

something were stuck inside. Water is brought and poured for him, which he swallows in a rush.

The ceremony over, an assistant passes around little shot glasses full of coffee with slices of bread. I don't expect him to remember about me, but he comes over to the window, smiling, offering me a glass. As the men file out, I stay back, away from the courtyard, but no one seems to mind my female presence now. When I see the man who'd been clutching his throat, I call out to ask him how he is.

"*Kawiy-yis*," he says. Good. His eyes are bright and dancing. "Where are you from?"

It is my last night in Libya, and yet the question still gives me a touch of fear. "America," I say.

He looks unfazed. "Have you seen a Sufi ceremony before?" he asks.

I tell him no.

"You are welcome," he says.

GEORGE SAUNDERS

The New Mecca

FROM *GQ*

Put That Stately Pleasure Palace There Between Those Other Two

IF YOU ARE LIKE I was three weeks ago, before I went to Dubai, you may not know exactly where Dubai is. Near Venezuela? No, sorry, that is incorrect. Somewhere north of Pakistan, an idyllic mountain kingdom ruled by gentle goatherds? Well, no.

Dubai, actually, is in the United Arab Emirates, on the Arabian Peninsula, one hundred miles across the Gulf from Iran, about six hundred miles from Basra, 1,100 from Kabul.

You might also not know, as I did not know, what Dubai is all about or why someone would want to send you there. You might wonder: Is it dangerous? Will I be beheaded? Will I need a translator? Will my translator be beheaded? Just before we're beheaded, will my translator try to get out of it by blaming everything on me?

No, no, not to worry. Dubai, turns out, is quite possibly the safest great city in the world. It is also the newest great city in the world. In the 1950s, before oil was discovered there, Dubai was just a cluster of mud huts and Bedouin tents along Dubai Creek: the entire city has basically been built in the last fifty years. And actually, the cool parts — the parts that have won Dubai its reputation as "the Vegas of the Middle East" or "the Venice of the Middle East" or "the Disney World of the Middle East, if Disney World were the size of San Francisco and out in a desert" — have been built in the last ten years. And the supercool parts — the parts that, when someone tells you about them, your attention drifts because these morons

have to be lying (no one dreams this big or has that much available capital) — those parts are all going to be built in the next five years.

By 2010, if all goes according to plan, Dubai will have: the world's tallest skyscraper (2,300 feet); largest mall; biggest theme park; longest indoor ski run; most luxurious underwater hotel (accessible by submarine train); a huge (two-thousand-acre, sixty-thousand-resident) development called International City, divided into nation-neighborhoods (England, China, France, Greece, etc.) within which all homes will be required to reflect the national architectural style; not to mention four artificially constructed island mega-archipelagoes (three shaped like giant palm trees, the fourth like a map of the world) built using a specially designed boat that dredges up tons of ocean-bottom sand each day and sprays it into place.

Before I saw Dubai for myself, I assumed this was bluster: brag about ten upcoming projects, finally build one — smaller than you'd bragged — hope everyone forgets about the other nine. But no.

I've been to Dubai, and I believe.

If America was looking for a pluralistic, tax-free, laissez-faire, diverse, inclusive, tolerant, no-holds-barred, daringly capitalist country to serve as a shining City on the Hill for the entire Middle East, we should have left Iraq alone and sponsored a National Peaceful Tourist Excursion to Dubai and spent our ninety quadrillion Iraq War dollars there. Maybe.

In Which I Fall in Love with a Fake Town

From the air, Dubai looked something like Dallas circa 1985: a vast expanse of one- or two-story white boxes, punctuated by clusters of freakish skyscrapers. (An Indian kid shouted, "Dad, looks like a microchip!") Driving in from the airport, you're struck by the usual first-night-in-new-country exotica ("There's a *Harley-Davidson* dealership — right in the *Middle East!*"), and the skyscraper clusters were, okay, odd looking (like four or five architects had staged a weird-off, with unlimited funds) — but all in all, it was, you know, a city. And I wondered what all the fuss was about.

The New Mecca

Then I got to my hotel.

The Madinat Jumeirah is, near as I can figure, a superresort consisting of three, or possibly six, luxury sub-hotels and two, or maybe three, clusters of luxury villas, spread out over about forty acres, or for all I know it was twelve sub-hotels and nine luxury-villa clusters — I really couldn't tell, so seamless and extravagant and confusing was all the luxury. The Madinat is themed to resemble an ancient Arabian village. But to say the Madinat is themed doesn't begin to express the intensity and opulence and areal extent of the theming. The site is crisscrossed by 2.3 miles of fake creeks, trolled night and day by dozens of fake Arabian water taxis (*abras*) piloted by what I can only describe as fake Arabs because, though dressed like old-timey Arabs, they are actually young, smiling, sweet-hearted guys from Nepal or Kenya or the Philippines, who speak terrific English as they pilot the soundless electrical *abras* through this lush, created Arabia, looking for someone to take back to the lobby, or to the largest outdoor pool in the Middle East, or over to Trader Vic's, which is also themed and looks something like a mysterious ancient Casbah inexplicably filled with beautiful contemporary people.

And so, though my first response to elaborate Theming is often irony (Who *did* this? And *why*? Look at that *modern exit sign* over that *eighteenth-century bedstead*. Haw!), what I found during my stay at the Madinat is that irony is actually my first response to tepid, lame Theming. In the belly of radical Theming, my first response was to want to stay forever; bring my family over, set up shop in my hut-evoking villa, and never go home again.

Because the truth is, it's beautiful. The air is perfumed, you hear fountains, the tinkling of bells, distant chanted prayers, and when the (real) Arabian moon comes up, yellow and attenuated, over a (fake) Arabian wind tower, you feel you are a resident of some ancient city — or rather, some ancient city if you had dreamed the ancient city, and the ancient city had been purged of all disease, death, and corruption, and you were a Founder/Elder of that city, much beloved by your Citizens, the Staff.

