluding that Bethsaida was a fairytale place, perhaps a combination of several other cities. It wasn’t until 1987 that Dr. Rami Arav—a university professor who headed up the Bethsaida Excavation Project—set out to prove that it did indeed exist, but had moved
half a mile inland after centuries of sea silt build-up. He found it perched atop e-Tell—a hilled inlet of the sea, still lording over Galilee, its crumbling homes hidden from human eyes beneath shrubs, trees, and dirt.

Our dig days were structured, with extremely early mornings to avoid the afternoon heat. We boarded a bus at five-thirty when the sky was just tinged with copper, our packs stuffed with gloves, floppy hats, water thermoses, sunscreen, and zip-up hoodies to ward off the chill of the morning. As the sun rose and the day grew hotter on our backs bent over Iron Age bricks, we peeled our layers away and let our skin darken.

Seven hours were spent meticulously sweeping tumbled walls with toothbrushes, clearing away layers of commerce, religion, and battles with fine bristles. At twelve-thirty, we packed up our tools and pottery shards, tore down the poles and black tarp that shaded the dig area, and hopped on our bus for home. Coated in sweat and grime, we ate lunch in the cafeteria then immediately trekked over to the shore and take running leaps off a wooden pier into the sea, letting cool blue wash over our bodies.

Afternoons were filled with card games, listening to music, watching American movies with Arabic subtitles, Arab soap operas and Al-Jazeera, or lazing about on beach towels in the Galilee sand and sun. While we donned our swim gear in the privacy of our bungalows, less-bashful European vacationers staying at the Nof Ginosar Hotel stripped down to their pasty-white bits in the middle of the beach, tugging on Speedos or next-to-nothing bikinis without a thought. So different from the kibbutz residents, who were quick to ask us not to attend lunch clad only in sports bras and shorts. I’d always thought Americans were considered wild, but we were downright prudish compared to the Euros. And if we were the prudes, what did that make the kibbutz people?
Nevertheless, the laborers were kind-faced, though not openly talkative. They hailed from a collection of various countries and cultures, all journeying to Israel to be a part of communal Zionist family. Living there consisted of working hard at the hotel or farms, but in an easy, peaceful manner. I’ve only ever experienced the same relaxed way-of-life on the island of Maui several years later, where locals wore flip-flops, cut-offs, and bare chests or bikini tops to grocery shop. The kibbutz Jews were much too conservative for bikini tops, but the casual sentiment was the same.

After our leisurely afternoon, we gathered at our shaded bungalow patio to chat and catalog our artifacts finds from the day—“reading” pottery. Pottery readings were similar to putting together jigsaw puzzles. We looked for shards found in similar locations and try to piece them together into cohesive jars, bowls, cups, platters. Hunching over red bits of broken household items for two hours redefined the old saying “One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.” It was fun to speculate about the two-thousand year-old fisherman’s wife who threw away a cracked oil lamp, and what her reaction might be to our resurrecting it and placing it on a glass-encased pedestal.

Bethsaida was divided into three areas: the City Gate (Area A), the Palace (Area B), and the Residential Quarter (Area C). We focused primarily on the City Gate area during the 2000 excavation. The three areas were a geometric maze of cobbled roads and
tumbling walls and that used to be the small square homes of fishermen, bustling market stalls, and Phillip’s palace. The e-Tell slopes were covered in green-gold grass, flowers. To the northeast was another hill, where the ruins of Chorazin rested. To the south, the Sea of Galilee was visible through a line of trees.

Certain parts of the slopes were off-limits. They hadn’t been swept for Syrian landmines leftover from the ‘60s and ‘70s, like many Golan fields. Even though “Danger: Landmines” signs are posted throughout the Golan Heights, occasionally some poor hiker stumble across one in a national park or off-beaten path, and loses a leg.

Another immediate danger in this northern region of Galilee is the close proximity to Lebanon. Bomb shelters scattered across the villages and kibbutz of northern Israel are a testament to the tension lurking beneath the calm. While the border is usually quiet save for the roar of military patrol planes, occasionally violence will break out when Hezbollah becomes restless.

In 2000, the year of our dig, Israel was in the process of retreating from Southern Lebanon to the UN-designated border, leaving vacated territories which Hezbollah quickly filled. In July and August 2006, all-out war was declared after the paramilitary group kidnapped two Israeli soldiers then killed five more in a failed rescue mission. Israel launched a joint air and ground invasion into Lebanon to weed out Hezbollah fighters. Missiles poured over both sides of the border.

Tiberias was hit. So was nearby Safed.

At the time of ceasefire, over a thousand civilians were dead. More than a million Lebanese and Galileans were displaced, either forced to flee or hunker down in their furnished bomb shelters to wait out the attacks.
Concrete coffin cut in two.
Earthen bolt hole, bunkered down
Deep in the belly of Bethsaida.

Shotgun shells, clay shards
Busted up by Hezbollah
And Herod Antipas, both buried
In the house of the apostles.

Fifty years of odium
Nothing new. What’s a thousand,
twenty, forty Common Era
Centuries of Hebrew ashes?

Give me a label for this land
And I will give you metal confetti.
17. Unearthing Bethsaida

“Dr. Arav—scorpion!” I eased the rock down over the place I was excavating a curious piece of blue pottery and backed away, making no sudden moves.

“Kill it.” The professor, engrossed in geographical data, didn’t even glance up from his clipboard.

“But it’s the size of my palm.”

“Fine.” He glared at me with sharp black eyes. “Wait for your hand to go numb after it stings you—then it won’t hurt as much.”

Scowling, I pushed up the brim of my floppy, dust-covered hat and scanned the dig site, hunting for a soul brave enough to slay the thing. Fifteen other red-faced, dust-covered diggers were scattered over the remnants of old Bethsaida’s fortified gate, tarps, spades, and pails strewn about them. All were engrossed in their work:

Scott, Sporty-Sarah, Chris, and Rachel dug a probe hole at the front of the city gate, uncovering an even earlier wall from the time of Abraham. To my left, Joni and Derek worked around a 1960s Syrian army bunker stuck in the middle of an Iron Age wall. The blonde-siren trio had stripped down to sports bras and sucked on popsicles under a shade tree, taking their ten-minute break. Mark and Hippie-Sarah raced wheelbarrows piled with rocks in and out of the city, hurling them over the e-Tell ridge. Kendra, Fred, and Mom-Joanne sifted buckets of dirt and collected pottery shards, carting them down the hill to the sinks for cleaning.

Grace was down from me at the base of the wall, but she’d never take out a scorpion for me.
I stared at the offending rock—something that had not seen the light of day for two millennia—and slumped back, exhausted, ready to surrender to the scorpion the half-collapsed wall I had meticulously excavated with a paintbrush for days.

But I wanted the curious, blue-tinged piece of pottery. It was unlike anything I had seen during the excavation. All of the pot and jar shards were a reddish brown, molded from the Holy Land’s earth and baked in its sun. Iron Age pieces were half-an-inch thick, hardy enough to exist after four thousand years and three fires, while the Hellenistic fishing village wares were thin and brittle, and decorated with jagged, unsophisticated ridges and red glazes. *Blue* glaze, though…

Holding my breath, I picked up the rock and slammed it over the scorpion, grinding it into the ground, its exoskeleton crunching. Gagging back bile, I set the rock aside and hurriedly swept away creatures remains. I pried up the pottery shard, anxious to get a closer look. *Surely this must be something extraordinary,* I mused, gingerly brushing away the dirt, running my fingertips along the shallow grooves of color. *Quite a find! Part of an aristocrat’s plate, maybe? An offering to the pagan bull stele?* Its surface was smooth and glossy, and still *so blue*—
“Ahh, look at that! That is new.” The gruff voice behind me yanked me out of my reverie. I frowned over my shoulder at Dr. Arav.

