

Every now and again my teaching practice brings along an invitation to go and pretend I know something about graphic design in a foreign destination. A few months ago that place turned out to be Sulaymaniyah in the east of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



An air of danger... Sign me up. Not to mention I'd never been offered that much money for a week of teaching. I immediately responded that of course I'm coming despite the very short notice and that I had already bought my tickets — just to be sure they didn't back out of the offer. But. If only the invite had said:

5 DAYS OF TEACHING AND  
6 DAYS OF NOTABLE  
DIARRHEA  
7 DAYS OF CONSTANT  
SWEATING  
A FLIGHT OF RIGOROUS  
VOMITING  
1 MONTH OF LIGHT NAUSEA  
3 MONTHS OF NOSE FULL OF BLOODY  
BUGGERS AND  
WHAT FEELS LIKE  
A LIFETIME OF GOOGLING IF YOU  
MIGHT HAVE CONTRACTED  
SALMONELLA OR CHOLERA



I would've known that instead of getting a generous amount of money for asking people "What do you think you should do?" or "Why don't you just keep working on it" for five days, I was going to be practically out of service like a public bathroom for many months to come. Despite the lengthy list of bodily discomforts that came with the trip I survived to tell the tale, and even had a lot of fun there.

I love travelling, so needless to say I was planning to squeeze a little holiday out of the trip. As soon as I got the invitation, I asked the organisers what the best sights in the region were. Instead of proclaiming "Can't wait to show you around!" as I had expected they basically said "It's better if you stay at your hotel room at all times":

REGARDING YOUR REQUEST TO SEE PLACES OUTSIDE OF THE CITY, GIVEN THAT THE CURRENT SITUATION IS STILL BEING ASSESSED BY THE EMBASSY WE CANNOT CONFIRM OR EVEN RECOMMEND TRIPS OUTSIDE OF THE CITY, AS WE WOULD LIKE TO ENSURE YOUR SAFETY THROUGHOUT YOUR STAY HERE IN KURDISTAN. WE DO ALSO RECOMMEND CHECKING THE EMBASSY WEBSITE AND TO CHECK THEIR SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE REGION ITSELF. WE WILL UPDATE YOU IF WE GET ANY NEWS ON THE SAFETY SITUATION, HOWEVER AS OF TODAY WE ARE UNDER INSTRUCTIONS TO LIMIT EXTERNAL VISITATION THAT WOULD REQUIRE OUR ASSESSMENT BEFORE YOUR VISITATION.

Little did they know what kind of a fool they had invited to teach their precious pupils. Not only largely devoid of any real professional abilities, but also lacking most necessary life skills and a sense of danger, running into unknown situations like a child curious to open the door of a flaming oven.

On the second day of the trip — the day before we were going to start the workshop — I told my hosts I will not be joining them for lunch that day and will instead catch up with them over dinner. I had been plotting since early morning to sneak out. It was late afternoon already so I had to act fast. I packed my passport for any checkpoints there might be on the way and headed down to the lobby. I asked the hotel receptionist to order me a car, who came back to me saying the taxi company will send me the best car they have. Why exactly, I never found out: the rule is to not ask

any questions when you get offered a good deal. Perhaps they, similarly to the organisers, thought I was heading for my imminent death? Might as well give her a comfortable send-off.

Of all the possible landmarks I had picked out a small waterfall to drive to for an hour, see it for a minute through the lens of my phone camera, and then drive back for another hour. I just wanted to get out and see a bit of the countryside and get a glimpse of how people lived outside of the city. Not to mention that this way I got to do my sightseeing from a comfortable air-conditioned environment, as opposed to melting away in the scorching heat: it was 40 degrees outside, the hottest I had ever experienced.

