

The Sandbox

I managed to step through the first set of heavy, glass doors in the school foyer in spite of my oversized bag's attempt to unbalance me. Leaning against the perfectly shined glass I did a quick, blurry eyed survey of the school's wide entrance. No friends in sight, I'd stayed too long again. Determined to win at least one battle, I slammed the offending bag onto the immaculately cleaned floor and shoved the overflowing mess it contained into submission silently wishing the contents were a certain colleague whose smug criticisms still rang inside my apparently empty, American head. The battle that ensued that afternoon had drawn a crowd of both teachers and students ensuring a future Brit/Yankee rematch and laying waste to my carefully laid plans to remain effective but invisible. That had always been my special gift. Throughout school, in sports, at home or on the job, any and all assignments were guaranteed completion with breathtaking efficiency after which I could be counted on to quietly disappear until called upon. How completely unnerving it had been to have my cherished anonymity threatened by unreasonable demands. I had established a solid network of support within my small, carefully chosen work world. Anyone who wanted me to extend that association beyond my comfort zone had better bring more than haughty reproach. Their verbal arsenal had better include a little blasting powder.

Anyway, the bag finally closed and satisfied with my minor victory, I stood up to happily find myself almost straight. My phone was another matter entirely. It had begun to sweat the moment the oppressive desert heat broke the door's seal and now threatened to slip from its unsteady shoulder to ear position. I really needed to put it down, couldn't afford the cracked screen a fall would result in. But the urgency in Madison's voice made asking her to hold

impossible. So, with unexpected dexterity, I tilted to one side to balance bag and phone and reached for the door. This would have succeeded had a push been required. Unfortunately, the only two fingers I had available proved unworthy of the pull needed to open the second set of doors. I stood there for a moment contemplating my predicament and feeling as silly as I must have looked. With my head leaning against the door and my bag now balanced I was actually pretty stable, and I couldn't help but wonder if maybe no one would notice if I just slept there for the night. As I reviewed my increasingly unrealistic options, Salem stood up from his post at the sign in table. Tall, and straight backed with smooth ebony skin, and a twinkle in his eye he reached for the outer door. I knew if I'd asked, he would help me with my bag to the car. The Emirati teachers never hesitated to ask for assistance, demanded it in fact. With a haughty snap of a finger accompanied by a single word command spoken in Arabic, they would drop their bags in front of whichever guard was nearest and proceed through the door. There was no need to make eye contact, no reason to look back. The bag and the guard would follow just as surely as the bright Abu Dhabi sun would rise. After all these months in country, I knew this. So, of course, I couldn't ask, couldn't risk Salem thinking I considered myself his superior. I was American. I believed in freedom, equality and carrying my own weight, or in this case, my own stupid, heavy bag. Smiling my thanks to Salem, and silently wishing I could be Emirati if only for a few minutes, I made my ungainly way from the building to the car. Tossing the irksome bag into the back I rolled down all the windows and threw on the AC before risking a breath of the stagnant, oven level heat.

“Are you even listening to me?!” Madison was clearly exasperated by all the huffing and puffing on the other end of the phone.

“Yes, of course I am.” I replied. “Your principal called you in and tore you a new one. It wasn’t fair. She sucks. Got it.” Madison’s incessant whining was the last thing I needed after a day of fending off pencil wielding twelve-year-olds.

“That’s right! Just blow me off like it was nothing!”

I could hear the pout in her voice. See her ponytail toss through the phone.

“Madison, she’s been telling you for weeks now to stop complaining about the girls. You can’t go to her every five minutes making demands and you really have to stop talking about the Emirati staff. They don’t like it. They won’t listen. It’s just making you crazy.”

“Well they’re making ME crazy. How can I teach when they talk over me? When they yell at me in Arabic? No one backs me up. I just can’t take it much longer I swear.”

