

# The Flight of a Dearborn Son

By Ali Osman

The flight attendant announced that the cabin door had been locked and that the approximate flight time was a little under two hours. My long-sleeved Penn shirt was suffocating in the August heat, and my anxiety flared as the plane took off from the Detroit tarmac. It was the first time I would be flying alone, so I had reason to feel such a way. Beyond that, I was leaving behind a community that had given me nothing but love, opportunity, and an identity that I would not be as proud to possess had I been born elsewhere. I also was leaving behind an irreplaceable family and a twin brother whose continued struggle with cancer made the takeoff incredibly emotional.

Within a week or two of landing in Philadelphia and beginning my long-awaited University career, I faced an inordinate feeling of homesickness. Although college freshmen often go through such a phase, the extent to which I was affected was further exacerbated by the uniqueness of the city I was raised in and the beautiful family of mine that resided there.

Dearborn, Michigan, a suburban town bordering Detroit, is truly inimitable. A North Pole for shawarma-lovers, the city is well known for having the largest concentration of Arab-Americans outside of the Middle East. Certain parts of the city feel like a walk down a Beirut souk, with signage in Arabic pointing visitors to the best Arab bakeries to hookah lounges packed with people daily until sunrise.

Beyond its Arabesque nature, Dearborn is home to a beautiful melting pot of people—diasporas from Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, and more. It is also home to many children born to parents who have experienced tremendous hardship.

My father's oldest brother, Nabil, died when he was fifteen after being injected with an HIV-infected syringe during school. His other brother, Riad, died from complications with high blood sugar after living fifteen years of his life blind. His oldest sister, Naziha, passed away after a failed open-heart surgery at the age of thirty-two. The list of those my father has lost goes on; such lists are common among the millions of immigrants fleeing countries that hold no regard for public health, education, or human rights.

It is these lists that motivate 'Dearborners' to do more than what our parents dreamt of back home—dreams that, for them, were far-fetched, discouraged, and often interrupted by the sounds of gunfire and explosions. Put simply, Dearborn is a more organized and less corrupt version of a typical Middle Eastern town, where people are able to break glass

ceilings and pursue opportunities that would be absent in home countries of the diaspora.

Because of the nature of the community I grew up in and my parents' constant emphasis on empathy and humility, I learned that the pursuit of an education was a blessing in and of itself. To 'Dearborners,' education is a means of escaping persecution and poverty and a mechanism of achieving social mobility. It was my duty to my parents, who worked hard to leave a country with no opportunity, to do whatever I had to in order to succeed. My definition of success, of course, was not on par with my traditional grandmother's wishes for her grandchildren to become neurosurgeons. The path I took—studying business at Penn—was an unorthodox one for Arab-Americans who grow up in homes that view medical school as the highest level of success.

The intense homesickness that swept in upon arriving at Penn was a direct result of being raised in a community where nobody really leaves. Dearborn parents are used to having their children live with them until they are married. I was moving away and, in the eyes of my parents, could easily become "corrupted" by a culture unlike that of Dearborn.

Traditionalism and conservatism manifested in Dearborn in a way that anybody who leaves faces a crossroads. They can choose to embody the values that their parents instill in them from birth, or they can choose to deviate from such values, conforming to those more widely accepted as "American." That a combination of the two was possible was merely an afterthought. My parents feared I would lose my love for Arab culture and would not want to return to the beautiful bubble of Dearborn. In retrospect, I shared this fear. It was unbeknownst to me that I could conserve who I was and where I came from in a world so different from my hometown.

During my first semester at Penn, I began to work around the seemingly terrible consequences of being away from home. As I met a few Lebanese people who came from similar first-generation backgrounds, I began to en-

gage in more and more activities that reminded me of home. I made it a tradition to eat a falafel sandwich twice a week and became closer to the Lebanese "bros" I met along the way. I listened to Arabic music while studying and kept in touch with family religiously.

However, I also participated in activities that anyone from Dearborn would consider alien. From fraternity parties to karaoke nights to using chopsticks instead of a fork, I did it all, and I had fun doing it. I developed a healthy balance of appreciating my traditional identity and learning to incorporate cultures, scenes, and communities very different from those to which I was accustomed. Gradually, I came to realize that conformity was not a requisite for participating in and enjoying traditional Western culture. With this realization, my homesickness began to fade.

In the end, everybody has the freedom to choose their own path. For me, it was imperative that I continued to respect and acknowledge where I came from. Choosing to adhere to societal standards in spite of one's upbringing risks losing the foundation that allows for such an opportunity in the first place. For me, the decision was easy. It was a decision driven by the inviolable respect I had for my mother and father and for their dream that I continue living a life where I do the opposite of 'biting the hand that feeds me.'

As I approach my last year at Penn, I approach my final "first semester flight" from Dearborn to Philadelphia. I can say with full confidence that my greatest achievement has not been in my academic or professional pursuits but in my understanding of family, love, and community. I have continued to respect the wishes of my family, preserve my love for my culture, and make decisions consistent with the standards of empathy, humility, and loyalty that my community ingrained in me. My final flight will feature the same long-sleeved Penn shirt and August heat. This time, though, my anxiety will have vanished; peace and tranquility will take its place in my mind.



*Osman family in Tripoli, Lebanon c. 1949*