Wandering around one night, a little lost, I came to the realization that verisimilitude and pleasure are not causally related. How is this "fake"? This is real flowing water, the date and palm trees are real, the smell of incense and rose water is real. The staggering

effect of the immense scale of one particular crosswalk — which joins two hotels together and is, if you can imagine this, a four-story ornate crosswalk that looks like it should have ten thousand cheering Imperial Troops clustered under it and an enigmatic young Princess waving from one of its arabesque windows — that effect is *real*. You feel it in your gut and your legs. It makes you feel happy and heroic and a little breathless, in love anew with the world and its possibilities. You have somehow entered the landscape of a dream, the Platonic realization of the idea of Ancient Village — but there are real smells here, and when, a little dazzled, you mutter to yourself (“This is like a freaking dream, I love it, I, wow . . .”), you don’t wake up, but instead a smiling Filipino kid comes up and asks if you’d like a drink.

On the flight over, I watched an interview with an employee of Jumeirah International, the company that manages the Madinat. Even though he saw it going up himself, he said, he feels it is an ancient place every time he enters and finds it hard to believe that, three years ago, it was all just sand.

A Word About the Help

UAE nationals comprise about 20 percent of the city’s population. Until three years ago, only nationals were allowed to own property in Dubai, and they still own essentially all of it. Visually identifiable by their dress — the men wear the traditional white dishdashas; the women, long black gowns and abayas — these nationals occupy the top rung of a rigid social hierarchy: imagine Hollywood, if everyone who’d been wildly successful in the movie business had to wear a distinctive costume.

A rung down from the Emiratis are some 200,000 expats (mostly Brits but also other Europeans, Russians, Lebanese, Indians) who comprise a kind of managerial class: the marketing people, the hotel managers, the human-resource gurus, the accountants, the lawyers, etc. But the vast majority of Dubai’s expat population — roughly two thirds of it — comes from poorer countries all around the world, mainly South Asia or Africa. They built Dubai, they run it with their labor but can’t afford to own homes or raise their families here. They take their dirhams home and cash them in for local currency, in this way increasing their wealth by as much as tenfold.

The New Mecca

They live here for two years, five years, fifteen years; take home-leaves as often as every three months or as infrequently as never.

And even within this class there are stratifications. The hotel workers I met at the Madinat, for example, having been hand-picked by Jumeirah scouts from the finest hotels in their native countries, are a class, or two, or three, above the scores of South Asian laborers who do the heavy construction work, who live in labor camps on the outskirts of town where they sleep ten to a room, and whose social life, according to one British expat I met, consists

[REDACTED]

You see these construction guys all over town: somewhat darker complexioned, wearing blue jumpsuits, averting their eyes when you try to say hello, squatting outside a work site at three in the morning because Dubai construction crews work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

There is much to be done.

The Wild Wadi Epiphany

A short, complimentary golf-cart ride down the beach from the Madinat is Wild Wadi, a sprawling, themed water park whose theme is: a wadi is flooding! Once an hour, the sound of thunder/cracking trees/rushing waves blares through the facilitywide PA, and a waterfall begins dropping a thousand gallons of water a minute into an empty pond, which then violently overflows down the pedestrian walkways, past the gift shop.

Waiting in line, I’m part of a sort of United Nations of partial nudity: me, a couple of sunburned German women, three angry-looking Arab teens, kind of like the Marx Brothers if the Marx Brothers were Arabs in bathing suits with cigarettes behind their ears, who, I notice, are muttering to one another while glowering. Then I see what they’re muttering/glowering about: several (like, fifteen) members of the United States Navy, on shore leave. You can tell they’re Navy because they’re huge and tattooed and innocently happy and keep bellowing things like, “Dude, [REDACTED]; I am all about dancing!” while punching each other lovingly in the tattoos and shooting what I recognize as Rural Smiles of Shyness and Ap-

prehension at all the people staring at them because they're so freaking loud.

Then the Navy Guys notice the Glowering Muttering Arabs, and it gets weirdly tense there in line. Luckily, it's my turn to awkwardly blip into a tube, and off I go.

This ride involves a series of tremendous water jets that blast you, on your tube, to the top of Wild Wadi, where, your recently purchased swim trunks having been driven up your rear by the jets, you pause, looking out over the entire city — the miles of stone-white villas, the Burj Al Arab (sail-shaped, iconic, the world's only seven-star hotel) out in the green-blue bay — just before you fly down so fast that you momentarily fear the next morning's headline will read MIDDLE-AGED AMERICAN DIES IN FREAK WATER SLIDE MISHAP; BATHING SUIT FOUND.

Afterward, I reconvene with my former line mates in a sort of faux river bend. Becalmed, traffic-jammed, we bob around in our tubes, trying to keep off one another via impotent little hand flips, bare feet accidentally touching ("Ha, wope, sorry, heh. . ."), legs splayed, belly-up in the blinding 112-degree Arabian sun, self-conscious and expectant, as in: "Are we, like, stuck here? Will we go soon? I hope I'm not the one who drifts under that dang waterfall over there!"

No one is glowering or muttering now. We're sated, enjoying that little dopey buzz of quasi accomplishment you feel after a surprisingly intense theme-park ride. One of the Arab kids, the one with the Chico hair, passes a drenched cigarette to me, to pass to his friend, and then a lighter, and suddenly everybody's smiling — me, the Arab Marxes, the sunburned German girls, the U.S. Navy.

A disclaimer: it may be that, when you're forty-six and pearl white and wearing a new bathing suit at a theme park on your first full day in Arabia, you're especially prone to Big Naive Philosophical Realizations.

