



Dogless in the Desert

Even when you can't fix everything, you can fix one thing

By Jayme Moye

I DIDN'T GO ON A PILGRIMAGE THROUGH THE HOLY LANDS of Israel and Palestine expecting to return as an international dognapper. Yet in the desert east of Bethlehem, just outside of a fourth-century monastery, that's exactly what I was about to become.

I'd been watching the local boys for 15 minutes. There were three of them, about nine years old, give or take a year. Dressed in dirty jeans and t-shirts, they hung around the small parking lot near the monastery waiting for tourists. They'd approach the foreigners, the tallest boy carrying a puppy, soliciting. What, I couldn't tell. Money? Candy? Attention? They'd look at the visitors' cameras, gesture toward their cell phones and talk animatedly in Arabic. No one understood them.

Once the tourists continued on toward the monastery, the tallest boy would toss the puppy to the ground. I'd watched the creature hit the pavement twice. Both times, it yelped, then lay limp. In the week I'd been on the pilgrimage, I'd seen a fair amount of poverty in the West Bank. But I hadn't seen abuse. And while I may have been misinterpreting the

exact situation with the dog, I was having a hard time witnessing it.

I've been fond of dogs since I was a kid. As a 34-year-old, I had two of my own back home in Colorado. Or had, up until three months earlier when my divorce was final. My ex and I had decided that both dogs—yellow Labs—would be better off living with him. As a travel writer, I am out of town more often than not. But I missed them terribly. I didn't want to make another regrettable dog decision, which is how I came to be plotting at a monastery in the Middle East.

I continued to watch. The puppy lay in the sand beside the parking lot, unmoving. It looked too small to have been separated from its mother. I imagined that it was hungry, thirsty, injured. I waited for the boys to become distracted. When a car pulled up and the Arab man inside called them over, I had my chance. I moved quickly, scooped her up and hid her in my sweater. No one seemed to notice. I ducked into the van, which was waiting curbside to take my group to our hotel for the evening. I realized that I now had a new problem: how was I going to explain this to the others?

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She opened one almond eye at my movement, and
I remembered Yunus' words, *her life is here.*

I didn't have much time to figure it out. Through the window, I could see that the members of my group—a team of academics—were starting to trickle out of the monastery. This 12-day pilgrimage was part of their work with a non-profit called the Abraham Path Initiative. They wouldn't understand. In fact, I was pretty certain they'd find my actions ridiculous, if not insulting, in an “ugly American” sort of way.

Hidden under my sweater, the puppy lay listless in my arms. It was possible no one would notice her, had it not been for the smell. Even after a full day on the trail, I was nowhere near that musty. I watched each of them crawl into the van, catch a whiff and raise an eyebrow or scrunch a nose. Yunus, executive director of the Abraham Path Initiative and the unofficial head of the group, slid into the seat beside me. He eyed the sweater on my lap. “You know you can't keep it,” he said.

I kept quiet. Yunus and his ilk were anthropologists and sociologists, trained in international conflict negotiation in situations far more dire than this. I was afraid they would convince me to put her back. But if I didn't speak, there could be no persuading.

He tried again. “Just what exactly are you planning to do with it?”

I looked at him, then looked down at my sweater. I pulled it back a bit so her head was exposed, and tears welled up in my eyes. “It's a she,” I said, keeping my head lowered.

Yunus tried again, more gently. “Dogs aren't pets, they're work animals. It's a hard life in Palestine—for people and for dogs. But her life is here.”

His logic reminded me of the discussions my ex and I had about where the dogs would live once we divorced. I'd done the right thing, the rational thing, in giving them up. But this time, there was more at stake.



Claudia Chang

I lifted my chin and stared straight ahead. “*Twendi*,” I said to the driver. “Let’s go.”

He started the ignition. Yunus exhaled and sat back in his seat. Conversation resumed in hushed tones. I felt like everyone was passing judgment on me, the youngest in the group, the one with the least experience traveling in the Middle East. But I didn’t care. The puppy barely moved in the 20 minutes it took to get to our hotel. In that time, I decided her name would be Amira, which means princess in Arabic.



We played tug-of-war with a sock on the Persian rug at the foot of the bed, and she yipped and pranced like a princess. I felt a surge of hope. When she started wagging her tail, I knew she was going to make it. And if she could make it, I could surely find a way to get her out of Palestine.

I opened my computer to do some sleuthing. In order to bring her back with me, she needed a health certificate from a vet and proof of rabies vaccination at least 30 days prior to her arrival in the U.S. That wouldn’t work. Maybe I could

IF THE ELDERLY WOMAN RUNNING THE ARAB WOMEN’S Union Guesthouse was surprised that I walked in cradling a puppy, she didn’t show it. Nor did she object when I went to the kitchen to get milk, bread and a small bowl.

