
**The Red Sea Bride, Chapter 1**

**Part 1**

**Dream by the Red Sea**

*My eyes fluttered open on thin streams of sunlight filtering onto the foot of the bed through filigreed wood balcony shutters. I was not alone. Near me—so close, one of my arms draped over her shoulders—was my husband's new wife. Her face lay in shadow. She was my replacement.*

*The bedroom was on the top floor of a whitewashed limestone structure of old Jeddah. A balmy, moist breeze tinged with brine fluttered in off the Red Sea, stirring the light muslin window curtains and bedsheets. I sat up, pushing hair out of my eyes and noticing splintered, foot-sized holes that mottled the floor. Strands of what had once been finely woven Indian rugs littered the spaces between.*

*"Look!" I nudged the sleeping girl so she would awaken.*

*She blinked and sat up, leaning back on one arm.*

*"You can't walk on the floor without being careful." I pointed at the gaps. "You might fall through and break your neck."*

*I got to my feet. Sensing the woman was an invalid, I lifted her in my arms, surprised at my own strength, and held her carefully. Such is the nature of dreams. She murmured something into the cotton scarf that I used to cover my head in prayer but which had fallen around my shoulders during sleep. Her words seemed to be of consent, even thanks, and I felt sad.*

*And suddenly I knew, as sleepers do while dreaming, that the dream was over.*[1]

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[1] When I had this dream, I had returned to the West after nearly two decades in Saudi Arabia. Later, I learned that my husband's new wife, whom I never met, had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

## Part 2

## Lessons of Childhood

The number of young, independent Western women who meet and marry Saudi men, flying far from their homes to make a new one in an isolated desert Arab land, is more calculable today than it was in the pre-internet age. Before the internet, each young woman thought she was alone in throwing caution, like fine grains of romance-bleached sand, into the winds of fate.

And she was.

In the late 1970s, I was one of those girls. Every Western bride of a Saudi has found herself, in childhood, on stepping stones leading away from home. Our culture teaches us to be friendly, open to new experiences, and to follow our hearts.

I got to Saudi Arabia through a love of languages, which my mother had depended on to win me back to herself. She made a great sacrifice—separation from her child—to break the spell put on me by a woman who taught at my high school.

Like most parents, she never saw that need arising. Mom spent her young adulthood trying to get over the pain of my father's departure with another woman. My parents' divorce came early, disorienting my little brother and me in ways we were too small, and my mother too emotionally hurt, to understand.

Mom got remarried to a man named Ted, twelve years her senior. He became a father figure to my mother, who could never please her own. I was four when Mom announced we would have a new daddy. She gave me the news at bedtime.

"Mommy, why? I want to keep my old daddy."

She assured me I didn't; this one would be better.

Being adopted is great if you don't have a parent, if the one you had was crushed by a rhino or lost in outer space. No one wants a new parent if the old one is somewhere to be found and made you laugh. We were told the old daddy was gone and we had to suck it up.

My maternal grandmother, "Nana," wanting her daughter to be happy, bankrolled the construction of a car dealership for Ted. It was luxurious, with a shower in his office bathroom. Ted drove home a new car for Mom (Marcia) to "break in" every few months. He also brought home a

battery-powered miniature children's Chevrolet that I drove down the sidewalk to see my friend Arlene, two houses away. The tiny car didn't stay long, for it was meant to entertain clients' children at the dealership.

My playmate Arlene and her brother, Barry, had been adopted by a kind Jewish couple who worked 60-hour weeks. While Ted contracted a construction firm to build a swimming pool in our backyard (sending the bill to Nana), Arlene and Barry's backyard was full of tumbleweeds, bugs and lizards. Our swimming pool was the only one for blocks around. My little brother, Steven, and I became popular with any child who could walk to our house in a swim suit with a towel over their shoulders, rubber sandals slapping against the concrete sidewalk on a hot summer's day.

Arlene and Barry's parents had little time to give to their children, who fended for themselves at home after school. I had watched Barry drink salad dressing from his refrigerator. No one was there to tell him salad dressing was not juice.

When not playing with Arlene, I visited my adored grandmother, whom I had been named for, in the nearby city of Pomona. Nana lived with Papa on a green hill surrounded by all types of trees. An avocado orchard lay on the property's upper reaches while a fecund pomegranate tree dropped fruit not far from the back kitchen door.

I liked Jimmy, the respectful gardener from Japan who had two green thumbs, and I loved Rosie, the black maid who took me on her lap every time I came over. She made frozen bananas dipped in chocolate, fried chicken, and apple pie. I discovered, when I was older, that she took a number of foster children into her house and legally adopted as many as she could.

One day my mother asked Rosie to take me to a black Baptist church, where the entire congregation was ignited to praising God in hand-waving, clapping, stomping and swaying musical jubilation. That visit offered two powerful spiritual lessons: it was fine to accept other people's ways of worship and music had the power to sweep away boundaries.*

Nana had bought tricycles for my brother and me to ride at the sprawling red brick hilltop home. We slept in the two poster beds in my mother's childhood suite with its own bathroom. Nana and Papa slept in separate beds in the master bedroom where the windows afforded a panoramic view. Ceiling-to-floor niche shelves, running the expanse of most walls throughout the house, were crammed end to end with books. My grandparents and mother were avid readers.

In the mornings, after waking up at Nana's house, I slid out of my poster bed to tiptoe into her bedroom and climb up next to her. In the afternoons, she read stories to me until a frog crept into her throat.

"Nana, please let me see the frog!"

She shook her head. The frog stayed hidden.

She was willing, however, to show me geese. Nana saved scraps of bread so we could feed those wildfowl at the local park. They were as tall or taller than I was and their exuberant honks scared me. When I cried and reached up to be held, she lifted me to the safety of the car's hood.

As a young woman, Nana had gone to the Julliard School of Music. A living room grand piano stood with its top open. Pages of etudes, nocturnes and mazurkas by Chopin cluttered the sheet music stand above the keyboard. Whenever Nana finished performing, I liked to sit on the bench and touch the keys, making pretty sounds. On my last visits, the piano top was shut flat to hold Nana's bottles of medicine.

My grandfather, Papa, became grumpier. I saw his face turn red at night. He yelled about money and papers needing to be signed. Nana's illness upset him. He snapped at her to get out the room he was in because she "stank." The colostomy bag she wore hanging under her clothes at her side, he claimed, had a bad odor from the bile it collected.

Nana went to the hospital to get better. I couldn't see her when I wanted. I tried to be patient. We spent more time at our home, in our pool, and with Ted.

Our adoptive father had a tricky habit of throwing his arm out at the dining table, like he planned on punching Steven in the head in the same manner he hit his punching bag. Steven cringed and flinched because half the time, Ted *did* slap him upside the head. The other half, Ted jerked back his arm to look at his watch, chortling that he had tricked Steven, making my brother jump in his chair.

"I'm army-training the boy," he explained to Mom.

Mom grew quieter around Ted until after Steven and I went to bed. Then their arguments woke us up or gave us nightmares, and sometimes there was a hole in the door or a wall next day, where Ted had punched his fist the night before.

One morning, when Ted was not in the house, Steven and I found Mom at the breakfast dining table. "Eat your breakfasts," she said. She had set out cereal and cold milk, not French toast or scrambled eggs like she often made.

We sat down and she drank coffee, not talking. Suddenly Mom stood up, her lower lip quivering and her brow furrowed. She threw her coffee cup across the breakfast nook. The porcelain shattered in pieces against the wall, we jumped, and coffee dribbled down the flowered paper.

My brother and I stared at each other, aghast, as our sobbing mother ran out of the room.

"What shall we do?" asked Steven. I felt helpless, shaking my head and lifting my shoulders.

Days later, Steven and I woke up to find our neighbors, the Forbes, at our house. Teenagers Terry, Larry and Linda Forbes were our babysitters. One of the kids and their mom got us dressed and took us to their house for a breakfast of French toast. They made quite a fuss over us. I thought it was a nice way to start the day and almost wished we could be surprised this way more often.