Finally a big black car with a capital c with darkened windows and black leather seats arrived, la-di-da, with a friendly-looking youngish bald gentleman with a prominent chin beard called Dillman at the helm. His name I of course only found out at the very end of our journey together, as when I stepped in and said hello in my regularly awkward and overly cheerful, high-pitched voice as I would greet any stranger, all I got back was an enthusiastic smile. Dillman was clearly a man of very few words, if any words at all. Maybe a mute. As long as he can drive, it makes no difference, I thought. In my head I was debating if maybe I just stepped in a completely random vehicle and had fallen pray to a local gang known for their posh rides, collecting naive young women in front of hotels to bring them to hummus fields (yes, you heard right, hummus) as seasonal workers, or maybe just as an afternoon snack for the boss. But hey, an adventure

is an adventure. You can't be picky. Maybe the hummus fields were the tourist destination I was looking for all along.

Full of excitement I was, but also gripping on to my phone following Google Maps and soon wondering why it looked like we were definitely not going to the small waterfall I was so eager to set my eyes on. Instead we were literally going in the opposite direction. I waited and I waited, until it definitely felt like something was not right. I tapped Dillman's shoulder as if to unmute him and showed him the map on my phone. "Waterfall?". He nods and says "Ahmad Awa," with another big smile. He accompanies the smile with a photo he looks up on his phone. It looked like a waterfall. I just thought, "Okay, then!" and figured that an adventure really is an adventure. The silence in the car had in the meantime grown unbearable and I thought I'll ask Dillman to play some local music. After some confusing exchanges through random



words and pointing at things Dillman 5 types something into his phone and shows it to me:

PEOPLE ARE SAYING IT

A riddle. I was never particularly good with those. I tried to decipher it but I had no clue what the people were saying, especially what Dillman was trying to tell me. I just continued with random words and pointing, “Radio, you, music” and Dillman finally smiled again and started to look for a radio station, none of which really seemed to work in the middle of the nowhere that we were. For the next two hours — yes, the one hour planned journey had already extended to two — we were accompanied by the very familiar sound of buzzing and hissing and an occasional 10 seconds of almost audible music. An excellent concoction for a juicy headache. But I was pleased to have completed the mission to have some sound in the car, so I wasn’t complaining.

The road was quiet, not much happening on the way. The sun was low already. Mountains, fields, some vegetation, an occasional mosque.



6

A few villages. One unattended burning barrel. More heat in the heat, I thought. We also passed through several checkpoints but didn’t get stopped once. A part of me was wondering if it would’ve been nice to have been stopped just to get some more insight into if we were indeed heading towards my small waterfall.

But no such luck, so we just kept driving and driving. The road was rather boring really, so I was banking on the waterfall now, if there was ever going to be one.

The mountains had become very impressive by now, with a lot of different textures gleaming in the approaching sunset. We were near the Iranian border.

The Ahmad Awa I had in mind was 28 kilometres away from



my hotel. We were now more than a whopping 120 kilometres away. A normal person would've been very worried but I had trust in Dillman and his smile. I was more worried that the sun was going to set soon, and we might need to experience the waterfall in complete darkness.

