



Nabatean Kingdom

Jordan

The contrast couldn't be greater: from a midday visit in a South African township to sunset in a British Airways Club World lounge. The flight back to the Northern Hemisphere is the first of several on which my award ticket grants me Business Class.

"Something to feel guilty about," my relative Maureen said to me earlier. Actually, I've never seen it that way: economists speak of "positional goods," products aimed at high-end consumers as a means of differentiating them from the great unwashed. But I hold out hope for more equalizing change, where luxuries of today become commonplace for the everyman and everywoman of tomorrow, just as the toilet and dishwasher did for much of the world in our time.

Call me an idealist with a champagne flute.

Those fabulous airplane seats I've always had to walk past are now mine: this one's a wide ergonomic recliner with a footrest several feet in front; the whole thing folds down to become a flat bed. After a terrific dinner and some sleepytime-inducing wine, I pass out for a full eight hours—a feat I've never managed before on an aircraft. Better yet: the following morning, a hot shower in the arrival lounge before setting off for the next leg.

Signs of what's to come greet me at my connecting gate: it's the period of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and in gates adjacent to my flight to Amman are a number of others going to Saudi Arabia. The departure lounge is filled with Semitic men wearing the *keffiyeh*, the Muslim head covering; quite a few others are garbed in the full-

bodied flowing white *thawb*. I'm leaving that nebulous construct known as "The West" for the first time in my life.

Jordan's a good place to start: it's a land known for its hospitality. My overnight stay at a midrange hotel in Amman sees me greeted with a chilled glass of mango juice on arrival; they also provide me with helpful information on how to get to Wadi Musa, my destination for the next day. No trains here, and the comfy, tourist-oriented JETT bus leaves at the crack of dawn—not going to happen knowing my sleep patterns. The alternate is to take local transport: a minibus leaving from one of the open-air bus terminals not far from the hotel.

The next morning a taxi takes me to the bus station. It's an honest country too, with official fares posted to destinations all over the country: for 117 Jordanian Dinars—about US\$150—they'll take you all the way to the "IRAQI BORDER," as the sticker posted inside the cab window effusively states.

The minibus is a tidy blue-and-white twenty-seater, with uniformed officer literally riding shotgun. The crowd is a blend of young and old, religiously attired and not. These buses leave when full; fortunately that isn't too long after I arrive. They aren't air conditioned, but that's not a problem here in late fall, when the temperature is just right.

After an hour or so we stop at a dusty roadside shop; next door is a rundown mosque where some of the more religious-minded folk head in for prayers—probably the real reason for our break, as Muslims must do this deed five times a day. The food at the store—some mangy grilled meats—doesn't look so appetizing, so I settle for something packaged, a bag of cashews.

"Where you from?" amiably asks one of the younger guys on the bus. I'm the only foreigner on board and their curiosity is disarmingly pleasant. These guys live in Wadi Musa but work in Amman, making this three-hour commute twice a week. We actually have something to share here, as I was once an itinerant multi-city contract worker myself.

It's not much of a town—really just a dusty entrance to Jordan's biggest archeological treasure. But I figure it merits at least a stroll as the sun goes down. Stone and cinderblock structures are the norm here, along with traffic circles no doubt borrowed from British Mandate days. On the front of one building, in Arabic and English, a

sign reads, “NO GOD BUT ALLAH, AND MOHAMMED IS HIS MESSENGER.” In the sandy yard of one home, children stop when they see me and yell out, “Hi hi hi hi hi hi hi!” as I pass.

My little inn near the center of Wadi Musa is likewise just-right hospitable: it’s run by a young, good-looking fellow, Ibrahim, and his mother, who cooks us a hearty meal of kebabs, humus, and other Middle Eastern dishes.

“Here, have a look.” Ibrahim’s playing around on his laptop, and shares with me and a couple of Belgian guys what he’s looking at. It’s his Facebook page, crowded with fetching females.

