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Shape of a Boy

My family and other adventures

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Israel & Jordan

A Lesson in Parenthood

with Ernie (Josh) in utero age fifteen weeks

1 March 2000, Jerusalem, Israel

'Oh, Little town of Bethlehem, how noisy/crowded/commercial we see thee lie'. I was glad to escape the scrum of tourists in Manger Square, and head to the Chapel of the Milk Grotto which, as excursions go, will probably rank as one of my weirdest. Said to be the spot where Mary hid in an underground cave to breastfeed Jesus as she and Joseph fled from King Herod, there was a small queue of devotees waiting to pray to 'Our Lady of the Milk'. Feeling more than a little ridiculous I joined them. So, the story goes that drops of Mary's milk fell to the ground, turning the brown stones a creamy white. It's a stretch for the imagination, even though there's 'evidence' displayed – a piece of the original brown rock that Mary's squirting breasts failed to hit. What's also unusual about the place is that it is visited by both Catholic and Muslim women

who are struggling to conceive or breastfeed. On the wall there's a notice that states that three thousand babies have been born to mothers who have prayed here. What it doesn't tell you is how many women have visited and remained childless. I'm guessing it's a lot more. Once in, I felt my cynicism ebb away, immediately charmed by the cosy atmosphere (would it be blasphemous to suggest that it would make a cracking bar?), with the uneven white walls and roof flickering with candlelight, softly illuminating the paintings of Mary and Jesus that decorate the walls. The altar was simple, adorned with a beautiful icon of Mary nursing Jesus, and there I found a young Arab woman kneeling in prayer. I hung back so as not to disturb her, wondering what her story was. When she rose, she looked back to me and smiled shyly, glancing at my stomach. I nodded and her smile widened. It was a lovely connection to make, and I felt immediately guilty for scoffing at her and the other women, who, most likely, were desperate to conceive. Who knows, if it had taken me longer to become pregnant perhaps I would have been on my knees beside her.

Neil was going on a hare-brained, team-building, camel-riding jolly in the Wadi Rum desert in Jordan (these were the days when large companies still had money to send employees on such extravagant nonsenses), and I had a commission to write a feature on Jerusalem for *The Sunday Telegraph*. So, we thought ISRAEL & JORDAN 7

we'd combine the two events with a few days in Israel together, before he departed for his desert adventure. The plan was that I'd stay on in Jerusalem to research my feature, then fly down to the coastal resort of Eilat, from where I would continue overland into Jordan, reconvening with Neil at the ancient city of Petra. I'd had my first scan and all was looking good, so there was absolutely no reason to take it easy at this stage of pregnancy (despite what my concerned family thought).

'I just wish you'd slow down a bit,' said my mum.

'In lots of places, you see pregnant women working in fields, and in India I even saw some on building sites carrying bricks,' I told her.

'Oh, those poor women.'

'My point is, as women we're designed to carry on our normal lives while we're pregnant, aren't we?'

'Depends what you call normal. Carrying bricks, though? I can't imagine it.'

I was beginning to wish I'd never mentioned the building site.

'I promise I won't do any bricklaying,' I told her. I really couldn't understand what she was worrying about. This wasn't a big deal . . . or so I thought.

Once Neil had left, I mooched around Jerusalem for a couple of days. Being alone never bothered me, especially in interesting cities and Jerusalem is without a doubt one of the most fascinating. Like walking 8

through history in a living, breathing museum, I did what I normally did and wandered at whim. In Jerusalem's higgledy-piggledy arrangements of narrow streets, I knew that if I tried to follow a map, I'd end up confused and frustrated (I've never been the best navigator) and miss what was going on around me. Straying off course was the way I liked to travel, in the hope of discovering something unique, perhaps an artisan's workshop or a scene of local life, away from the tourist hotspots. As a travel writer, you're forever on the hunt for something new to write about, but on this day, halfway down one small street, I panicked. There wasn't a soul around. I looked back to where I'd just come from, suddenly unsure of which small lane had brought me to this spot. Later, I realized that I was experiencing pregnancy-induced brain fog, which had also caused me to put my passport in the minibar instead of the room safe.

Up ahead, a door swung open and a young Muslim woman stepped out, tugging at the hand of a small boy. She paused to lock the door, while her son kicked a stone around, his big brown eyes glancing shyly back to me, and seeming to ask, 'What are you doing here?' It was a good question and feeling safer in their company I stuck close, trusting that at some point they would lead me out of this maze and into a busier part of the old city. We parted ways, with shy smiles, at the Hurva Synagogue, and with reassuring ISRAEL & JORDAN 9

landmarks again now visible, I headed up to the Western Wall, more commonly known as the Wailing Wall.

