

Reva Mann

How the other half live

It isn't often that I get an invitation printed in black Edwardian script on quality white paper, inviting me to the British Consulate in East Jerusalem for a party.

Dressed in cream fitted trousers and a cotton crochet top, I slink into Beni's cab. We drive over to the East side of the city where shop signs are now written in Arabic and clusters of schoolgirls are walking home wearing jallabias over jeans and scarves over their heads, tied under the chin. We turn into the Sheikh Jarrah Quarter where a pungent smell of honeysuckle and deep purple bougainvilleas cascade over the ancient stone walls.

Familiar faces of Her Majesty the Queen, Prince Charles and Tony Blair framed in silver greet me in the hall of the Consul's residence. I walk through the majestic living room to the garden where the guests are standing in groups, drinking and laughing. The garden is superb and tended, so the Consul tells me, "by a marvelous gardener from Hebron." Wicker furniture upholstered in white raw silk dominates the lawn on the far right, the bar and lavish buffet to the left. So this is how the other half live, I think to myself making a bee line for the bar.

A glass of chilled chardonnay in hand, my attention is grabbed by a dazzling Palestinian woman, impeccably dressed in a bronze sequined sleeveless dress and I'm sure those are Prada shoes on her slender feet. In Oxford English she tells me about her job at the Palestinian University Al-Quds, where she is currently creating the syllabus for a new course on the history of Jerusalem.

"What's included in the course?" I ask, mixed emotions churning inside of me. The destruction of the holy temples and the coming of Messiah cross my mind.

"The Armenian quarter, the Christians, churches, mosques...you know, I mean there's so much..."

There is so much, I think, looking around me at the society of well-educated refined Palestinians eating, drinking and making merry who live only a ten-minute drive from my house, but in my day-to-day life I hardly know they exist. Living in a Jewish community of Anglo Saxons, the only Arab person I have daily contact with is Rasmi, who delivers my groceries from the local supermarket. The other Arabs I see are the suspect guys who stalk outside my apartment selling dusters, and suicide bombers on home-made video clips shown on T.V. But peace with these cultured people would be a whole different ballgame, I think, checking out the dazzler's matching Prada handbag.

"Shall we get something to eat?" she asks, and I follow her to the buffet and spoon salad and tachina on my plate.

"The chicken's delicious," she offers me a stick of kebab, but I refuse.

"I keep kosher," I say.

My words seem to reverberate around me and fill the space between us.

I look down at my half empty plate and my infatuation immediately wanes. I'm done, I think to myself. It's time to go.

Sure that Beni has finished his shift for the day, I ask the maid to order me a local cab. I step out of the private residence under the eyes of surveillance cameras and wait at the security booth. I'm suspicious of the limo that glides up, but the security guard assures me that it's a taxi. Unable to see out of the windows that are drawn with black

curtains, I fear being kidnapped or lynched until the sexy young Arab driver turns around and asks me where I'm going.

"West Jerusalem," I say, a term I have never used before.

I sit back on the plush upholstery eager to reach the familiarity of the Jerusalem I know and love, where our history comes from the Torah and where, baruch hashem, my dinner plate is always full.