“She was here last month,” he says, pointing to one from Germany. “She says she’s coming back next summer.” *Shit, Ibrahim’s a player.* He’s also into Hollywood comedies, judging by his DVD collection.

“This one’s my favorite,” he tells us, pulling out *Eurotrip* from the pile. “You want to watch?” *Sure, why not.* it makes for a perfect, if unlikely, end to a day of travel and settling in.



Next morning begins early. I’m a bit trepidatious, having dragged myself halfway down this country to see more ruins. Happily, I’m captivated up front: the Siq is a marvel, an entry canyon barely twenty feet wide walled by jagged, curving rock soaring straight up a hundred feet or more. Slivers of sky form knifelike cutouts between the peach-hued stone; overall, the effect is the natural world’s answer to a medieval town street. *These guys sure knew how to make an entrance.* Along both edges run grooved channels, mini-aqueducts where water flowed into cisterns after the flash floods endemic to the region.

I round the final curve in the Siq and there it lies: *al khazneh*, the Treasury, a monumental Greek-styled façade carved into the auburn rock. It’s the grand first edifice of Petra, the “rose-red city,” principal outpost of the Nabatean Kingdom. They ruled these lands for more than a thousand years, establishing a far-flung network of caravanserais, rest stops for the trading caravans of ancient days. It’s a sight of cinematic proportions...which is partly what’s drawn me (and, I’m guessing, the sizeable horde of other Western tourists) to this spot:

they used this place for the climactic final scene of the third *Indiana Jones* film. Inside, however, no warren of caverns, no knights from the Crusades, no home to the Holy Grail: the Treasury's interior is small and nondescript. All the money's in the façade, like a storefront on the set of an old Western. Maybe the Nabateans were better showmen than we give them credit, the Spielbergs of antiquity.

Petra was more than just a warren of caves, though little remains of the freestanding structures; a colonnaded street and a crumbling amphitheatre suggest the grandeur of what was. The valley floor bustles with tourists, vendors of trinkets, donkey and camel rides. I decide to break from the crowds and hike the path to the pagan ritual ground, a semi-ruined set of stone-block structures that make up the High Place of Sacrifice.

Passing a scattering of vendors and a few watchful cats, I reach the summit, a couple hundred feet up where a vista of the valley awaits, along with a quartet of young female travelers. American English speakers all, they too hail from San Francisco. Something tells me if I were straight this might have been a bit of a pick-up; instead we snap photos and they head back down the mountain, leaving me alone with the reddish-brown rock formations and killer views.



I sit for a long time. Something about this place—its seclusion, its long-ago role as a pagan ceremonial alter, perhaps even the fact that I am for the first time away from the distraction of gay-friendly lands—brings to the fore the emotional turmoil I've been pushing away all these weeks. *How did everything go so wrong?*

If there's one thing I've learned in all my years of moving around, it's that the folks you leave behind often view your departure as something of a betrayal. You are, in a sense, rejecting them in favor of someplace else.

It all began over a decade ago: I was a struggling wannabe screenwriter—before the tech bug bit me—when I met Steve, a Liberal Arts major at USC. A reserved intellectual with a biting wit, our friendship back then weaved from intense dependency to old-married-couple bickering. Yet in spite of waxes and wanes our bond strengthened

through the years. That is, until 2001, when I became another tech-crash layoff statistic and had to relocate just as Steve began a descent into drug addiction. While under the influence he wrote me nasty, hateful e-mails as a goodbye. More than a year later, clean and sober, he expressed contrition and slowly we rebuilt the trust that had been broken.

Flash forward a few years to about six months after the surgery: Bradley and I headed to San Francisco on our scouting foray, dividing our time between Steve's place in the East Bay and a hotel in the city. Platitudes about "visitors and fish stink" fail to capture how badly it went. Steve's acerbic humor clashed with Bradley's propriety—though I saw deeper forces at play: some was the not-uncommon antagonism between a spouse and a close friend. More came from their respective histories of substance use, with Steve a recovering addict and Bradley something of an unacknowledged problem drinker. Maybe heading for happy hour to get better acquainted while I caught an early-evening snooze was a bad idea. The two of them ended the night with a nasty squabble in a hotel parking lot—and I spent the remainder of the trip hearing rejoinders of "I never want to see him again" from both parties. *Terrific*. Just what I needed on an assessment tour of a prospective hometown.