Be that as it may, in my tube at Wild Wadi, I have a mini epiphany: given enough time, I realize, statistically, despite what it may look like at any given moment, we *will* all be brothers. All differences will be bred out. There will be no pure Arab, no pure Jew, no pure American-American. The old dividers — nation, race, religion — will be overpowered by crossbreeding and by our mass media, our world Culture o' Enjoyment.

Look what just happened here: haired and tension were defused by Sudden Fun.

Still bobbing around (three days before the resort bombings in Cairo, two weeks after the London bombings), I think-mumble a little prayer for the great homogenizing effect of pop culture: Same us out, Lord MTV! Even if, in the process, we are left a little dumber, please proceed. Let us, brothers and sisters, leave the intolerant, the ideologues, the religious Islamist Bolsheviks, our own solvers-of-problems-with-troops behind, fully clothed, on the banks of Wild Wadi. We, the New People, desire Fun and the Good Things of Life, and through Fun, we will be saved.

Then the logjam breaks, and we surge forward, down a mini-waterfall.

Without exception, regardless of nationality, each of us makes the same sound as we disappear: a thrilled little self-forgetting Whoop.

We Buy, Therefore We Am

After two full days of blissfully farting around inside the Madinat, I reluctantly venture forth out of the resort bubble, downtown, into the actual city, to the Deira souk. This is the real Middle East, the dark *Indiana Jones*-ish Middle East I'd preimagined: an exotic, cramped, hot, chaotic, labyrinthine, canopied street bazaar, crowded with room-sized, even closet-sized stalls, selling everything there is in the world to buy, and more than a few things you can't imagine anyone ever wanting to buy, or even accept for free.

Here is the stall of Plastic Flowers That Light Up; the stall of Tall Thin Blond Dolls in Miniskirts with Improbably Huge Eyes; the stall of Toy Semiautomatic Weapons; the stall of Every Spice Known to Man (SAFFRON BUKHOR, BAHARAT, MEDICAL HERBS,); the stall of Coffee-Grinding Machines in Paris on the Floor; the stall of Hindi Prayer Cards; the stall of Span-gled Kashmiri Slippers; of Air Rifles; Halloween Masks; Oversized Bright-Colored Toy Ships and Trucks; a stall whose walls and ceiling are completely covered with hundreds of cooking pots. There is a Pashuun-dominated section, a hidden Hindi temple, a section that suddenly goes Chinese, entire streets where nothing is sold but bolts of cloth. There's a mind-blowing gold section — two or three

hundred gold shops on one street, with mysterious doors leading to four-story minimalls holding still more gold shops, each overflowing with the yellow high-end gold that, in storybooks and Disney movies, comes pouring out of pirate chests.

As I walk through, a kind of amazed mantra starts running through my head: *There is no end to the making and selling of things there is no end to the making and selling of things there is no end...*

Man, it occurs to me, is a joyful, buying-and-selling piece of work. I have been wrong, dead wrong, when I've decried consumerism. Consumerism is what we are. It is, in a sense, a holy impulse. A human being is someone who joyfully goes in pursuit of things, brings them home, then immediately starts planning how to get more.

A human being is someone who wishes to improve his lot.

Speaking of Improving One's Lot: The Great Dubai Quandary

Dubai raises the questions raised by any apparent Utopia: What's the downside? At whose expense has this nirvana been built, on whose backs are these pearly gates being raised?

Dubai is, in essence, capitalism on steroids: a small, insanely wealthy group of capital-controlling Haves supported by a huge group of overworked and underpaid Have-Nots, with, in Dubai's case, the gap between Haves and Have-Nots so wide as to indicate different species.

But any attempt to reduce this to some sort of sci-fi Masters and 'Droids scenario gets complicated. Relative to their brethren back home (working for next to nothing or not working at all), Dubai's South Asian workers have it great; likewise, relative to their brethren working in nearby Saudi Arabia. An American I met, who has spent the last fifteen years working in the Saudi oil industry, told me about seeing new South Indian workers getting off the plane in Riyadh, in their pathetic new clothes, clutching cardboard suitcases. On arrival, as in a scene out of *The Grapes of Wrath*, they are informed (for the first time) that they will have to pay for their flight over, their lodging, their food (which must be bought from the company), and, in advance, their flight home. In this way, they essentially work the first two years for free.

Dubai is not, in structure, much different: the workers surrender their passports to their employer; there are no labor unions, no or-

ganizing, no protests. And yet in Dubai, the workers tell you again and again how happy they are to be here. Even the poorest, most overworked laborer considers himself lucky — he is making more, much more, than he would be back home. In Saudi, the windfall profits from skyrocketing oil prices have shot directly upstairs, to the five thousand or so members of the royal family, and from there to investments (new jets, real estate in London). In Dubai, the leaders have plowed the profits back into the national dream of the New Dubai — reliant not on oil revenue (the Dubai oil will be gone by 2010) but on global tourism. Whatever complaints you hear about the Emirati ruling class — they buy \$250,000 falcons, squash all dissent, tolerate the financial presence of questionable organizations (Al Qaeda, various national Mafias) — they seem to be universally respected, even loved, because, unlike the Saudi rulers, they are perceived to put the interests of the people first.

On the other hand, relative to Western standards, Dubai is so antilabor as to seem medieval. In the local paper, I read about the following case: a group of foreign workers in Dubai quit their jobs in protest over millions of dirhams in unpaid wages. Since by law they weren't allowed to work for another company, these men couldn't afford plane tickets back home and were thus stuck in a kind of Kafka loop. After two years, the government finally stepped in and helped send the men home. This story indicates both the potential brutality of the system — so skewed toward the employer — and its flexibility relative to the Saudi system, its general righteousness, I think you could say, or at least its awareness of, and concern with, Western opinion: the situation was allowed to be reported and, once reported, was corrected.

Complicated.

Because you see these low-level foreign workers working two or three jobs, twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day, longing for home (a waiter shows me exactly how he likes to hold his two-year-old, or did like to hold her, last time he was home, eight months ago), and think: Couldn't you Haves cut loose with just a little more?

