

The Codeine of Jordan

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When you're a Jewish woman in a Muslim country with a nineteen-year-old Mexican boy whom your boyfriend knows nothing about and you've got a raging urinary tract infection—your thighs sore from squatting over the hole in the floor that passes for a toilet at the hotel—and you can't find an open pharmacy never mind a female pharmacist who speaks English, you can be expected to be a little cranky.

"*Aie*," Mateo says, wounded. "You don't have to snap," after I grab from his hands the guidebook that supposedly gives the location of English-speaking drugstores. I look through the book again, as if I hadn't just studied it a half-hour before, scouring the pages of this glib book written by college students half a world away. Twenty-four hours, the book said about the last pharmacy we checked. Open all the time, it promised.

We're back at the hotel now, waiting until 8:30 a.m., when I'm guessing the pharmacies might open. I have this dream right now, as I run to the toilet for the fifth time in so many minutes, unable to eke out the stream that is both razor sharp and oddly relieving at the same time. A dream that I will walk into a pharmacy and say, "Bactrim, please," and a kind female pharmacist with understanding eyes and a hijab over her hair will smile knowingly and hand over a bottle. True, at home in Seattle, Bactrim requires a doctor's visit and a prescription, but this is Wadi Musa, Jordan, so maybe it's different here. After all, you can get Tylenol with codeine without a prescription in Canada. Maybe Bactrim is the codeine of Jordan.

Mateo gently tries to rub my shoulders, but I shrug him off. "*Huevos*," he says, *eggs* being the hip swear word of the month. His tone is mock tough, but I can hear his worry. He—a Mexican-born Jew of Syrian parents—is as misplaced as I. His dark skin and Semitic nose allow him to blend in here in a way that I, even

when I'm wearing a long skirt and modest shirt, cannot. "What can I do?" he asks, nuzzling his stubbled chin against my neck. His accent is fierce. My sweet boy speaks four languages, none of them well.

An hour later at the drugstore, a sour-looking man of no more than forty, wearing a button-down white shirt and black pants, stares at me after my brief, quiet utterance of my ailment. His face is so smooth, so absent of wrinkles that it looks as if he hasn't cracked the merest of smiles in ages. As his silence continues, my panic mounts. If he doesn't know what a urinary tract infection is, I'm certainly not going to explain it, although perhaps I could somehow draw a picture?

I'm sweating through my "Love Your Mother Earth" T-shirt, having given up all semblances of modesty in my agony, even though there's a chill in the morning desert air. I need to use the toilet again, and I'm fighting back tears, because I just don't know how I got into this. Which is, of course, a lie. I know exactly how I got into this, how I didn't want to marry the boy back home, so I took a short trip abroad to find myself, and found myself taking up with a gorgeous, thin-as-a-reed, dark-toned boy nine years my junior, whom I met on the kibbutz and who was willing to travel with me to Jordan and who didn't remind me—as the boyfriend always did—to go the bathroom after having sex.

The pharmacist's eyes are a deep brown, and his eyebrows meet dangerously close in the center of his forehead. He hasn't blinked. "You need to see a doctor," he says.

I am in a country I never imagined I would be in. Far on the other side of the earth, having this phenomenal adventure, and now I am back squatting in the shared hotel bathroom, noticing nothing other than the pink tile. Actually, I could tell stories about this bathroom, I've been squatting here so long. The shower head is in the middle of the wall, with no separation from the toilet, so water could spray everywhere. Not that it sprays. It trickles slowly when off, and in a steady stream (a stream like I wish I could produce right now) when it's on. There are indents in the tile, where my feet fit nicely, and so I have to watch where I pee so as

to not wet my feet, that is if I *could* pee. The smell of rancid urine mixes with that of a cake of pine-scented deodorizer, giving the room a decayed odor, like that of a roadside gas station restroom. The door doesn't seem to lock all the way, although I can't be sure, and I lean precariously, a delicate balancing act, squatting here with one hand reaching toward the door so no unsuspecting tourist can wander in to see me perpetually posed for leap frog.

I have no idea what I've eaten an hour ago (I think I ate; I must have eaten); I didn't notice the women draped in rich blue, pure white, pale peach head scarves walking in the streets; I didn't pay attention to flakey squares of nut-filled baklava that were being laid out in delicate rows in the bakery shop window; I ignored the boxy, pale yellow cabs already lining up to ferry tourists to Petra. I'm focused like I've never been able to focus on anything before, focused on this shooting pain, and it's not the kind of adventure I had joined up for.

At the Green Crescent Medical Society, the doctor seems surprised to see me. "How can I help you?" he asks clearly, although with a distinct accent. He is a thin man, with a caterpillar-like mustache, wearing a crisply ironed white shirt and tie, which appears to be the uniform of Jordanian professional men. His face is pockmarked, dotted with acne scars. The office is cluttered with a living-room sofa, complete with tears on the side of the dark red fabric, and a pile of papers fluttering beneath a rock-like paperweight on an ornately carved wooden desk. This looks more like the study of a professor in an underfunded college than a medical doctor's office.

"I, uh, have, uh, a urinary tract infection."

His surprised expression quickly melts into a look of skepticism as he stares at me.

"I've had them before," I add. "At home I take Bactrim."

His gaze is sharp, scrutinizing. "That is a diagnosis."

I just nod.

"Are you married or single?" Ah, the all-important medical question about my marital situation. The question that will determine all that is right with the world and all that is wrong with me.