"Don't worry; your mother is fine," said Mrs. Forbes reassuringly.

When I came home after school, my mother was sitting with red-rimmed, dark-circled eyes, staring out at the backyard. I got the feeling that she wasn't really noticing anything in it. She didn't hear me walk in. I thought she was hypnotized until my touch made her notice me. She pulled me close, smelling like flowers, and then flipped the world over by saying Nana had died.

My mother's words were a hideous vacuum cleaner, sucking every bit of happiness out of the house. Now I saw how the garden didn't matter. A huge, dark void had been following my mother around for weeks: it was the reason I couldn't go to Nana's house. The dark chasm started following me too, outside when I went to play (but not really playing), and with me to school and to bed. The darkness engulfed me and my brother, and swallowed our mother like a cocoon.

Not long after, I asked Mom to please explain why God took Nana away. She was the best Nana in the world.

"The good die young," my mother said, haltingly, "because God misses them."

Papa cried at Nana's funeral and visited us every day for a month. He had stayed at his wife's deathbed until he got her signature on a new will. If Ted had known the contents of that legal document, he would have dragged Papa out into the street. After the 30-day waiting period to allow contest from aggrieved family members, Papa stopped coming to our house.

Ted's dealership went bankrupt right after Nana returned to God. Ted blamed the bankruptcy on a shadowy "partner," who must have been Death, and decided we should move to the beach on my mother's dime.

All I grasped about this change of residence was that I was losing Arlene. She was a gentle girl who had taught me about Hanukkah, a superior holiday to Christmas because she and her brother got presents every single day for eight days.

Arlene often stood under my bedroom window after I had gone to bed. There, she was shielded from view by landscaped shrubbery. During

the setting of the summer sun or in the cold early dark of winter, she stood, perspiring or shivering, and shared the problems she had at home. If we moved, I would have no one to play with or talk to after I went to bed.

At the conclusion of weeks spent visiting ornate mansions facing the water, Ted settled for a slender, white-washed house sandwiched into a block on one of the man-made islands in Newport Beach. Mom could afford at least that.

A spanking paddle, purchased by Ted on a summer trip to Illinois, was packed inside the moving boxes and hung on a hook at the top of the stairs. The paddle was thick wood and had a picture of a little kid with his pants down and a red burning butt. Flames came out the child's buttocks to emphasize pain. The illustration was scary, but Ted thought it was as hilarious as the crack in the wood caused by hard whacking on Steven's posterior.

The spanking paddle's position on the wall at the doorway leading to our bedrooms was a warning to be good or our adoptive father would beat our naked butts until we cried and screamed and blood appeared.

Steven got the worst of it. Even going to bed was no escape, for Ted was capable of pulling a child out of bed to get what he or she deserved.

Living at the beach was more expensive than living inland. Mom was a small heiress but she had to get a full-time job because Ted no longer brought in an income. He studied at home to be an insurance agent and most of the time he was in a bad mood.

I tried to avoid him when he was grouchy, but sometimes he trapped me. He grabbed my fingers to yank over the dusty tops of wall paintings. Cinderella wasn't doing her job. Mom went to work every day while Ted made notes in books at home, slurped coffee and dunked his cream cheese-slathered toast into the same brew while eating eggs covered in ketchup, just like in the army.

Mom left a list of after-school chores written down on paper. I made sure that Steven and I got our chores accomplished so Ted wouldn't yell at or spank us. Ted made a chore list for us too, but he kept it in his head. We were supposed to ask, "What do you want us to do, Daddy?"

Then he rattled off the tasks Mom had asked him to do before she drove off to work. I tried my best to protect Steven, but Ted liked to torment my brother at day's end. Sometimes I tried claiming credit for whatever "wrong" Steven had done so he wouldn't get hurt. It was hard to watch my little brother be spanked, or hear him cry all alone in his bed.

Strangely, when he was not mean or hateful, Ted tried hard to bond with me, if not Steven, and Mom most of all. One morning, as she was on her way out the door to work, he grabbed her and French kissed her, the two

of them swaying—and Mom struggling—next to the dining table where Steven and I were trying to eat our breakfast cereal. I almost spit out my corn flakes.

Soon after, Ted asked if I wanted to see my grandmother. My jaw must have dropped. He claimed peculiar things at times, like when he insisted tadpoles would grow in rainwater caught in a bucket. My third or fourth grade teacher had debunked the concept of spontaneous generation, but Ted insisted it was real science.

"I mean *my* mother," he said.

A mother? Where had he been hiding her? On that summer trip, when we had visited his cousins on a farm in Illinois, catching fireflies to keep in glass mason jars, there had been no mother among the family members, at least not one belonging to Ted. Now he had one?

"Sure," I said. "How come I haven't met her before?" After all, he had adopted us. His mother must be an adopted grandmother. He mumbled something about her not being often present. Okay, so she traveled a lot? Maybe having a new grandmother would fill in the painful loss of Nana.

We went to a trailer park and he told me to call the lady, whom I would meet in a moment, "Oma."

"That means 'grandmother' in German."

"Does she speak only German?" I asked.

Ringing the trailer doorbell, he assured me she spoke English. An elderly woman wearing bright red lipstick, a skirt and a sagging bra with no blouse or shirt covering it, opened the door.

"Hi Mama," said Ted.

"Hi Oma," I said.

Oma had dementia and couldn't remember how to get properly dressed. I felt sorry for her and for Ted. No wonder he had kept her hidden. Ted seemed to be reestablishing his family ties while trying to keep his marriage to Mom together. I was too young to say whether his efforts were reasonable. Being grouchy so often was definitely not helping.

I entered sixth grade in Newport Beach. The school was situated on the peninsula, and kids could see the waves crashing on shore through the wire fence while we played foursquare or shot baskets.

When the teacher asked who would show me around the school, Patti raised her hand. Patti was the butt of jokes for her brains, with jealous enemies like Ann, who taunted her. The wise teacher chose Patti from among those who raised their hands because as a stranger untouched by

festering schoolkid prejudice, I was a good candidate to be Patti's friend. She needed one.

Patti came from brilliant parents—a father aerospace engineer who worked on the Apollo project and a mother anesthesiologist. It is hard to make friends when you are so smart studying takes all of five seconds. Patti had a photographic memory and could look at any page and remember it. Ann hated her, as did a few other mean kids.

I found Patti amazing. She became my 6th grade guru, and we solemnized the spirituality of our friendship by giving a full burial ceremony to a dead seagull found on the beach one foggy weekend morning.

She introduced me to musical wizards like Peter, Paul and Mary, the Mamas & the Papas, and Donovan in the temple of her little bedroom. While the record spun, she showed me the window next to her bed where a male hand once slid in, trying to grope the prepubescent female who lay there.

Together, we did arm pumping exercises, imagining the results would be a Sophia Loren hourglass figure. Patti chanted, "We must, we must, we must improve our busts!" Both of us stayed parked at "A" cup size for an eternity.

For the 6th grade talent contest, Patti talked me into accompanying her in singing "Jamaica Farewell," the two of us swaying in grass skirts while she strummed away on her guitar. Ann competed against us. Later known as "the voice," Ann won first place while Patti and I won third, helped by our parents' ballot box stuffing.

Ann stared down her nose at both Patti and me all that semester. I tried to avoid her on the playground, but one day, I found Ann, flanked by her toadies, standing in front of me. She smiled into my face.

"You're going to hell."

"What?" Disliking me or my choice of friends didn't give Ann the right to pronounce my eternal damnation. "What makes you say that?"

"I can tell by your eyes."

"What can you tell?"

"I am a born-again Christian," Ann explained, "and I have been taught what to look for in people's eyes. I can see you haven't been born again, so you are going to hell."