I closed my eyes and sank into the head rest as I listened to Madison’s quiet sobs. We’d arrived in Abu Dhabi a few months before, part of a group of over a thousand Western teachers brought in to work with the public schools. Some had come seeking fortune or adventure. Others, like me were fleeing. Unlike my South African or Indian friends, I had no economic disaster to propel my journey or excuse the distance I’d put between myself and my family. It was mediocrity I fled. I’d reached middle age having led an ordinary, people pleasing life. It was intolerable, the idea that I might die without ever having lived.

Madison on the other hand, she came with a plan. Her enthusiasm had been infectious. Barely twenty-six, her narrow, freckled face could often be seen smiling behind large, brown framed glasses surrounded by long, blond curls. She was a chatterbox as my mother would say. She’d been excited beyond words at the prospect of teaching in this exotic place. Within the first week enthusiasm gave way to exhaustion and then despair. Madison’s western ideas of

classroom etiquette had been quickly rejected by her Emirati charges. Indeed, it was a lesson we'd all learned from the moment we stepped into our classrooms and the baptism of fire that followed.

As I listened to Madison's latest drama, my mind went back to that first day in Al Noor. I'd arranged my desks into small groups to encourage discussion and allow for activities. My walls were filled with attractive pictures of lessons to come, helpful vocabulary words, inspiring quotes. I'd prepared a fun, get-to-know-you activity with small prizes and gifts to get us all into the spirit of a new year.

When the girls came roaring into the room, knocking each other over and going through my things, I put it down to enthusiasm. When they barely quieted down enough to hear my introduction and ask about them, I put it down to the language barrier. But, then their older sisters began banging on the door, demanding that they be allowed to speak to their siblings and becoming disturbingly aggressive when asked to return to their own classes and I learned that their true command of the English language turned out to be in the form of colorful expletives which they employed with imaginative expertise. Cajoling tones were met with indulgent smiles. Demanding tones were met with contempt. In fact, on that first day, there were no words or tones that could in any language be interpreted as effective.

After the students were dismissed, I joined the other western teachers in my grade six pod for an impromptu emergency meeting to talk survival and strategy. In the end, we figured it out: we were in their world, we would have to do things their way.

Madison refused to accept the possibility that her skills and good intentions would not eventually be recognized and appreciated. When her initial efforts were rebuffed, she redoubled

them. While the children had been amused by her misguided attempts to order them about, her Emirati colleagues had been nothing short of offended. As far as they were concerned, she'd been brought to this country as a guest. It was her job to teach the children, to love them and guide them. To criticize the children, to challenge the skills of her Emirati counterparts was not only ungrateful, it was rude. It became clear early on that changes would have to be made and Madison was resisting the idea that those changes would have to be hers.

"Are you still there?" Madison had been rambling through her tears leaving little room for response.

"Yes, of course I am." I sat up and put the car in gear too emotionally drained to choose my words carefully. Madison was in pain and needed me to listen, that was clear but what seemed less clear to my young friend was the danger she was putting herself and by association, me in. If I couldn't help her understand there would be consequences. It was past time that Madison accept that her classroom was no different from any other in the Abu Dhabi Public School System. We were all grappling to find our way and still retain some semblance of sanity. The difference was, most of us had recognized the painful truth with which she still struggled. She still thought this was a battle she could actually win.

"I'm just worried about you. You didn't get into it with the Islamic teacher, again did you?"

The silence that followed was my answer.

"Madison! You know how dangerous that is. You can't argue with an Emirati, especially the one that teaches Islam and more especially not in public. What were you thinking?!"

“They don’t know everything! They just think they do. If they would just listen. I could help so much but they act like I’m the problem just because I want the girls to behave so I can actually teach them something. I want them to be more than just someone’s wife or mother!”

“You mean the two most important roles their culture has to offer? Are you listening to yourself? You’re pushing too hard. You need to back off.”

“Why, what can they do?”

It was a stupid question. We both knew exactly what THEY would do.