“What do you mean, ‘new’?”

“It isn’t Hellenistic; it’s medieval. Probably from that Crusade monastery down the hill. Not anything important, but still interesting. Send it on for cataloging.” Ignoring my sudden deflation, the professor stalked away, still flipping pages and making notes.

Brushing the glazed piece once more, I carefully placed it in my artifacts tray, more confused than ever—and slightly indignant. Only in an ancient place like Galilee could something so old be “new.” But digging through layers of civilizations in an only an hour’s time could make one forget how old it really is—like flying to the Holy Land instead of taking a boat. No, the relativity of time wasn’t what baffled me.

What I absolutely cannot figure out—something I continue to puzzle over—is how the hell one single shard of medieval pottery found its way into an Iron Age civilization.
18. Tell-Tale Sunburns

The old Benz bus was not a luxury vehicle, despite its highbrow brand. In Israel, most everyone drives cheap white Benz compacts like racecars, their fenders and doors dented and scratched from wild careens and close scrapes with Bedouins and camels. The bus that transported us to our dig had also whipped over countless country roads—it had the worn shock absorbers to show for it. We jostled along gravel into the gentle curves of the Galilean hills, their slopes violet and rusty in the early morning shadows. The sun, barely burning to the east, hadn’t yet dried off the dew. The tires weren’t kicking up dust, so I fiddled with the metal latches of my window and opened it, allowing the salty sea breeze to flow in and mingle with the stale air inside the bus. But the breeze was a lot colder than I thought, and I didn’t want to freeze out the occupants of the seat behind me.

“Do you mind?” I asked, twisting around to face Chris and Rachel.

Chris glanced up at me and eased his hand from Rachel’s knee, casually returning it to his own lap. “Mind what?” he asked.

“The open window. It’s kind of cold.”

“Not at all,” he replied, his full mouth pulling into a smile. “It will help me wake up.”

I studied him a moment, my gut twisting uneasily. His eyes were shielded by dark sunglasses. It bothered me that I couldn’t see them, see his reaction to being caught caressing Rachel’s pasty, sunburned skin.

Rachel was nothing like Marie, Chris’s girlfriend back home. Having pale skin myself, I had always envied Marie her beautiful olive complexion and green, almond eyes. I wondered what she was doing now, so far away in Iowa, in our half-empty dorm. Perhaps
she was still struggling to learn the guitar, so she and Chris could play songs together. Or maybe she was engagement ring shopping with our roommates. More than likely, she was still working on the scrapbook for Chris’s return present—the same one she had been creating for a month, with pictures and poetry and memories—to give to him when he stepped off the airplane.

I also knew that Rachel’s boyfriend was planning to propose to her when we arrived in Chicago, a little more than three weeks from now. She told me so herself during one of our late-night chats when we first arrived—before she began having late-night chats with Chris. Before the strangeness of the Middle East began to encompass us. Before our loved-ones were cast into dreamlike caricatures of long-ago acquaintances, the foreign becoming familiar and the familiar, foreign.

My eyes darted from Chris to Rachel. She bristled beside him, her red arms covered with goose bumps. Her own hands were tucked beneath a windbreaker draped over her khaki-clad thighs, but I could see them nervously fidgeting under the shiny blue fabric.

“I can close the window if you’re cold,” I said.

“I’m fine,” she snapped, her sad face turning toward the window.

Sinking back into my seat, I also gazed outside, using my faded college sweatshirt as a cushion between the jolting metal window frame and my head. The sun was inching over the hills now, painting the Golan Heights in fiery colors. It was going to be a hot day; our skin would bake. When we arrived home in Chicago, we would be brown and lean and changed. I wondered if I would seem as different to my friends and family as I felt, and was glad that no boyfriend or fiancé would be waiting for me at the airport baggage claim.
Slipping my headset over my ears, I listened to the Broadway revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar*—a guilty pleasure that I couldn’t resist while in the Holy Land. Hearing rock-star Jesus croon lyrics like *If you knew all that I knew, my poor Jerusalem, you’d see the truth but you’d close your eyes*, then surprise! there’s Jerusalem just around the corner…it thrilled the secret geek within me.

Rachel was reflected in my window pane, her lips pursed sullenly as she too watched the landscape skim by.

She resented me, I was sure. To her, I was a link to home: a living, breathing reminder of people who would be waiting for her in Chicago. But, for the first time, I wondered if I might one day be the same sort of reminder to Marie. I wondered if she would see me as a menacing shadow of betrayals that happened in far away, foreign places. Places that could have been dreams, if our skin wasn’t so burned.
19. Gamla

The path to the ruined city of Gamla was dotted with Bedouin tombs. Nothing recent—these tombs were ancient stone building blocks resembling mini Stonehenges, and possibly just as old. It struck me as odd that so many remained intact, despite precarious teetering of the top stones laid across their base pillars. I wondered if a good Samaritan had rebuilt the structures at some point in an effort to preserve history.

We wound our way through the Yehudiya Reserve, a basaltic plateau that eventually gives way to a series of deep canyons and green volcanic mountains.

Half the group decided to hike into the canyon and up the steep slope to explore the Gamla ruins. I chose instead to circle the biblical city and study it from neighboring hills—close enough to appreciate its tragic splendor, but far enough to not be overwhelmed.

I’d already experienced the sadness that lingered in Masada, even two-thousand years later, and didn’t feel the need to traipse through the death site of another nine thousand Zealot men, women, and children.

The fortified city of Gamla had existed since the Bronze Age, but really became prominent when King Herod populated it with Jews as part of his strategy to settle frontier land.
In 66 AD, though, the Jews of Gamla joined the Zealot movement against the Roman Empire. They built a wall around the city, ready for any siege Agrippa might plan. At the peak of Gamla was a watchtower. The city was indeed under siege for seven long months, and its defenses held. The Romans went home, but returned with three legions to once again try for the city. This time, the soldiers breached the city wall and entered Gamla.

The Zealots were ready.

The steep incline of the hill gave them the advantage; they rained arrows down upon the legions and forced them back in a stunning victory.

But the Jewish victory was short-lived. A few days later, the Romans crept to the bottom of the watchtower and rolled five giant stones through it, bringing it down and sending a mass panic rippling through the city. Gamla residents, penned in by their own city walls, chaotically fled for the only opening in the wall—the steep drop-off at the city’s peak. The Romans seized the city, killing four thousand. Another five thousand plunged over the cliff and fell to their deaths, or were trampled underfoot and never made it to the edge.

Birds of prey—eagles, Griffon and Egyptian vultures, mainly—thrive in the Golan plateau. They swoop and dive between wild cliffs and waterfalls, still picking at bleached bones that crumbled to dust two thousand years ago. My eyes followed them as I skirted along the rim of the canyon that circled Gamla’s peak, eventually finding a picturesque crevice with shrubs and yellow flowers cascading over its jutting ridges. I settled on top of it and spotted the rest of my dig team snake their way up the road to the ruins like ants on a dirt hill.
A small voice in the back of my head accused me of being a coward. That it wasn’t
the sadness of the place that kept me away, but the fear of losing yet another fairytale to
facts. I forced the fear back and turned my thoughts to the Zealot revolts itself.

The open rebellion of the Jewish people against Rome was as political as it was
religious. Josephus wrote in his Jewish Antiquities that “they have an inviolable attachment
to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord.” The Sicarii Zealots would
use any means necessary to secure their liberty from Rome, including violent insurgencies
not only against Roman soldiers but their own Jewish neighbors—those they considered
collaborators with Caesar.

