

IJSSIS NON-ACADEMIC FICTION

LOOKING FOR LINEN

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Abstract

Most Americans stateside assume that life abroad must be, if not magical, quite exotic. My original short fiction story, "Looking for Linen," shows the half-truth of that assumption. It describes one day in the life of Alice, an American expatriate working in a university library in Doha, Qatar, in the Arabian Peninsula about ten years ago. She takes a personal day for important errands but unwittingly ends up on a street of shops far from her destination, a highly frustrating situation for her because like many people from the States, she values efficiency and productivity above most things. But while trying to find her way, she encounters what Americans might characterize as the exotic nature of Doha when she meets a Yemini who sells honey, Indians who convince her to try on a sari, and Persians drinking tea, while talking of hand-line fishing for Hamour. They all try to help her to no avail. At the end of the day she is dismayed to realize she has failed to accomplish a single task and nearly misses the irony that she has spent much of the time personally relating to people from all around the world, the truly significant "stuff" of life in the topsy-turvy, modernizing "Wonderland" of the Gulf.

1. Growing Smaller While Upside Down

No matter how well she planned, Alice could not get the timing of things down in Doha. When shopping, she arrived either too early or too late or the shop was closed for the *Qailulah* and wouldn't reopen until evening. She forgot how long ago she had been able to step foot inside a grocery store and was now down to using paper napkins as toilet paper. Ridiculous. Just ridiculous.

Take the fabric shop in front of her. It was midmorning and to Alice's mind should be open. But it was locked tight. Peering through the window she saw two white counters. Bolts of variegated cloth filled a shelf. But no employees. As she straightened up and pulled her sunglasses back down from the top of her head, she glanced quickly at her watch and thought of the long list of errands folded and tucked neatly in her purse. Mamma was probably right: she expected too much from herself. She had never lived abroad before and had been here only five months. But she had to make the most of her personal day off from the library. They had been developing a new section and the amount of work kept multiplying until it had eaten up what little spare time she had.

A man appeared in the open doorway of the store next door. She assumed he was a shopkeeper. To Alice, he looked Asian, but she was not yet adept at distinguishing Filipinos from Pakistanis from Sri Lankans from Indians from Bangladeshis. She once asked a security guard in her compound if he was from India. "No, madam, Nepal," he said. He must have been used to it since he seemed to take her mistake in stride. Everybody was so mixed up together in this place. She had lost count of the times people assumed she was British.

The shopkeeper nodded in her direction and said, "Finished." The hem of his pale, longish shirt moved slightly in the breeze.

"Finished? Are they closed?" Alice asked.

"Closed. Not come back," he said.

"When will they open?"

"Finished. No coming back."

"Oh, you mean they've gone out of business. But there are still things in there."

The shopkeeper shrugged. "Not come back this week."