Someone could teach a kid how to do that? I was impressed even if this was not a conversation I wished to prolong. I went straight to the girls' bathroom and looked in the mirror, trying not to be obvious to anyone who walked in. I studied the pupils and corneas of my eyes closely but didn't see

anything to indicate eternal damnation. No inflammation or dark spots. Surely hell clues weren't in the whites of the eyes? They weren't bloodshot or yellow. I looked healthy.

If being born again meant being cruel, I could do without it. Being born once was enough.

My family's narrow two-story house, from which I heard the surf breaking at night from my window, was right across the street from Ann's. That was at first an uncomfortable proximity to the girl who made claims to seeing souls. I preferred entering and exiting by our garage door, taking Via Palermo rather than Via Orvietto up or down the street to get somewhere.

In seventh grade, we students were told we could dress up for Halloween. I forgot about that permission until the morning arrived. Then I turned to the woman who knew everything, to save me.

"Mom! What shall I do? I don't have a costume!"

My mother gave it a thought, then reached into the foyer closet and pulled out an overcoat and hat belonging to Ted. She drew a mustache on my upper lip with charcoal. I was either Ted or a hobo. I looked idiotic.

Yet I was pleased. In chill autumn morning air, the coat sagged off my shoulders, and it was all I could do to keep it and the hat on while carrying my books. In those days, students did not use backpacks. On weekends and in between classes, all unnecessary books were kept in lockers. Our books must have been thinner than nowadays because I do not remember my back or shoulders hurting.

At the bus stop, a bunch of kids were already waiting: Patti, the handsome and identical Baduini twins (with one of whom I was quietly in love for a good six months), my brother, Steven, Ann (who pretended not to see me or Patti), and a handful of other kids. Most wore an attempt at a costume.

I stuck my hand into my Ted the hobo right pocket and was surprised to find a metal item. It was an oblong silvery object attached to a black plastic handle with an on/off switch.

"What is this?" I asked of no one in particular, holding up the strange useless product. I pushed the switch "on." The metal object started vibrating. It struck me as quite funny.

"Well there's a useless item!" I said, watching it jiggle in my hand.

Patti grabbed my elbow hard and pulled me aside. Ann was staring at me with her nostrils flared, ready to throw her head back and laugh like she always did. A tall boy snickered and elbowed another kid whose lips raised to show his teeth.

“Put that away,” hissed Patti. “Hide it. Put it back in your pocket.”

“Why?”

“It’s a dildo. A vibrator.” Her breath tickled my ear. “Put it back and talk about something else.”

I was mystified. “What is a dildo vibrator?”

Patti had never looked so stern. “I’ll tell you later,” she promised, “in the bus.”

I slid the metal thing back in my pocket, and Patti kept her word.

Indeed, the school bus was an extracurricular classroom where brilliant Patti expounded fascinating theories about what made people the way they were. She gave me the lowdown on every kid living on Lido Island. There was a boy, for instance, who had gone from genius to retard because his father made him study too much. He was reduced to making motorcycle noises.

After Patti explained vibrators, I was embarrassed and sure my mother had not known what was in the pocket. She had given me the coat Ted wore to work when it was cold. Why did Ted need this thing? According to Patti, it did not work with male anatomy.

The rest of the day was nerve-wracking, as I was preoccupied with trying to decide what to do with the metal vibrator. I secreted it in my locker, only to find Ann and her saintly associates watching me narrowly every time I went back to that stash for a change of books. You’d think they could find some weary travelers’ feet to wash.

“Got your little sex toy?” I heard behind me as I climbed in the bus after school. Snickering followed. Patti was in front of me. I still had the metal thing deep in the coat pocket. It was the safest place for transport.

Seated next to Patti, who was conversing with someone, I opened my history book, suddenly keen to know more about British tax policies on the New World colonies. I did not look up until the bus came to my stop.

Getting off, I let Ann have a good lead before proceeding down Via Orvietto. I passed several houses before realizing I should have walked down Via Palermo. Too late. My gaze remained on the ground. That is when I saw the student paper lying on the sidewalk. It looked clean, as if it had just slipped out of someone’s binder.

I saw the name “Ann” and picked it up. It was a returned vocabulary quiz with an A on top and doodling on the sides.

Oh wow.

She had written, “I repent.”

At what point in the day had she written “I repent”? Was she sorry for making fun of Patti and me? Of assuming God’s role?

I folded the paper and slipped it into my pocket. If a steamroller had been cruising down the street, I could have taken out the metal vibrator and tossed it to be smashed, but no such luck.

At home, a list of items Mom wanted from the store waited for me. Inspired by Ann’s quiz, I hopped on the bike, still wearing the coat. Right off the island was a church I had to pass before getting to the market. I left my bike in front and walked in. The place was empty, thank God.

After walking up the nave, I laid the metal vibrator upon the altar. Inspiration struck again, and I pulled out Ann’s quiz, laying it next to the vibrator. She deserved a little credit with the Almighty.

Who knows what the preacher thought.

The winds of religious revival had whipped through our house as they had through Ann’s. Ted and Mom had invited representatives of various Christian sects to speak to us on weekends. I remember Mom getting flustered because the Mormons wouldn’t drink coffee, tea or wine. She couldn’t think what to offer. Coffee, tea or wine were the best times of her day.

My brother and I were required to be present for each religious presentation. Sitting cross-legged on the floor while visitors from a new church droned on about stuff that wasn’t Edgar Allen Poe or the Beatles might have been my most boring childhood memory if Ted hadn’t come up with the idea of buying a large boat. It seemed a natural course of events subsequent to going bankrupt and moving to a beach town. There were boats in the bay around Lido Island, where Ted had moved us, and where Patti, Ann, and lots of my new schoolmates lived.

Boats became an obsession with Ted. He and Mom took their wine coolers to the end of the street and watched the weekend parade of sailboats go by. Mom knew how to sail from when she was a kid, visiting Balboa Island on weekends.

My brother and I were given a sabot, a two-seater dinghy (small boat) designed for young people. I did rather well in sailing lessons taken with Patti. She and I went out in the sabot, loving the spray of ocean water in our faces and our hair swirling in tangled energy masses. Sailing is fun on windy days, when weight placement in the vessel means everything. In a high wind, we had to sit on one side of the boat, sometimes leaning out to keep from capsizing, and of course we ducked when tacking (turning) so as not to get hit in the head by the moving boom. Patti pointed out strange vessels like Catamarans and named people sailing them.

Other times Patti and I lay on our surfboards, paddling them slowly around the island under lucky people's waterfront piers, where everything smelled like brine and mollusks until we got under the main bridge to the island, where the stench of Sulphur made us pinch our noses shut. We often forgot to apply sunscreen, burning the backs of our lily white legs bright red, so they hurt to bend when we sat in the classroom next day.

Ted had grander plans than a kids' sabot or the Lido-14, a six-seater sailboat, he sailed with my mother and friends. He wanted a cruiser to go deep-sea fishing with. To that end, we should all learn how to navigate. Then Ted, still unemployed, could buy the cruiser and in case he and Mom were occupied in the hold with the door bolted, Steven and I could navigate the ship.

If anyone thinks gym, chemistry or grammar is boring, they should try a navigation class at the age of twelve. The classes lasted three, four or fifteen hours each and were all held at night after dinner, when hastily consumed food was digesting in my stomach. Steven was considered too young to attend, but I had to since Ted said I inherited his IQ. Apparently it came with the adoption papers. Ted bought a captain's hat at the first class and wore it to every lecture. I wish the dreariness of those classes could be sold in pill form. Insomnia would be wiped out forever.

Meanwhile, music tamed savage beasts. In junior high, Ann, Patti and I found ourselves together under the direction of the junior high choral music master, Mr. Lynde.

A passion for music made us sing while the rock revolution, gripping the world, preached loving the one you're with. We all three had pianos, which we practiced. There was too much uniting us to keep us foes any longer. Pronouncing religious judgments upon others is an unrewarding undertaking, and I think Ann wanted friends, as most kids do. She let the matter of my damnation slide.