To get anywhere near it, you have to pass through a metal detector, and this one was operated by a young female soldier with long blond hair, red lipstick and a machine gun slung over her shoulder as casually as a handbag. She stubbed out her cigarette, gestured that I should raise my arms and began to frisk me briskly.

'Careful,' I muttered.

'Problem?' she snapped back.

'I'm pregnant,' I told her. 'You could be a little less rough.'

'Where your husband?' she asked rudely, glancing around.

'Why?'

'Not good to be alone here,' she told me.

'Really?'

'Perverts. Flashers. You be careful,' she said, patting my legs to check for explosives. She wasn't exactly selling Jerusalem as a tourist destination.

'Oh, okay. Thanks,' I told her. 'I'll be careful.'

At the Western Wall, I paused to watch a bar mitzvah – the coming-of-age ceremony for Jewish boys. A large family were giving whoops of encouragement to a skinny, bespectacled thirteen-year-old boy, who was reading earnestly from the Torah. 10

Around him, business went on as usual, with other Jews rocking backwards and forwards deep in prayer, and young soldiers, fresh into National service, prowling around. Taken away from their studies to safeguard their country for twelve months, they looked more intent on smoking and flirting. If there were troublemakers in the crowd I doubted they would notice.

With the warning of perverts and flashers still on my mind, when I arrived at the Jaffa Gate to walk the city's ancient stone ramparts to Lion's Gate, I attempted to tag on to the end of a German coach party (these were desperate measures for desperate times).

'This is a private tour,' a stout German woman told me.

'I didn't realize,' I lied. 'Does it really matter?'

'We paid for a private tour. Better you find another,' she barked.

I wanted to have company as I walked the ramparts that would take me past the Dome of the Rock, one of the most emblematic buildings in Islamic culture.

'I've heard that for female solo travellers it's best not to be here alone,' I told her.

She folded her arms and shook her head.

'And I'm not listening to the tour,' I added, which was true as it was in German. 'I won't bother you.' ISRAEL & JORDAN 11

'Schleich dich!' she hissed at me, which I later discovered meant 'Get lost!'

After that, it was tempting to hole up in my hotel room and if I hadn't been there on assignment I may have whiled away the remainder of my stay watching Israeli versions of *EastEnders*.¹

¹ *EastEnders* is a British soap opera set in the East End of London, which has been broadcast on the BBC since 1985. Instead, the next day I reminded myself that I had a job to do and hopped in a taxi to travel from central Jerusalem into Palestine on the West Bank, to visit Bethlehem.

'Are you sure this is the right way?' I asked, peering at a map in my guidebook. After yesterday, I'd decided that I should give maps another go. We'd veered off course, away from the main road, and were now travelling through the country lanes of a much quieter rural area. I wondered how long it would be before someone found my body in a ditch as it dawned on me that I hadn't told a soul where I was off to that day.

'Better this way,' the taxi driver told me, grinning at me in the rear-view mirror; his gold tooth glinting in the sunshine.

'But Bethlehem isn't in this direction, is it?' To be honest, I didn't really know. Rather it was a gesture, to let him know that I was on to him, so if he was indeed thinking of murdering me, he could think again.¹²

'No need to worry. We'll be there very soon,' he replied, switching on his radio as if he'd had enough of me. Questioning him further would be futile anyway. He was either going to kill me or not. Twenty minutes later, he dropped me exactly where I'd asked to go – on the corner of Manger Square – and wished me a good day like the nice man he was. As I got out of his taxi, I caught sight of a photograph pinned to the dashboard of him with his wife, two daughters and a son. I gave him a generous tip to make up for letting my imagination run riot.

Manger Square was more commercial than I was expecting, lined with market stalls selling olive wood worry beads and nativity scenes; I stopped to buy a Christmas tree decoration – a simple olive wood carving of Mary on a donkey. The focal point of the town is the Church of the Nativity where, as if by magic, raucous tour groups are reduced to quiet awe as they enter the underground chamber below the church where Mary is said to have given birth to Jesus. I'm not in the least bit religious, but with hormones kicking in and caught up in the romance of the moment I may have put my hand upon my growing bump in some kind of embarrassingly attention-seeking way as I watched pilgrims bend to kiss the spot where Jesus is believed to have been born. Really though, the place made little impression on me, and I was ISRAEL & JORDAN 13

rather disappointed. Back outside, with senses restored, I tried to work out the direction of Milk Grotto Street.

