
**Lines of tenderness in the desert sand**

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Kuwait

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Dalal writes in her notebook, “Miss, you are so angry.” My eyes slowly scan to the words I have written in red on yellow cardboard and taped to the classroom wall, ‘Anger is just hot sorrow.’ Sitting at my desk in Salmiya in the villa where I teach, I write, “Thanks, Dalal, for noticing how sad I am.” I get up from my desk, place a few books into my bag, put the computer to sleep, sign 3:30 p.m. by my name and amble towards the van that brings me to and from work each day. Sign-in time is 6:45 p.m.

No matter where I teach, I have learned that I have to burrow right inside my students’ hearts to be able to teach them anything. As almost everything in the Middle East runs counter to my deepest beliefs and pleasures, getting to feel tender towards my students and this place has been among my greatest challenges.

Without tenderness – that liquid feel that moves past my heart into my throat and then swims in my eyes, and stills me for a second with its power, connecting my heart with theirs – I cannot impress lines of tenderness in the
Common ground was hard to find in a place where culture and climate shook my Canadian roots terribly on arrival in August, where my students are both second language Arabic and learning-challenged teenagers, mostly boys. Gender is an issue here, as is religion, as are child-rearing practices where the rod is not spared. There is much conflict between the pillars of Islam and the temptation of money, conflict that creates inconsistency for my students, a hotbed for Islamic fundamentalists, and zero eye contact amongst strangers.

Arrival, August 22, 2002

On leaving the airport, a blast of 50 degrees Celsius hit me as I was ushered by three Arab men into the back seat of a Mercedes. Speeding into the unknown, I was driven to the “green building,” a sixth floor apartment in a brand new complex furnished with brand new furniture, linens and dishes all still wrapped in plastic. Inside my white plastic world, I tore at a plastic bag with my teeth, pulled out a too-small sheet and draped it loosely over the mattress in my master bedroom.

As the days pass, I have learned how to tell when I...
have reached the sixth floor in my apartment building by cigarette ash ground into a corner of the brand-new stairway, and a blackened banana peel curled on the window ledge. I scratched an "x" with my key beside the light switch as a third marker in case the harris goes on a cleaning binge. The sea of concrete buildings, and satellite dishes from every window and at every turn, as far as the eye can see, look the same.

Within the heat and loneliness and unfamiliarity of living in a place where beige and pink are the predominant colors, line upon line of buildings and honking horns, cars rushing too and fro along the King Abdulaziz Bin Abdulrahma Al Saud Expressway, Fahaheel and Ring Roads, I feel caught in what I have come to see as the underbelly of change. The political situation in Kuwait is also very hot, evacuation plans and war a routine part of conversation.

The day I walked into my classroom on September 1st, my lips pursed into a frown; shock was a part of my daily life.

Trapped in my own desolation, I began my life in Kuwait one minute at a time, hanging on my wall that old serenity prayer about accepting the things I cannot change, unable to see past my nose into the bigger picture. At my first glimpse of completely covered women on Kuwaiti Airlines, eyes cast down and somewhat dispassionate, children's faces burrowed into black polyester instead of soft skin, I felt cloak-and-dagger fear.

How much power, I wondered, must a scripture have to force women to cover their beauty, and men to expect it!

In a book with short articles about life in the Middle East, I read about the power of a creed to stifle women in Saudi Arabia.

Under full cover except for the whites of their eyes, a group of professional women, doctors and lawyers, struggled in their long black abayas, meters of black cloth like huge cocoons, into cars assembled in the desert, and drove a few miles to protest the ban on their driving. All the protestors were effectively muted by fellow Muslims, by women as outraged as men. They lost jobs and personal freedoms.

In Kuwait, which is becoming increasingly conservative, I have met several strong and intelligent women who have recently begun to pull and twist unfamiliar hijab to cover hair that is perceived to tempt men, in a show of solidarity with Muslim values.
My one female Kuwaiti student has long flowing hair with blond streaks, and I worry.

September, 2002

Dr. Anders explained to us during orientation week, “Kuwait is a shame-based society, not guilt-based like the west. Learning difficulties are a huge stigma. Our parents shelter their kids and do not expect much. Money is not an issue.” She told us the metaphor of the butterfly who frees himself from his cocoon by beating his wings against it, building muscles so he can fly. If we slit the cocoon and free him, he will die.

