

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>		viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>		ix
<i>Prologue</i>		1
Chapter One	<i>Surprises in Beirut</i>	5
Two	<i>Paris of the Middle East</i>	15
Three	<i>Fighting in the Streets</i>	21
Four	<i>Immersed in the Muslim Culture</i>	25
Five	<i>Moving Targets</i>	37
Six	<i>Sand Dunes, Camels and a Five-Star Hotel</i>	45
Seven	<i>Damascus — Joy, Intrigue and Disappointment</i>	51
Eight	<i>Home is Where the Head is</i>	59
Nine	<i>Arabian Days</i>	71
Ten	<i>Riches of the Middle East</i>	79
Eleven	<i>Abu Dhabi Prison</i>	87
Twelve	<i>Precious Memories</i>	95
Thirteen	<i>Raising a Daughter in the Middle East</i>	101
Fourteen	<i>Giver of Life</i>	111
Fifteen	<i>Nos ou Nos</i>	121
Sixteen	<i>It's Okay, Habeebe</i>	135
Seventeen	<i>Password: Bernadette</i>	141
Eighteen	<i>Folly of the Heart</i>	147
Nineteen	<i>The Darkness Grows</i>	152
Twenty	<i>Mask of Safety</i>	159
Twenty-one	<i>Ready to Run</i>	165
Twenty-two	<i>Four Checkpoints</i>	171
Twenty-three	<i>The Day After</i>	179
<i>Epilogue</i>		182

# Prologue

He had a light complexion and deep brown eyes — a dead give-away he was from Syria.

At least it was a dead give-away if you grew up in the Middle East and caught his accent. But since this was Milwaukee and I was raised in the small city of Neenah, Wisconsin, the only thing I knew for sure when I first saw him was that I was in love.

It was 1970 and I was 19 years old. As the oldest of six children, I had left the security of my family to attend Prospect Hall, an all-girls school in Milwaukee. I walked into the Open House at the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) on April 4 with a couple of my girlfriends, decked out in a purple mini-skirt, matching purple V-top with a purple suede, beaded vest, large hooped earrings and pink, patent leather platform shoes. We were attending the Foreign Students' Night and there he was — a tall, slender man with dark, long curly hair standing at a table against the wall at the back of the room. He stood out among the students: well-groomed, foreign and aristocratic. He smiled. I was intrigued and in love from the beginning.

His name was Maher and we dated from that moment on. He had such a different air about him and was so handsome that when he came to my apartment to pick me up, my roommates and friends would either stay or stop by before he arrived just to see him. He also drove a new, orange-red Camaro.

Maher graduated from the Milwaukee School of Engineering in 1972. His parents attended the graduation, traveling from Beirut, Lebanon. They were not pleased to see him involved with an American woman and were determined to take him home to marry someone of their own choosing.

They did take him home to Beirut and the night he came to say goodbye was the first difficult night of my young life. I believe it was for him, too. When he left my tiny apartment and I closed the door, I placed my hand and head on the door and wept silently. It was as though I could feel his hand on the other side as I heard him weep. It was the first time I had ever heard a grown man cry. And then he was gone. It was over. After being with him for two years I thought I would never see him again.

Maher's parents were, however, unable to convince their son to forget me. He continued to call me from Beirut. We had talked about marriage before he left, but for his parents it would be a scandal for him to marry a Christian. They simply could not consent to such a thing.

Maher got a job as an industrial accountant for a large American accounting firm in Beirut. We didn't see each other for 18 months. Finally, Maher insisted to his family that he wanted to see me and was sending for me to come and visit. I had no idea at the time what that took and how he did it, but he did. I was working for a law firm in Milwaukee as a legal secretary and took a week vacation during Christmas of 1973 to join him. As it turned out, I called my office from Beirut and extended my vacation for another week.

I did not stay at Maher's home while I was there. Instead, he rented a small flat for us. It was my mission to prove to Maher's family that I wasn't going to take their son away from them to America. And I guess I needed to know for myself if this relationship could work half a world away from my own family. His parents were cordial but the objections remained.

I was very fond of the city of Beirut but knew I had to go back home. A year passed and though I was still very much in love with Maher, I decided I needed to get on with my life. I

figured a new career would help. I had always wanted to work for the State Department and decided to take the necessary tests. I wrote Maher and told him that my papers would be in order soon and that I was willing to go anywhere the State Department sent me. Two months later, he flew to Milwaukee and proposed.