Condemnation has a similar bad effect on marriages. Ted was a jealous man and caused my mother much suffering. More than once, the morning light displayed how he had put his angry fist through the back of a chair or door. As their marriage deteriorated, he attempted to play the kid card. I came into my own room one day after school to find him sitting in my rocking chair, crying.

"Why are you crying, Dad?" I had never seen a grown man cry before, and certainly not the very man who wielded a paddle so sharply he could draw blood. Tears rolling down his cheeks were a phenomenon that didn't match my experience of his army personality.

I knew Ted to be a crafty crocodile, unexpectedly driving up to my summer school (right before 7$^{th}$ grade) with a toothy smile on his face. Patti and I had just returned from a full day of playing hooky, and I was relieved

for having gotten back before Ted could notice. As soon as I got in the car, he smacked me hard across the face. My head hit the opposite window. At home, I was grounded for six months (made to stay at home except for school). All the Beatles posters I made with pastels were thrown in the garbage. My subversive hippy music was hidden in the foyer closet (where the coat came from) next to Ted's scores of *Playboy* magazines.

Still, this was also the man who claimed credit for saving my life, driving me to the hospital when I woke up in a sweat from a nightmare that an army was marching across my stomach. In the emergency ward, the doctor said my appendix had swelled up like a grapefruit and was ready to burst.

Ted's tears were deeply disturbing. I went downstairs to find my mother. "Why are you divorcing Dad? You made him cry!"

On a stepstool in the kitchen, Mom turned her head to look at me, her expression one of defeat.

After Mom left Ted, I was ill for almost a month in the eighth grade. We had moved off Lido Island to a less posh neighborhood. Mom worked full time, and the sailboats were sold. Luckily, I was still at the same school. Mr. Lynde took a song I had written, titled "Like Lovers," about the divorce my mother and Ted were headed for, and wrote it out for the entire choir. When I came back to school, he surprised me by having everyone sing it.

"It's your song," he said. "Which do you prefer for the spring concert? Do you want the choir to sing it or for you and Ann to sing it alone?" Love of music and proximity of houses had pulled Ann and I together.

"I prefer to sing it as a duo with Ann," I said. Mr. Lynde kindly allowed us to record that song on that year's record LP. Now I wish I had opted for his choir version. He was a gentle soul.

Mr. Lynde soon after announced that a whirlwind of musical influence, the indomitable Mrs. Galbraith, would appear on our campus the next week to audition candidates for the choral department of Newport Harbor High. Ann, Patti and I bit our fingernails in anticipation. What if one or two of us was accepted and the third not?

In our hearts, we worried that our trio would not survive the jealousy. Girls are silly to worry about such things. Friendships are like lizards' tails. They fall off and new ones grow.

The day arrived and with it, Mrs. Galbraith, her hair flaming red and steam rising off her skin from the passion for music that coursed through her veins. She had trained in New York, Vienna and other glittering cities. She was a madwoman of music.

Ann and I made it onto the list of new members for the "Chantelles." Not having a voice like Ann's, I do not know why Mrs. Galbraith chose me. Patti would be in the other two groups. On reflection, I realize that year's denial helped steel Patti's determination to become a lifelong creatively active musician, singer and piano teacher. Like her brother, Chris, born with a guitar in his hands, Patti has made a splash in her field.

If Mr. Lynde was a ray of light, Mrs. Galbraith was a blazing festoon of fireworks. She was a magnet, a Svengali who pulled anyone with an ounce of talent—not necessarily musical—into the choral music department to serve the greater purpose of performing vocal arts. She had studied opera somewhere, but managed to grow nodes on her vocal chords from over-training, the trauma of falling in love, smoking, or all three. Famous opera star Beverly Sills had been her classmate, but poor Mrs. Galbraith had not scaled the same heights (a point she glossed over). We heard her crooning along in her cigarette-lowered alto to all the arrangements she conducted.

Mrs. Galbraith had to hunt hard to get males to audition for the regular choir and the Madrigals. She allowed the talented males to do other things like conduct or accompany us on piano or guitar. For the years of her rule, Mrs. Galbraith pandered to student egos, choosing favorites for various projects. She made us all believe that no classes were more important than her extra-curricular ones.

With no children of her own, she usurped the position of many parents. By the end of my freshman year, if not sooner, Mrs. Galbraith became my mother's undeclared enemy.

Almost every teen in the choral music department lived for music and Mrs. Galbraith. Our parents became unimportant as Mrs. Galbraith oozed music from every pore of her body and made us swim in the stuff. She called rehearsals during weekends and early mornings before class. The wealthier parents were persuaded to donate their vacation homes for weekend rehearsal retreats, during which we sang and they bought the food, cooked and kept a respectful distance.

The Chantelles spent winter breaks at mountain cabin retreats our parents were forced to finance, but not allowed to visit. We did not ski or play in the snow. We sang. During the school year, Mrs. Galbraith shuttled us around, competing hither and yon. We were endlessly rehearsing on a bus going somewhere.

A girl who developed severe laryngitis was lambasted by Mrs. Galbraith for her psychosomatic illness. Apparently the laryngitis—though real—had been produced as an act of rebellion. The girl had to perform with us.

"How can she do that?" we asked.

"She will stand and mouth the words."

"What if she has a fever and can't stand?"

"Then two of you shall prop her up on either side. The show must go on." We felt like she was driving us straight to the Metropolitan Opera, stoking the fires of greatness. If she took our talent so seriously, by golly, so would we.

The only acceptable reason for not performing, Mrs. Galbraith said, was death. Cadavers did not look good on stage. In that case she excused us.

She found a way to have a special connection to every singer, so that the girl (or boy) in question felt irreplaceable. She assigned me the drawing of the program cover for our choral music department's winter performance of *Amahl and the Night Visitors,* an operetta by Gian Carlo Menotti. I made the paper mâché parrot that was carried by one of the three kings. Ann was given a singing lead.

Passion spun out from Mrs. Galbraith in luminescent threads. She could have been a Marvel Comics superhero, each one of us enthralled into submission. When she rehearsed us in singing *The Creation,* a rock cantata by David Bobrowitz and Steven Porter (lyrics adapted from Genesis in the Bible), Mrs. Galbraith shook her wild red locks and cried, "I don't care whether you are atheists at home, while you sing this gorgeous music, you *believe*!"

Her grasp caused us to neglect other abilities, other subjects. My English teacher, Mr. Ulander, had arranged visits to our classroom from television actors Anthony Zerbe and Roscoe Lee Browne, who enthralled us with poetry, and from science fiction writer Ray Bradbury. In my yearbook, Mr. Ulander wrote, "When are you going to free yourself from that diabolical music department and get down to some serious writing?"

In high school, teens are distracted by their friends. If I did not heed his words, it was largely Ann's fault. The apple of Mrs. Galbraith's eye took center stage wherever she went, even English class. In senior year, when Mr. Ulander selected students to be at his round table literature class (where he presided like King Arthur), Ann stole the show. She liked to cry out an author's name, then fling her upper torso into the center of the table, arms outreaching so that her fingers touched someone's typed papers. She lay with one cheek pressed down, dark tresses spread out like the floating locks of a drowned Ophelia. Mr. Ulander didn't stop her, so I guess her found her behavior acceptable.

Ann's amazing voice could be matched by her massive need for validation. Once she told a boyfriend (whom I met) that she had leukemia, just to see how he would respond. He broke down crying. She watched him

stumble around red-eyed and shaken for a day or two, and then confessed she was fine.

When not emoting or singing, Ann invited groups of friends to eat at a Newport Beach restaurant chain her dad owned. She signed the check with her name and did not use cash. I thought she was going to be famous.

Being surrounded by so much talent was a dizzying, adrenalin-pumping sensation. To walk through any southern Californian neighborhood in the 70s was to hear fledgling rock bands practicing behind garage doors. Ann was a lead singer in the Newport Harbor High music department and with a rock and roll and blues band formed by Patti's brother, Chris. Patti, too, played guitar and piano. Mrs. Galbraith's favorite male students, Joe, Gary, and Jerry, played various instruments, sang and composed and were so dazzling that the rest of us felt like turtles.