Some of my students are waiting for the moment they are freed, lying in their protected worlds dreaming about motorcycles and sleep. “Miss, I don't need to work,” said Abdul, already bored with his motorcycle that goes 110 kilometers an hour, and not interested in homework.

In the beginning, I felt like I was caught in a cocoon so strong that I would die trying to break through.

I do not remember the particulars of that hot uncertain autumn except that I was angry a lot. I wrote and displayed the phrase that I always hang in my classroom, **Anger is just hot sorrow.** This phrase helps me remember that a child who is acting out is actually deeply hurt.

And I knew that I was deeply hurt but that did not excuse me. It was my job to find the key to the tenderness that floats freely inside me. Luckily, I was raised in a large family who always spoke loudly and all at once like Arab students do. And I had many years of teaching experience to help me through the minutes. I could trust those instincts and structures for reading and writing and math and homework that may be carried into any teaching situation.

How could I get inside my students' hearts when mine was broken?
Slowly, very slowly.

The key to a child’s heart comes through reading, that moment in a story or poem when a choked throat almost prevents the words from coming, and I have to read slowly to dilute the pain of it. Or absorb the beauty.

One of my first tender moments in the villa was when six-year-old Ramo was killed by wild dogs in Island of the Blue Dolphins, our first novel. And, like in Genesis, there was a beginning, and there was silence! And it was good. Aziz, usually fiddling with something or fighting sleep sat up, “What happened, Miss?” And Mohamed whined, “Whyyyyy, Miss?” That moment was fleeting and shallow but real, death and violence an easy pull for most students.

To deepen their involvement now that they felt sorry for twelve-year-old Karana who had returned alone to the island to save Ramo, I had to keep the story moving despite settings and vocabulary unfamiliar to them. I learned to pull whole phrases out of the book ahead of reading, snatches of meaning I could relate to their lives or teach them about or do research on or draw: otters, dolphins, islands, effect of climate on land and people, grief, the hunt. When the phrase or idea came up in the reading their faces lit up with recognition and they felt less helpless to understand.

October, 2002

When I told them there was a film version of Island of the Blue Dolphins, they moaned, “Miss, why don’t you just show the movie instead of wasting time reading this boring book?” Though they later insisted the film was better, they kept pointing out parts that were missing, “But, Miss, they left out the part about the devilfish. Where is the tsunamis? I really wanted to see the little sea elephant beat up the big one.”

I smiled as they played into my reader's hands, “See, I told you books are better.”

None of this process was ever smooth. ‘Miss, can we just see the movie?’ still piqued my frustration as I struggled to keep the kids in place in the tiny reading corner. ‘Dalal, you are too close to Mohamed; you are not even supposed to be in the same room! Aziz, five minutes out! Aziz, wake up! Huff! Puff!’ They were seldom riveted to their seats, except when there was death or violence, but we finished the book.
In Kuwait, a city that has mushroomed from a fishing village to a rich, modern city in a very short time due to its rich reserves of oil, the culture has been an oral one and reading is not natural yet, not an ingrained activity. So, I explained to the children about neurological impress and drew diagrams of the recipe box mind and how a person has to see words many times before they become filed there, automatic like driving a car. And I added, “When that happens you are a reader and the world opens up to you.”

And, like good writing, I know I have to show them that, give them a taste for it.

“What to do,” accompanied by a shrug is a common Kuwaiti expression when something is beyond control. “What to do? What books to read?” I stewed. Muslims are afraid of Western ideas corrupting their children. Our librarian was directed by the censors to slash silver marker over the upper thigh of a female diver in my math book. I had to erase Israel from my unit on Southwest Asia, delete kissing from movies. One of my students looked towards the wall each time Scheherazade got close to the sultan in Arabian Nights. Charlotte’s Web is banned.

Their experience is deserts and heat, not mountains and seasons and snow, Ramadan not Christmas, giving up food and water for up to fifteen hours a day for thirty days and praying five times a day, not giving up chocolate for lent, abundance not poverty, intact families and multiple moms, not divorce. Cats are haram (bad), not cute little furballs that they love. Honour can be threatened by losing a taekwondo match or getting a C+ instead of a B- in writing. Mohamed asks every day, “Miss, do I have any C’s? My father doesn’t like C’s.” Few flowers and trees grow in Kuwait.

November, 2003

I have some success with poetry, especially a poem called “Moon” by Jean Gay, as we could all remember the moon broken into pieces over the Arabian Gulf. As we read, I recalled that same moon over the China Sea, and over Selby Lake in my backyard in Quebec,
how the same light reflected back into the same water refracts into shimmering pieces and dances everywhere. I showed them these places on a map, how far apart and how similar. Jean Gay and they and I connected inside the moon, timeless and round.