But ask the workers, in your intrusive Western way, about their Possible Feelings of Oppression, and they model a level of stoic noble determination that makes the Ayn Rand in you think, Good, good for you, sir, best of luck in your professional endeavors!

Only later, back in your room, having waded in through a lobby

full of high rollers — beautifully dressed European/Lebanese/Russian expats, conferring Emiratis, all smoking, chatting, the expats occasionally making a scene, berating a waitress — thinking of some cab driver in the thirteenth hour of his fourteen-hour shift, worrying about his distant grandchild; thinking of some lonely young Kathmandu husband, sleeping fitfully in his sweltering rented room — do you get a sudden urge to move to Dubai and start a chapter of the Wobblies.

On the other hand:

A Kenyan security guard who works fourteen-hour days at Wild Wadi, euphoric about his new earning power, says to me: "I expect, in your writing, you will try to find the dark side of Dubai? Some positive, some negative? Isn't that the Western way? But I must say: I have found Dubai to be nearly perfect."
Complicated.

The University of the Back of the Cab

A partial list of wise things cab drivers said to me in Dubai:

- 1) "If you good Muslim, you go straight, no talking talking, bomb blast! No. You go to mosque, to talk. You go straight!"
- 2) "This, all you see? So new! All new within! Within one year! Within within within! That building there? New within three year! All built within! Before, no! Only sand."
- 3) "You won't see any Dubai Arab man driving cab. Big boss only."
- 4) Re the Taliban: "If you put a man into a room with no way out, he will fight his way out. But if you leave him one way out, he will take it."
- 5) "The Cyclone Club? Please to not go there. It is a disco known for ~~_____~~."

One night my driver is an elderly Iranian, a fan of George W. Bush who hates the Iranian government. He tells me the story of his spiritual life. When young, he says, he was a donkey: a donkey of Islam. Then a professor said to him: You are so religious, so sure of yourself, and yet you know absolutely nothing. And this professor gave him books to read, from his personal library. "I read one, then more, more," he says, nearly moving himself to tears with the memory. After two years, the driver had a revelation: all religious knowl-

edge comes from the hand of man. God does not talk to us directly. One can trust only one's own mind, one's own intelligence. He has five kids, four grandkids, still works fourteen-hour days at sixty-five years old. But he stays in Dubai because in Iran, there are two classes: The Religious and The Not. And The Religious get all the privileges, all the money, all the best jobs. And if you, part of The Not Religious, say something against them, he says, they take you against a wall and . . .

He turns to me, shoots himself in the head with his finger.

As I get out, he says: "We are not different, all men are . . ." and struggles to remember the word.

"Brothers?" I say.

"No," he says.

"Unified?" I say.

"No," he says.

"Part of the same, uh . . . transcendent . . ."

"No," he says. He can't remember the word. He is old, very old, he says, sorry, sorry.

We say goodbye, promising to pray for our respective governments, and for each other.

Cleaning Among the Mayhem

Dubai is a city of people who come from elsewhere and are going back there soon. To start a good conversation — with a fellow tourist, with the help, with just about anybody — simply ask: "Where are you from?" Everyone wants to tell you. If white, they are usually from England, South Africa, Ukraine. If not, they are from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Kenya, Nepal, India.

One hotel seems to hire only Nepalese. One bar has only Ukrainians. You discover a pocket of Sri Lankan golf-cart drivers, all anxious to talk about the tsunami.

One day, inexplicably, everyone you meet, wherever you go, is from the Philippines.

"Where are you from?" you say all day, and all day people brightly answer: "Philippines!"

That night, at a club called Boudoir, I meet L, an employee of Ford in Dubai, a manic, funny, Stanley Tucci-looking guy from Detroit, who welcomes me into his party, gets me free champagne,

mourns the circa-1990 state of inner-city Detroit: feral dogs roaming the streets, trees growing out of the upper stories of skyscrapers where "you know, formerly, commerce was being done, the real 1960s automobile world-class commerce, man!" The night kind of explodes. This, I think, this is the repressive Arabian Peninsula? Apparently, anything is permitted, as long as it stays within the space within which it is permitted. Here is a Palestinian who lives in Los Angeles and whose T-shirt says LAPD — WHERE EVERYBODY IS KING

cense. The smell, the scale, the level of loving, fascinated attention you are receiving, makes you realize you have never really been in the lap of true luxury before. All the luxury you have previously had — in New York, L.A. — was stale, Burj-imitative. Your entire concept of *being inside a building* is being altered in real time. The lobby of the Burj is neither inside nor out. The roof is so far away as to seem like sky. The underbellies of the floors above you grade through countless shades of color from deep blue to, finally, up so high you can barely see it: pale green. Your Guest Services liaison, a humble, pretty Ukrainian, tells you that every gold-colored surface you see during your stay is actual twenty-four-karat gold. Even those four-story columns? Even so, she says. Even the thick fourth-story arcs the size of buses that span the columns? All gold, sir, is correct.

I am so thrilled to be checking in! What a life! Where a kid from Chicago gets to fly halfway around the world and stay at the world's only seven-star hotel, and GQ pays for it!

But there was a difficulty.

Help, Help, Heaven Is Making Me Nervous

Because, for complicated reasons, GQ couldn't pay from afar, and because my wife and I share a common hobby of maxing out all credit cards in sight, I had rather naively embarked on a trip halfway around the world without an operative credit card: the contemporary version of setting sail with no water in the casks. So I found myself in the odd position of having to pay the off-season rate of \$1,500 a night, in cash. And because, turns out, to my chagrin, my ATM has a daily withdrawal limit (surprise, dumb ass!), I found myself there in my two-floor suite (every Burj room is a two-story suite), wearing the new clothes I had bought back in Syracuse for the express purpose of "Arriving at the Burj," trying to explain, like some yokel hustler at a Motel 6 in Topeka, that I'd be happy to pay half in cash now, half on checkout, if that would be, ah, acceptable, would that be, you know, cool?