High school was cocooning me in an emotional turmoil. My mother realized she had to do something to help me regain my sense of self. She zeroed in on my fascination with languages.

As a small child, I had sometimes interfered with my little brother's cartoon craving. *George of the Jungle* is over? Good, click. Welcome Japanese soap opera. Scream. Kids didn't have multiple devices in the 60s. We had one TV in the living room and shared it.

When I enrolled in high school French, Mom started thinking about how to use that interest to help me. French class was the only place Mrs. Galbraith and Ann did not show up. The teacher was pleasant and un-pushy, and I received A's.

From out of thin air, my mother conjured a strange little woman with a heavy accent who knew people: European princesses and princes, daughters of international magnates, famed actors, film makers and South American coffee plantation owners. Mom took Patti and me to meet her. Patti dreamed of studying German in Austria, but her mother was too busy anesthetizing to attend the meeting and hear how to get her daughter placed in an Austrian boarding school. (How many children need a parent's attention instead of money? Patti said she might as well have been raised by wolves.)

The lady matched girls to appropriate schools in Europe. My mother warned me this European school broker would test us to see if we passed muster. We were all to have tea together. I had to hold my teacup properly, sit with my back straight and not slurp. I was to answer thoughtfully and articulate. Because I might not pass, you see.

Suddenly I wanted to. Oh, so much.

Madame was not very tall but towered over the tea party with her impeccable manners and bearing. She spoke to us in several languages. When

Patti and I failed to answer in a heartbeat, she said, with sympathy, “If you are fortunate enough to go to Europe, you will learn to speak your second language *well*.”

She might have been a German actress or impoverished aristocrat from Tsarist Russia, brandishing jewels and contacts. To me, she emphasized the desirability of attending a genteel girls’ school in some converted castle of French-speaking Switzerland, where young European countesses, diamond mine owners’ daughters and the offspring of sheiks came together. This was heady stuff. Suddenly Mrs. Galbraith’s vocal music department seemed hopelessly mundane.

I realize now my great fortune. Up until that point, I was a typical high school kid plodding through life, distracted from my own abilities due to being hypnotized by a music teacher and overwhelmed by her favorites.

My mother bought me new luggage, warm clothes, and several pairs of gloves. Papa escorted me to Switzerland. Château Mont Choisi was everything this mysterious “Madame” had described it as and more. There, I was thrown in with girls from all over the world who spent, for a weekend’s pleasure, the same amount as I received for half a year’s allowance. To get me out of the grips of a teacher whom she saw as potentially harmful, Mom had to let me go free. In so doing, she taught me to pursue dreams on my own. I was not yet sixteen.

For almost three months, I spent long moments gazing out my bedroom window, looking up at the tall hills of Lausanne with tears rolling down my cheeks. The tears were not for Mrs. Galbraith; they were for my mother. I missed her cooking, her laughter, her prettiness, and her hugs. She missed me too. She was the only mother to bake cookies (some of them Italian, due to a new romance) and send them to Switzerland. Everyone on my floor of the château ate the cookies.

In addition to daily French classes and English with an American teacher who encouraged my writing, I took singing lessons with a Madame Goldenhorn in downtown Lausanne. Her father, Monsieur Goldhorn, came to our school to give piano lessons.

Mme Goldenhorn assured me that with six years hard work, I would be trained for the operatic world. My mother never contradicted this goal although it was a direct result of the steely Mrs. Galbraith controlling me from overseas. I intended to rejoin her classes in my senior year of high school, when I returned to Newport Beach.

My new best friend at the school was Suzanne, from Queens, New York. In the winter break, she and I went on an organized excursion with others of the girls to the German-speaking mountain resort of Zermatt. There we learned to ski.

I fell in love with one of the German-speaking Swiss horse-drawn sleigh drivers of Zermatt, named Matthias. He was handsome and smart, reading Herman Hesse and loving photography. The rest of the school year, I begged a German friend, Sybil, at the boarding school to translate my letters from English into German, which I painstakingly rewrote in my own handwriting, thereby learning a bit of German.

Suzanne was kind enough to accompany me by train to visit Matthias' village of Fiesch, founded in the 13th century. About 650 human beings lived there. As we walked through town, Matthias waved at half the people, all cousins.

Fiesch was so high in the Alps that in winter, the children either took the squeaking milk train down the slope or skied their way to school. Because it was spring, the mountainsides resembled green velvet, save for the highest reaches covered in snow. White clouds moved across the sky, interspersed with sunlight that brightened the steep sides carpeted in wild flowers. Baby lambs leapt and danced in joy.

California seemed so different compared to Switzerland. This was what my mother wanted me to learn: "The world is bigger than Newport Beach."

I went home in June, leaving behind Alpine vistas and a unique young Swiss German man. Mrs. Galbraith was waiting. I had senior year before me. Mrs. Galbraith took it into her head that the Chantelles should dress like dancers in the Folies Bergère, wearing hot pants and kicking up their legs in unison. To this end, every girl was put on a diet and weighed once a week.

She asked me to teach French accents for songs we sang. Had Toulouse De Lautrec yet lived, Mrs. Galbraith would have manipulated him into the front row of the school auditorium, supplied him with a full bottle of absinthe and a sketch pad.

My lack of enthusiasm to be a showgirl was not lost on Mrs. Galbraith.

"Sylvia, would you come to my office after class?" she said in honeyed tones at the beginning of the semester, winking at one of her favorite male students, who held a baton in his hand.

"I want to hear all about your year in Switzerland."

I followed her into the office, naïve as a puppy enticed by a biscuit. She asked me if I appreciated her shift to all things Francophone.

"It was a choice made as a special acknowledgement of your return to the department."

"Thank you, Mrs. Galbraith." I hesitated, then decided to be brave. "Being a dancer in hot pants on stage isn't really my dream. Singing is fine, but I've always been the worst in ballet class because I can't balance on one foot." That was true. I had been terrible in ballet class in Switzerland. Suzanne had been great.

Mrs. Galbraith's neck and cheeks flushed as red as her hair. For a moment she was speechless with fury, then she blurted: "You are a *selfish* little bitch who walks on people to get what she wants!"

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and my eyes widened. How could she say that? What had *I* done to her?

Mrs. Galbraith was sitting in a chair pulled out from the desk, kicking her leg. She yelled, her voice so shrill everyone heard, and at the same time, she blocked my passage to the door.

I suspect she mistook me for my mother.

The poisonous effect of her words penetrated my heart.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Galbraith." I remembered a lady does not get mad. A lady stays calm. "I will *not* be remaining with the Chantelles." The back of the chair felt hard with me pressed against it, regretting having followed her into the office. I stared down at my clasped hands.

For a brief instant, Mrs. Galbraith showed regret. "Don't leave," she pleaded. "I'll let you conduct!"

It must have been hard for her to make that offer since she reserved the honor for the guys. I cannot understand why she wanted me to stay. I had no great voice and performed no important service, save, perhaps, to her ego.

I withdrew from classes with Mrs. Galbraith and enrolled in choral music at the local community college. I tried to teach Mom how to say things in French.

Over the moon in relief at my break with Mrs. Galbraith, my mother reciprocated with knowledge on wine and cooking. She had recently married a man who loved cooking as she did. Their romance had blossomed over the gas range when Don came over to our house to make chili. Don's parents had both emigrated from Italy. Mom had joined my European experience.

After my high school graduation, Mom and Don got married. There were but a few tiny snags to this happy time. One was the news from Mom that my brother and I were illegitimate.

"How can you say that? You were married to Dad."

“In the Catholic Church,” she said, “to which I have returned, that marriage doesn’t count. I am very sorry.”

She had converted to Catholicism as a teenager while living with nuns at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy. If she wanted me to help shoulder her guilt for leaving the pope, she failed. Mom and the pilgrims on the Mayflower had taught me to believe in freedom of worship.

