

A Bedouin in Europe

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It was seven o'clock Warsaw time. I was the first to step down from the plane, for my seat was the last row. The breeze was different from what I was used to in our desert. The sky was clear and it seemed like I was seeing it for the first time. I slowed down so the other passengers would step ahead, for I had no idea what I was to do after disembarking. I took my place in a long queue of non-European passports. When it was my turn, the customs officer welcomed me with a quick smile, which soon became more cheerful when he read the invitation extended to me by the Polish Agency for Culture and Education to pursue my studies in Poland. It stated that I was an outstanding student and recommended that all administrative procedures be facilitated for me. He stamped my passport with a warm and proud "Welcome to our country". I received it with all due love and appreciation. I continued to follow the people in front of me towards the luggage belts, where I soon found my suitcase. I then found myself in an even more spacious hall with a crowd of people. Youngsters, as pretty as angels, were running about; the features of the elderly seemed to reflect the burden of the wars witnessed by Poland under the Nazi occupation. Then you are soon distracted by a group of well-dressed young people who carried flowers, and others who seemed to be dressed in a uniform, carried papers with names printed on them. I soon understood that these were cab drivers. I scanned the papers, wondering if I would find

my name, only to find my family name carried by a blond smiling girl. Her sheer look was enough to make one forget the tiredness of the trip. I approached her, waving my right hand, and she met me with a smile I swear I never saw the likes of. We greeted each other, while my Bedouin heart seemed to explode at her delicacy. My mind was distracted, wondering who the genius was who had engrained in us, the people of the desert, that a woman had to be fat, and that the slim ones did not count as women. Slim women were outcast, and their families driven hard to clear them of such deficiency. At times they would make natural bitter extracts, too hard for camels to digest, not to mention a girl's liver who was not even ten yet. And at other times, they would force the slim girl to undertake tough exercises. Youstina soon recalled me from my reveries, as she pulled at my suitcase and said, "You seem exhausted. Please let me help you with the suitcase." She, then, gave me a piece of sweets, which seemed to be made in their famous cuisine. I swallowed it reluctantly, my mind haunted by the images of the girls in my family who were doomed to slimness. We got onto a public bus, where Youstina informed me that we would reach the university dorms in ten minutes. I smiled back, "Don't worry. I spent over fourteen hours on the go since I left my house to arrive here." I told myself that spending one moment in the halls of knowledge was better than centuries in the arms of ignorance and backwardness. We

arrived at the university where we found two lady employees awaiting us. The three ladies, then, spoke in Polish, firing away, with “tak tak tak” recurring amongst them. They received a copy of my passport, and then one of them gave me the key to my room saying, “Welcome to our country.”

Youstina took her leave, pecking a kiss on my right cheek, and leaving the left one deprived.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, looking left and right in search of my room, number 206. I found it in the middle of the corridor. I opened the door as I remembered the last door I closed before my trip. It was the door to my room in the dorms in Rabat. There was a huge difference between the two rooms. The comparison was not right in the first place. My new room was spacious. In the right corner was the bed, in the other corner a desk and chair. The room had a balcony that overlooked a green garden, which soon reminded me, with grief burning my heart, of the garbage and waste you would see, were you ever to look out one of the windows in the dorm in Rabat. I asked myself who was to blame? Was it possible to dream of a better tomorrow?

I didn't know how, but soon the words of the dorm employee and of the customs officer materialised in front of me: “Welcome to our country.” The sense of pride as they spoke the words. I felt like the whole issue lay in the pronoun “our” and the word “country”. When one has a sense of belonging, one considers the country like a big home, and all efforts are exerted to make it as wonderful as the small personal home. It was the belief that personal stability was related to the stability of the country. The prosperity of the country was related to their personal prosperity. But my dear self, how are we to convince the young and old in our countries of this? How are we to convince them that change was possible? That it was an issue of honest will and intention? There my mind failed to find a satisfying answer. I felt that the exhaustion was taking over my slim body. I dragged myself into the shower,

which was located in a bathroom I shared with the neighbouring room. Suddenly I ran into a short girl, with dark hair, and a light skirt. She welcomed me merrily and asked, “Did you move in here?” She pointed at my room. “Yes,” I replied. “Well, hello. My name is Birgitt. I am an American Jew, from Poland. You?”