A question that gets to the root of who I am and what my worth is in life. But I didn't get to be twenty-eight without becoming used to that question, and it makes me instantly wary. A good five beats pass as I debate how to answer. If I say I'm married, he'll never know the difference. I wear a ring to discourage the men who need to be discouraged. But if there's one thing I've learned in life it's you never, ever lie to doctors. Doctors are your friends. Doctors help you. I respond, finally, "Single."

He continues with his questions and these are more in line with what I would get at home. Discoloration? Blood? Discharge? He's not getting the answers he wants. When I confess to a kidney infection about seven years back he becomes concerned.

"We need to do an ultrasound!"

"An ultrasound?" A feeling finally surfaces through the pain. That of dismay. I know about ultrasounds. Rather, I know about the cost of ultrasounds, and it doesn't fit in on a traveler's budget.

"When you've have a childhood kidney infection, you must be careful."

"But I wasn't a child! I was twenty-one!"

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-eight."

Is that a slight smile? A bit of relief I see in his gaze? No, it's actually a bug on his forehead that he's trying to swat away by furrowing his brow and dodging his head slightly. "I would have thought you were sixteen."

For fifteen minutes he grills me on my medical history, before an idea hits him. "Do you engage in non-marital intercourse?"

Again the pause, but there's no point in lying here. I think of the Mexican boy who is nervously waiting in the lobby, the darling thing who whispers to me in Spanish as we lie in bed, who tells me his father always said difficult women are worth the challenge, which, I suppose given the circumstance, is lucky for me. "Um, yeah," I mutter.

A piercing look. A deafening moment of silence. Finally, *finally*, he says, in a reprimanding tone, "Do you think this could have something to do with that?"

Well, duh! Why hadn't it occurred to me that "single" immediately translated into "virgin" in his mind? I suppose the twisted contortions I have my body in, trying to lessen the pain, must have put a kink in my brain. "Single." "Not married." Ergo "virgin."

I simply respond, "Yes." Contrition is what I am going for. I'm not sure it is working.

"Are you here with a friend?"

A friend, a friend! Yes, I'm here with a friend. Oh joy, oh happiness, I finally have the correct answer, the thing he wants to hear. "Yes!" I practically shout.

"Tell her to come in and then hop up on the table."

Foiled. "Actually, my friend is male."

He nods, at this point not surprised by anything. He calls into the waiting room, and a woman with a chubby face and a dark blue chador covering her heavy body comes in and sits on the couch in the corner. The flow of the fabric obscures her, erasing any feature that could make her distinct, and I can't even determine if she's a teenager or middle-aged. I try to look at her face, but she turns her head downward, as if she's never seen a more fascinating rug pattern. She doesn't read; she doesn't pick at her fingernails; she just sits.

"Okay, get on the table," and for a moment I panic. This man is *not* going to give me an internal! But I feel like a junkie, so desperate for that prescription, for that pretty oval green pill that's going to make my life all better that I lie on the beige medical table, surprised when he covers me with a gray wool blanket. How hygienic can that be? He lifts my shirt not even high enough to expose my belly ring, and presses on my stomach. "Does it hurt here?" I shake my head, and he moves his hand around until he reaches my bladder, and I say, "Yes."

Ten minutes and one ultrasound later ("Look here's your kidney," he said, his tone implying the obvious, when all I see are wavy lines), he declares, "You have a urinary tract infection."

Isn't that where we began? Isn't that what started this conversation? I nod.

“Are you in much pain?” he asks, his voice stoic, simply trying to gather the facts.

“Yes,” I say, when what I’m thinking is “Oh God, yes, I’m in dying pain, isn’t that obvious, why else would I be here?”

“Okay, I’ll give you a shot and a prescription. Lie down.”

Briefly I think of autoclaves and disposable needles, but it all pales when I think of the Bactrim. I turn on my stomach, knowing what’s coming next but not quite believing it. He ever so slightly pulls down my black leggings. No comment is made about the tiny daisy tattooed on my ass.

I turn toward the woman on the couch, who hasn’t moved but seems to be peering at me from the corner of her eye, and comment, “I can’t remember the last time I got a shot down there,” but she says nothing, and I can only assume she doesn’t speak English. I flinch slightly as he gives me the injection.

He and the woman leave the room so I can leap off the table and pull my leggings up the inch he had drawn them. He returns to hand me a bill, written in both Arabic and English, with the recognizable writing in big block letters as if a grade-schooler had written them. Sixteen dinars. Ten dollars. I try not to grin as I hand him the cash.

Afterward, my Mexican boy walks me to the pharmacy, where I triumphantly hand my prescription to the man with one eyebrow. Now that the shot has taken effect and the pain is subsiding, I can browse the shelves as he prepares my drug, eyeing the unfamiliar boxes with the unfamiliar writing. The boxes are plain, without the elaborate packaging I’m so accustomed to.

With pills in pocket, we head for the street, where Mateo buys me *ush al-bulbul*, the tiny treat that means “bird’s nest,” a pocket of dough filled with pistachios. We walk down the street, and I notice for the first time the empty beauty of the desert town, the store windows that look like a Midwest town caught in the 1950s, and I smell the *mansaf*, lamb in fragrant yogurt sauce, being cooked in preparation for dinner in the neighboring restaurants. My Mexican boy distracts me with talk of what we’ll see in Petra as I clutch

my beloved prescription of Bactrim—O, how I love thee!—and I swear to myself that I won’t have sex until I get back home, safe and sound in Seattle, no matter how long that takes. And I mean it. Well, for another eight hours, I do. ☺