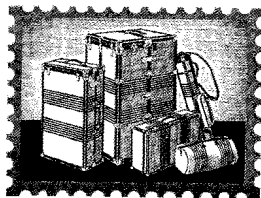




Out the Other Side

A pilgrim braves Hezekiah's Tunnel in Jerusalem.



From the moment I left it at the check-in counter at Newark International Airport, I knew my bag wasn't going to get to Tel Aviv. I kept looking back over my shoulder, blinking dumbly, as you do at something you may never see again. So it was a confirmation of my worst assumptions about chaos and human flaw when my oversized duffel didn't tumble out with the rest of our group's luggage onto the carousel when we arrived. At that point, having flown countless hours and eaten only foil-wrapped salty foods for the past day and a half, I was short on resilience. I started to well up and then all-out sobbed at the inhumanity of it all.

Losing your luggage can be traumatic, especially on a trip to a foreign country. Because you don't lose just your luggage. You lose the one string tying you to anything and everything that you know for sure exists: a yellow hairbrush, a tube of moisturizer, sandals that have taken

on the shape of your feet. You don't lose your bag. It loses you. The system, the gods, fail you. And when your bag, that symbol of all you possess in the world, fails to appear, the string breaks, hurling you into the unknown.

For the first day or so, as I waited for my brain and body to catch up to the local time, I tried in vain to push the luggage-worry out of my head. I felt regret, though I hadn't done anything wrong. "It'll show up," everyone said. As if my wayward duffel had just taken the long way, made a stop in Paris, and that I shouldn't take it personally. Then the guilt emerged; after all, given the rare opportunity to travel so far, many would gladly go with just the clothes on their back, and not work themselves into a lather because they didn't have an alternate pair of shoes. I tried to assume a Buddhist posture of non-attachment. And then went back to pining for my hair gel. It was an extreme and tiring exercise in faith.

This, of course, was fitting, as I was on a ten-day study tour through the Holy Land, led by my uncle, Father Robert Barone, a professor at the University of Scranton. I was one of fifteen or so travelers (assorted priests, nuns, and lay folk) whom he'd handpicked for the journey, many of whom had made this trip before. I was twenty-four years old, and this was my first trip with my uncle, my first time to Israel. Being the newbie of the group, I kept hoping this was some kind of initiation, a Catholic hazing, and that as soon as I gave up my material longings, someone would come trotting out of the kitchen, with my duffel in tow. "You passed the test!" No chance. Not yet, anyway.

My roommate Arlene felt particularly sorry for me. Sweet Arlene, whose husband owned a sub shop outside Scranton, and who had arrived at the airport armed with a sack of ham and turkey sandwiches. She wore red glasses à la Sally Jessy and a soft blonde bob, and spoke in a way

that made you believe she'd never done a careless thing in her life. "I'm so sorry about your bag," she whispered tragically, digging through her immense Samsonite. "I don't know what I'd do if that happened to me." She handed me a billowy flowered nightgown with ruffled sleeves straight out of Betty White's trailer on the *Golden Girls* (when I'm stressed, I go straight to my '80s-TV happy place). "I know it'll show up, sweetie. They always do."

We were staying at the White Sisters, a convent and rooming house run by French nuns who catered to pilgrims. Located just outside the Old City, it was, as you'd imagine, a clean, sparse setting: polished linoleum floors, tiny, hard beds, blank walls, a crucifix in every room. The White Sisters were warm and hospitable hosts, starched and scrubbed, with such a soft step they seemed to float through the halls. Here's how the days went: rise before dawn, mass in the garden at 6 A.M., and breakfast at 7 A.M.—a delicious meal of ripe tomatoes, warm, fresh-baked bread, cheese, jam, and cold cuts. Meet my Uncle Bob for a morning lecture tour in the Old City, return for lunch, siesta, and then out again in the afternoon.