The Sicarii Zealots of 66 AD were not a long leap, really, from the religious
extremists of today—groups that justify the killing of enemies and innocents alike if it brings
them one notch closer to unquantifiable dreams of religious freedom. How could the Zealots
possibly have known when their social revolution was successful? When Rome retreated and
left them their liberty? When all traces of old rule were wiped clean and they could rebuild
their society upon the stones of charred synagogues?

Rebellion is just as deeply rooted in personal ideal as it is in a collective social ideal.
And one person’s heaven is different from his neighbor’s. Ultimately, each person must
decide whether to rebel. Outside forces—governments, political movements, armies—can
force someone into action, but they cannot force a person to rebel. Rebellion is nothing more
than the individual’s desire for liberty.

And I wanted liberty, so much. Liberty from the fear of crumbling fairytales. Liberty
to determine for myself the difference between right and wrong. Fiction and truth. God and
no-God.
I wanted to be able to imbibe and sing drunken Journey songs in the street without the fear of being hell-bound. To flirt shamelessly with a gorgeous man and not feel as though I’m cheating on some past boyfriend or future husband. To reject Deb’s apologies and tell her to kiss my ass, I’d never forgive her!—and be perfectly okay with it.

I leaned back on my elbows and rolled my head, working the kinks from my neck. The wind at the top of the canyon was dry and sweet—a quiet roar across my ears. I closed my eyes as it skimmed up the contours of my body and over, as if I were just another flower-covered jut in the rock ridge.

I needed this rebellion. Needed to break some rules. Excitement fluttered inside of me as a concrete plan began to form in my mind—a conscious first leap out of my good-girl cocoon. I knew just who to seek out for step one. Abigail, Lee, and Tara: the blond siren trio who had crafted crazy nightlife into a masterpiece.

This was it. No more half-attempts to break free. I was officially declaring open rebellion on flannel-board Jesus in a grand swan-dive from my safe cliff.

I just hoped someone would be there to catch me before I hit the ground.
20. Trust Fall

--Gamla, 67 AD

Gamla pinnacle rises steep, free-standing
in a valley. Camel hump of moss
and walls ground down by soldiers’
pummel march that swept a city over.
Charcoal ruin—gravestone to those raining
down
down
down.

Up-pour of Roman arrows, pelting
the Zealot mass in sharp drops of fire.
Clumsy flight of prisoners, wave of panic
washes back, herded to the peak
of a death pen. Speared by Caesar or go
down
down
down.

She sees her child fall over the edge
and she follows.
He sees his wife fall over the edge
and he follows
down
down
down.

Five thousand trampled. Four thousand leap—
no one to catch them at the ground.
21. Tiberias

My first leap of rebellion came in the form of a trip to Tiberias—a city several miles to the south of our kibbutz. I could consider it an official act of rebellion because, rather than taking an orchestrated trip with the entire group, we hitchhiked to get there. And “Good-Me” would never do anything dangerous like hitchhike.

The four of us—the siren trio and me—were loitering in the elbow of Kayarden Road, the point where the main thoroughfare sharply curved to the left, avoiding a headlong tumble down a steep slope and into the Sea of Galilee. The street corner was a pleasant place to loiter. We could relax under the shade of palms and fragrant purple flowers, marveling at how green the lawns were, how blue the sea was.

We hitchhiked into Tiberias that day because we were desperate for something to replace Nutella, a chocolate frosting-like substance that had become a stomach-churning breakfast staple on our early morning digs. And while we discovered that Nutella was tasty when mixed with cornflakes, we needed something more familiar, more American, to spread over our jelly and flatbread sandwiches. So, armed with a pool of shekels from our fellow excavation team, we put our fingers to the wind and hailed a white VW on the country road to Tiberias…to search for peanut butter.

Tiberias is a small, flourishing resort town with spas and restaurants galore. Once, a very long time ago, before the Byzantines, before Saladin, before the Crusaders, it was the epicenter of Jewish culture—a refuge for the displaced Sanhedrin after the Romans plundered Jerusalem and drove out the Jewish court. The Mishnah—the basis for the Talmud—was written here. The very foundation of Tiberias was carved from rock by the hands of Galilean carpenters. Ironic, then, that after Herod Antipas first built the magnificent
northern capital in 20 AD, not a single Jew would settle there. Tiberias was built atop the ruins of Rakkat, a town destroyed and its people murdered. This made the ground unholy, so its streets remained empty until Antipas forced the rural Galileans to move there.

Since Tiberias first writhed and protested into existence, it has been a refuge—a city of second-best, where its occupants sit under its palms and purple flowers and long ad nauseum for the shade of another city just beyond their grasp. The sun is bright and brilliant, the breeze off the sea is as cool and soothing as silk. But very few can ever call Tiberias home, when the memories of previous homes fester in their brains like fatal wounds.

How easy it is to forget that this refuge city is tucked away in the war-ravaged Golan Heights, just twenty miles inside a hotly-disputed border. Tiberias is beautiful, primeval, serene. Its very survival amidst centuries of destruction is alluring because it sings of safety to exiles who have nowhere to go.

Our quest for peanut butter ended at the same grocery store I’d found the jars of mayo days earlier. We relaxed on the street corner, four rebellious, hitchhiking college students, grocery bags filled with jars of peanut butter scattered about our feet, waiting for a lift back to our kibbutz. Several more Jif jars were clutched tightly in our arms because they feebly link us to America, this sad comfort food.

A compact car slowed and I jumped up, thinking we’d found a ride. Instead, its driver—a thin, middle-aged woman with brown stringy hair and frown etched firmly in the lines of her face—shook her finger at us, scolding.

“You girls, you are foolish! Someone will kidnap you if you are not careful!”

The woman peeled out and we coughed on the dust kicked up by her bald tires. Glancing at each other, we nervously chuckled and put our fingers out again, less enthusiastic
than we had been. Somewhere above us, an Israeli patrol plane roared through the clear sky on its way to south Lebanon.
22. Bomb Shelter Discothèque
   --Kibbutz Ginosar, 2000

I see him in the underground
Through a mass of kibbutz people
Waving their burnt earthen arms.
A pale shell entrenched in reeds.

He’s alone—nineteen, twenty.
A sand dollar Danish boy.
Stark against thousand-year dirt that clings to cracks
Even now, while hard-eight techno rattles walls.
Even now, while warplanes howl across a blackened Golan sky
And whistle warnings over water.

The Danish boy’s here for the beach
And warm waters of Galilee—
Making memories before he slides
Into the oblivion of adult life.

I say I’m already an adult.
I’m here for the ground,
Or the things buried beneath—
Sifting through primeval trash.

The sun hasn’t touched his face
Or blistered skin below his neck
Like it has mine. Sore,
Branded by a widow’s mite on an overheated silver chain
Dangling just below my throat while I dig for pots and coins
Left behind by Bethsaida fishermen.

He’s mine in the bomb shelter,
My unsullied sand dollar.

Mine in a one-night universe
Where Gentiles grind to music,
Where I’ve always kissed cheeks.
Drank gin. Held hands
With friends and beautiful Danish boys
Not quite nineteen.

Here in the underground
The line between bodies belongs to us.
The sea, to nobody.
The ground, to nobody.
23. Jordan River

Slopes rose up on either side of us as we skimmed along the Jordan River in open-top orange kayaks, bouncing over the choppy spring gradient. While I’d spent many summer camps canoeing in the safe circle of Lake Darling in southeast Iowa, I’d never kayaked on a river. And even though these rapids were barely large enough to rock the boat, I was still a little nervous.

The Jordan River flows from four streams down the side of snow-capped Mount Hermon, into the Sea of Galilee, and then runs north to south along the boundary of Israel until it filters into the Dead Sea. The portion of the river I’d seen south of Jerusalem was half-dried, barely a creek in the arid southern stretches. But the northern Jordan was more like the rural Iowa rivers of home—lush and swollen, maybe twenty feet wide, lined with bushes and the occasional canopy of trees arching over the water.