“Can’t you just say you used to be Episcopalian? That your children were born in that church?”

“No, I can’t.”

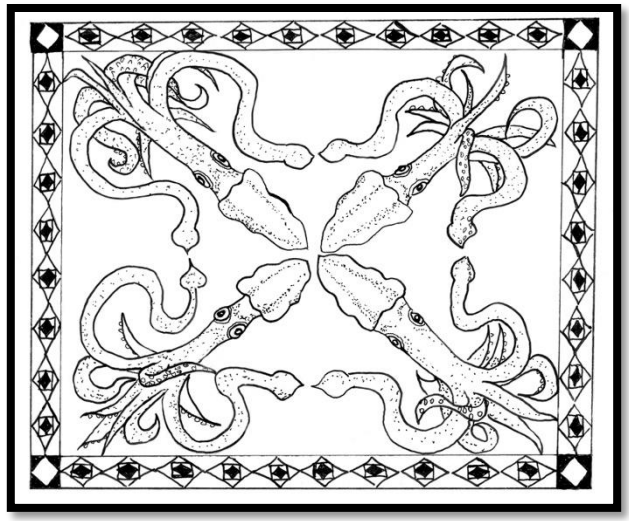
Whatever floats your boat, I thought. She was still my loving mother.

Although Dad had reappeared in our lives, pressing Mom to remarry him, she decided they were better off friends. He accepted her choice of new husbands with grace. He came over almost every day to teach Steven how to fix cars. Dad said he loved Mom no matter whom she married. Steven got sent to a military boarding school for a year and he hated it. I went back to Switzerland to continue voice lessons.

Don was a cool guy. For a Halloween party he and Mom hosted, he wrapped himself up like a mummy and walked to our house, crossing a big street that way, because he couldn’t bend his legs to sit in his car.

I believe he stopped traffic.

Don and Mom became co-managers of a restaurant called The Lost Mine in northern California and moved north, far away from the wiles of Mrs. Galbraith, whom I would encounter only once more, after I had become a Red Sea Bride.



## Chapter 2
## Changing Worlds

My potential as an opera singer was littered with cigarette butts. All the girls met at the Swiss boarding school had smoked. Ashtrays had been forbidden, but the girls let their cigarettes die out balanced on their filter ends. I had picked up the nasty habit.

My friend Suzanne, who smoked since she was 11, came back to Lausanne in the same year I did. She enrolled at École des Beaux Arts and I, at the Lausanne Conservatory of Music.

"You smoke," said Mme Goldenhorn during my second lesson. "I can hear it in your voice. You will have to throw away your cigarettes if you want to be an opera singer."

I imagined a burning desire to be an opera singer, despite Mrs. Galbraith no longer being my mentor. It would be cool to send her a little note from, say, a job singing at the La Scala Opera House in Vienna.

Mme Goldenhorn now presented me with my first challenge of self-discipline. Suzanne was no help. I walked down the hill to her flat from my boarding house, Château de Vennes, and told her the ultimatum Mme Goldenhorn had given me. Suzanne contemplated my predicament, puffing out smoke rings.

"Want one?" she asked, pushing her pack towards me. Suzanne thought everything was funny. "It's no different than my not understanding what my teachers are saying in French."

I didn't laugh. "Why don't you work harder on learning French?"

“Why should I?” she asked. “You’ve always been around when we go out to eat. You order the meal, so I don’t have to study.”

Many of the young people at Château de Vennes smoked. Danielle Junod and her mother, two delightful ladies who ran the boarding house, were more focused on the rule about our leaving the door of our bedrooms open when male and female students were in the same room than on whether we smoked.

Except for opera singers, Europe felt like a world of cigarette smokers. French guys studying engineering in Lausanne walked around puffing on Gaulois, a cigarette so cool it didn’t have filters.

My grandfather came to Lausanne to find me twiddling my thumbs, not attending the Conservatoire de Musique. He enrolled me at École Lemania to continue French studies.

Chips were falling into place. I liked studying French. Suzanne did not fare so well with art school, partly because of an anti-Jewish director and because she got sick as a dog during winter exams. I found her, one day, feverish in her apartment, with a temperature threatening to ascend beyond 104 Farenheit.

I called the hospital. A nurse instructed me to get my friend in the bathtub and give her a sponge bath in vinegar, wrapping vinegar-soaked rags around her extremities. It took days before she got better.

The art school director sent Suzanne a letter telling her to “find happiness in another profession,” but my friend was tenacious. She reapplied and made it through to the end of the year at École des Beaux Arts, doing well, going on to study at C.W. Post College in New York. Like Patti, Suzanne was full of interesting information. Religions, romance and rock music were her favorite subjects.

I had never heard of Islam before meeting Muslims in Switzerland. “Oh, Islam is similar to Judaism!” exclaimed Suzanne, “Both religions focus on the concept of One God.” Raised Jewish, Suzanne had fallen in love with a Christian. (Eventually she became Catholic. Then she married a Buddhist from Japan who moved her to California where she found a career in a private school working for an Iranian Catholic with a Muslim husband.)

At the end of that second year in Lausanne, my heart was broken by a French boy and I came home with a mention of « très honorable » (*summa cum laude*) on my Diplôme d'Alliance Française.

Tired of her daughter being so far away, Mom rejoiced to find the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies only a couple of hours from her house. There I enrolled.

She and Don opened a French restaurant in Saratoga, California, both serving as chefs. They ordered langoustine (a slim, orange-pink lobster) from Spain and blue prawns from Maui. Don's Italian mother, Elvira, came in twice a week to make cannelloni and cannoli. The most popular dessert was Mom's French silk pie, intensely chocolate, which the restaurant served with espresso.

My mother read cook books like other people read detective novels. The restaurant was named *Le Mouton Noir, "*The Black Sheep*,"* a term used to describe a disreputable family member. She hung my poem on the subject, in French, in the establishment's foyer.

Patti and Ann had both moved to northern California for college. Patti warned me, when I next saw Ann, to not go into shock. "The Voice" had anorexia in the wake of her parents' divorce and her father's remarriage, giving him new children and interests. She was no longer a star, but a waif.

For a few years, while Ann attended UOP in Stockton to study music, Mom consented to inviting her to our home on the weekends. I hoped accepting Ann into my own family would help her get over her depression. At the end of each weekend, Ann drove off to sing and I, to study French and world culture.

In my second semester at the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies, a batch of male students arrived from Saudi Arabia to learn English. Two were princes. I had heard of Saudi Arabia.

A girl in my English class at Chateau Mont Choisi had been the daughter of Zaki Yemeni, the Saudi minister of petroleum. Later, at Chateau de Vennes, two girls and their little brothers would prove to be my future Saudi husband's distant relatives. (I did not know that then.) In France, I had watched a bemused Saudi prince at a casino in France lose half a million dollars in thirty minutes. Employees had roped off the section so viewers could not get too near the prince and his lovely blonde companion. The smile had never faded from the man's lips.

Between classes at the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies, six to eight or nine Saudi boys leaned on their sports cars just next to the school's mail office. Whenever female students walked to the mailroom, that group of Saudi boys meowed like cats and made kissing sounds in the air. We girls began waiting for them to go back to their classes before retrieving our mail.

One of my French teachers, a *pied noir*, had grown up in Algeria, tried to explain the culture gap to us:

"You cannot be too angry with them. They do not know how to act. They come from a rigid society where women seldom walk in the streets. In cities, women stay at home or go by car that a man drives to a doctor's

office, shopping center or villa, and even then, it is with fabric covering them from head to toe."

That sounded very strange. None of the Saudis I met in Switzerland had told me about that. Maybe they didn't want anyone to know?

The *pied noir* French teacher added that the boys hanging out near the mailroom came from desert villages. "They feel like they are on another planet, seeing women moving around in society." We girls calmed down. Most of us were interested in other cultures; that was why we studied foreign languages. Of course our male peers in class didn't really care since the Saudi boys hadn't bothered *them*.