Inside my room, I set Amira down in front of the food. She ate slowly, as if she really didn’t have the energy. I wondered how long it had been since she’d eaten. She had sable fur, the color of the sandy desert she came from, highlighted with swatches of white on her muzzle, chest and feet. Her brown eyes were an unusual almond shape that made them appear almost human. She would have been beautiful had she not been so filthy.

I carried her into the bathroom and set her in the sink. I rinsed her fur, lathered her with my shampoo and rinsed her again. I remembered how I had washed Cody Bear in the bathtub at least once a week when he was a pup. Part of it was my new-dog-mom obsession with keeping him clean. Part of it was his penchant for jumping into any body of water he saw, including the tub. He loved the water. Amira didn’t. She squirmed under the spray from the faucet, but was too weak to put up a struggle.

As I towed her off, she fell asleep. Her breathing was labored. She didn’t stir when I searched out and removed three ticks. When I was done, I joined the others for dinner. Yunus spoke first. “There is a shelter in Jerusalem,” he offered. I told the group that I didn’t know if she’d make it through the night. I couldn’t tell if their eyes were sympathetic or condescending.

Amira opened her eyes when I walked back into the room. Her ears perked when I reached for her. I took her off the bed and let her do her business. She walked to the now-empty food bowl and looked up at me. I hurried back to the kitchen and got her more bread and milk. She ate with considerably more gusto, and then set out to explore the room, sniffing under the bed, in my suitcase, around the trash can.

convince Cody Bear’s vet to forge papers, have them faxed to me, and pretend she had been traveling with me from the start. I checked pet regulations on the airline I’d flown. No dogs allowed. Shoot. Maybe I could buy a ticket on another airline for the return flight. Or I could take her to a shelter in Jerusalem, pay for 30 days’ worth of care and vaccinations, and then have her sent to me on an airline that permitted pets once she was ready. I was so busy scheming that I almost forgot the biggest roadblock: three months earlier, I’d decided that I wasn’t home enough to have a dog.

I turned to look at Amira. She was asleep at the top of the bed, curled up against the pillow. She opened one almond eye at my movement, and I remembered Yunus’ words, *her life is here*. I knew then that I couldn’t take her with me. Not just for my own good, but also for hers. I thought about her in a shelter, in a crate on an airplane, in my 400-square-foot apartment in Boulder, and none of it seemed right. However much I struggled with the conditions I’d seen in Palestine on this trip, Americanizing Amira was not the answer. I got ready for bed with a heavy heart. I didn’t know how or where I’d leave her, just that I had to let her go.

AMIRA SLEPT CURLED BESIDE ME ON MY PILLOW. I slept little. In the morning, I got my things ready for the day’s trek, and fashioned a pouch for Amira out of a headscarf, like those I’d seen mothers carry their babies in at the Whole Foods store in Boulder. At breakfast, the group looked at me like I was crazy. I did my best to ignore them. On the trail, Amira was a good sport about riding in the pouch. She mostly slept.

An hour into our walk, we came across a family of Bedouins, nomadic shepherds. Typical of Muslim hospitality, they offered us tea and bread, and we accepted. I let Amira out to stretch her legs. As I sipped the sweet black tea, I noticed how she blended in, wagging her tail among the goats and sheep. The Bedouins had their own sheep dog—tall and



rangy, with light fur—tied to a tree. I imagined that’s what Amira would look like when she was grown. It was easy to picture a future for her here. She seemed to belong.

When we stood up to leave, I didn’t retrieve her. I thought perhaps she could earn her keep as a sheep dog. She had a better chance with the Bedouins than she did with the boys in the monastery parking lot.

The matriarch of the tribe motioned that I’d forgotten something. I shook my head no. I opened my arms to say, *here, here is where she belongs*. The old woman nodded. She reached down and touched Amira’s head. I turned so they wouldn’t see me cry.

Amira didn’t follow me. And I didn’t turn back for one last look. Instead, I walked at a quicker pace than usual. I felt like I needed to keep my body moving so my mind could rest. The others gave me space, and I hiked alone for the better half of the morning.

Eventually, Yunus caught up with me. I don’t know what I expected—a scolding perhaps, or maybe an *I told you so*. But

he matched my pace and didn’t say a word.

I spoke first. “I’m sorry,” I said.

Yunus slowed down a little. “You know, originally, no one agreed with what you did. But you improved conditions for that puppy, alleviated some bit of suffering.”

I snuck a glance at him. It was true. Amira was better off. I couldn’t guarantee her safety or her health, but I’d done what I could. I’d removed her from a harmful situation. In that moment, I realized how powerless I’d felt on the pilgrimage. Walking through an oppressed and impoverished society can do that to you. The magnitude of issues in the West Bank had made all of us feel that there was nothing one person could do to help.

I slowed my frantic pace and fell into step with Yunus. I’d done something. However small, it was something. “Ultimately, it’s not about what we can’t do. It’s about what we can,” he said.

I realized I was dogless once again. But it didn’t feel quite so terrible this time. **B**

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