My God, if you could have bottled the tension there in my suite at the Burj! The absolute electricity of disappointment shooting back and forth between the lovely Ukrainian and my kindly Personal Butler, the pity, really . . .

My Arrival in Heaven

The Burj Al Arab is the only seven-star hotel in the world, even though the ratings system only goes up to five. The most expensive Burj suite goes for \$12,000 a night. The atrium is 590 feet from floor to ceiling, the largest in the world. As you enter, the staff rushes over with cold towels, rose water for the hands, dates, in-

I'll be having anxiety nightmares the rest of my life), which would once again prominently display the words PROVIDER DECLINES TRANSACTION. It's true what the Buddhists say: Mind can convert Heaven into Hell. This was happening to me. A headline in one of the nine complimentary newspapers read, actually read: AMERICAN JAILED FOR NONPAYMENT OF HOTEL BILL.

Perhaps someone had paid for my room.

Mon Petit Pathetic Rebellion

On one of my many unsuccessful missions to the ATM, I met an Indian couple from the U.K. who had saved up their money for this Dubai trip and were staying downtown, near the souk. They had paid \$50 to come in and have a look around the Burj (although who they paid wasn't clear — the Burj says it discontinued its policy of charging for this privilege), and were regretting having paid this money while simultaneously trying to justify it. Although we must remember, said the husband to the wife, this is, after all, a once-in-a-lifetime experience! Yes, yes, of course, she said, I don't regret it for a minute! But there is a look, a certain look, about the eyes, that means: Oh God, I am gut-sick with worry about money. And these intelligent, articulate people had that look. (As, I suspect, did I.) There wasn't, she said sadly, that much to see, really, was there? And one felt rather watched, didn't one, by the help? Was there a limit on how long they could stay? They had already toured the lobby twice, been out to the ocean-overlooking pool, and were sort of lingering, trying to get their fifty bucks' worth.

At this point, I was, I admit it, like anyone at someone else's financial mercy, a little angry at the Burj, which suddenly seemed like a rose water-smelling museum run for, and by, wealthy oppressors-of-the-people, skills for the new global economy, membership in which requires the presence of A Wad, and your ability to get to it/prove it exists.

Would you like to see my suite? I asked the couple.

Will there be a problem with the, ah . . .

Butler? I said. Personal butler?

With the personal butler? he said.

Well, I am a guest, after all, I said. And you are, after all, my old friends from college in the States. Right? Could we say that?

Sorry, uh, sorry for the, you know, trouble . . . I say.
No, sir, the lovely Ukrainian says. We are sorry to make any difficulties for you.

Ha, I thought, God bless you, now *this* is service, this is freaking Seven-Star Service!

But over the next few hours, my bliss diminished. I was approached by the Lebanese Floor Butler, by several Mysterious Callers from Guest Services, all of whom, politely but edgily, informed me that it would be much appreciated if the balance of the payment could be made by me pronto. I kept explaining my situation (that darn bank!), they kept accepting my explanation, and then someone else would call, or come by, once again encouraging me to pay the remaining cash, if I didn't mind terribly, right away, as was proper.

So although the Burj is a wonder — a Themed evocation of a reality that has never existed, unless in somebody's ~~dream~~ dream — a kind of externalized fantasy of Affluence, if that fantasy were being had in real time by a very rich Hedonistic Giant with unlimited access to some kind of Exaggeration Drug; a Giant fond of bright, mismatched colors, rounded, huge, inexplicable structures, dancing fountains, and two-story-tall wall-lining aquariums — I couldn't enjoy any of it. Not the electronic curtains that reveal infinite ocean; not the free-high-speed-Internet-accessing big-screen TV; not the Burj-shaped box of complimentary gourmet dates; not the shower with its six different Rube Goldbergian nozzles arranged so that one can wash certain body parts without having to demean oneself via bending or squatting; not the complimentary \$300 bottle of wine; not the sweeping Liberate stairs or the remote-control front-door opener; not the distant view of The Palm, Jumeirah, and/or the tiny inconsequential boats far below, full of little people who couldn't afford to stay in the Burj even in their wildest dreams, the schmucks (although by the time of my third Admonitory Phone Call, I was feeling envious of them and their little completely-paid-for boats, out there wearing shorts, shorts with, possibly, some cash in the pockets) — couldn't enjoy any of it, because I was too cowed to leave my room. I resisted the urge to crawl under the bed. I experienced a sudden fear that a group of Disapproving Guest Services People would appear at my remote-controlled door and physically escort me down to the lobby ATM (an ATM about which I expect

We said that. I snuck them up to my room, past the Personal Butler, and gave them my complimentary box of dates and the \$300 bottle of wine. Fight the power! Then we all stood around, feeling that odd sense of shame/solidarity that people of limited means feel when their limitedness has somehow been underscored.

Later that night, a little drunk in a scurvy bar in another hotel (described by L., my friend from Detroit, as the place where “

Kleenex dispensers. He had been at Al Maha since the beginning. He loved it here. This place was his life's work.

Each villa had its own private pool.

After check-in, we're given a Jeep tour of the desert by a friendly and intensely knowledgeable South African guide, of that distinct subspecies of large, handsome guys who love nature. I learn things. The oryx at Al Maha have adapted to the water-sprinkler system in the following way: at dusk, rather than going down to the spring, they sit at the base of the trees, waiting for the system to engage. I see a bush called Spine of Christ; it was from one of these, some believe, that Christ's crown of thorns was made. I see camel bones, three types of gazelle. We pass a concrete hut the size of a one-car garage, in a spot so isolated and desolate you expect some Beckett characters to be sitting there. Who lives inside? A guy hired by the camel farmer, our guide says. He stays there day and night for months at a time. Who is he? Probably a Pakistani; often, these camel-feeding outposts are manned by former child camel jockeys, sold by their families to sheiks when the kids were four or five years old.