One day a group of foreign ESL students trooped past my French classroom. A bunch of Saudis were mixed in. The tallest of the young men paused to scrunch his eyes up through the window. I thought, "My Lord, who is that?" He was the most handsome of any of the young Saudi men, and in truth, of all the young men at the school. He resumed walking with his group, leaving a few of the girls in my classroom tittering in excitement. We had not seen him before.

"Do you know who that is?" I asked a classmate.

"No, but I can get his name!" she exclaimed. "I talk to one of the Saudi students a lot." Not long after, she told me the tall young man's name was "Malik." Malik means "king."

The name fit. He stood out for his athletic build, beautiful eyes and dazzling smile. Other Saudis clustered about Malik, competing for his attention. Yet his eyes were mine whenever I passed, blushing, and his voice remained stilled though a throng of compatriots pressed around with jokes and laughter.

One Friday afternoon he blurted, in a melodious accent, "Have a nice weekend, Sweet Angel." The young Saudi men near him (not the same who stalked the mailroom) fell silent. I murmured "thank you" and floated to my car.

He frequented my thoughts that weekend as I sunbathed under an apple tree in my tiny Carmel garden. My pretty little gray cat, Alceste, vied for my attention, hopping in and out of the cottage window. She was torn between me and her newborns. I had named her after a grouchy male human character in a French play even though she was female, friendly and furry. Alceste was so trusting and affectionate she jumped on the hood of my car whenever I slowed to a stop in front of my cottage. I tried to make her stop.

The next week, Malik called to ask me out. I do not know how he got my phone number and I was too distraught to care. The night before, Alceste had gone missing. Her kittens had been mewing for food for hours. I searched through the streets from dawn, feeling my heart race. At 8 am, I

began dialing the numbers of veterinary clinics. At last a receptionist described a cat brought in from a hit-and-run. I heard a recognizable meow in the background. It was Alceste.

"That's her! I'll be right there." I scribbled down the address and hopped in my car.

The clinic was deserted and chilly, with a steely antiseptic odor. "The gray cat is mine," I said, leaning against the countertop. "Whatever you need to do, I'll pay for it." I knew my mother would help me with money if necessary. I wanted to see Alceste, so my pet could know I had found her and would take care of her.

The receptionist looked at me with big eyes, blinked and cleared her throat.

"I'm so very sorry. Your cat has just died."

I was eighteen year old. Alceste had been my dearest little friend. I sat down and cried. Soon, however, I stood up, remembering the tiny, motherless kittens that waited in feverish hunger. They would die if I did not nurse them.

It was definitely not the right day for Malik to call and ask me out. Yet he did. "I can't," I said, sobs choking my words. "Alceste died. I—I need—a few days to grieve."

"Oh!" his voice was warm. "I am *so* sorry. Who is Alceste?"

"My cat."

I was too naïve to understand the silence that met me on the other end of the line.

In Saudi Arabia, cats were all feral. In Malik's parents' generation, wild, mangy street cats snuck into homes. Their broods could be found under beds or staircases—wherever shelter from the desert presented itself to an expectant mother cat. The kindest people tolerated the creatures until the kittens were big enough to be shooed out.

Most Saudis of the 20th century found street cats as endearing as the pop-eyed pink geckos that hang by suction cup feet on walls. Few in Jeddah, Malik's home town, would get emotional about a cat except when kicking it out of the house. Malik wasn't sure if I was rejecting him or making fun of him. Much later I learned that he and his siblings grew up with a dog whom they loved. Unlike many urban Saudis, their father taught them to enjoy and care for animals. Cats, however, were not common pets during Malik's youth, so it was as if I had said I could not go out with him because a fish in my aquarium or a lizard on my front porch had died.

He almost didn't call back.

Despite these gaps in understanding, we fell in love. Our conversations were fascinating. Malik talked with me for hours on a subject many young Western men found dull, taboo or mythological—God and the unseen world. Malik's perspective was significantly different.

I had read about Islam in my 8th grade world religions class, but when I expressed interest in Muhammad, the teacher assured me that he was a false prophet.[2] Malik didn't try to convert me; he simply answered my questions. He told me about angels, created of light, who accompany us throughout life, recording our actions without interference. Jinn, he explained, were beings made of smokeless fire.

Like humans, jinn are allowed free will to choose their paths in life. In folklore and literature, the West knows them as devils or "genies," putting a fanciful spin on their supernatural abilities. The prophet King Solomon commanded jinn who were under his power. Jinn, like people, can incline to good or evil. (Becoming a devil is a choice of the soul, whether that soul belongs to a human or a jinni.) Angels, by contrast, are created by God to be obedient. It is not in their nature to choose rebellion.

When we didn't speak of the unseen, Malik spun an exotic cultural tapestry, narrating stories of his boyhood in Jeddah. We spent a lot of time introducing our cultures to each other through food. He constructed an outdoor underground oven using a large, high-fired, oval-shaped water container he found in a garden shop. After planting that container in a cement base, he surrounded it with bricks and mortar. Then he cut out an opening.

In this "oven," he made *sambusak*, a traditional Saudi meat pie. In return, I cooked beef stroganoff and veal Marsala. I taught him tennis so he could play with me. When he saw me painting, he asked to have a go, then painted a scene of Arab boys waving to a boat with a lateen sail in the Jeddah harbor.

Like many Saudi students who have come to the West, he took to cultural hobbies and interests as if born to them. He had physical courage that was hard to match. Once he swam across the Ubhur Lagoon in Jeddah on a dare. When at last I saw that lagoon, I was staggered.

One day we walked down the hill from the Monterey Institute to have lunch downtown by the water. Seagulls circled overhead, scavenging for discarded sandwiches or chips, while the faint bark of seals floated off the bay. The sun had broken through the fog and we saw the ocean's

[2] Peace be upon him. Muslims say these words when any of the prophets recorded in Scripture are mentioned, from Adam to Moses and Jesus, etc. Peace be upon them all and upon the prophet Solomon mentioned subsequently. Ameen.

sparkling blue waters sparkling. Such magnificent afternoons etch a permanent memory for college students.

I had chosen to wear a narrow red skirt and matching sweater. Malik seemed appreciative. “Do you know everyone is looking at you?” he asked. I wasn’t sure if that was bad or good.

Malik had dated other Western young women before me. A Saudi Airlines scholarship had earlier sent him to the Midwest, and he had met a girl there who had changed his life, though I knew nothing of her at first. Now he was on a scholarship from the Saudi government.

One day I knocked at his door, as planned, to go to a movie. He answered, but went inside to answer the phone. I waited outside because the day was beautiful. When he did not come out again, I returned to his front door and opened, entering to the sound of sobs. What was this? Malik was a very manly sort of guy, not one given to weeping, yet his face was wet with tears, like someone whose dream has shattered.

“What is wrong?”

“She found me.”

The story came out in broken bits: While attending school in the Midwest, Malik had attracted the obsessive attention of a young woman named Jean. Muscular, blonde and domineering, she had a black belt in karate. Seeing him in class, she stalked him to his room at the university and began a relationship.

Malik was Muslim, but he was also a male cut free from his country, desperate to run into the stereotypical “loose” Western woman his elders railed so angrily against. Jean offered herself as the real deal, and within a month or so, she was pregnant.

As tall as Malik when she wore heels and possibly as strong, Jean rarely left his room. She dropped all her classes halfway through the first semester. She was not inclined to studies or a job. An indulgent father paid her bills.

“I got tired of her always being there. I never asked her to move into my room!” he told me. Finally Malik insisted Jean leave, only to come back from class that day to find all his personal belongings on the rooftop.

Despite being pregnant, she was dressed in her karate clothes, ready for a fight.

“You can’t get rid of me. I am the mother of your unborn baby!”

Jean’s father, an airline pilot, met with Malik and asked him to give the child a name by marrying his daughter. He offered to buy Jean and Malik

a house. Malik agreed to marry Jean, provided it was understood he wanted a divorce after the baby was born.