In my effort to understand the culture, I came across an adult short story that touched me and I thought, “My students will love this!” It was about a wizened Arab who prods his donkey right past the barriers at the airport in Morocco, anxious to meet his son who has been studying in France for five years, “Ooohoo! Bouchaib. Ooohoo, my son!” He has sold all his land and goods to educate Bouchaib, spent his last money to prepare a huge feast to welcome him back home, proudly invites the policeman who is trying to restrain him.

Embarrassed by all the commotion, Bouchaib tells his golden-haired wife to wait a moment, scurries over to his father and whispers fiercely, “I will come to see you in a few days, once I get my wife settled.”

My students listened to the story but did not feel the deep sorrow of the father, the shame of the son, nor see the connection between Bouchaib and why their parents resist western culture, as I did. But they loved to call, “Ooohoo! Bouchaib. Ooohoo, my son!” Similarly, they often repeated the pronunciation of cricket by the Chinese storyteller from *Cricket in Times Square*. One of them said, “clicket,” and everybody laughed. I knew I had to figure out how to use this oral pleasure of theirs to encourage their reading and guide my selections.

**November, 2002**

To get closer to my students, now that I have my foot in the door, I fast with them during Ramadan, no water nor food from the moment the “white thread separates itself from the black” at 4:30AM until dusk at 5:00PM for thirty days. Instead of lunch, we have a 25 minute rest break except for my one American student who hides in a backroom to eat and keeps her water in the washroom as it is against the law, and cruel, to eat or drink in public during Ramadan. Sometimes I allow one or several students whose heads keep nodding, eyes closing, to sleep in the reading corner for an hour or more during the day. Their lips are chapped and their breaths stink, and they often cannot focus.

*Fasting with them increases the tenderness.*
Sometimes when my mouth was puckered from thirst they said, “Drink, Miss, you do not have to do this.” We played Scrabble and Monopoly together instead of eating, and we shared the dizziness that sometimes happens. I was surprised that they did not know how to place the letters, nor count the score in Scrabble. They winked at each other thinking they were distracting me from reading, and I let them think that, satisfied that they were making words.

Ramadan fatigue encouraged a bit of film, and as we watched The Arabian Nights, the movie about Scheherazade telling stories to save her life, I smiled, “See how important it is to read. There are so many great stories waiting for you, your culture is so ancient and so rich and so intelligent.”

They grinned, “Yes, Miss, we know.”

Their writing was stiff and dry like their reading, something they seldom did but knew they should, like brushing their teeth which many of them avoid, “How many lines, Miss? How many words? What do you want us to write about?” On the first day, I showed them my writer’s notebook and told them they were required to write every day like me, about something they remembered. And every day I responded to their ideas:

“Wow, Aziz, you drive your motorcycle one hundred kilometers an hour down the highway! What does it feel like? What if you get caught?” And he explained how the patrolman is either a relative or family friend or just chucks him on the head and says to be careful, or how a friend with a mobile alerts him to make a detour.

I asked about the wedding ceremony Mohamed was all excited to attend, when he described the disdasha and the kutra he would wear and how handsome he imagined looking, “Please tell me exactly what happens. What is the disdasha made from? Do you wear pants under it? Are you serious that the men never sit with the women?”

“Do you put the corpse right in the ground?”

“You mean only men can go to the cemetery during a funeral? Will your mother be able to attend your burial?”

I was fascinated by their experiences and often said, “Gosh, I wish you would write a book. Kids in Canada would be so interested in your ideas.”

November, 2003

As a group, we write class poems about the desert and sleep and Ramadan. They write about their
experiences of camping in the desert, funeral ceremonies where they bury the corpse facing Mecca and weight him down with stones, soccer in 50 degrees Celsius heat, going to the chalet for the weekend, the pillars of Islam, their fidelity. So curious about their fasting and their iftars (first meal at dusk during Ramadan, called breakfast) and their families, I encourage them to write their experiences as to an alien. And that is how I feel at times.

Consistent and persistent, one minute at a time moved now to one hour and one day at a time; slowly they explain and slowly I learn about their culture, about their God, about their habits. And they learn how interesting they are, and their writing gets richer, and they sometimes ask, “Miss, can we write longer?”

And I always say, “Yes, how much time do you need?”