For lunch, we have a killer buffet, with a chef's special of veal medallions.

I go back to my villa for a swim. Birds come down to drink from my private pool. As you lower yourself into the pool, water laps forward and out, into a holding rim, then down into the Lawrencian desert. You see a plane of blue water; then a plane of tan desert. Yellow bees — completely yellow, as if spray-painted — flit around on the surface of the water.

At dusk, we ride camels out to the desert. A truck meets us with champagne and strawberries. We sit on a dune, sipping champagne, watching the sunset. Dorkily, I am the only single. Luckily, I am befriended by B and K, a beautiful, affluent Dubai-Indian couple right out of Hemingway. She is pretty and loopy: Angelina Jolie meets Lucille Ball. He is elegant, reserved, kind-eyed, always admiring her from a little ways off, then rushing over to get her something she needs. They are here for their one-and-a-half-year anniversary. Theirs was a big traditional Indian wedding, held in a tent in the desert, attended by four hundred guests, who were transported in buses. In a traditional Indian wedding, the groom is supposed to enter on a white horse. White horses being in short supply

Luckily, It Didn't Come to Jail

Turns out, the ATM definition of *daily* is: After midnight in the United States. In the morning, as I marched the 2,500 dirhams I owed proudly upstairs, the cloud lifted. A citizen of the affluent world again, I went openly to have coffee in the miraculous lobby, where my waiter and I talked of many things — of previous guests (Bill Clinton, 50 Cent — a “loud-laughing man, having many energetic friends”) and a current guest, supermodel Naomi Campbell.

Then I left the Burj, no hard feelings, and went somewhere even better, and more expensive.

Heaven for Real, Plus in This Case It Was Paid for in Advance

The Al Maha resort is located inside a stunningly beautiful/bleak, rugged desert nature preserve an hour outside of Dubai. My Personal Butler was possibly the nicest man I've ever met, who proudly admitted it was he who designed the linens, as well as the special

in Dubai, her grandfather, a scion of old Dubai, called in a favor from a sheik, who flew in, from India, a beautiful white stallion. Her father then surprised the newlyweds with a thirty-minute fireworks show.

Fireworks, wow, I say, thinking of my wedding and our big surprise, which was, someone had strung a ~~new~~ of Bud cans to the bumper of our rented Taurus.

She is her father's most precious possession, he says.

Does her father like you? I say.

He has no choice, he says.

Back at my room, out of my private pool, comes the crazed Arabian moon, which has never, in my experience, looked more like a Ball of Rock in Space.

My cup runneth over. All irony vanishes. I am so happy to be alive. I am convinced of the essential goodness of the universe. I wish everyone I've ever loved could be here with me, in my private pool.

I wish *everyone* could be here with me, in my private pool: the blue-suited South Indians back in town, the camel farmer in his little stone box, the scared sad Moldavian girls clutching their ostensibly sexy little purses at hotel bars — I wish they could all, before they die, have one night at Al Maha.

But they can't.

Because that's not the way the world works.

"Dubai Is What It Is Because All the Countries Around It Are So ~~Small~~."

In the middle of a harsh, repressive, backward, religiously excessive, physically terrifying region, sits Dubai. Among its Gulf neighbors: Iraq and Iran, war-torn and fanatic-ruled, respectively. Surrounding it, Saudi Arabia, where stealing will get your hand cut off, a repressive terrorist breeding ground where women's faces can't be seen in public, a country, my oil-industry friend says, on the brink of serious trouble.

The most worrisome thing in Saudi, he says, is the rural lower class. The urban middle class is doing all right, relatively affluent and satisfied. But look at a map of Saudi, he says: all that apparently empty space is not really empty. There are people there who are not middle class and not happy. I say the Middle East seems some-

thing like Russia circa 1900 — it's about trying to stave off revolution in a place where great wealth has been withheld from the masses by a greedy ruling class.

That's one way of saying it, he says.

Then he tells me how you get a date if you are a teenage girl in Saudi Arabia:

Go to the mall, wearing your required abaya. When a group of young guys walks by, if you see one you like, quickly find a secluded corner of the mall, take out your cell phone, lift your veil, snap a picture of your face. Write your cell number on a piece of paper. When the boys walk by, drop the scrap at the feet of the one you like. When he calls, send him your photo. If he likes the photo, he will call again. Arrange a secret meeting.

The world must be peopled.

The Truth Is, I Can't Decide What's True, Honestly

One night, at dinner with some People Who Know, I blurt out a question that's been bothering me: Why doesn't Al Qaeda bomb Dubai, since Dubai represents/tolerates decadent Western materialism, etc., and they could do it so easily? The Man Who Knows says, I'll tell you why: Dubai is like Switzerland during World War II — a place needed by everyone. The Swiss held Nazi money, Italian Fascist money. And in Dubai, according to this Person, Al Qaeda has millions of dollars in independent, Dubai-based banks, which don't always adhere to the international banking regulations that would require a bank to document the source of the income. A Woman Who Knows says she's seen it: a guy walks into a bank with a ~~lot~~ of money, and they just take it, credit it, end of story. In this way, the People Who Know say, Dubai serves various illicit organizations from around the world: the Italian Mafia, the Spanish Mafia, etc., etc. Is this known about and blessed from the top down? Yes, it is. Al Qaeda needs Dubai, and Dubai tolerates Al Qaeda, making the periodic token arrest to keep the United States happy.

Later, the People Who Know are contradicted, in an elevator, by another Man Who Knows, a suave Luxembourgian who sells financial-services products to Dubai banks. Dubai has greatly improved its banking procedures since 9/11. Why would a terrorist group want to bank here? he asks. Think about it logically: Would they not

be better served in a country sympathetic to them? Iran, Syria, Lebanon?

