

Puzzles

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Mom and I studied each puzzle piece with the intensity of an archeologist who just discovered a rare artifact. The sheer curtains swayed in the warm, refreshing spring breeze off the Mediterranean. We had set up a card table in the petit salon, off the larger living room. The marble tile chilled my feet when I shifted in the folding chair.

We had just finished creating the border of our jigsaw puzzle when we heard a bird chirp. My mind wandered as I fingered the abstract inside pieces. We continued working in silence, trying to make sense of the puzzle without a guiding picture. Mom brought it home in a clear plastic bag and announced, "It will be a challenge not knowing the picture!" More like a distraction. We had been in Lebanon just over a year, and we both needed activities to keep busy. I needed to avoid obsessing over a boy in my class and the confusing seventh-grade dating rituals. Mom needed relief from the constant worry of living in a war zone.

In November 1976, the bank my dad worked for asked him to manage their Middle East Region. A few years earlier, he had declined the same offer. To deny them again would jeopardize his career, so in January 1977, our family moved to West Beirut from a comfortable Connecticut suburban life, where Dad commuted to New York City via the Penn Central trains; where Mom had just completed her master's degree in special education; where my brother played ice hockey; and where I took dancing and horseback riding lessons.

Although the Lebanese civil war—known as The Troubles by the Lebanese—had lulled, it still percolated. Skirmishes bubbled up regularly. Instead of crossing the CT-NY state border, Dad crossed the ominous Green Line dividing the city: West to East, Muslim to Christian. The Green Line was an invisible barrier, void of life, between warring factions,

guarded by snipers. Mom, my brother, and I stayed on the west side; our school, the American Community School (ACS), was adjacent to the American University of Beirut and a short drive from our apartment. While we did not have the same dangers as Dad crossing town, we had no doubt about the dangers surrounding us. Checkpoints with soldiers shouldering AK-47s, armored vehicles, buildings bleeding bricks into the streets and pock-marked with bullet holes were part of our daily scenery.

We did our best to blend in, but assimilating came with sacrifices and challenges. We struggled to find equilibrium without our old hobbies and activities. I felt like a square peg in a world of round holes, holes left by bullets and mortars and voids left by former family frolics. Ice rinks and dance studios did not exist, and there were no horses to ride – they had been shot for their meat. ACS hired Mom to teach English as a Second Language, but the job did not fully distract her from her daily worries and fears. After several months, the tensions of war created tensions within the home. Although not outwardly hostile, my parents were at odds about living in a hardship zone. My brother zoned out, and I stayed in a neutral zone, hoping everything would be just fine.

Another trill—louder and urgent—interrupted my thoughts about how best to ask mom about an invitation I had received. After another trill, Mom said, "It sounds like it's inside." We went on a search. We listened. The chirps seemed to come from the bedroom wing, down a marble hallway off the front hall. We searched the guest room, the closest to the front hall. My brother's and my rooms followed; after being certain the bird was not in any of those rooms, we closed the doors. At the end of the hall, the master bedroom suite door was open. The hall extended about five feet beyond a "front door." To the left was the bathroom and to the right the bedroom, the darkest room in the apartment. While the other three bedrooms had south-facing sliding glass doors leading to a long balcony, the master

bedroom suite only had a window and a small door to the balcony. The dark wood furniture, mocha quilted bedspread, and heavy curtains created a somber ambiance.

The small sparrow blended in well with its dark surroundings. At first, we doubted it was in the room; it remained still and quiet while we waited and listened. Convinced it wasn't in the room, we headed toward the door. Our movement made the bird flutter to the top of the bureau mirror. For several minutes, we played stalk-and-fly. The bird allowed us to get so close, and then would flit to another perch.

"Close the door," Mom whispered. The bird had just done a fly-by near the open door.

"What? How are we going to free the bird?" We had no real plan to help set it free.

"We need to keep it in this room. We're lucky the cat hasn't come in yet." Mom had a point.

With the door closed, Mom explained the only way to free the bird was to coax it out the window. Since neither of us had brought the key to unlock the balcony door, she slid the window open about six inches. Then she pulled the curtain closed except for the opened six inches.

"Pull the balcony door curtain closed," she directed.

"Why are we closing the curtains?"

"The bird won't see the glass and could fly into it. If they are flying too fast, well..."

I remembered the living room window at my friend Sarah's house in Connecticut. It was large, taking up most of the front wall of the house. Her father had placed special decals on the window. Sarah explained the decals prevented birds from flying into a window and breaking their necks, or worse, if they had enough speed.

"Do you think she could get that much speed in here?"

"I don't know, but she'll focus on the light from the opening. Let's stand on the other side of the room and herd her to the window."

