

**I Don't Know You, Sister: Tales from a Diasporic Reencounter**  
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I wore short shorts to the airport.

I had been living in Copenhagen for about 7 months, and it had been the worst summer anyone had remembered, arriving after the worst winter anyone had ever remembered. It had rained everyday since May, and the temperature had not risen above 13 degrees (Celsius. One other unit I had to learn to think in, and my errors and pauses would provoke the unavoidable “why do you Americans insist on using different units than the rest of the world?” conversation to which I had grown extremely accustomed.)

So, in celebration of my yearly trip back “home” to sun-drenched Lebanon (the place my parents are from and where my sister lives) I donned a pair of my shortest shorts and hopped on the metro to the airport.

Just as the trip to one’s lover’s house is filled with fond flashes of past touches, caresses, and illicit whispers, as soon as I sat on the metro, memories of my past trips to Beirut began washing over me. In truth, I have always thought of my summers in Lebanon as romantic flings: short and sweet, bursting with emotion, and usually better in retrospect. When I was there I felt strange, distant, and foreign, but when I was back in the States I missed the place and proudly identified as Arab. It was a classic first-generation kid’s problem: Jhumpa Lahiri could have probably written it much better than I. Like many other Lebanese and Palestinians living in the States, my parents had started taking me back to Lebanon after the war ended. And since then I had grown so accustomed to this yearly pilgrimage that long after I had stopped going on family vacations I still tried to make the trip on my own.

Hence me now running into the Copenhagen airport trying to find the helpdesk for Middle East Airlines. In my short shorts.

For a bit at least, the short shorts were also for my boyfriend. After 7 months of big sweaters, boots, and earmuffs I wanted to give him something to remember me by before I left him alone for 2 weeks. “Have a safe trip on airline intifada” he quipped as I kissed him goodbye at the entrance of the airport. I gave him a look and he apologized, but I was unfortunately used to these jokes. The Danish sense of humor was probably the hardest and most confusing part about my time in Europe. It was a place where left-wing, open-minded, smart people openly used words like faggot and nigger (always in jest) supposedly as a way to comment on the absurdity of racism and homophobia. As an Arab American, knowing the history of hate and violence connected with each word, I looked on in amazement as my friends used them free of connotation, free of the weight of history. I came to realize that rather than being weighted by the memories of racial apartheid, my Danish friends were weighted by memories of the fear of fascism. This different history produced a fundamentally different relationship with freedom of expression, and how words work.

They also saw the US as a violent and oppressive place, with values counter to those of Denmark. The only thing sacred to Danes is equality. And because they feel so strongly that their society had found equality, they could say nigger and faggot and dyke and awful words because they were nothing more than a relic of a past and unrealistic time. Which is why the new immigrants to Denmark seemed to trouble even the most progressive Danes. Suddenly in a country where everyone had always been equal, power dynamics for the first time showed their face. They felt their little bubble about to pop, so they clung on to it as hard as they could while it was still there.

Which is why I didn't even give a thought to the fact that I was now lugging a rather heavy suitcase in my little itchy bitsy shorts. And the only moment I noticed the shortness of my shorts was when I got to the check-in line for the plane heading to Beirut.

Whenever I flew to Beirut from the States, the only thing I would notice was how similar everyone looked to me. Standing in line, chatting in half Arabic and half English, I felt a shared history with these strangers that I missed in my everyday American life. And indeed, there was a shared past for those of us in line. Most of us were descendents of Christian migrants from Beirut or the close suburbs. We were educated, upper-middle class, and on our way back to Lebanon to visit our grandmothers in their apartments. This is the vision I had always had of going back to Lebanon.

This was not the case in the Copenhagen Airport. The line was filled with women in full hijab, with families of five or six children with as many suitcases. Bigscreen televisions were piled on portable wrapped fish tanks piled on boxes of not-yet-assembled Ikea furniture, all ready to be presented to families back "home." I was carrying one suitcase, a purse, and holding one bottle of Danish bitter to give to my sister upon arrival. I could feel eyes staring at my bare legs and one suitcase and suddenly my trip "home" felt like a trip to a country to which I had never been. I even felt the impulse to snap a picture of these exotic people. What Lebanon were they going to? And why wasn't I part of it?

My experience as a half-Lebanese, half-Palestinian American in Copenhagen had been filled with that same sense of false belonging and *déjà vu*. Paradoxically, in Copenhagen I was surrounded by people like me: people who had been born in a western nation to immigrant parents. Presumably like me, they had had to negotiate two cultures, two languages, and two "homelands." But somewhere in this negotiation, things had turned out differently. The diasporic reality of living in Denmark versus the US had turned us, the first-generation kids, unrecognizable to each other. In truth I related much better to the Danish people I met. In Copenhagen my identity transformed from an Arab American immigrant to an American expat within 7 months. In the US I was a person of color, an Arab part of a large community of first-generation Arab Americans coming to terms with our sometimes-conflicting identities. In Copenhagen I was an American with dark features.

Which is probably why the person behind me in line chose English when he pointed to the open counter ahead of us. Even he knew I didn't quite belong in the equation, and that I must be a

foreigner on a layover. Again looking down at my very bare legs, I smiled and thanked him, and then grabbed my luggage and went to the counter.

“Is that all you have to check in?” The man at the counter said to me as I gave him my suitcase.

“Yup.” I replied, and handed him my American passport.

“And that is all your hand luggage?” he asked, gesturing to the small leather purse I was holding. I nodded, and waited for him to hand me my ticket.

The man at the counter began to laugh. “I am so, so happy someone like you is in my line! I am upgrading you to business class. I don’t want you sitting with *them*...you know there are 30 infants checked on to this plane? You need your rest.”

And just like that, I was upgraded to whiteness. Although I was euphoric at the thought of flying business class (as I had never sat in business class before) I felt ill at ease. Perhaps it was his use of “*them*” so many times, or how easily I was upgraded, as if it were the natural place for me. Or maybe it was that the feeling of difference, and my keen sense of not belonging seemed to be acknowledged and validated by the people around me. On my trip back to my people, everyone around me seemed to tell me that I was the foreigner.

As a person with no fixed nation state, is my identity as fluid as people’s relationship with any one of the nations I exist in? I am Arab American in the US because my relationship with the Arab world, and my fellow Americans relationship with the Arab world seem to have some consensus. In Copenhagen everything shifted. Because I didn’t fit into people’s conception of an Arab, I was no longer one, neither to outside groups or inside groups. Out of my own context, I was a blank slate for people to project onto. And I did the same to others. I thought when I moved to Copenhagen I would be meeting long-lost brothers and sisters of the same diaspora, but instead I was sitting in booty shorts on an airplane, chatting with a Danish journalist about American politics.