Recently, when I went to pick up my students from PE, I was met by a hubbub of voices, “Miss, Khaled is sitting out by the road. Captain is going to take him to the hospital.”

Seven kids in tow, the first time they were all present in almost the whole month of Ramadan, I ran to the sidewalk where six-foot Khaled was sitting on a chair grimacing in pain. He swallowed and said, “Hi, Miss.”

“Oh, no, Khaled, what happened?” In the midst of chaos, the coach arrived with the car. Mohamed asked if he could go with Khaled and, noticing his eagerness to help his friend, I said, “Of course.” We walked back in the hot sun to our classroom. Again, I asked, “What happened?” Well, everyone was talking at once and throwing themselves on the floor and picking up their pant legs to show me what happened. I laughed out loud, “Never mind, we’ll call the hospital at lunchtime.”

On the way to the hospital, Khaled told Mohamed, “Pack my books and my driver will pick them up. Don’t forget to write down the homework.” Later, Mohamed, usually active and innocent like a puppy, soberly packed Khaled’s homework with Dalal's help.

He phoned his dad to ask if he could go to his friend. When he hung up he mused, “That’s the first time my father was not mad when I asked to go visit a friend.” It was almost as if he grew up that day.

February 2003

When I visited Khaled in hospital two days later, he
was surrounded by his whole extended family the whole time, many relatives coming in and out during the few minutes I was there. His sisters served cardamom coffee from tiny gold-rimmed cups, and Belgian chocolate. The room was inundated with the scent of huge bouquets and bahour, a type of bark that is burned over charcoal and wafted under clothing, an exotic scent I will always associate with Arabia. I sat in that large room and learned first-hand the importance of family as I watched Khaled’s shy grin and listened to his father’s explanation about the pin in his leg and Khaled’s healing. His father was in dishdasha, his mom and sisters in western dress and all the other women in abayas and hijab.

The dress of Kuwaitis varies, but graciousness and decorum are standard.

As I sat there I thought, "This story has to be written."

My students mostly believe that I want to understand, to help, despite the days the whole thing falls apart. My two girls are often absent or say they are sick, loll on their desks with headaches and stomach problems. One very active boy sucks my energy, three often come late, three do not do much homework, two often fall asleep by fifth period since their families are often up very late, and one lashes out with his thin fingers to touch things like me.

One day I went to watch my students play in a soccer game in the desert sand. They were losing desperately, playing without heart. “Captain, can I take off my shoes?” my Bedouin student asked over and over. Seeing their predicament, Captain shrugged his shoulders and nodded. Aziz came alive. His brand new blue soccer socks flashing, he helped his team score four goals in ten minutes.

“Aziz, it was amazing how much more focused you were with your shoes off! You guys would have won if you'd had ten more minutes to play.”

“I’m Bedouin, Miss.”

I wondered if Aziz’ shoe trick would work in the classroom. Aziz is one of the sleepers. Often he stays up past one or two o’clock in the morning; either because he is in the desert camping, or at the chalet on the Arabian Gulf; or because it is Ramadan; or he is just being Arab in Kuwait, where it is too hot to be awake in the daytime half the year.
Mohammed also played in the soccer game. I remembered how angry he had been when his brother had lost at taekwondo, smashing his fist into his hand and muttering angrily, “...I told people he was good, and he embarrassed me.” I told Mohamed, “That soccer game got really exciting. You guys played well. I am very proud of you.” Leaning down to tie his shoe, he did not say anything, just a fleeting smile.

February 2003

I watch their taekwondo fights. I change a mark from a C+ to a B- knowing the difference saves huge shame, and sometimes I protect them from each other's prejudice, “What is the thing with Bedouin being an insult?” I ask the whole class. “I don't understand when you hurt him by saying he is Iranian.”

I do not say much, just that none of it make sense to me. And when there is tenderness and shared experience and positive regard, it means a little when I say that.

On the last day of Ramadan, I had some time alone with my difficult student as only two out of six came to school. “Asmi, you chose the values of aspiration, virtue and realization as described in Voices of the Heart, to represent you in your collage. You wrote these are kind things and you like them. You wrote that a thing that is bothering you is homework. Do you think a fairy is going to fly in the window and tap you with her wand, Poof! Now you can read and do math, now you can join the police academy?”

Asmi smiled at this, “No, Miss.”

“Do you think that even if you work hard you will not be able to pass? Is that the problem?”