Sporty-Sarah scooted by me in her kayak, her paddle flicking me with a cool spray. “Gotchya!” she laughed over her shoulder. Ever a thrill-seeker, she’d suggested that we race down the river. First one to the end earned the shekels we’d pooled before we put in. Grinning, I picked up my pace, edging around the next string of rapids to gain ground. Not everyone was racing; Grace meandered along with several other students a way back, choosing instead to quietly absorb the experience. But I was determined to orchestrate my rebellion, so I felt obligated to join.

So far, my attempts to rebel had been pathetically tame. Last night, the three sirens and several others went with me to the Nof Ginosar hotel bar to drink. Their staff was the epitome of patience with our shabby-dressed group while we almost obnoxiously hooted over our card game and drinks. Truthfully, we’d spent a ridiculous amount of money at their bar,
so perhaps that was why they smiled silently. For all I knew they were used to it, or were laid back enough to also enjoy a fun evening. Whichever it was, they took our money and kept the liquor coming.

That night, I was drinking to forget. And as the old saying goes, no one should drink alone. Just an hour before, I’d checked my e-mail and found a three-day-old message from Deb sitting in my inbox, bold, demanding my attention. I was a mess of resentment before I even clicked it open. How dare she intrude on this sub-universe I’d crafted, which specifically did not include her or the past school year’s debris? I nearly deleted the e-mail without reading it, but curiosity got the better of me. It was very short, emotionless:

Hey. Letting you know I’m in counseling, working through a lot of stuff. Have fun in Israel, say hi to Grace.

After we finished at the hotel bar, we’d gone skinny-dipping in the Sea of Galilee. Such blasphemy, it surely ranked up there with stumbling drunk along the Via Dolorosa. I’d like to think I was that rebellious. In actuality, just as I’d worked up the courage to join the others under the pier, a kibbutz man came strolling out to enjoy the night air. My naked colleagues panicked and hid under the pier until the three of us still clothed convinced the man to give us a minute of privacy. At first he’d refused to leave, thinking we were being incredibly rude: “Why can’t I be out here? I have as much right as anyone else!” After we explained the embarrassing situation, he scoffed and strode away while the swimmers slinked out of the water and collected their clothes in shame.

My orchestrated rebellion really had not gone as planned so far.
Today, I considered kayaking rebellion because, despite the easy canoeing each summer, I had a ridiculous fear of deep water, rushing currents, anything that might suck me under and drown me.

When I was eight, my parents had forced me to take swimming lessons. They’d been easy at first, treading and floating in a pool three feet deep, shallow enough that I could still touch the bottom and keep my head above water. But when we moved to the deeper end and the water was well over my head, I’d panicked. Clinging to the diving board, I screamed and sobbed, refusing to jump off. My instructor, a poor teenaged girl who didn’t know how to handle my tantrum, told me I’d fail my lessons if I didn’t let go. Even my six-year-old sister jumped off the diving board, trying to entice me into the water by telling me how much fun diving was. Still, I refused to budge. Finally, my mother gently told me I didn’t have to jump and it was perfectly fine if I failed my lessons.

I’d never failed anything so categorically before—not in school, not at church—and it was a blow. But I was aware that I’d chosen to fail. I still had control—I was scared of the diving board, so I chose not to jump. And that, despite my failing swim lessons, was a victory in my book.

Control. That’s what I’d been aching for during the past school year. Since I was old enough to begin making my own decisions, most choices I made went back to keeping a firm
grasp on my independence. But I’d felt it pried from my fingers by slipping grades, sleepless nights, helplessness in the stalker situation, Deb’s betrayal. Deb had control over me, and it’d left me anxious to the point of illness.

The funny thing was, I was so hell-bent to actively regain control, now that was controlling me.

This whole conscious attempt at rebellion had to end. It seemed immature now. I was a cliché—one of those kids that intentionally tattooed and pierced themselves to be unique, not even realizing that’s what a million other kids did to be unique. It was time for a wake-up call above and beyond rebellion. I was getting all wrapped up in my self-serving angst.


Several kayaks pulled out ahead of me, coasting to a halt on the shore to the right. I was the fourth to arrive, so no shekels for me. But Sporty-Sarah hadn’t won, either, and the competitive twit in me was a little smug. Tossing my paddle in the kayak, I dragged it out of the river and up the slope, then settled on the wooden dock with the others. We kicked our feet in the water and waited, enjoying the warm breeze. I relished the utter peace of the place, content for once with the here and now.

I studied my feet in the water, my skin smooth and clean as a blank canvas. A little too blank—it needed some marring. Finding peace was a lifelong undertaking, with plenty of scars. When I returned home, I’d have to get a small tattoo on one of my feet to remember this place.
24. Calming the Storm

I was perched on the slimy wooden dock, suspended over the water. Arid land dotted with green shrubs rose up on either side of the primeval inlet, then gently fell away as it sank into the wide span of blue sea. Layer upon layer of massive clouds pillared up from the water to meet the steely sky, the light of day barely piercing their denseness. Beyond me, a small ship skimmed along the coastline and I followed its progress. As it drew closer, I saw that it was one of those replica wooden fishing boats (“Christ’s Cruiseline,” we called them), its sail lowered in the encroaching storm. A gust of wind swept around me, thrashing through the golden reeds and whipping wet strands of hair about my head. I tucked my bare feet under my towel and lifted my face and throat to feel the chill breeze.

Why had I been so afraid of storms? To be there was to step away from the fear of something which no longer lived in this blissful plain of ancient memories.

This is Galilee.

I had never stood there and yet I always stood there. The tucked-away inlet had a familiar, ageless aura about it that led one to believe it had existed since the beginning of the earth, and at the same time, had never existed at all.

I scooped up a handful of fine white sand from the planks and let it sift through my fingers, the wind picking it up and scattering it across the beach. A few granules glinted in the soft gray light. There was no sun in the sky, no one thing illuminating the panorama before me. But the rocks, reeds…even the tiniest grain of sand was alive with some source of pure light that came not from the sky, but within each object.

The fishing boat again caught my eye as it traveled along the shore, away from me. I strained to see a crew aboard the ship, wishing for sailors hauling fish-laden nets up the sides
or a first mate at the helm, steadily guiding the vessel through the water. There was nothing—not even the flash of a face or the wave of a hand. Then with a start, I realized the boat seems to have no destination, no urgency to return to the harbor before the storm overtook it.

The storm…Even as the massive gray clouds churned, somehow I knew I’d never let them reach me…that I’d be gone when the blowing rain strengthened to the full force of the gale hovering upon the choppy emerald waters. There was no time there, in Galilee, in that place. What is time, after all, but a mere human invention, squelching the spirit with the heavy burden of duty?

If time did not exist there, I wouldn’t mourn its loss. I leapt from the dock and flung my arms in the air, feet carrying me to the sea’s edge. Easing my fingers into the wet sand, I carved my name.

This is Galilee.

If there is no time, then the waves—sweeping up the shore, swirling about my heels—can never erode it.
PART THREE: BETHLEHEM

Battle for Herodium Hill
Battle for a West Bank Hill
Battle for Daher’s Hill
Bubble-letter News Report
The Others
Conquest
Sever Seventeen
Birthday
25. **Battle for Herodium Hill**

We trudged up winding stairs through the inside of a massive cone-shaped hill, breaking into the sun amidst Herodium, King Herod’s winter palace south of Bethlehem. I was already breathless from the dizzying climb. The wind hit my face as the sun did, whipping coarse sand into my hair and eyes and nostrils, stealing the rest of my breath and forcing me to use my sweaty tee-shirt as a makeshift mask. Amal and I hunted around the weathered stones—or what was left of them after Romans bombarded them with yoga ball-sized boulders—and found a nook sheltered from the wind. We weren’t the first ones to reach the top. Four other students had already discovered that the nook, with its smooth floor, was the ideal location for an impromptu game of Euchre.