"That's why I gave up the scholarship," Malik explained. "I was willing to take legal responsibility, but I couldn't stay with Jean. I went back to Jeddah and gave up the scholarship. You don't know what she's like."

I soon learned. She threatened to come to California, wanting to live with Malik even though divorce proceedings went into effect after the birth of their daughter. She also wanted cash and lots of it. Money quieted her.

Over the years and despite the adoption of the little girl, Lujain, by Jean's father, Jean tracked us by phone, insisting on and demanding more and more money. She was strangely abusive to me, calling me "Snow White" for reasons I have never understood.

Malik visited his daughter, bringing gifts and spending all he had. He claimed there was nothing he could do about Jean's father adopting Lujain, for he could not afford a lawyer. I was a little surprised by what struck me as passivity. After a few years, Jean found another Saudi and did the same thing, having another child. Then she got a full-fledged pimp and had a third child.

While I felt sorry about Malik's experience, I couldn't help but wonder why so many young Saudi men insisted of thinking of Western girls as joy rides. Maybe Jean filled the bill, but I knew no other woman like her.

There were other cross-cultural love stories like mine and Malik's, but the general male Saudi student attitude towards women in the West did not seem romantic.

For instance, once while Malik and I sat with a few of his friends at a café, some girls walked by on the sidewalk. Malik's Saudi friends said, "*Lehem*" and laughed.

"What does *lehem* mean?" I asked.

"It means 'meat."

We were drinking coffees and teas, but no one had ordered meat. It took a moment to understand "meat" meant the girls. I wasn't happy about that. Malik said his friends were being silly.

I decided to learn Arabic. It was not offered at the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies, strangely, though the school seemed to offer every language under the sun. An Arabic class *was* offered at nearby community college, taught by Professor Khalidy, a native of Lebanon. Professor Khalidy confided later that he had been driven out of the Monterey Institute by teachers who wanted Arabic taught by non-Arabs (or not at all).

Professor Khalidy introduced his students to Middle Eastern issues and counseled us when, in our dealings with Arab people, we could not grasp cultural differences. Like many Lebanese, he served as a bridge of understanding between Arabia and the West. He showed slides of his war-torn homeland. I became interested in world politics.

At the language institute, I took a class on Israel's kibbutz system and a second on the making of Palestine. I acquired a Turkish female roommate named Gizem, who taught her native tongue at the nearby Defense Language Institute for military personnel. Gizem was preparing a group of American students working for the CIA to infiltrate her homeland under Turkish identities.

When visiting home, I asked my mother for her perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma. She had trouble finding words and could not form an answer. I repeated my query, boiled down to basics: "From what you have heard, Mom, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys?"

"The Israelis are the good guys and the Palestinians are the bad guys."

Was it that easy to sum up? Loving my mother, I wanted to hear her say that all human beings deserve understanding and compassion.

My mother knew I was dating a Muslim, yet she had quickly stated that the Muslims—Palestinian or otherwise--were the "bad guys." Malik had warned me. He liked Americans very much, but he said we did not sympathize with Muslims in international conflicts. I had defended my culture's ability to be fair.

* * * *

With a Bachelor's degree in French achieved, I made a round of sad farewells, none sadder than the one between Malik and me. According to plan, I was going to Paris to study international journalism. That career path thrilled, but I was heartbroken to leave Malik. We tried to be mature about breaking up. How could there be any other way for us?

A couple of Malik's friends had urged him to marry me. "My mother would never accept that," he explained to me sadly on our last meetings. "She would say you are not 'clean.'"

I stared at him. Really? Then what would she say about Malik's relationship with Jean, or for that matter, about Malik's younger brother Hisham, who had no sooner come to Monterey than he had started a relationship with our landlady, who happened to be his teacher?

"Don't feel bad," I responded coolly. "I was always planning on being a foreign correspondent. I never wanted to give that career dream up."

In Paris, I reconnected with old friends, made new ones, and took refresher classes in French. I met writers, including a young journalist conducting a series of interviews with the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Despite the intellectual stimulation, my heart and mind were distracted by the concept of God Malik had shared with me. I had begun to perceive myself as "Muslim," one who "submits" to God. I missed the stories of family and old Jeddah that Malik told so well, and through which he had ushered me into a vibrant, foreign past.

Malik missed me too, writing, *"To my only love, forever I am wondering, how should I start this letter? I don't know what to say except that I have just lost my pearl. My life has started to show a huge change. . . . Sylvia, everybody loves you here. Hossean, Aijaz, Essam—they all miss you, and Hossean even asked for your address, which I gave to him. I love and will never forget you, and I will help you whenever you ask (whatever you need, and at any time). Sleep well, relax and be sure that you are not forgettable. May the Peace of the Lord Almighty be upon you, wherever you go. Your slave, Malik."*

One day we spoke on the telephone while I was in France. It was the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and I was trying to fast (abstain from food during daylight hours to develop spiritual enlightenment) and he was surprised at my effort.

Abruptly he proposed marriage, painting a prospect of bright possibilities: I could pursue a master's degree in San Diego after we married. Once he managed to obtain the elusive permission for our marriage, I could teach at King Abdul Aziz University for Women.

Everyone in Jeddah, he assured me, would love me as much as he did. What a fascinating future I would enter with this handsome, spiritual, funny, intelligent, and ambitious Saudi man!

His proposal felt like the answer to my prayer for guidance. I returned to Monterey without telling my mother[3] because I was afraid she would try to stop me.

Mom had been gracious about my having a Saudi boyfriend while I was studying at the Monterey Institute. Whenever I had driven back to the coast from her house, she had let me stop at Fishermen's Landing to pick up a lobster from her seafood supplier and put it on her restaurant bill, knowing

[3] It was the era of the Moonies, when Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church, presided over mass marriages in the USA after allegedly brainwashing young people. American parents had begun resorting to kidnapping their own children to hold them captive until they were "deprogrammed."

I would share it with Malik. She had sometimes sent the odd bottle of fine wine or round of good cheese back for me to share with Malik.

However, I knew my mother would not like me to move to the other side of the world. Her dismay would be harsh. A future as an international journalist is not the same thing at all as a daughter cutting herself off in a backwards Arab kingdom.

My mother's joy had been palpable when I achieved a college degree, something no one in the family had done in living memory.

Malik was scared, too, because of a strict Saudi law banning marriage to foreigners. He could be imprisoned for years if our marriage was found out before he had permission. His family would blame me.

After being back in the States a week or two, I began writing letters to my mother, begging her forgiveness for changing my plans. Despite my difficult decision, I adored her. I explained that marriage to Malik was not only for love but because Islam was my new faith. Finally she agreed I could visit her.

When I got back home, Mom refused to go outside her house with me. She was embarrassed to be seen with a daughter who wore a scarf on her head like Queen Elizabeth on a foggy day. I understood her feelings. My conversion was so recent that even I was groping my way, trying to get used to it. I loved fashion, and scarves over my hair made me feel frumpy.

"How will Malik's parents like to have a spoiled Californian girl as a daughter-in-law?" my mother demanded.

Was I spoiled? I would try not to be.

My grandfather had a few questions to ask before disowning me: "Did Sylvia marry a prince?"

Malik, alas, was not a prince. My insurance-selling grandfather had feasted on grilled sheep eyeballs with a couple of royal Bedouin clients. Blue blood and wealth are a sauce that make anything palatable.

Lacking the regal connection, I was a disgrace. I wrote to Ann, still in Stockton, begging her to cheer and console my mother.

Ann, whom I had adopted into my family as a sister, replied, "Don't ask me to be there for your mother. I release you from friendship with my non-Muslim love."

We were back on the playground and I was once more condemned.

Mom wrote to me, "I do not want you to die, but I never want to see you again."

Dad wrote, “All religion is hypocritical and your choices are stupid.”

To Malik’s family, I remained a secret.