Herding a bird is not easy. The bird alternated between the top of the headboard and the dark veneer of the mirror frame. Minutes passed and still the bird had not ventured toward the window. As Mom and I stood quietly, the bird seemed to relax. Mom put a finger to her mouth signaling not to speak, and with her other hand pointed to the edge of the bureau. I took a step in that direction. Mom made a step toward the bed. We began to inch our way to the bird's two favorite perches.

The bird took flight toward the window, flew by the curtains, turned towards us, CHIRP, and circled again. It landed on the top of the armchair near the balcony door. She cocked her head left and then right, assessing her options. We stood still. She hopped in small increments along the back of the armchair, inching closer to the window. With a final chirp, she flew to her freedom.

Once the bird escaped, we sat in the darkness and quiet. My mind returned to seventh-grade thoughts.

"Mom, how-do-you-know-if-you're-in-love?" It was less of a question and more of blurting out of words. A forever tomboy, I was embarrassed to admit I liked a boy. I was also embarrassed to ask a woman who was watching her marriage dissolve. I felt selfish to ask, but who else did I have? My brother's and my relationship, once close, had disintegrated like the ashes at the end of his joints. Dad was too busy with work responsibilities. Shrapnel from The Troubles of a small, beautiful country had exploded into our nuclear family unit, fragmenting the pieces of a once interconnected family life.

The real question, though, was about permission. Asking forgiveness was not an option, especially given what I wanted to do.

"Why do you ask?" Mom had a keen sixth sense, even through the fog of anti-depressants. My parents knew that just a week earlier at a friend's party Ramsey and I had finally started "going steady" after flirting for months. My first boyfriend. In my pre-teen awkwardness, I had even asked Dad for permission to have a boyfriend.

"Ramsey asked me to go his family's farm on Saturday."

"Where's the farm?" Its location was why I needed permission: The farm was in Sidon, in the south of Lebanon, where the war was more active.

After the typical pre-adolescent pleading and justifications—his brothers will be there, his grandfather's driver will take us, and his grandfather will be with us in the car and at the farm, I've never gone, Joe (my brother) gets to do all kinds of cool trips...

Mom replied, "I'll talk to your dad." We returned to the jigsaw, wondering what picture the pieces would reveal.

That night, I lay in my single bed, my room sandwiched between my parents' and brother's rooms. I felt caged by the thick cement walls of unhappiness on either side. To the right, shouts and angry words, although muffled, still pierced through. To the left, the bass notes of Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti* marked time until I fell asleep, feeling alone.

I woke up to the iconic BBC pips announcing the top of the hour. A proper British voice echoed down the hallway from Dad's bathroom, "This is the BBC. It's five o'clock Greenwich Mean Time," followed by the morning's news headlines.

A few months earlier, despite my aversion to jogging and early mornings, I had started waking up at six to join Dad for his morning exercise. Jogging seemed a silly exercise to me. I already ran plenty. At school, we played capture the flag or tag or just ran because we had too much pent-up energy. Important executives, however, did not get exercise

behind their desks and conference tables. Mornings were Dad's only option since he often came home just before dinner. For me, jogging became quality father-daughter time.

I heard Dad turn off the water. He was done brushing his teeth and almost ready. I rolled over, debating my options. I feared a rejection of my request. Not knowing all day would be worse, though, so I got dressed in a t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers.

Exiting our apartment building, Dad checked his new digital watch purchased in Switzerland during our summer vacation. In 1978, digital watches with timers and stopwatches and alarms were technological marvels. Just past six in the morning, few cars passed; morning was one of the few times of day the streets were quiet of the cacophony of horns. Taxis, known as *services* (pronounced *serveecee*), tooted their horns to attract fares. If you waved off one taxi, the one immediately behind would toot its horn, hoping you needed it instead of the other guy's. Dad's stopwatch beeped our starting time. We started to hoof our way down what is now Avenue du Charles de Gaulle, toward the beach.

I'd like to say it was awesome to see the Mediterranean daily. I suppose in the larger mosaic of life it actually was. However, at the time, raw sewage oozed from a pipe nearby, dulling what should have been sparkling azure water. Some mornings our route had a certain malodor prompting us to hasten our pace.

A lone *services* drove past tapping its horn. The driver looked at us intently. We must have been an odd sight: Exercise had not yet caught on as a world-wide craze, especially in a country whose citizens' exercise often involved dodging the next bullet. Dad and I waved him on.

Beyond the beach, turning inland, Dad and I sought places for solid footing between mountains of rubble and debris from the surrounding shelled buildings. Bullet marks freckled the exterior walls that still stood. Refugees squatted in the apartment buildings in good

enough shape to risk residency. We rarely saw the residents, just evidence of life: laundry hanging on clotheslines; chickens clucking and strutting on balconies; infant cries through an open window. An occasional onlooker regarded us curiously, a father-daughter team out for a bizarre western ritual that involved expending energy for no obvious reason. Until two days earlier, the only change each morning had been the color of the clothes hanging to dry.