This particular card game—an old favorite among my German-American relatives (the ones who muttered in *deutsch* at family reunions when they didn’t want the children to understand)—had marked our month as a time-killer, eating up evening hours with bowers and tricks and bids. Winning the game requires a good deal of strategy, risk-taking, and people-reading.

Next to me, Amal followed the play, picking out patterns. “Will you teach me to play this game?” she asked, intrigued.

“All right,” I countered.

I only met Amal Nassar yesterday, when her family joined us for dinner at the Franciscan guest house in Manger Square. The Nassars are members of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. Both of Amal’s uncles teach at the church’s school. Her family frequently hosts international guests, accompanying them through Bethlehem and the surrounding villages and serving as cultural liaisons. Amal swore that her English was not so
good, yet she answered our questions with ease, infusing our often-lacking language with the poetic metaphor of her own Arab tongue. On this particular day, she and her sister journeyed with us as we hopped from ruin to ancient ruin across the West Bank.

“There is the chariot track, where they raced for Herod’s pleasure. Can you see it?” I followed Amal’s pointing finger to the arid stretch of land beneath Herodium. A faint “O” was inscribed into the plain like a giant graffito initial worn away by decades of wind and sand. The entire landscape beneath the fortress was marked with squares and ovals and letters, the remnants of a civilization leveled in A.D. 71 by Lucilius Bassus on his march to Masada.

“Herod had quite the party house here,” exclaimed Joni as she stumbled into the protected corner with us. Tightening the purple bandana around her head, she took in the sight with a whistle. “Check that—quite the party palace.”

“It was,” Amal explained. “Josephus—the Jewish historian—said that Herodium was a city second to none, with costly royal houses and grounds, and an irrigation system.” She blushed, as if embarrassed to be an eighteen-year-old spouting Josephus. “Do you see the shapes etched across the land? They were the houses, arenas, feast halls, and reservoirs. They made up this hill city. Did you know that it is the sister of Masada?”

I remembered Masada—also a doomed city on a hill. Two glitzy sister palaces, so far removed from the turmoil in Jerusalem that a false sense of security condemned them, entombed them in abandoned grandeur and sand. Quite the party.

Amal continued. “Somewhere among those ruins is the tomb of Herod himself, hidden in the hill.”
As I skimmed along the edge of the palace, my tee-shirt mask still in place and my skirts mercilessly whipping my ankles, I imagined that the King’s tomb was directly beneath my feet. Piles of gold and invaluable artifacts sprang to mind, vivid pictures either from an Egyptian pyramid exhibit or an Indiana Jones movie, I can’t be sure which. Despite toiling with a toothbrush over dirt-covered walls for two solid weeks, it was impossible to shake the fanciful Hollywood stereotypes of archaeologists. Those archaeologists—Howard Carter and Dr. Jones—just had more adventurous dig locations than we did. I wanted badly to discover Herod’s tomb in Raideresque fashion amidst snakes and bad guys and Roman rubble, find some secret logic in the shadows of the pillars circling the inner palace, at just the right time of day when the sun hit a crystal that triggered a door or wall and out popped Herod’s tomb.

Later, years after I returned to the States, some lucky bastard with a grant from Hebrew University did find it. It was exactly where Josephus said it would be—“atop of tunnels and water pools, at a flattened desert site, halfway up the hill to Herodium.” No bad guys or snakes, though. Just a king.
26. Battle for a West Bank Hill

King of Clubs…Ten of Hearts…Jack of Clubs (the left bower, yes!)…Queen of Spades…

At least two tricks from me. If Amal had anything good, then more.

“Can you explain this once more?” she asked.

I glanced at my cards partner comfortably settled in the lobby sofa, now a recent convert to the game of Euchre.

“A basic hand plays like this: Four players, two sets of partners. Assume a hand is dealt and that hearts are named as trump—the suit chosen by the highest bidder, or maker, that takes all other cards.” I sorted through the cards, pulling out all of the hearts and lining them up along the coffee table. “The trump cards are: Jack of Hearts, Jack of Diamonds, Ace of Hearts, King of Hearts, Queen of Hearts, and so on. In each round, whoever plays the highest card wins the hand.” I placed two spades and a club with a trump card to make my point. “If the highest bidder doesn’t take the number of hands they bid, the defender wins. And if a maker partner goes it alone, their points are doubled.”

Her eyebrow quirked and she shuffled her hand of cards, arranging them in some logical order that I hoped would sweep up a couple more tricks. In the corner of the lobby, Amal’s little sister was perched on the back of an armchair, head bent over her guitar, softly strumming chords. Her ponytail kept falling across her face and she whipped it back. She and one of the guys were sounding out Weezer’s “Island in the Sun,” though she wasn’t familiar with the song. Across the sparse, sun-faded room, heads bobbed along to the laid-back harmonies in the midst of card games, journaling, and conversations. Every now and then, a “hip hip” was mumbled absently when the guitar strummed each refrain.
The steep streets of Bethlehem were empty that day. Eerily quiet. Amal explained that it was a worker’s holiday, something akin to our Labor Day when everyone—even the food vendors, to our detriment—leave their businesses to spend a full day of rest with their families. Several of us had ventured out of our Franciscan guest house into Manger Square that morning in search of breakfast, only to find all of our favorite food vendors were not there. One lone cart was stationed on the side of the hill—an old man with his black and white checkered keffiyeh tied haphazardly over his head, selling bags of fresh pistachios. Whether he needed the money, had no family, or both, he had defied tradition to go to work. We pounced on him with our shekels, buying enough pistachios to snack on throughout the day.

I cracked another shell and popped the tasty shriveled green thing into my mouth, eyeing my card opponents to see what they would do. The “enemy” was an old hat at Euchre. Derek watched Joni, observing the corners of her mouth turning up slightly, the almost imperceptible shake of her curly head, the way she peered over the top of her black-frame granny glasses. Derek, in turn, cleared his throat and scratched his scalp, loosing flecks of sand that had been steadily building up there the last few weeks. Damn them—table talking. They knew each other’s gestures—could see what the other was seeing in their hands, and the havoc they could wreak with the ten combined cards.

Amal and I, of course, did not know each other well—certainly not well enough to read each other’s minds, and probably not even enough to read each other’s cards. Her dark, full eyes studied her royal court behind a cascade of heavy black hair. Uncovered hair. Beautiful, rich hair that swung freely down her back, unhindered by scarves and traditions. She was a little younger than me, and God, how I admired her. She walked among the
Arabs—among her people—apart. She loved them. Some loved her back, some turned their faces away in shame or hatred. Yesterday, on the top of Herodium, I asked her how she could live in Palestine as a Christian, instead of a Jew or Muslim. She explained it like this:

“The westerners accuse us of nationalism. The extremists say we lack patriotism.”

What could she do, she continued, but live as her own heart told her to?

And she does, with courage.
27. Battle for Daher’s Hill

I squinted against the sunlight, trying to make out the boundaries of the neighboring settlements.

My dig team was planting fledgling olive, almond, and plum trees on a hilltop in a desperate attempt to cultivate the land. It was a commanding hill—from it, one can see the other hills of the West Bank rolling away into the blue Mediterranean Sea. It was also strategically situated between three Jewish settlements.

Daher’s Vineyard was owned by Amal’s family. The land had been with the Nassars for generations, and remained in her family despite impossible conditions. Unlike so many other Palestinian farmers whose ownership of their land had consisted of a handshake, the Nassars actually possessed a written deed to the vineyard—something unheard of in the West Bank. It was because of this deed that the Nassars were able to prevent the land’s confiscation and settlement by the Israeli government as long as they had. But keeping the land was a task of international proportions.