Back home in Boston the mood now changed: Bradley's parents, quietly acquiescent about our California adventure at first, began to agitate for their son to stay put. After one further hospitalization incident—Bradley endured a couple of these after the transplant, not uncommon in these cases—his mother admonished that he'd probably always be indigent, might never be well enough for the big bad world outside their care. My independent lifestyle and inability to offer him health insurance worried them too—though I still held out hope for a solution that would make everyone happy.

Bradley, meanwhile, revealed his intentions another way: on a Sunday evening before one of my work-related flights he headed out on the town without me. Halfway through the night I awoke to the sound of the bathroom shower running; emerging from bed I noticed the door to the second bedroom was shut. As I was about to open it Bradley emerged from within with most of his clothes off. In the bathroom the shower continued to gurgle.

“Did you bring somebody home?” I asked.

“Just to jerk off!” he replied defensively. I noticed his glassy eyes and slurred speech: *he’s shitfaced*.

Disclaimer: we did have something of an open relationship. But not *that* open. Not bring-a-guy-home-and-do-him-in-the-other-bedroom open. Something bigger was afoot. No time to deal with it now, though: my crack-of-dawn flight was waiting. I kept my feelings in check but they lingered like rainclouds over the week. Finally, the following Friday night, Bradley met me outside my doorstep for a stroll around the neighborhood.

“My parents asked what I wanted to do, if I really wanted to go with you. They’re planning to get a place in the city, you know.” They’d been talking for years about selling their suburban home.

“I guess you know what my answer is.”

Even now he can’t come out and say it. But the message was clear.

It’s over.

Things moved quickly after that and I had little time to think. My condo sold swiftly; the promised work opportunities out west materialized almost as fast. Before I knew it I was living in San Francisco and Bradley was in another relationship. *Classic rebound*, I thought. He talked up the new guy’s virtues—a fellow with Hollywood connections—loudly and often. Finally I told him to stop. I couldn’t take it anymore.

It pains me to say it, but the feeling that welled up most during those weeks wasn’t anger or pain—it was disappointment. *I risked my life for this guy*. I’d always treated the surgery as a rational, carefully considered act, but the truth is, when you donate a piece of yourself—in this case the Jew ironically granting the gentile a pound of flesh—you also impart some of your aspirations to the recipient. And this was not the direction I’d hoped for or considered even in my wildest imaginings. Seeking a sanity check, I decided to make Steve my confidant; given his bias we’d skirted discussion of this so far...which might have been where I should have left it: upon hearing my musings, Steve did a complete about-face and hurried to Bradley’s defense.

“Well, you know, you’re the one who abandoned *him*.”

Hub? Steve had often prided himself on his penchant for devil’s-advocacy...but if ever there wasn’t a time. I’d come seeking cama-

raderie, solace, the sort of bonding soldiers expect in a foxhole. I hadn't expected blandishments about his guilt for prior squabbles with the guy—or for what I suspected this was really about: the fact that I'd abandoned him to addiction all those years ago.

"I can't help the way I feel," Steve added. The conversation segued, as conversations often do, to other matters. His newfound spirituality in particular and how it informed his outlook...over my protestations that this *really wasn't the time*. On we blathered, for hours, and although it was probably the most strained conversation we'd had in years, it felt, by the end, that we reached something of a resolution.

Or maybe not: Steve didn't answer my calls on subsequent days and retreated to his preferred mode of communication during a conflict—instant messaging chat. I find this medium to be precisely the worst for working through things, and sadly I was right on the money: Steve adamantly insisted that I accept his right to an opposing outlook. "You can't tell me how to feel," he wrote. "Deal with it." He went on about his spiritual quests, explaining how he'd labored to conceal them from me, his secular friend. *Who is this guy?* In one breath obstreperous and indignant, in another channeling the Dalai Lama. It felt like I'd re-befriended an entirely different person than I'd imagined, one just as unhelpful in a crisis as he was all those years ago. In an angry e-mail the following day Steve set forth an ultimatum: apologize unequivocally for my hurtful and narcissistic behavior—or never contact him again.