'Can we help you?' I looked up to see two good-looking young guys in their mid-twenties grinning at me.

'Oh, I'm fine,' I told them.

'Are you lost? We can show you the way,' one insisted.

'I know where I'm going,' I said, heading off in what I hoped was the right direction.

'We'll come with you. Better than being alone,' the other said, walking in step beside me. 'Where are you from?'

My heart rate sped up. 'I'd really rather be left alone,' I said, taking a sudden change in course.

'Oh, come on. Be friendly,' the first one said, touching my arm. At this unexpected physical contact, I reeled back.

'Please leave me alone. I am with child,' I said, sounding as much like the Virgin Mary as I was able. I mean, come on. I was a lone pregnant young woman standing within spitting distance of the Church of the Nativity. Surely, even these two stalkers had standards and could see the irony of the situation? It worked like a dream.

'Oh, so sorry,' one said.

'Take care of yourself,' said the other. 14

I watched them slope off with their heads hung, like a couple of King Herod's henchmen.

Once I'd reached the Chapel of the Milk Grotto, I relaxed a little. Oddly, the entrance was at the front of the main chapel and visitors entered in full view of the congregation. In a moment of embarrassment at having been thrust into the limelight, I stuffed a large donation into the offering box, and then slipped quickly by the rows of women (and a few uneasy looking men), all fiddling with their rosaries and no doubt praying for good lactation.

Through a second humble door, I stepped into the smaller chapel where Mary is said to have breastfed Jesus and experienced the kind of warm glow you get from visiting a cosy country pub or your Granny's front room. I got a flashback to a grotto at Christmas where, aged five, I'd asked Father Christmas for a Tiny Tears doll. Was I having some kind of religious epiphany (doubtful)? Or had I been reduced to a bag of raging hormones (likely)? Either way, I was glad I'd visited.

For the next part of the trip, which would take me to Eilat and then into Jordan, I wouldn't be travelling alone. The partner of a colleague of Neil's (also on the team-building jolly) had arrived in Jerusalem and would be joining me. All I knew of him was that he was American, his name was Slim and that on my return from Bethlehem he'd left a friendly note at ISRAEL & JORDAN 15

the hotel reception, which read, 'Shalom! Let's catch a cab to the airport together.'

At the designated time, I waited in the hotel foyer for my new travelling companion. When Slim arrived, I discovered that he was in his mid-fifties, wheelchair bound and a force of nature. Cracking jokes by the minute, I warmed to his live-life-to-the-full attitude and admired his tenacity. Being in a wheelchair was not going to hold him back. Going through security we stuck together, chatting all the while as he told me about his career as an art dealer in New York. I never once considered what an odd-looking couple we made, but others had.

'Can you tell me what your relationship is to this young woman?' a fierce-looking female security officer asked Slim.

'This girl? Well, I hardly know her. Picked her up at the hotel,' joked Slim, winking at me.

This was no time to be making jokes. Israeli security forces don't have time for them. Plus, Slim had intimated that I was a hooker. Not good. Not good at all. I was swiftly frogmarched into a nearby interrogation room by her. The last thing I saw was Slim mouthing 'Sorry' at me as the door clunked shut.

'What are you doing in Jerusalem?' she barked.

'Writing a feature. I'm a journalist.'

She narrowed her eyes. Foreign journalists were 16

generally considered nuisances in Israel at that time. I wondered if it might have been better to have said I was an escort.

'I write about travel,' I quickly added, but she'd already moved on.

'The man you are with, what is his name?'

'Slim,' I replied.

'This is not the name he has given.'

Of course, it wasn't. Slim was so obviously a nickname. 'Well, I expect Slim is what his friends call him. It was the name he told me, but it's probably something like Jim or James.'

From her expression, I could tell that it was neither.

'What is your relationship to him?'

'We don't have a relationship. He's the partner of a woman my husband works with.'

'And where is your husband?'

I hesitated, conscious of just how ridiculous my answer would sound. 'He's riding a camel in the Wadi Rum,' I told her.

'What for?'

I resisted the urge to say, 'F**k knows!' and instead explained that it was a team-building event.

At this information, she gave the slightest of smirks. 'And how long you stay in Israel?'

'I go to Jordan today. Could I please sit down?' I asked. I was starting to worry about missing the ISRAEL & JORDAN 17

flight, which in turn was making me feel hot and a little faint.