One of our first and most memorable excursions was to Hezekiah's Tunnel, for which, without my blasted luggage, I was somewhat unprepared. We set out in the morning for the City of David, where the ancient passageway awaited. Dug by hand around 700 B.C., the mile-long tunnel runs beneath an ancient hill in Jerusalem called the Ophel Hill, transporting water from the Gihon spring to the Pool of Siloam in the southwest corner of the city. Two teams simply started digging toward each other and met up somewhere in the middle, led by the sound of each other's shouts. When Jerusalem was attacked by Assyria in 701 B.C., this tunnel (named for King Hezekiah) saved the city from destruction and capture by its enemies. With a

constant supply of fresh water, the inhabitants could resist surrender, and not, as the Assyrians had hoped, get trapped “like birds in a cage.”

I feared that we might very well get trapped like birds—in a cave. Did I mention that once inside, you’re wading through water of ever-varying depths? That water levels may be at your knees one minute, mid-thigh the next? And no sign outside indicating that you must be “this high” to enter? My uncle, a large man at six feet, 275 pounds, with a bad knee, had gone through alone years before, with water up to his chin—something I wish he had waited until afterwards to tell me.

We walked a half mile to get to the tunnel through a depressing landscape, a littered and largely abandoned valley of scrap-metal shacks, and as we got closer, I instinctively started looking around for, I don’t know, a ticket booth, some big fanfare, a bored-looking employee collecting stubs. But there was no governing presence to be seen. That is, unless you count the two questionable fellows slinking around the entrance selling t-shirts that read “I Survive [sic] Hezekiah’s Tunnel.” They flashed glinty, dangerous smiles and said they’d wait for us on the other end—“in case” we made it through.

We weren’t the only people there for a little off-road adventure. A small cluster of Asian tourists—complete with backpacks, cameras, and hats—was collecting at the mouth of the dark cave, moving downward into the roar of water. You’d have to be crazy to go in there, I thought. And in we went.

This kind of unpredictable outdoor activity was the very reason I had packed the way I had, and without my suitcase, my efforts were all for naught. I fantasized about how much more ready I’d be with my own flashlights, amphibious footwear, and vaguely appropriate clothing. If

the mounting anxiety about being in a closed, dark, water-filled tunnel wasn't enough, I looked and felt ridiculous. Lorraine from two doors down at the convent, a fellow traveler, had taken it upon herself to dress me, since we happened to wear the same size ("Well how do you like that!"). I had politely declined, but she'd insisted, and I was taking on the day's challenge in a pink-striped babydoll dress that she said was "just darling" on me. I looked as if I was about to launch into a rendition of "On the Good Ship Lollipop," not brave an ancient ruin. My shoes, a pair of imported blue rubber Chinese flip-flops, were a half size too small, on loan from Sister Margaret.

To get into the tunnel, we walked down a set of steps, but we couldn't see them beneath the cold, rushing spring. We had to hold the single handrail and feel our way down through the current. Absent the hot sun, the temperature dropped by ten or fifteen degrees, and the cool, damp air, while a relief, raised every hair on my arms. I stuck close to the front of the line with Ed, my uncle's former student and right-hand man, and one of the few people with a flashlight. And I tell you I have never seen darkness like that. Not during a new moon, not in a closet, not anywhere. Even Ed's flashlight beam seemed to get swallowed up by the inky black atmosphere. Because we were beneath the holy City of David, Bob said, we were essentially in holy water. I told myself no one could die in holy water. I didn't know if that was true. It didn't matter.

Walking proved tricky because I wasn't walking at all but rather wading through knee-high water on an uneven and rocky path, the hem of my silly sundress flapping with each step. Sister Margaret's flip-flops were clearly not up to the task, designed more for strolls on the boardwalk than offshore excursions. With each slip over the stones, the hard rubber jammed into the webbing between my toes

and threw my balance, but luckily there wasn't anywhere to fall. I could flatten my palms against the walls without fully extending my arms. In some places, the ceiling hovered just inches above my head. For the claustrophobe, it was the kind of scenario you might spend a lifetime trying to avoid.