First, they must prove that the land is being used. Since 1924, the Nassars have struggled to grow olive, fruits, grapes, almonds, wheat—working by day, and often sleeping in a cave on the property at night. Their water allotment had been cut to a bare minimum, hardly enough to keep trees from withering and dying. They had no running water, and collected rain in a cistern. Every day they saw the settlements of Neve Daniyyel, Kfar Etzion, Beter Illit, with their flourishing gardens, plumbing, electricity, and money. They saw the settlements creep closer and closer, bulldozing roads across Daher’s Vineyard and uprooting saplings in the dead of night.
Second, they must forever prove that the land is theirs. For fifty years the Nassars had fought land confiscation in Israeli courts, and every time their claim was upheld. Their struggle has garnered international media attention, become a cause embraced outside the walls of Palestine. The land is more than land: it is a symbol of solidarity in the face of injustice. They cannot build, so they pitch tents. The family invites all to work the land, to visit their “Tent of Nations” among the olive trees. Their “nation” consists not only of Palestinians, but Christians, Muslims, Jews, and foreigners. The Nassars show them love. They teach their children to honor life. They fight their battles without bombs strapped to their bodies. Without leaving limbs strewn across a public square.

The West Bank is one of those places that everyone hears about on the news, but isn’t really sure where or what it is. A landlocked region, the Jordan River borders it to the east (the country of Jordan is also known as the “East Bank”), and the rest is almost entirely encapsulated by Israel. Jerusalem is in the West Bank, as is Ramallah, Nablus, Jericho, and Bethlehem.

Like the rest of the Holy Land, the West Bank has centuries of turmoil beneath its belt. The last fifty years have been particularly strife-ridden, as Israeli settlements were founded and grew, borders shifted, and Palestinians decried the loss of land. The control of the place falls to both Israel and Palestine—a complicated power share that causes even the brightest students to pull their hair in world geography classes across America. Since the 1993 Oslo Accords, the West Bank has been broken into areas A, B, C:

A: Full Palestinian civil and military control.

B: Full Palestinian civil control, joint Palestinian-Israeli military control.
C: Full Israeli civil and military control.

One can’t simply refer to a West Bank map and see three distinct chunks labeled A, B, C. Areas A and B are 227 separate polka-dots of various shapes and sizes scattered across the map. The dots are comprised of Palestinian villages, Jewish settlements, and intermingled metropolises whose residents will fight to the death to keep a stake in their land. The space between the polka-dots is Area C.

When the state of Israel was forged in 1949, thousands of Palestinian farmers and villagers were displaced as borders were carved in the land. They settled in refugee camps, and many families have lived in these camps for fifty years. Housing is cramped, resources are sparse, making for high
tensions and sometimes violent outbreaks. And while conditions are dire, they have produced a slew of civic servants, doctors, engineers, writers, and poets, all tenaciously dedicated to sharing the Palestinian identity with the rest of the world.

Dheisheh is one of the refugee camps that were created as a temporary humanitarian solution to the problem of accommodating these expelled Palestinian families. According to the Karama Organization, a not-for-profit group based in Bethlehem, nearly 12,451 inhabitants live in Dheisheh, with a total of 2682 families. The number of shelters in the camp is 2480. The inhabitants of this densely populated camp are facing—like in other refugee camps worldwide—severe everyday problems in housing, education, economics, health, hygienic, and public service shortages.

I saw Dheisheh on the southern outskirts of Bethlehem—just the fencing around it, covered in bright, bubble-letter graffiti. Phrases like “Free Palestine” jumped out at me, and with a start I realized the words were in English. The spray-paint slogans were not for other Palestinians, but a message to the outside world—a less-violent, last-ditch effort to grab the attention of a camera in the hope that someone watching the evening news from their cozy couch cared enough to do something.

Because of the complicated border system between the three areas, Amal and her family were separated from Jerusalem. Israeli road blocks and check points barred them and other Palestinians from leaving the West Bank without good reason. Often “good reason” was still not enough—one visit across military lines to visit family or shop in Jerusalem might be all it took to cut them off from their home in Bethlehem. If there was an incident somewhere, sometime, that caused roads to close, their passes might have been revoked.
Brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandchildren could live just ten miles apart and not see each other for years.

The roadblocks scattered around the West Bank were supposed to control the number of potential Palestinian extremists entering Israeli territories, as well as to protect the Jewish settlements in between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I saw those settlements firsthand, perched on hills like marble chess pieces, their white walls gleaming in the sunlight.

Patting the last of the dirt around the fragile olive tree, no bigger than a twig, I despaired for it.
   --Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Bethlehem, 2000

Free Palestine.
Same old graffiti scrawled
on fences around the refugee camp.
Bubble letters ripe for popping—
sixty years over-ripe,
desperate for the world’s eye
to see, to read
once in the panning glance of a camera lens.

Clichés slip
unseen—
   past cameras
   past intifadas
   past military checkpoints
   past flimsy peace talks
and meld with mindless back-page media slogans.

Tired clichés…
until they see a refugee boy
hunkered down in an alley.
His young blood bubbles up
from a hole above his navel
and stains his fingers ruddy red.
He sobs, he dies
while swarms of cameras watch with wide glass eyes.

Now rage boils.
Bubbles up
   and over—
   over tanks
   over tainted mangers
   over bloody alleys in Bethlehem
and splashes onto cable news special reports

for a while.
29. The Others

Manger Square was growing dark as the sun sank below the hazy edge of Bethlehem. The earthy smell of baking clay still filtered in through the windows, even as the streets cooled. The pistachios long gone, we had since reverted to snacking on flatbread and Nutella, despite our best efforts to leave these unwanted dietary staples behind in Galilee.

I leaned against the window frame in my bedroom, fighting the temptation to swing my feet through the open window and dangle them over the edge, five stories above the square. Up here, at the pinnacle of this little town, I was hovering above the world. Bethlehem stretched below the hill in deep indigos and oranges, the day’s heat steaming from the bricks and painting the city with Impressionistic flare.

There was a riot today. Not in our part of the city, but north, at Rachel’s Tomb. Still, we could feel the unease, the hatred flowing up the hill, flooding the empty Manger Square. Enclosed by a barrier separating it from Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem, the tomb is the third holiest site in Judaism. It is a pilgrimage for Jews, especially mothers who wish to pray for healthy children at the feet of the Israel’s favorite wife. Rachel herself died in childbirth, naming her last child Benoni, “son of my pain.”

With one last deep breath, I turned and flopped down on my bed, mentally sorting through ideas for my journal. From this angle, a church steeple was framed in my bedroom.
window. To the left, the silhouette of a minaret tower reflected in the pane of glass. The overall effect created something similar to the split screen device often used in news reports and debates—the two opposing towers situated next to each other flawlessly. I grabbed my camera and snapped a picture.

I reminded myself to show this to Amal.

At first I thought it was thunder, lightning flashing through my bedroom window. Back home in Iowa, my family was being bombarded by spring thunderstorms and lightning and pounding rain. It wasn’t thunder rumbling, though, but a dull, continuous roar. My eyelids were heavy, but I force them open because I sensed something was incredibly wrong. It was not me pulling me up out of my bed but some other unseen force, commanding me to move and move quickly. I obeyed.

Rolling out of bed, eyes half closed, I pulled on a sweatshirt and a pair of drawstring punjabi pants I found in the market earlier this week. Stumbling over to the window, I pushed back the curtain to see what the commotion was.