'No,' she told me. 'Empty your bag.'

I did as I was told, putting my camera, guidebook, purse and few other bits and pieces on the table before her, which rather embarrassingly included something called a Lady-pee (a portable loo-bag for women on the move) that I'd only tried to use once (unsuccessfully) on a night bus in China. ²

² I have made the name 'Lady-pee' up because it would be very embarrassing to be sued by a company that makes wee-bags. Even so, it went with me, like a security blanket, on all of my travels. The guard picked it up and peered at it.

'What is this?' she asked, giving it a shake. The bottom of the pouch contained wee-soaking crystals, which, when jiggled, made a sound like either gravel or crystal meth granules, depending on your levels of suspicion.

From her belt, she took a knife, which was hanging in a sheaf next to a gun, next to a taser, next to some kind of blunt instrument like a small truncheon, and split the pouch open. The white granules spilled on the counter, which she took one sniff at, then swept aside.

'Pockets,' she barked at me.

Now I really did start to panic. I'd heard stories of strip searches, and even of internal examinations. ¹⁸

I imagined the snapping sound that her rubber gloves would make as they were pulled on and thought I might cry, and then, in my pocket while searching for a tissue, I felt the crinkle of paper against my fingers. It was my twelve-week scan photo of Ernie that I'd recently taken out of my wallet to show Slim. I pulled it out and held the image out to her.

'Please can I sit down? I'm pregnant and you're frightening me. Here's a photo of my baby,' I said.

She took the black-and-white photo from me and squinted at it. In it, Neil and I had joked that Ernie looked like he was sticking his middle finger up at us, but she didn't seem to notice and I watched as her face softened to a smile. 'You can sit,' she told me.

I didn't miss the plane, although I was the last to board, and I could barely look at Slim, (who turned out to be called David), as he congratulated me about how 'no harm had been done' and that it would 'give me something to write about' (it hurts me to admit that he was right). No question though, it was Ernie who'd saved the day again.

From Eilat we travelled over the border into Jordan and on to Petra. I held it together for the two-and-a-half hours that we bounced along the imaginatively named Wadi Rum Desert Highway, a dusty road that cuts a line through a basin of sandstone and granite mountains, known as the Valley of ISRAEL & JORDAN 19

the Moon. Was this too bumpy a journey for little Ernie? Still reeling from the airport incident, I was tense and jittery, and I've never been more pleased to see Neil than when I clambered out of the jeep. So glad in fact that I burst into tears.

'I'm so stupid,' I wailed. 'What was I thinking of?'

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'It was too bumpy for Ernie,' I sniffled, putting a protective hand on the small but discernible new bulge to my stomach. 'What if I've hurt him?'

I blurted out a garbled version of my last forty-eight hours, which went something like this. 'Stupid German cow wouldn't let me join her tour group even though there were flashers. Taxi driver took me off the main road and I could have been murdered. Got followed by two men in Bethlehem and one touched me. Israeli security guards took me away. Thought I was a prostitute. Felt dizzy. Couldn't sit down. They cut open my Lady-pee with a knife.' This last sentence sounded way more painful than I'd meant it to and ended on a wail.

Understandably Neil's face portrayed a mixture of emotions, mostly alarm and confusion with the odd flicker of amusement. He asked if anything hurt (it didn't), if I was dehydrated (I wasn't), and then he insisted that I got straight into bed for a nap. He had one last unenviable afternoon of quad biking with his workmates to get through with a backside rubbed 20

raw from riding a camel. I lay there for a while, and when calm, conceded that perhaps I may have got things a little out of proportion. There was a danger now that Neil might want to wrap me in cotton wool for the remainder of my pregnancy, which would really get on my nerves. Now safe and snug under a blanket, I accepted that I would have to rethink the way I lived my life from that day on. With my mum's concern ringing in my ears, for the first time I understood the overwhelming need a mother has to protect her child. My journey as a mum wasn't beginning in another six months, it had already begun and Ernie's wellbeing (even though he was the size of an apple right now) would be my number one priority from this day on. It was Ernie who had got me out of trouble twice in the last twenty-four hours. What a great team we were already, and I was determined to look after my new little travel buddy.

'Hungry?' I asked Ernie, stroking my growing bump.

I scanned the room-service menu. Should I have the traditional falafel served with an orange and pomegranate salad or the Western cheeseburger? I ordered both. Eating for two was surely the only excuse I needed.