A half nod, a tiny boy who gives himself injections of growth hormone each morning, probably too late, and has a blackbelt in taekwondo, Asmi stared at me with huge eyes with long black lashes, liquid eyes that he has learned to use. “Maybe.”

I am reminded that anger is just hot sorrow.

“Asmi, there is no fairy. You made a neat collage with your ideas from Voices of the Heart. I’m glad you came today so we had a chance to talk alone.”

Last week during a math test Dalal remarked, “I’m starting to get the hang
of these problems, Miss!” Other students nodded, and I remembered how in the beginning they had always left word problems blank. And it felt tender, as I paced between their desks while they scratched away so seriously on their tests, drawing pictures, underlining words and taking chances.

Yesterday, Asmi called me like he usually does after getting down one line of work, one math example, “Miss, miss!” and then, sotto voce, “Oh yes, I have to get it all down first.” And he sat back down and concentrated for ten minutes.

As I finally finish off this piece, we are on the brink of war in February, over halfway through the year. Today I watched Aziz and Asmi get defeated in a taekwondo tournament, the same day I discussed with my director the possibility that I might leave for home at the end of this week because I jump at each loud sound, and my daughter wrote, “COME HOME!!!”

As I ponder my time here I think of how much I have learned; how another valve has been opened inside me that channels a difficult and gracious experience in the Middle East into my reckoning of the world; how disdasha and kutra have become familiar; how I accept that the husbands will sit separate from their wives at the clinic as I wait to get my plantar warts operated; how I feel more empathy for Palestine, and how I am still by the piety, feel some concern at its power and some wonder at its certainty.

Departure, March, 2003

Today at work, Miss Ameena, the librarian, gave me a plastic bottle with water from Makkah and some shiny black prayer beads. She told me the water was a miracle sent to quench the thirst of Abraham’s second wife, Hagar, banished to Makkah by God when his first wife, Sarah, became jealous. I looked at the water and up to Ameena’s hijab and careful smile, “You made
my day, Ameena. I will keep this water in a special bottle.”

“No, drink some, drink all of it if you want, it will help you.”

I carefully taped a piece of paper around the water bottle and labeled it Holy Water and Zam Zam, thinking, “Carpe diem.” But I was already imagining the delicate Egyptian blown glass perfume bottle sitting on my mantle in Canada, “Oh, and this is Zam Zam, holy water from the Hajj my friend's family made to Makkah when I was in Kuwait.” And how I would feel like a world traveler with my trophy case.

As I sit here writing, I think, ‘I better drink that water. It is not meant to be hoarded in a pretty jar. Drink it with Ameena and tell people how it was to be Christian in Kuwait and how holy the water felt – Muslim holiness evoking the same tenderness as the words written for me by the Buddhist monk near the sky burial fields in Sichuan; or the thin wafer and grape juice I shyly shared with the congregation in my small church in Dunham; Shabat dinner with Marion; or the toothless smile of the wrinkled old Chinese woman in Yangshuo who looked at me with sparkling eyes and said, ‘Go carefully.’”

Pedagogy of the heart and unfamiliar landscapes slowly intermingle and change. My heart ever opens and shuts in response to the difference that shocks, then warms and slowly insinuates itself inside me, broadens my longing and deepens my compassion. Then real learning happens, mine and my students.
Editor's Note

I received Gay’s final copy of her article the day before she left Kuwait which was a week before the first bombs fell. She returned to Canada a few days before Coalition troops entered Baghdad. This photograph arrived in my mailbox a week later forwarded by Gay from a colleague in Kuwait who was involved in a romantic liaison with the photographer. Massimo (a nom de plume) was working in a classified position with the Coalition army. Gay’s colleague had decided to remain in Kuwait with him and to record the events through photography.

Haunted by the memory of the children she had left behind, Gay returned to Kuwait two weeks later to spend the remainder of the war with her students.

About the Author – Gay Grannary

Known as Gay Girl Gabby Gut Grannary when I was a girl, I have never stopped asking questions, curious to understand everything. “Thanks, Kurt,” I said when my teenage brother handed me a little red diary with a lock on it when I was twelve years old. I did not know that he would die almost exactly a year later, and I stroked over and over again the words scrawled there about him. I dedicate to him Lines in the desert sand and that first diary that I have carried into each class I have had in Quebec, China and now Kuwait. I show my students the childish writing and share some of the memories that flash fresh each time I read them. I tell them about the words that describe all the forty years between then and now, some of it found between the lines in the desert sand.