And so, in the span of a few weeks, two of my closest relationships vanished into the ether.

Efforts were made in fits and starts to patch things up, but it all came to naught: Bradley grew ever angrier at my disapproval of his life, which at this point seemed centered more around the new fellow and further drunken bouts instead of a return to school. *I sound like his parents*, I mused, while his real parents continued their role as tireless nursemaids. Steve, meanwhile, informed me of his plans to set up a discussion website, "Where friends can disagree." The cherry on the sundae, the afterburner on the angst turbojet, was the final hostile missive Steve sent right before I flew off to London. *Fuck you and have a nice trip.*

It all reads like the plot of a daytime soap...especially recollecting it here atop a Jordanian cliff-top. Though maybe coming at it now holds deeper significance: just as I've shifted continents, headed further into the world, away from the comfortable and familiar, so too now comes an inner shift. *I need to face this stuff.* Understand what it all means, what it spells for the future. This dizzying, kaleidoscopic world journey offers more than mere distraction. I believe each of us, in a sense, is a world in microcosm, a brew of different forces pulling and tugging every which way. And yet, without the fertility of new experience we remain a psychic monoculture, unable to see past ourselves.

No more. This trip is my chance to draw deep, to look further within, to garner the understanding that's eluded me for so long.



I trundle down from the High Place of Sacrifice and find a bunch of camels lounging at the base. I walk up to one of their owners and negotiate a decent price for a ride across the valley, to the steps of Petra's other big-ticket building, the Monastery. It's my first time riding one of these beasts, and in spite of touristic hokiness—some middle-aged ladies looking on let out a chuckle as I mount the thing—it's something I just have to try.

It's an easy, languid ride—particularly since there's a saddle with grips on both sides. The gentle swaying motion isn't for the seasick-prone, but for me it's oddly hypnotic. The driver of the camel leading mine sits with one leg folded over the other, but I don't dare try that—it's a long way down. On the sand the beast's hooves pad rhythmically; they're as soft as the ground itself—unlike the keratinous crunch of horses—and perfect for the desert floor.

"Difficult climb! One hour!" call out the donkey-jockeys, but I ignore them and with my long legs make it to the top in barely twenty-five minutes. There I'm greeted by a broad, expansive plaza that's shadowed by the columned Monastery. Like the Treasury, it's carved into the mountainside as if about to burst forth like those unfinished Michelangelo sculptures back in Florence.

That's a wrap for Petra. Now I need to get back to Amman. Ibrahim has an answer cheaper and friendlier than the JETT bus.

“Go with my friend Ismail,” he says, motioning to a middle-aged businessman with a Camry. He’s heading up there and offers to take me for a nominal sum. On the road, Ismail offers me some *lafab*, thick chewy pita bread that’s a specialty of some Amman bakery. If any food has the potential to replace chocolate as my new carborific treat, it’s this.

My evening’s free and Amman’s a big city, but that doesn’t translate into much: the Middle East is one big no-fly zone for me where gayness is concerned. All the gay guides mention death penalties and underground communities and I don’t dare try; I prefer to leave the region with all my extremities intact, thank you very much. Besides, I’m not sure how a gay bar would fare in a region where the dominant religion outlaws not just sodomy but alcohol as well.

“Oh no, many places to drink,” Ismail offers when I tell him I’m not much of a drinker (I say nothing about my sexual orientation). That Jordanian hospitality again, along with an eagerness to show that *we’re not like them*, those other unabashedly conservative Muslim countries. It’s heartening; perhaps someday Jordan will break with its more religious neighbors and become a Mideast haven for the homos. Someday. Just not now.