

Chapel Talk by Amanda Trabulsi

During Thanksgiving vacation, my parents and I traveled to Saudi Arabia, which is my father's native country. This was the first time for my mother and me to visit Saudi Arabia, since I had just received my citizenship, last year. It took me twelve years. It was also the first time to meet all 114 of my family members that currently live there. **Talk about family reunions.** Though some of us in the West believe that women in Saudi Arabia are second-class citizens and have no opportunities, I found that women there are very independent and strong. Many of them are professionals. I have aunts and female cousins who are physicians, doctors, dentists, and accountants. Also contrary to our view, women are not forced to wear the hijab (the clothes covering up the head and body), though many of them do choose to cover up. What amazes me is that under the hijab, the women dress in the most modern fashion. The clothes they wear underneath range from casual jeans to fancy dresses. It is strange how all my life I would never think about wearing an abaya (a gown one would wear outside or in public) or a tarha (a scarf used to cover one's head), but once I started wearing these clothes in deference to my family, I felt almost immediately comfortable after the second day wearing it. The tarha even helped me with bad hair days, which is frequent for me. Maybe this could have helped you, Mr. Hungerford. I thought it would be fine not having to cover up in front of my family; however, this was not the case. Normally, a Saudi Arabian woman does not have to cover up in front of her father, brother, husband, grandfather, or uncle; however, she does cover up in front of those men she might marry. The most striking difference I found there was how close families are. There are family gatherings almost every week, and these gatherings include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, first cousins, second cousins, and first cousins once removed. A vivid memory of Saudi Arabia was when my parents and I arrived at my uncle's house in Jeddah, and my mother and I met the whole, new family. New faces kept on entering through the door, and I thought it would not end. As often happens outside of the United States, many people in different countries kiss once, twice, or three times on the cheek. Contrastingly, in Saudi Arabia it is about eight to fifteen times. Initially, I felt quite awkward having to hug and kiss family members I had never met before, but their embracing me as a returned family member eased my apprehension. As I look back now, I do not think I have ever experienced anything so warm and comforting.