Roads and Kingdoms - It’s 5 O Clock Somewhere

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*Amman, Jordan*

It’s a simple task: Buy an inexpensive bottle of white wine to use in a risotto. But as a recent transplant from Pakistan - where Prohibition is in its fourth, wretched decade - to Jordan, I’m not even sure how to buy wine. While most of my friends abroad can confidently rattle off their favorite wines from a menu, I rely on the drink choices I’ve memorized, or whatever suggestion I can elicit from a bartender.

The art of delicately sipping wine has escaped me entirely. What I do know is the art of surreptitiously buying - and hiding - alcohol in Karachi: bargaining with bootleggers who conceal bottles in schoolbags and under their shirts to evade the cops, or shiftily standing on the pavement outside a dimly lit liquor store as the store’s runner/guard/longtime employee ferries bottles of licensed Murree beer from a barred storefront window that resembles a prison cell. The rapidly warming bottles arrive swathed in layers of brown paper bags and plastic bags, which I instantly transfer to an even larger bag I’ve brought along for the expedition, and thrust a pile of notes at the runner for having spared me the five-step walk to the window, a lecture from the city’s self-styled moral police, or arrest.

And so I walk into the liquor store near my house in Amman, large tote bag at the ready, passport safely tucked in my handbag in case I have to show ID. There’s a teenage kid sitting behind the counter, as if he’s been left to mind shop. I look around as I enter the store, wondering if I am completely conspicuous, or if being a single woman in a liquor store marks me out as a foreigner.

It’s just a bottle of wine; I remind myself. But as I confront a series of labels and price tags, I am overwhelmed with the sheer amount of choice. Do I want sweet wine? Is local wine a better proposition? Why is red wine so much cheaper? Should I spend nearly $20 on wine?

But I’m hesitant to ask these questions. I speak classical Arabic; the colloquial Arabic I knew eight years ago when I last lived in Jordan, is only slowly resurfacing.

“Hal ai nabeed abyad arkhas min hadha?” The kid finally looks up. I realize my request sounds entirely ridiculous, like speaking Shakespearian English in a McDonald’s. What I’ve just said in Arabic translates to “Hath you any white wine that costs less than this?”

He strolls over, probably to take another look at the 31-year-old woman who can’t seem to choose a simple bottle. “White wine?” He says in English, lazily looking over the labels. “Red wine, 10 JD.”

I shake my head and point to a bottle of white wine made in Jordan. “There’s no price tag.”

“Fourteen,” he decides, somewhat arbitrarily.

I hand over the money. I am about to take the bottle and put it away in my bag when he reaches under the counter. Out comes the familiar sight of a brown paper bag, followed by a plastic bag. I could be back in Karachi again, making small talk with the runner about the local television reporter on a crusade against alcohol sales in Pakistan, nervously keeping a lookout for acquaintances who might be shopping on the street. Instead, this teenager is wrapping up my purchase. As I walk back home, I realize the top of the bottle is peeking out and I transfer it to my tote, hoping no one notices. For the first time in years, I realize, no one is.

The wine, in the risotto, and in the glasses I savor over the next few days, is delicious. Now all I need to do is learn how to order wine without sounding like I emerged from the 16th century.