Good point, I say, thanking God in my heart that I am not a real Investigative Journalist.

In Which Snow Is Made by a Kenyan

Arabian Ice City is part of a larger, months-long festival called Dubai Summer Surprises, which takes place at a dozen venues around town and includes Funny Magic Mirrors, Snow Magician Show, Magic Academy Workshop, Magic Bubble Show, Balloon Man Show, and Ice Cave Workshop, not to mention Ice Fun Character Show.

But Arabian Ice City is the jewel.

Because at Arabian Ice City, Arab kids see snow for the first time. Arabian Ice City consists, physically, of: wall-length murals of stylized Swiss landscapes; two cardboard igloos labeled GENTS' MOSQUE AND LADIES' MOSQUE respectively (actual mosques, with shoes piled up inside the mock-ice doorways, through which people keep disappearing to pray); a huge ice cliff that, on closer inspection, is a huge Styrofoam cliff, being sculpted frantically to look more like ice by twenty Filipinos with steak knives; and a tremendous central cardboard castle, inside of which, it is rumored, will be the Snow.

This is a local event, attended almost exclusively by Emiratis, sponsored by the local utility company; an opportunity, a representative tells me, to teach children about water and power conservation via educational activities and "some encouraging gifts." Has he been to America? He makes a kind of scoffing sound, as in: Right, pal, I'm going to America.

"America does not like Arabs," he says. "They think we are . . . I will not even say the word."

"Terrorists," I say.

He shuts his eyes in offended agreement.

Then he has to go. There is continued concern about the safety of the Arabian Ice City. Yesterday, at the opening, they expected one hundred people in the first hour, and instead got three thousand. Soon the ice was melting; the children, who knew nothing of the hazards of Snow, were slipping, getting hurt, and they'd had to shut the whole thing down, to much disappointment.

Waiting in the rapidly growing line, I detect a sense of mounting communal worry, fierce concern. This is, after all, for the children. Men rush in and out of the Ice Palace, bearing pillows, shovels, clipboards. Several Characters arrive and are ushered inside: a red crescent with legs; what looks like a drop of toothpaste, or, more honestly, ~~spoon~~, with horizontal blue stripes; the crankiest-looking goose imaginable, with a face like a velociraptor and a strangely solicitous Sri Lankan handler, who keeps affectionately swatting the goose-raptor's tail and whispering things to it and steering it away from the crowd so they can have a private talk. The handler seems, actually, a little in love with the goose. As the goose approaches, a doorman announces, robustly, "Give a way for the goose!" The goose and goose tender rush past, the tender swatting in lusty wonderment at the goose's thick tail, as if amazed that he is so privileged to be allowed to freely swat at such a thick, realistic tail.

The door opens, and in we go.

Inside is a rectangle about the size of a tennis court, green bordered, like one of the ice rinks Sears used to sell. Inside is basically a ~~table~~ of crushed ice and one Kenyan with a shovel, madly crushing. And it does look like snow, kind of, or at least ice; it looks, actually, like a Syracuse parking lot after a freezing night.

Then the Arab kids pour in: sweet, proud, scared, tentative, trying to be brave. Each is offered a coat, from a big pile of identical coats, black with a red racing stripe. Some stand outside the snow rink, watching. Some walk stiff-legged across it, beaming. For others the approach is: bend down, touch with one finger. One affects nonchalance: snow is nothing to him. But then he quickly stoops, palms the snow, yanks his hand back, grins to himself. Another boy makes a clunky snowball, hands it politely to the crescent-with-legs, who politely takes it, holds it a while, discreetly drops it. The goose paces angrily around the room, as if trying to escape the handler, who is snill swatting flirtatiously at its tail while constantly whispering asides up at its beak.

And the kids keep coming. On their faces: looks of bliss, the kind of look a person gets when he realizes he is in the midst of doing something rare, that might never be repeated, and is therefore of great value. They are seeing something from a world far away, where they will probably never go.

Women in abayas video. Families pose shyly, rearranging them-

selves to get more Snow in the frame. Mothers and fathers stand beaming at their kids, who are beaming at the Snow.

This is sweet, I scribble in my notebook.
And it is. My eyes well up with tears.

In the same way that reading the Bible, listening to radio preachers, would not clue the neophyte into the very active kindness of a true Christian home, reading the Koran, hearing about "moderate Islam," tells us nothing about the astonishing core warmth and familial sense of these Arab families.

I think: If everybody in America could see this, our foreign policy would change.

For my part, in the future, when I hear "Arab" or "Arab street" or those who "harbor, shelter, and sponsor" the terrorists, I am going to think of the Arabian Ice City, and that goose, moving among the cold-humbled kids, and the hundreds of videotapes now scattered around Arab homes in Dubai, showing beloved children reaching down to touch Snow.

What Is Jed Clampett Doing in Guitmo?

Having a Coke after Arabian Ice City, trying to get my crying situation sorted out, it occurred to me that the American sense of sophistication/irony — our cleverness, our gilbness, our rapid-fire delivery, our rejection of gentility, our denial of tradition, our blunt realism — which can be a form of greatness when it manifests in a Gershwin, an Ellington, a Jackson Pollock — also causes us to (wrongly) assume a corresponding level of sophistication/irony/worldliness in the people of other nations.

Example One: I once spent some time with the mujahideen in Peshawar, Pakistan — the men who were at that time fighting the Russians and formed the core of the Taliban — big, scowling, bearded men who'd just walked across the Khyber Pass for a few weeks of rest. And the biggest, fiercest one of all asked me, in complete sincerity, to please convey a message to President Reagan, from him, and was kind of flabbergasted that I didn't know the president and couldn't just call him up for a chat, man-to-man.