Manger Square was filled with hundreds of people swarming, churning five stories below. Their faces glowed orange from the lanterns and flashlights they carried, and I could tell that they were angry, agitated faces—mainly men but some women—shouting and jumping and waving their arms. Frowning, I cranked the window open to hear what was going on, only then remembering that the only Arabic I understood was a few select phrases like “hello” and “goodbye” and “peace be with you.”

Suddenly, a “pop-pop-pop-thud” ricocheted off the outside wall and echoed across the square. I immediately dropped to my hands and knees, horror shooting through me as I
realized it wasn’t a crack of thunder that woke me. Another pop-pop-pop, and then another. Choking back bile in my throat, I crawled over to Grace’s bed and shook her awake. She moaned and swatted back my hands. Grace has always been extremely difficult to wake up. She’s a tiny person, but sleeps like a bear. But after another thud against the wall near our window, she shot straight up in bed, eyes wide and startled.

“What?—” she stammered. I tugged her out of bed and onto the floor.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on. Let’s get out of here!” Grace heard the quake in my voice and didn’t ask anything more, following me as we crawled out of our room. Others in our dig party were also stumbling out of their rooms and into the dark windowless hallway, their voices edged with panic. My eyes hadn’t adjusted yet, but I could just see someone—Abigail, I think—shaking with sobs against the wall, Joni and Derek trying to get her to breathe. Another round of pops and Abigail shrieked. Half of us ducked, our arms covering our heads.

“Attention!” A beam of light cut through the darkness and hit our huddled forms. I squinted, trying to see who was behind the flashlight. “Everyone, listen!” Fred patted along the wall looking for a light switch. He located it and light flooded the hallway, causing a ripple of surprise as our hands moved from shielding our heads to shielding our eyes. Two of the Franciscan priests hovered behind him, clear of the doors. “Listen,” he commanded again, “no one will get hurt as long as you stay away from the windows. The people outside aren’t going to hurt you.”

Fifteen pairs of dubious looks answered him. Fred was obviously insane. Hundreds of rioting people firing guns into the air could only mean one thing: we were going to meet a very violent end.
But twenty minutes later—all of us lining the hallway walls and uncomfortably settled on the floors—no one had yet met a violent end. The doors of the Franciscan house weren’t pounded down, screaming Palestinians didn’t storm up the stairs and shoot us to death. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t happen. The crowds still churned and roared below our windows. The tension was till potent, every pop-pop-pop sending a wave of shock through our spines. Sleep was out of the question, so we did the only thing we could think of to pass the time. We played cards.

“Euchre, anyone?” Scott pulled out the broken-in deck of cards.

“I’m in,” I croaked, scooting a little too close to him.

“In too,” said Joni, and she and Derek settled across from us in the narrow hallway. Others made themselves comfortable, quietly chatting or trying to find the best position to sleep in. Grace leaned her head on my shoulder, knees pulled up to her chest. The corners of my mouth tugged a bit, simply grateful for my friend’s presence.

“So Scott, did you actually think to grab cards as you dove into the hallway, or do you sleep with a deck down your pants?” Joni asked in an attempt to lighten up the tension.

Instead of answering, he grinned naughtily at us, and I had the sudden urge to wipe my hands on my flannel PJs in disgust.

“Dude, that’s wrong.” Derek shook his head as he called trump and flipped over a card. “You’re going to die for that, Scotty-boy.”

And then it hit me. I could die. I could actually die, and there was nothing I could do about it. Some stray bullet, fired at just the right angle, could whiz through the air, shatter one of the house windows and hit me square in the head.
My hands began to tremble as the missing puzzle piece in my rebellion panorama fell into place: who would catch me when I hit the ground? I could die, regardless of my religious status, and I had not control over it whatsoever.

In my need for control, I’d forgotten about “the others.” How could I have forgotten? There is a Bible passage in Hebrews that Christians often like to cite as an example of how those who have faith accomplish great things:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

It’s encouraging to hear how God blessed them and they conquered the world. We American Christians—safely cocooned in our religious freedom—sometimes like to feel cozy in the idea that we have God on our side and therefore nothing bad will happen to us. We tend to overlook the second part of the Hebrews passage, about the others:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised…

Up to this point, my “faith” had simply been another avenue of control. That by being a Christian, I could protect my precious hide. But the others had died, despite their faith. They did as God asked, but still suffered horrendously. The age-old question “why does God allow bad things to happen if he loves me?” reared its ugly head and knocked me
flat for the first time, because now it was personal. There was no magical Christian bubble, a
force-field faith that would keep me from being hurt if I just believed. It was bitter—this
shattering of my naïve, childish idea that no matter far I leapt, there was a safety net stretched
across the ground to bounce me right back up, unharmed.

My mind obviously not in the game, Scott shot me a concerned look when I made
another bone-head play and lost another trick. The hard linoleum floor was beginning to
make my tailbone ache as I flipped through the stack of playing cards. Not daring to crawl
back to my room for a pillow, I shifted a leg underneath me to ease the pressure. To my
right, Grace hunched over, head resting on her knees, arms wrapped around her face. She
was very still, and I wasn’t sure if she’d fallen asleep or was praying.

Now, did it matter whether I tried to please God or not, if I could still be hung out to
dry in the end? What did I have faith in, exactly, if not the idea that God loved me enough to
save my life? And where the hell did that leave me?

I didn’t know anymore.

I’d figure it out later, but for now I had to focus on self-preservation. If my magic
bubble was gone, then it was up to me to save my own sorry ass. The first step was to own
up to the childish stunts I’d been pulling—not just in the Holy Land, but at home over the
past year. Running away from Deb. Taking friends like Grace for granted. I couldn’t
always be the one in control.

It was time to grow up.
30. Conquest

“I will bid five.”

I cast anxious eyes at Amal, wondering just what she had in her hand to warrant such a high bid. Joni and Derek gave each other meaningful looks, ready to take us by storm. With ‘psychic powers’, I willed her to read my mind. But my mind was still weary from the previous night’s lack of sleep, so Amal had to play cards without the benefit of my ‘psychic’ help.

She smiled calmly, confidently.

Now Joni and Derek were worried.

“Trump is spades,” she declared. I relaxed, seeing the two spades nestled next to a couple hearts and a club. This might very well be the only time I’d let my guard down since the first round of gunshots last night.

What I had witnessed hadn’t been a real riot, Amal explained, though all evidence contradicted that assertion in my eyes. “It is different from America—when we celebrate, we gather together and dance and shout, wave arms and hands, lights, even fire guns into the air. And beating Jericho in a football match is a reason to celebrate in Bethlehem. It is not supposed to be frightening.”

Football. Huh. I suppose riots happen after sporting events in America, too. Superbowl wins. World Series wins. Lakers fans seem to riot whether the team wins or loses. It was unsettling, though. It could have just as easily been a real riot.

On April 3, 2002, nearly 220 men sought refuge in the Church of the Nativity after Israeli Defense Forces deployed tanks into Bethlehem to raid the city and root out Palestinian
militants. They were under siege for thirty-nine days. During this period of fighting, the Bethlehem Lutheran Christmas Church, as well as the church’s cultural center, was used by the IDF to detain prisoners, as well as to fire nearly five hundred bullets on gunmen in the streets. The use of the church was a violation of the status of religious properties, safeguarded from assault in the Fourth Geneva Convention. Both Israeli troops and Palestinian gunmen avoided fighting within the compound, which saved the church from more significant destruction. Nevertheless, considerable, systematic damage was done to the cultural center, a civil institution whose primary goals included the advancement of Palestinian education, health ministry, social, economic, and cultural preservation. The main telecommunication system of old town Bethlehem—telephone lines, fax, lease line and email—was destroyed. Their computers were smashed, disks stolen, printers and paper files scattered, ripped, defaced. Obscene graffiti was scrawled across walls. Toilets were overflowing. Windows shattered, furniture broken, walls riddled with holes. Tank shells hit the new Cave Gift Shop—a lovely little gallery that sold Palestinian arts and crafts to raise money for the center. Much of the artwork was ruined or taken, and the entire lower store façade was completely destroyed.