I glanced at my watch. We would be back home in about six minutes. I feared Dad wouldn't remember to talk to me. Dad kept pace a few steps ahead. Just as I was about to pick up my pace to catch up, I heard the bleat, the noise that had interrupted our morning musings the previous two days.

Baaah-aah-aah-aah. I looked over my shoulder. Nothing.

Again, Baaah-aah-aah-aah. I looked between the buildings. Nothing. I sidled up next to Dad.

Baaah-aah-aah-aah. I looked at Dad, puzzled, and he at me.

"Where is it?"

A fourth bleat. "There!" Dad said.

"Where?" I scanned the road, seeing nothing but red dirt, a road full of potholes, and some palm trees. A fifth bleat.

"Look up." He pointed—on the fifth-floor balcony railing of an apartment building balanced a small white goat. She surveyed us from her perch.

"Baaah-aah-aah-aah." Was she goading us for clinging to an American behavior such as jogging in such a non-American environment? Was she merely saying Good Morning to the only souls in sight? "Baaah-aaah-aaah-aaah!"

"Why is she up there?" I asked.

"The family probably keeps her for milk."

"Won't she fall?" My cat often walked our fourth-story balcony railing. She had expended two of her nine lives falling into the second-story balcony—an amazing acrobatic feat considering the balconies were not staggered.

Goats, however, naturally maneuver in the most unlikely, inhospitable territory, climbing and balancing on precipices that boggle the laws of physics. To the goat, balcony standing was nearly normal, living up high on precarious perches. Even in an unnatural environment, she acted like a goat. We defined a new goat species that morning: The Lebanese Mountain Goat, just as loud, stinky, and troublesome as other goats, yet it had learned to survive among man-made treacheries of balconies, shelling, and confined apartments. She was stubbornly behaving like a goat.

Weren't we essentially doing the same: Clinging to our true natures in a foreign and troublesome landscape? An attention-starved girl who learned to jog in order to keep the family dynamics "normal" among the treacheries of war. An up-and-coming bank executive who exercised away the stress of crossing between hostile territories. Jogging was our Switzerland: a neutral activity we shared in an effort not to lose ourselves to the chaos.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"Did Mom talk to you about me going to Ramsey's farm?"

He was quiet. Ahead was a slight incline we typically sprinted in the final stretch back to the apartment building.

"Let's sprint first," he said.

In front of the apartment building, we walked in small circles with our hands on our hips gulping for air. I paused and bent forward. When I straightened up, Dad was observing me.

"So, Ramsey invited you to his house?"

"Not his house. His family's farm in Sidon."

"It's not safe there."

"But I'll be with him and his grandfather, brothers, and a bunch of others. It's not like I'm going alone."

"I dunno—"

"It's not fair!" I exploded. "Joe gets to take his motorcycle wherever he wants. He even went to the Israeli border. I don't get to do anything." I had pulled the unfair card, but I didn't care. I just wanted to spend a day with someone who would hold my hand and smile and make me laugh.

Dad studied me for a moment. He sighed—a tell-tale sign he was considering it. "I'll think about it. Let's talk tonight."

I suffered through dinner anticipating teasing from Dad and Joe. Instead Dad and I regaled about finding the goat. Mom laughed at all the right places, but only audibly; her eyes betrayed her concern and depression. Joe seemed to respond to the conversation with a seven-second delay. After dinner, Joe stole back to his room. Mom and Dad asked me to stay at the table for a moment.

Faster than a sniper's bullet, I evaluated their faces. Mom simply looked tired. Dad had on his business face. No hints as to their answer. Letting me go was risky. Cell phones did not exist yet, and the land lines in Lebanon were sketchy on a good day. If anything bad did happen, letting my parents know would be a challenge.

"Your mom and I have discussed letting you go to Sidon," Dad said and then paused. I hated when he paused. "It's dangerous there. But," he paused, "it's dangerous everywhere."

Remember the stray bullet that hit your brother's window? A stray bullet could get any of us—at work, at school, at the golf club." He paused. The anticipation was killing me. I was waiting for his stray bullet of "no" to pierce my heart. "We have decided to let you go. Just be smart if you hear any shots or shells being fired." The consummate banker, Dad used words economically; these few words expressed his trust, his worry, and his love simultaneously.

I jumped up and hugged Mom and then Dad. "Thank you! Can I call him to let him know?"

"Of course. Ask what time they'll pick you up and what time we can expect you back. It's just a day trip, right?" Mom replied.

"Yes," I answered. I ran down the hall to my bedroom, praying Joe hadn't called his girlfriend. We had one phone line.