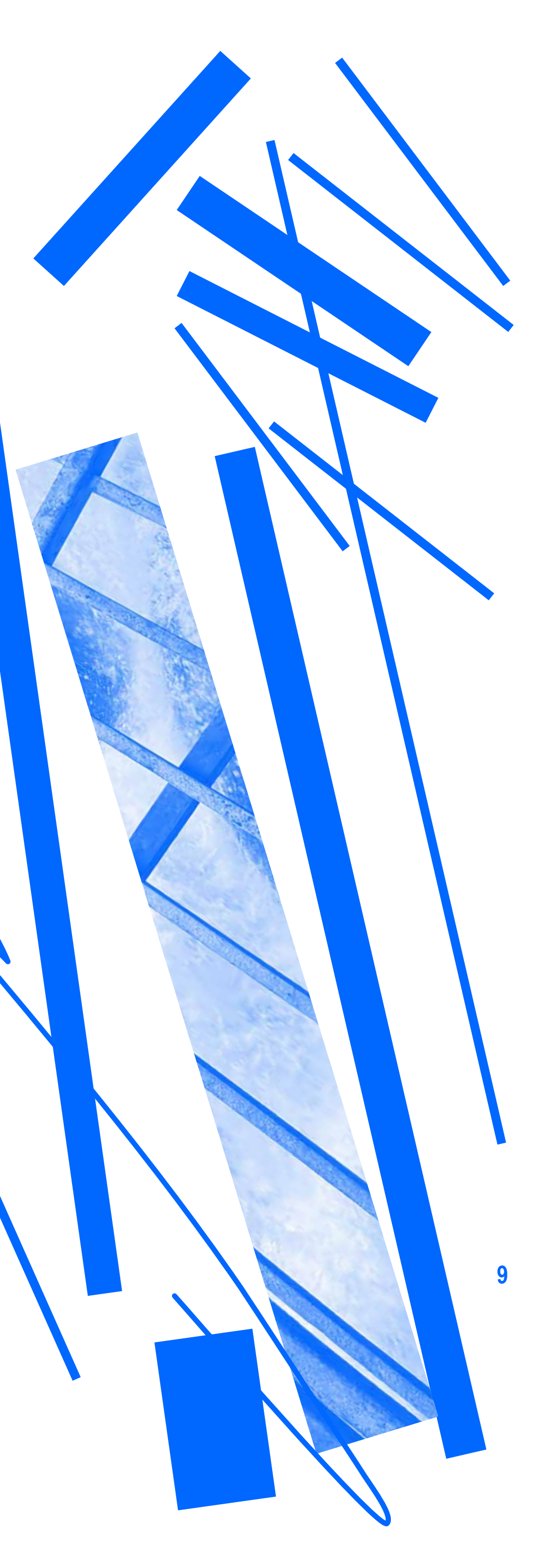
To my great relief, I finally spotted a sign suggesting that we were indeed approaching Ahmad Awa, and before we knew it, we were parking the car. I realised that I had no idea which direction to go to find my small waterfall. I was planning to try to suggest to Dillman that he could



come along, but it seemed like he was way ahead of me. He uttered multiple sentences in Kurdish, which I naturally didn't understand. My local vocabulary that I had noted down so far was:

*khuda hafiz* (something along the lines of goodbye), Dr Amanj (a local acupuncturist I was told I should definitely see), *shah* (king) and *zor spas* (thank you). Dillman pulled his phone out again and showed it to me:





IT'S  
LIKE  
I'M  
GOING  
TO  
THE  
BATHROOM  
WITH  
YOU

The riddles were back. While I was delighted by the offer, I didn't really need to use the restroom. The sentence made me giggle, but got us no closer to the small waterfall.

LOOKS LIKE I'VE BEEN WRITING  
HERE

Yes, you have, Dillman.

YOU'D LIKE TO EAT ME

Now I was both trying very hard to keep myself from bursting out in laughter, but also starting to think if my initial worries about being involved in some kind of a sacrifice ritual might in fact come true. But who would get eaten? I still had all the faith in the world in kind Dillman, so was not at all worried but I was definitely eager to start the move towards the small waterfall before it was too late to actually see it. After exchanging some awkward looks of confusion mixed with even more confused smiles, Dillman finally stepped out of the car and we were on our way. But as we were walking some more messages appeared:

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED  
TELL  
ME

HOW'S IT GOING  
TO  
BE HERE?

I'M GOING TO THIS  
CONTINUE

The best scenario I could imagine is that he wanted to have some food there. I had only brought a nearly finished pack of peanuts for the road and wouldn't have minded a snack, but I was thinking ahead how I'd die trying to explain to him that I could hardly eat anything at all here besides meat, as anything else will likely make me spend the rest of the week in the bathroom. At least that's what I had been told and I had more or less just landed, so I felt like it was too soon to throw all caution out of the window ahead of the workshop. I had no idea what to say but to smile and shrug my head like the "I don't know" emoji. Dillman doesn't seem to mind and we keep walking.