And still, despite the forces fighting against them, the Nassars and other Christian Lutheran Church members had hope. After the invasion of Bethlehem, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Christmas Church, wrote:

During twenty-six days of great fear, strict curfew and daily suffering, we have learned to take every single day thankful from the hand of the Lord as if it were the last in our life. Yet, we continue to plan as if we had the whole future open for us. We will never give up on our town and community. We are here to stay…We will continue to call for reconciliation in the midst of rising hate, revenge and retaliation.
The ministry of Jesus Christ was never as crucial for his hometown as now. Our commitment to this ministry has never been stronger than now.

As Amal took each card trick in a total coup—one, two, three, four, five—Joni and Derek’s faces fell considerably. I considered rioting in celebration. I desperately wanted to take Amal with me on the last leg of our journey—to Jordan—to be my Euchre partner. I didn’t want to leave her behind.
31. Sever Seventeen

I was too warm to see you slump home
in a red windbreaker and rain boots
after thunderstorms made mud of practice fields.
    Mascara streaks black on your skin
    and cornhusk hair clumps over eyes
    crying for the hale Catholic boy,
    who’d rather hold a shriveled-up nun than you.

I was too warm to hear your ginger notes
in fingers curled like soft dutch letters
upon piano keys a half-step flat.
    Ice packs nurse your doorknob wrists,
    twisted too far by dark, eager
    hours in a music closet, writing Debussy
    for a Rolling Stones kind of guy.

I was too warm to feel your soccer toes
fiercely bashed by cleats sharp on flesh,
or frilly shoes so snug, your arches groaned.
    Satin pools between your tender ankles,
    down the stairs of your mother’s front porch.
    You weed dead flowers from her geraniums
    and wait to be claimed by a crumpled white Pontiac.

Then, you were too warm to miss.
    Now, cold young thing, I miss you.
May 16, 2000. It was my twentieth birthday, and the entire dig team was celebrating in the small dining room of a Jordanian hotel not far from the ancient city of Petra. The hotel staff had ordered a cake—soft white frosting topped the angel food, fresh fruit scattered around the base. It was amazing.

The cake here was spongy, less heavy than cake back home. We’d purchased a cake a week ago in Bethlehem for Mom-Joanne in honor of Mother’s Day. She’d spent it away from her children for us, and the cake had been an attempt to cheer her up. A rowdy group of middle-aged Italians with lime-green tour bandanas also were staying at the Bethlehem guest house. When they saw the cake, they broke into a round of “Happy Birthday,” swept Mom-Joanne off her feet and danced her around with true Italian passion. We’d laughed and clapped along, swinging around the Italians and dishing up our cake.

This birthday celebration was less exuberant, more bittersweet. We were leaving the Holy Land in two days. Tomorrow morning we’d load up our bus and travel to Amman, stay one more night at the Al Manar Hotel, then head to the airport for the long flight back to Chicago. So we were a moody bunch—too anxious to sleep, too tired to move.

We’d spent the day at Petra, one of the wonders of the ancient world. The entire city was carved out of a canyon by the Nabateans in 100 BC, an extensive three-story maze of red-rock homes, temples, arches and windows, even a coliseum with stadium seating. It was hidden from Western civilization until 1812, when it was ‘discovered’ by a Swiss explorer on a trip to what is now Jordan. Camels and calashes pulled by ponies zipped in and out of the canyon like taxis, carrying visitors not up to hiking. Of course, we were always up for
hiking. At this point, we didn’t even think about tired muscles and tight, sunburned skin. It just was.

Sporty-Sarah stuck candles in my cake (where had they found those?) and lit them. The team circled round, dinner plates ready, and sang. Face flushing at the embarrassing attention, I smiled at them, blew out my candles, then grouped up for a picture.

Typically, when one blows out the candles on their cake, they make a wish. I made a resolution. Two, actually.

First, I needed to forgive Deb. While forgiving her would give her a chance to move on, ultimately I wasn’t doing it for her. After all, she might not even accept it. She still might believe she did nothing wrong. No, forgiving Deb was for my own peace of mind. I couldn’t carry the bitterness anymore—it was weighing me down, hurting me more than it hurt her. I’d look for her at commencement, and I’d talk to her.

Second was an issue more far-reaching. I’d questioned my faith, and there was no turning back from that path now. No more sitting on the bench, a coward, waiting for others to take my place on the front line. The fairytales had to go. I’d replace them with experiences, seeking truth, shedding the self-absorption, learning about people.

And this is what I have learned about the people of Israel and Palestine:
It is easy from an outsider’s perspective to say *Why can’t you just share?* Before I met the Holy Land, I could sit in judgment high on my American throne, and proclaim, like Solomon, “Cut the baby in half. You both can have a piece.” Who would love the child enough to let it go? But now the story is more complex, more gray.

For peace to be remotely possible in the Holy Land, the desire for control must be forfeited by both sides. I can only hope that one day, this will happen. I have met these people. I have seen love, and generosity, fierce loyalty and brotherhood from both sides. They are as capable of it as the next person.

But I am not so naïve as to ignore that there are some who are capable of great evil. Their hatred has simmered to the point that they despise the others more than they love their own people. And when they’re given cause, without forgiveness hatred can boil until it erupts violently and blindly, taking as many lives as they can.

In a year’s time, on a mid-September morning, I would be glued to the television with my roommates, watching as the Pentagon and World Trade Center burned and crumbled to the ground. Shock registered on the faces of others, students stumbled to classes like zombies, confused by how another people could hate us. I too was shocked by the horror of it. But I’d also known it was only a matter of time before the violent hatred broke from Mid-East borders and spilled onto the seemingly safe shores of the U.S.A. I cried again when news stations replayed footage of Palestinians celebrating the tragedy in the streets of Jerusalem, firing their guns and waving their hands. I felt betrayed by them. I also felt intense sorrow for the Palestinians and Israelis who’d fought so tirelessly to form tenuous bridges of peace for the greater good of their people.
If coexistence does not achieve peace, the conflict will end only because one people is tragically, completely annihilated by the other. The question is, will those who’ve found peace in forgiving stand up to those who thrive on hatred? There are Israelis and Palestinians alike who are brave enough to do so. I pray that their numbers grow.

As we polished off the rest of my birthday cake, the hotel manager and several of the staff ventured into the room and made their way toward me. “Eeid milad sa'aeed!” they exclaimed, hovering behind my chair. One of them handed me a small package wrapped in thick, blue paper. A present. They’d given me a birthday present. Tears began to leak from the corner of my eyes before I’d even slipped a finger beneath the paper. I unwrapped the gift—it was a necklace. A circle of hand-carved ivory and brown beads, so delicate. Camel bone. At the center of the necklace hung a square pendant, about half the size of my palm. A gangly camel was etched there, encased in an intricate border.

I was openly crying now as I traced the carved camel, touched by their utter generosity. I was a stranger from a country that had so much wealth. But I was still a homesick girl away from my family on my birthday, and they knew that. They’d stepped in, played family to me. They took joy in being kind. And isn’t that what life is really about? Perhaps I didn’t have to search too far for truth.

I came to the Middle East looking to sate my need for rebellion. If anything, my experiences only fired it. I knew that when I returned home, there would be no stopping the drive to separate myself from who I was before and who I was after— whoever that woman was. I had no clue any more, but I knew this: I would find her. I had cut my way through
the safety net and discovered an entirely different world on the other side. So big, so brutal.

It is too beautiful to hide from.