I left for Beirut, Lebanon, in April of 1975 to be married, five years from the time I had first met Maher. I was 24 years old and he was 29. My parents were surprisingly supportive. Perhaps because I had known Maher for five years; perhaps because he was always very kind and thoughtful; perhaps because they could see how much in love I was with him and he with me. Cultural and religious differences were never discussed. Maher had lived here for a number of years, was not a practicing Muslim, was well educated and came from a wealthy family. All seemed well. Of course, I'm sure they were not happy to see me leave the States, but they had always allowed their children to make up their own minds and they knew how determined I was.



## Chapter Four

*Immersed in the Muslim Culture*

There was a break in the violence and on June 2, 1975, I began my first job for the Far East Travel Agency. I was wild with excitement. The other employees were all Lebanese — I was the only foreigner. They hired me because they had English-speaking clients. Though they spoke English, it was broken, but not bad. It was a perfect fit for me. They were very kind and I loved working there from the beginning. Finally, I had a job, which was important for two reasons. First, it showed that I was more than an outsider or visitor in this country — I could make a positive contribution to my new homeland. Second, I could start contributing financially to our goal of getting our own place after the wedding. “Flats” as they called them, were very expensive in Beirut and it would take my salary in addition to Maher’s to be able to afford one.

I was greeted and introduced to everyone. We all worked in one large rectangular room except for the boss who had a separate office. My desk had a typewriter, a phone and everything else I needed. The telex machine was on another desk close by. One side of the office fronted the main street and was all windows, so it was very light and cheery. Everyone in the beginning just stared at me, but soon everything fell into place and I felt very comfortable, especially when I could help by talking to an English-speaking client over the phone. These clients were delighted to speak with an American.

On June 19, I became a Muslim. In Lebanon at that time, there were no “mixed” marriages allowed. You were either both Christian or both Muslim. In order to marry the man I loved, I needed to become Muslim. I knew my parents would understand even though they were Roman Catholic and raised me in the Catholic Church. They believed it didn’t matter what you called your God, as long as you believed in Him. I would not become a “practicing” Muslim — just in name — though I would follow and respect its customs.

I accompanied Maher and his father to the Muslim “court” where I met three sheiks. Sheiks were the religious leaders of the Muslim faith, like priests in the Catholic Church. I presented my papers, including passport, and a document I had obtained from the American Embassy. It declared that I was of the Christian faith and that there was no reason why I should not be permitted to marry Maher, a Syrian. It also stated that I had not previously been married. Maher presented his passport and his birth certificate. I had to repeat and acknowledge that I understood an oath, the testimony of faith, *ash-shahada*, which I was required to say in Arabic: “*Ashhadu anna la ilaha illa Allah, wa anna Muhammadun rasoolu Allah*” (I declare there is no God but Allah, and

Muhammad is His messenger). Then an official document was drawn up and I was registered as a Muslim. The whole process took no more than an hour.

Maher’s father then met with another sheik and set a date for him to come to the house and perform our wedding ceremony. The time and date was set for Saturday, June 21, at 4 p.m.

On the day of the wedding, I awoke at 5:30 a.m. — everyone else was sleeping. I was anxious to get up but stayed in bed until 7:30 a.m. so that I did not disturb anyone. Maher had some things to do in town and Nadia, his eldest sister, had to go to work.

Maher had given me a pre-wedding gift — a bottle of the most expensive perfume you could buy — Joy. I was so excited that I dropped it and it broke. I was horrified. I couldn’t believe I did that! But Nadia was right there. She immediately grabbed some tissues and said, “You have to make use of this wonderful perfume.” I watched as she dabbed the Joy perfume from the floor then said I should put it in my shoes! How clever, I thought. When I told Maher he simply smiled and said it was okay — not to worry. Nadia was right.

I polished my blue high heels and ironed my blue silk wedding dress, Maher’s shirt and the silk tan suit I was going to wear the next day. I had at least established myself in the house so that I could do my own ironing. It took me a long time to convince Umm Saad that I could and wanted to do this. I felt it necessary to show I was useful in some small way, that I was raised to do my own work. She would never let me do anything, not even make my own bed. I wondered if this was a tug-of-war between two cultures, where I was supposed to take care of myself in America and she was supposed to take care of me here in Lebanon. Or perhaps it was simply a tug-of-war with my own

self-esteem, that I wanted to prove I could contribute something, even if it was simply ironing. Yet something else pulled at my heart — a desire to lend a helping hand to Umm Saad with her heavy workload — but perhaps that wasn't my place either.