“My name is Mohamed,” I said. “I'm from the Moroccan desert.” She seemed to be ecstatic at the mention of Morocco, and said, “That's my maternal grandmother's homeland. My mother always told me how Morocco hosted the Jews, and the great respect they enjoy with the people and the royal family.” I nodded and said, “Yes.” My smile seemed tired, but contained an overwhelming feeling that with this experience I was a new-born thrown into a new world. She excused herself saying, “Let's meet again.”

“Yes, sure,” I said.

I went into the bathroom and took off my clothes, while my mind tossed about hundreds of questions. Where is the Europe everyone was warning me of? Why did the Jewish girl not treat me warily, me the Muslim? There was such a difference between our religions. How could Birgitt travel alone? Where did Youstina learn all this gallantry and the ability to handle any situation better than men did? My people in the desert insisted that women were created for pleasure in the bed. If a woman wanted to go out, the kitchen was good enough for her. What if my folk were to see the beauty of Birgitt the short, or Youstina the slim? Would they cease fattening our girls as if they were cattle, not humans?

I then got dressed and left the bathroom, wondering how it was not only a bath for the body, but a pressing invitation for an intellectual bath, too. I threw my tired body on my bed, reciting the prayer for travelling which the speedy events had made me forget about.

The alarm clock on my phone rang. It was 6 am; my first morning in Poland. I got dressed and went to the breakfast hall. I met my neighbour Brigitt, neatly dressed and a distinctive scent emanating from her. She suggested I order the third option on the menu, saying it was the healthiest. We chatted about the discipline



Literary workshop with the winners of A Sea of Words contest in Barcelona, 2021 (IEMed Collection).

each one of us was specialising in. We discovered that we were both at the faculty of sciences and technology, with a slight difference in the times of our classes. We decided to go together to find out about our lectures, which were due to start after two days. It was fun to walk with her. She was a mature girl, despite her young years. She was well-read about other cultures and history, clever in communicating her thoughts, very accurate in her choice of words. We went through many paths and alleys, not even noticing. I felt like I was only then performing the act of living. The beauty of Polish architecture added a special touch to the scenery, for I was a lover of architectural arts. And then suddenly I heard foul words in Arabic. I turned towards the source where the words came from, to find two young men sitting on the pavement of a square. Next to them was a bottle of wine they were

fighting over. I was stunned by the scene and disappointed. Brigitt interrupted me: "Here we are at the university. Look, there's Building A, where Monday's class will be." She then added: "Let's go to the cafeteria and get some rest." It was a huge yard surrounded by columns in Roman style. At the top of each column was the engraved face of a human. I later understood from the expert Brigitt that they were Polish thinkers and scientists. It was a sense of pride in the past and the forefathers engrained in every inch of the place. Brigitt later asked me: "Why do you let me speak more than you? Why do you prefer to remain silent and just listen? I, too, love that, but we're chatting and getting to know each other." Her shining eyes stimulated me and I said spontaneously: "I'm a man of the desert. We grow up in a tough environment. Most of our time we tend the cattle and

search for water. We don't return to our tents until night. This is my first day in Europe – the land of non-Muslims – as I always knew it." She interrupted me smilingly. "It doesn't matter where you are from, or the nature of your origins, or your faith. What counts is that your heart holds love, that you look at all people through humane and friendly eyes. The world today counts on us, the youth, to lead humanity towards a future of peace and prosperity for us and the coming generations, without any harm to the natural resources of the world."

She paused for a moment, to smile that smile of a loving girl as she said: "You owe it to Poland." I replied without thinking: "Yes. Beyond the ability of words. The few hours I had spent here were enough to change many concepts, and correct many wrong ideas that occupied my mind. The scene of the two young men a while ago was enough to understand the fear of European governments, and their repetitive call for essential integration. The decency of the customs officer was enough to

understand that this continent respected the law and welcomed, and encouraged, anything that was legal. The trust that the Polish state granted me when it offered a monthly stipend, housing and food was evidence that the European governments wished to extend their hand to the youth of the south to develop their skill and serve their countries. Your culture is far-reaching, your style of conversing, the way you present your ideas, all these showed me that what a woman can reach by far exceeds what the mind of a Bedouin like me could grasp. Females were not created for sex alone. Females are sophisticated humans who can offer a lot."

Her smile seemed to express victory, her brows moved up, as she said: "At last you spoke more than me." She then lent closer, taking my hand, and pecking a kiss on my left cheek, which I had been deprived of that night.

I replied, sarcastically: "Your kiss is more precious to me than the scholarship." We, then, left the cafeteria, totally different from how we had come with.