While I struggle with my own long history of generalized anxiety, I'm not a textbook claustrophobe. I stride into elevators or tight spaces with relative ease. But I do consider myself somewhat adventure-averse—and I'm a lousy person to have around at an amusement park. There's something taunting and horrid about their manufactured thrills, and even as a kid, I felt no desire whatsoever to strap myself into a plunging basket or a perilous, zipping tube. But while this tunnel walk was more vigorous sightseeing than amusement ride, they had one thing in common: once you started, there was no getting off until it was over. There were no exit signs, and no way out; turning around was not an option. Which made this little jaunt through Hezekiah's tunnel fairly metaphorical. Here, as in life, there was just no going back out the way you came in.

Given that this was a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I expected sightseeing, academic lectures, interesting discourse on the roots of the Catholic faith. I even expected prayer—some internal dialogue, self-reflection. I did not, however, anticipate having an existential crisis that hovered somewhere between travel gear and fear of the dark. I wasn't sure if I was testing my mettle or indulging some *Goonies*-esque fantasy in which I brave feats of danger for buried treasure (and the '80s hits keep on coming). And I must confess: back at the tour bus, when I realized what I was in for, I'd downed half of a Lorazepam—just enough to stave off any disengaged moments of panic that might befall me underground. Faith could only take me so far.

And yet in many ways this tunnel was a testament to faith—certainly of the men who dug it in hopes of resisting their enemies. On this trip, I would go on to visit many churches, temples, and mosques, beautiful, awe-inspiring houses of prayer. But nothing came close to the kind of religious experience I felt moving through that narrow passage under the Ophel Hill. Ed snapped off his flashlight, plunging us into pitch black, like the inside of a velvet pocket. “Look at that,” Ed said. “I mean, is this incredible or what?”

The rushing water was long behind us now, and the tunnel grew quiet, save for the drag and splash of our legs moving through it. No one spoke. For a few long moments we moved in silence, and the initial fear and disorientation fell away. I was strangely comforted by the notion that, even without a light to see by or any tangible idea of how far we’d come, we all knew where we were going, and that we weren’t alone. What shoes I had on hardly seemed to matter.

Because of the twists and turns, there wasn’t a sign of light until the very end, which took us about forty-five minutes to reach. I was used to walking a mile to the train station in far less time, but this wasn’t a mindless commuter jag; it was a sacred delivery from one end of darkness to the other. And when the first break of light appeared, we cheered and yipped as if we’d been traveling for days. It occurred to me that this was the kind of experience every twelve-step program, ropes course, and trust fall aims to replicate, but I can’t imagine any coming close. To be struck, then and there, with the realization that you would make it through, after all.

As we emerged, one by one, blinking in the daylight, we became giddy in the heat, and grateful beyond words. The spring water was a clear, jade green in the sunlight as it poured from the tunnel into the Pool of Siloam, where,

as told in the Gospel of John, Jesus rubbed mud on the eyes of a blind man, and gave him sight.

Later, over vegetables that had been boiled to within an inch of their lives, we regaled each other with tales of our own fright and fearlessness. The front desk attendant interrupted the meal with an announcement. "Terri?" he said tentatively. I raised my hand. "The airline called. Your luggage will be here in one hour." And I was seized with such joy I leapt up and hugged him, which scared him half to death. A whoop of applause and laughter went up from the group, and for a moment we reveled in the peace that comes when things return to their natural order.

Back in my room, I opened my bag: there were my worldly possessions, just as I'd left them. And yet, I felt oddly disappointed. Not sure why—after all, what did I expect would be in there? The Holy Grail? Some sacred talisman? A treasure? Nope. Just some socks, extra shirts, my amphibious sandals, dry as a bone. A bottle of styling gel (which in truth I was glad to have). My luggage, in some ways, had become a moot point. And that night I slept soundly, in a t-shirt that smelled like home.



Terri Trespicio is an award-winning poet who earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College, where she also taught writing and editing. She currently teaches in the publishing certificate program at Boston University, and works full time as a senior editor at Body+Soul magazine, where she also hosts a weekly radio show for Martha Stewart Living Radio on Sirius. After many years of traveling with her uncle, Rev. Robert Barone of the University of Scranton, she now happily tags along with her adventurous mother, Jeanne, a leisure travel consultant, in her journeys abroad.