Maher had ordered the cake (since I had no idea where to get it or what to order) and carried it in about 1:30 p.m. It was two layers high, all white and decorated with white hearts and white-coated almond candies; and topped with a bride and groom with a heart shape over them. In many ways it was similar to a wedding cake in the States, except for the almond candies. (Candied almonds, along with those in pastel colors, were an expensive treat and very popular in Beirut.) A silver tray of white and blue almond candies sat nearby. Everything matched very nicely. Maher had a tailor-made light blue suit with a tailor-made white shirt with a dark tie. My dress was a darker shade of blue.



My parents

I had sent a telegram to my parents in Neenah informing them of the date and time of our wedding at the Tarabishi home. It was 2:00 p.m. and I was hoping to hear from them by phone. (While I took phones for granted, Maher told me it took them two years to get a phone in Beirut. It wasn't just putting in an order, either.

If you didn't know someone or pay someone a lot of money, you didn't get a phone. That's how things worked here in the Middle East.) The phone rang in the foyer and I ran for it, wedding dress and all. It was my mom, dad and family. I knew all would be well this day ...

After talking to my family, I called Madame (Maher's mother) to our bedroom and motioned her with my hand to sit

next to me on the bed. I put my right arm around her and told her in Arabic that I loved Maher very much and that I was going to be the best wife I could be to him. She understood my broken Arabic. With tears in her eyes she said that she now had three daughters: Nadia, Ruby and Nancy. I had so hoped for that. I kissed her and she told me to call her Mother now, instead of Madame.

Maher went to pick up the sheik and returned at 4:15 p.m. I walked into the salon where the sheik, Maher, Maher's parents, Nadia, Aby and Tony were sitting. Aby and Tony were my witnesses. Aby was a male friend of Maher's who had come back to Beirut with Maher from the States. Tony was once Maher's roommate in Milwaukee. That was it. Women were not allowed at the ceremony except for family. I remember thinking this wasn't right and had an uneasy feeling about it, but I dismissed it as just a plain, awful fact of life. I was determined to learn and accept the customs of the Muslim faith, little by little.

At first I was disappointed that there was no formality about the wedding — so simple, too simple, I thought. I had no real wedding dress and it bothered me, which was surprising. I thought it really didn't matter, but it did. And, funny thing, I wanted a white wedding dress, too. But it wouldn't be proper since the ceremony was so informal and in the home. I finally realized this and settled for the simple blue silk dress. It was a short-sleeved, one-piece silk dress that crossed over at the waist (tying on the inside at the opposite side of the waist) and snapped at the other side. It was three-quarter in length and it didn't take long before I fell in love with it. It was perfect, just like the entire day. I carried a single red rose into the room.

Everyone stood as I entered. Then we all sat down and I was introduced to the sheik. He proceeded to tell Tony about the



Abu Nouman and the sheik  
in the Tarabishi home

Muslim faith as it relates to marriage. Tony then translated and made sure I understood and approved of everything he was saying. In the Muslim faith the man is to provide everything for his wife, she is not responsible for anything, nor does she have to do anything in the way of earning money. The man is totally and completely

responsible for his wife in all respects. A symbolic amount of money is acknowledged as being received now, before the wedding, after the wedding another sum of money is supposed to be paid to the bride. This is for divorce purposes, since nothing is given to the wife at the time a divorce is granted (if it is granted at all). Traditionally, a woman can ask for anything she desires at this time. Any amount of money, a camel — anything she desires. Funny, I had never been in the position before to get anything I desired. My parents had never asked me that. My teachers had never asked me that. Come to think of it, no one had ever asked me that question before now. What was it I really desired? I think they were scared to death I was going to ask for a lot of money, so they suggested a small token amount of 10 sterling pounds (about \$15). I remember thinking I was a modern woman and 10 pounds was okay because it was just symbolic, so I agreed. How young and naïve I was.

The sheik then asked me, “Do you take Maher as your husband for 10 sterling pounds?” I said “Yes,” and that was that. We were man and wife.