

Overalls in Beirut

I think for as long as I am alive, I will always remember the trip my family took back to Lebanon for my aunt's wedding. It was in the summer of 1999 and I was barely ten years old. I remember my mom packing what felt like sixty suitcases - ten for each of us. I still have this specific memory of her sitting on top of a particularly fat one as she tried, with all her might, to squish the contents far enough for the zipper to close. She had packed so much stuff that my closet was bare to the bone. When it came time to weigh everything, my dad plopped the fat one on top of the scale and almost fainted.

"What do you have in here?!" He was wide-eyed.

"Stuff we need!" my mom called back.

That answer didn't satisfy him as he opened the suitcase and pulled out, I kid you not, an entire two-pound can of nuts.

"Who on earth is this for?" he said turning the can this way and that.

"For Um Khalid!" my mom replied.

And then my dad, looking incredulous, said something like, "Oh, so if Um Khalid wants nuts there is room but when I want to bring extra Tylenol for Fares ibn Ammeh there is no room?"

This would go on for several hours.

Arabs do this you see whenever one of us goes back to the homeland we end up bringing stuff back for the entire village. If I told you that once there was a time my uncle brought back an entire fridge from American to Jordan, you wouldn't believe me, but an Arab would. They would nod sagely like this was the most common thing in the world; bringing fridges across the ocean.

My mother always came down with a case of bad nerves before any large trip. My father too but in a different way. Where my mom's anxiety manifested in packing literally everything under the sun, my father manifested in getting to the airport as early as possible. Even if that

meant we were all bored out of my mind in the terminal with hours to go. “Better late than nothing,” his motto was.

The night before the big trip I was so excited that I stayed up writing a bucket list of things I wanted to do on my first trip overseas. Let me bring up the fact again that in this scenario I am ten and here are some of the items on my list.

1. Go for a walk.

Okay, seems reasonable enough.

2. Buy a souvenir.

Okay, this one is still not outside the realm of possibility for a ten-year-old I did get an allowance.

3. Go hiking by myself.

Alright, now it’s getting dicey.

4. Learn how to surf.

Uhh.

5. Go skiing.

Okay, so I apparently didn’t get the memo that I’m going to the Middle East.

6. Get a boyfriend.

Someone really needed to sit down with me and explain, in detail, that I am TEN.

Okay so I’m laying there in bed writing up this bucket list of semi-impossible things to do and I drift off into sleep; happy and warm. I awake the next day. The big day is here! I’m going on an airplane! I’m going to be so well-traveled and worldly!

Before I go any further, I’d like to bring something up for consideration and that is, when you hit the ripe age of ten aka the Double Digit Number, you are, for all intents and purposes, an adult – in your mind. In your tiny child mind you think that you are an adult! And you want to do adult things! Like choose your own clothes! And ride a bike with a helmet! And taxes!

So here I am, very worldly and adult-like, getting ready to go into the bathroom to change into something I saw on the Disney channel that screamed “mature adult” when I am stopped by my mother in the hallway.

“No, no!” she is saying, “Here where this!”

And she pulled out the uglies looking overalls I have ever seen in my life out of a JC Penney bag. They had baggy shorts (like a tomboy I noted) and had an extremely large picture of Winnie the Pooh on the front complete with a chest pocket.

“This is what you’re wearing to the airport,” my mother said and handed me the overalls like a warden handing an inmate their orange jumpsuit. I probably looked like I was about to cry or explode or burst into flames because my mother, whose fuse was already short from the additional stress of her own making, added, “No whining.”

If this was a tv show this is the part, I would look into the camera with a disgruntled look on my face while a sad sounding trombone plays out a couple of drawn-out notes.

And so, I put on the mark of shame, felt my ego get taken down several pegs, and spent the car ride to the airport grumbling internally.

After spending forever in the TSA line – we are Arab afterall (TSA’s favorite people!)- we walk over to the terminal where I’ll flight will be departing in four hours and I see one of the saddest sights I have ever seen in my life.

There, in between gates C6 and C7 stood the rest of my cousins, all around the same age as me, wearing the exact same Winnie-the-Pooh JC Penney clearance rack overalls. I looked around and as their defeated eyes met mine an unspoken understanding passed between us.