11

We soon reached the very crowded waterfall. It was Saturday afternoon — the end of the weekend — and many local families seemed to have gathered there to admire the view. The waterfall was beautiful and bigger than the small waterfall



I had imagined. Dillman gestures to me to take some photos of him and passes me his phone. One way or another I learned that he had been to the waterfall once before when he was a child. He liked the waterfall and was happy to be back. I have no memory of how I exactly communicated it, but I showed Dillman a lake that we had passed earlier on the map on my phone and attempted to suggest that we could pass by there on the way back. Dillman didn't seem to know what to say and I thought we'll just see what happens.

Dillman started walking up a path to the right of the waterfall, and I followed. There were extremely steep steps, followed by very slippery rocks on the side of the waterfall. If I had had the possibility to explain to him that I had very poor knees and that I'm certain I will fall into the water or just break both of my legs, I would have, but as there was no real possibility for that, I just kept following him. Dillman stopped at a relatively random spot and took a very long phone call. I spent time looking around and

12



pondering over how I exactly ended up where I had — a common pastime of mine. It turned out there was no real destination for this little extreme sport stroll, and as Dillman got off the phone, we turned back and had another opportunity to enjoy the high steps and slippery rocks. No limbs were broken and we headed back to the car.

An older man stopped us half-way and said something in Kurdish.

There happened to be a woman next to us ready to translate: the man was curious where I came from and what I was doing in the region. He wanted to show me around in the coming days. He also said he was Dillman's brother or maybe just a relative which later turned out to be a joke. He asked for my number so we could arrange something, and even though I was about to drive 120 kilometers back towards the west, I felt like the room suggested I should give him the number, so I politely agreed.



We got back to the car and started driving. Silence again. The sunset was now in full glory, painting the sky over the mountains in hues of red, orange and yellow. I was pleasantly tired and bored, still slightly grinning over the messages from earlier. Hunger was slowly creeping up on me. I did skip the hotel lunch after all, not to mention turning down the kind offer to eat my driver. But how would've I returned to my teaching duties without a chauffeur? I might not be the most qualified educator but if there's one thing I'm good at, it's showing up.

13

We drove through the town of Khurmal and a mineral spring on the edge of the town. It was located right next to a low ragged dwelling —



stopped at a spring on the town. It was located right next to a dwelling —



possibly a type of sauna house. The stream was calm and the water was lined with rocks of different sizes. We took our shoes off and dipped them into the cold water. More messages:

THIS WATER IS COMING OUT OF THE WATER



THE HOUSE IS NOW CLOSED

THIS PLACE IS MORE THAN 2000 YEARS OLD

THIS TREE IS 150 YEARS OLD



THIS WATER IS SULPHUR WATER

14

While I was appreciative of the bits of information he was providing, I was a little puzzled by how he was all of a sudden making so much sense. No bathrooms, no eating, no “People are saying it” style of poetry. Just straight up facts.

THE SMELL

IS GOOD

FOR YOUR SKIN

I'd never heard of smell having such strong physical effects, but coming out of Dillman's mouth it had to be true.

15

Once our feet were numb from the cold, we wrapped up at the spring and headed back on the road for the final stretch. It was more or less dark already so there was nothing much to look at. I spent the rest of the trip looking out of the window into the



darkness, contemplating over the day, and how our communication and occasionally the lack of it had steered it. While Dillman was in the role of the driver, traditionally a role with relatively few lines, he became the protagonist of my trip. The intentionality of his messages remained unclear — likely being framed by technology — but the possibility of “People are saying it” having been a chosen course of exchange, had some thriller quality to it.

We finally pulled up at the hotel again and Dillman passed me his phone one last time:



## YOUR TRIP WAS A BIT OF A BUMMER

Even a hint of slang now. I had so many questions, but there was no way to get him to answer them. I proceeded to explain to Dillman that I really did have a great time, knowing that all he probably understood is what he could read from my face: an awkward smile, some blushing, some confusion, a hint of apology. I thanked Dillman the best way I could, and before I got out of the car, I asked him what his name was. “Dillman,” he said.

16

YOU DON'T LIKE THE FRUIT

FRUIT IS  
NATURAL

#8

People are saying it