Example Two: On the flight over to Dubai, the flight attendant announces that if we'd like to make a contribution to the Emirates Airline Foundation children's fund, we should do so in the provided envelope. The sickly Arab man next to me, whose teeth are

rotten and who has, with some embarrassment, confessed to "a leg problem," responds by gently stuffing the envelope full of the sugar cookies he was about to eat. Then he pats the envelope, smiles to himself, folds his hands in his lap, goes off to sleep.

What one might be tempted to call *simplicity* could be more accurately called a *limited sphere of experience*. We round up "a suspected Taliban member" in Afghanistan and, assuming that Taliban means the same thing to him as it does to us (a mob of intransigent inconvertible Terrorists), whisk this sinister Taliban member — who grew up in, and has never once left, what is essentially the Appalachia of Afghanistan; who possibly joined the Taliban in response to the lawlessness of the post-Russian warlord state, in the name of bringing some order and morality to his life or in a misguided sense of religious fervor — off to Guantánamo, where he's treated as if he personally planned 9/11. Then this provincial, quite possibly not-guilty, certainly rube-like guy, whose view of the world is more limited than we can even imagine, is denied counsel and a possible release date, and subjected to all of the hardships and deprivations our modern military prison system can muster. How must this look to him? How must *we* look to him?

My experience has been that the poor, simple people of the world admire us, are enamored of our boldness, are hopeful that the insanely positive values we espouse can be actualized in the world. They are, in other words, rooting for us. Which means that when we disappoint them — when we come in too big, kill innocents, when our powers of discernment are diminished by our frenzied, self-protective, fearful post-9/11 energy — we have the potential to disappoint them, bitterly, and drive them away.

Look, Dream, but Stay Out There

My fourth and final hotel, the Emirates Towers, is grand and imperial, surrounded by gardens, palm trees, and an elaborate fountain/moat assembly that would look right at home on an outlying *Star Wars* planet.

One Thai prostitute I spoke with in a bar said she'd stayed at the Emirates Towers four or five times but didn't like it much. Why not? I wondered. Too business-oriented? Kind of formal, a bit stuffy? "Because every time, they come up in the night and t'row me out," she said.

Returning to the hotel at dusk, I find dozens of the low-level South Indian workers, on their weekly half-day off, making their way toward the Towers, like peasants to the gates of the castle, dressed in their finest clothes (cowboy-type shirts buttoned to the throat), holding clunky circa-1980s cameras.

What are they doing here? I ask. What's going on? We are on holiday, one says.

What are their jobs? When can they go home? What will they do tonight? Go out and meet girls? Do they have girlfriends back home, wives?

Maybe someday, one guy says, smiling a smile of anticipatory domestic ecstasy, and what he means is: Sir, if you please, how can I marry when I have nothing? This is why I'm here: so someday I can have a family.

Are you going in there? I ask, meaning the hotel.

An awkward silence follows. In there? Them?

No, sir, one says. We are just wishing to take photos of ourselves in this beautiful place.

They go off. I watch them merrily photographing themselves in front of the futuristic fountain, in the groves of lush trees, photos they'll send home to Hyderabad, Bangalore. Entering the hotel is out of the question. They know the rules.

I decide to go in but can't locate the pedestrian entrance. The idea, I come to understand, after fifteen minutes of high-attentiveness searching, is to discourage foot traffic. Anybody who belongs in there will drive in and valet park.

Finally I locate the entrance: an unmarked, concealed, marble staircase with wide, stately steps fifty feet across. Going up, I pass a lone Indian guy hand-squeezing the thirty-three (I count them) steps.

How long will this take you? I ask. All afternoon?

I think so, he says sweetly.

Part of me wants to offer to help. But that would be, of course, ridiculous, melodramatic. He washes these stairs every day. It's not my job to hand-wash stairs. It's his job to hand-wash stairs. My job is to observe him hand-washing the stairs, then go inside the air-conditioned lobby and order a cold beer and take notes about his stair-washing so I can go home and write about it, making more for writing about it than he'll make in many, many years of doing it.

And of course, somewhere in India is a guy who'd kill to do some

stair-washing in Dubai. He hasn't worked in three years, any chance of marriage is rapidly fading. Does this stair washer have any inclination to return to India, surrender his job to this other guy, give up his hard-won lifestyle to help this fellow human being? Who knows? If he's like me, he probably does. But in the end, his answer, like mine, is: that would be ridiculous, melodramatic. It's not my job to give up my job, which I worked so hard these many years to get.

Am I not me? Is he not him?

He keeps washing. I jog up the stairs to the hotel. Two smiling Nepalese throw open the huge doors, greeting me warmly, and I go inside.

Goodbye, Dubai, I'll Love You Forever

Emirates Airlines features unlimited free movies, music, and video games, as well as Downward-Looking and Forward-Looking live closed-circuit TV. I toggle back and forth between the Downward-Looking Camera (there are the Zagros Mountains, along the Iraq-Iran border) and *Meet the Fockers*. The mountains are green, rugged. The little dog is flushed down the toilet and comes out blue.

It's a big world, and I really like it.

In all things, we are the victims of The Misconception From Afar. There is the idea of a city, and the city itself, too great to be held in the mind. And it is in this gap (between the conceptual and the real) that aggression begins. No place works any different than any other place, really, beyond mere details. The universal human laws — need, love for the beloved, fear, hunger, periodic exaltation, the kindness that rises up naturally in the absence of hunger/fear/pain — are constant, predictable, reliable, universal, and are merely ornamented with the details of local culture. What a powerful thing to know: that one's own desires are mappable onto strangers; that what one finds in oneself will most certainly be found in The Other.

Just before I doze off, I counsel myself grandiosely: ~~con-~~cepts. Don't be afraid to be confused. Try to remain permanently confused. Anything is possible. Stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, world without end, amen.