On Saturday morning, I did not mind waking at six o'clock. I waited on the balcony for their car to arrive. They honked the horn as they pulled up to the front of the building. I dashed inside, hugged and kissed my parents, nodded in agreement to all their safety advice, and double-skipped down the stairs. The elevator was too slow. Outside, I waved up to my parents and then slid into the back seat with Ramsey and his youngest brother, Jad. His grandfather, middle brother, Makram, and a driver were in the front seat. Front bench seats were still the default choice for most automobile companies.

Sidon was about twenty-eight miles south, but due to the road conditions and check points, the drive took more than an hour. It felt longer, though, with Ramsey's younger brothers teasing us: "Ramsey and Jenn sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g" with peals of laughter. As we passed through Sidon, I gazed at the ancient ruins of the Sea Castle, a reminder of the country's tumultuous history, a history I didn't know, but imagined stories full of romantic

promise. In reality, Sidon's history is richly layered with Crusader knights, Roman invasions, and Phoenician sailors. The Castle of the Sea, built in the thirteenth century, was a first line of defense for the seaport critical to the commerce of the land. My bland history lacked romance and adventurous quests; I had yet to go on an unchaperoned date or kiss a boy. Crammed in a small car with six passengers, heading towards the front line of The Troubles, I was on an adventure worthy of any fairy tale princess protected by her handsome, brave knight.

After initial pleasantries with the family and farm workers, I felt welcomed and at home. Despite their past and current history with war and conflict, the Lebanese are warm and hospitable. Ramsey, his brothers, and several young farmhands took me on a tour of the farm. Then Ramsey and his brothers took out BB guns.

"What are you going to shoot?" I asked. My brother had a BB gun in Connecticut and shot tin cans and targets he set up. He never aimed at birds, squirrels, or even snakes that lived in the woods and swamps beyond our backyard.

"Birds," Ramsey's brother said.

"Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing."

We walked into one of the groves.

"Shh," Ramsey's middle brother hushed me. Ramsey lifted his gun and took aim. I turned my head and held my breath. He missed. The farmhands teased him in Arabic and laughed.

I exhaled. As this scene repeated itself several times, I remembered the sparrow that Mom and I had freed days before. I pondered our cultural differences. Ramsey's paternal

family was Lebanese. Hunting and farming were what they did for a living and for food. I had grown up in suburban Connecticut where our meals were purchased wrapped in styrofoam and plastic, already killed and butchered. I had never wondered about how the meats were processed to be sold in the local grocery store.

"Here, take a turn," Ramsey held out the BB gun to me. His brothers nodded in agreement. I stared at the gun.

"C'mon," the youngest brother encouraged me.

"It's easy. Look, there's one in that tree. Take aim and shoot. Here's how you hold the gun," Ramsey demonstrated.

"I don't think I can."

"Sure you can." Ramsey offered me the gun again. When I didn't reach out for it, his brothers began to tease me.

"Chicken! She's chicken to shoot a bird!"

I wanted to be a part of his world. I looked at the bird, then to the gun. "No. I just don't..." I didn't have a reason. The bird flew off.

"I'm tired of shooting anyway," Ramsey said. He handed the gun to his brother. "Take this back to the house. Take them with you, too." He nodded at the others who had made up the hunting party. He took my hand and started walking further into the groves.

"Where are you going?" his brother asked.

"For a walk. We'll be back for lunch."

The hunting party had new prey: me and Ramsey. The little peeping Toms wanted to spy something more than hand-holding. After several interruptions, and some angry brotherly words, we found refuge in the banana tree grove. I had never seen a banana tree. I

stared straight up at the broad, dark leaves canopying us from the late morning heat. The birds chirped a happy love song for us.

When I brought my eyes back to Earth level, Ramsey's green-hazel eyes gazed at me with a smile to charm. The warmth of his olive skin relaxed me as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders, becoming the skin protecting a delicate fruit. I wondered if his brothers' earlier taunts would come true. Nervous and excited, I took a small step back from the protective hug, but not out of his arms. He looked down and smiled. I blushed and looked down, but my gaze stopped at his lips. He took his cue.

My first kiss. Gentle, slow, meaningful. Everything my life was not. I surrendered. I wanted my first kiss to last forever. I felt light. I wanted to fly and sing with the birds.

The war and my family ceased to exist. In that moment, I felt like a normal pre-adolescent girl. Like the sparrow in the apartment, I discovered a small, bright opening in the scary darkness. Like the goat out of its element, I was adjusting to a new and foreign world. Despite all that was falling apart around me, in that moment, hope, hospitality, and love made life a little less puzzling.

Jenn Gilgan's work has appeared in BioStories.com, *Sinkhole* magazine, and *National Geographic* Education Blog.