

# Ebbing Winds: Life Rituals at Home and Abroad

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Ebbing Winds – Life Rituals at Home and Abroad

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Thesis Chair: Mary Darlín Neal, Ph. D.

## **Abstract**

The intent of this thesis was to write a memoir of my five month trip to Libya that explores cultural differences through my experiences as an American with Western ideals. This memoir is focused on the cultural norms of marriage in the rural town of Msalata, in the central rural farming belt north of the ever expanding Sahara Desert of North Africa. My goal was to produce a work that is informational while showing the humanity of the local people through my perceptions as an outsider with different expectations. It was a time of discovery for me about the value of my upbringing and the positive aspects of American and Libyan culture. Our five months in Libya proved our strength and weakness. Libya was not what I expected. The people were hospitable beyond my experience. The customs at times were primitive and required an open mind. My children and I were the token Americans that summer who were invited to every wedding and birth. I was expected to attend many social events from circumcision celebrations to giving condolences along the side of my brother-in-law's wife. Due to my American Christian upbringing I shared the moral values of Islam, which made it easy for me to become Muslim and live an Islamic life. At the same time, I could not fully accept all aspects of Libyan culture nor did my husband. Hadi rejected many things about his culture because it conflicted with Islam. My thesis did not come out the way I expected. It took a different direction from what I had original planned. It became focused on wedding traditions rather than on broader cultural contrasts.

For my beloved family who have been my inspiration and support. Thank you for pitching in when I needed you. You are my greatest joy and my dearest friends.

For the Fergiani family who accepted us without reservations, showed us generosity beyond measure, and transformed our world view during our five months in Libya. My gratitude and love is unending for all that you did for me and my children.

For my professors who guided me and saw my potential.

## **Acknowledgement**

It is with humble gratitude that I offer my thanks to my committee members, who have given generously of their time to guide me through the creative process of writing this memoir of a momentous part of my life. My sincere thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Darlín Neal, for your continued support, constructive criticism, and direction through this long process. My thanks also to Dr. Fayeza Hasanat for your time and inspiration to take a post-colonial look at my own experiences as an American in Libya. I extend my deep thanks to my out-of-department committee member, Dr. Ty Matejowsky, who provided a different prospective and view of my project.

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## Arranged

Six weeks had passed since my *shahadah* and Ramadan was only a couple months away. I continued to read my Quran and any Islamic literature in English that my friends could find for me. I tried to visit Eman and Mona often, but my visits to the Saudi sisters had to be saved for days off of school when my parents were at work or after work on Saturdays.

I hated explaining where I was going and didn't want to argue with my parents. My brother, Nick, had made asking my parents' permission like putting my hand in a scorpion tank and hoping not to get stung. Nick finally went off to the Navy over a year ago, after coming home with a fractured cheekbone and a blood red eye from a night in the city jail charged with a DUI.

My parents were still on high alert waiting for me to trip up, just like my brother. Nick made them adversaries, testing their limits continually by breaking curfew by at least fifteen minutes every time he went out without fail. Then he would kiss my mother with his alcohol perfumed lips when he came in. I learned to conduct all my shenanigans within acceptable hours in order to avoid my parents' fury being that the snare would only be pulled tighter with each infraction. After all in their view, I was a girl and could get into more long term trouble than a boy. The enforced traditional double standard and my parents' volatile responses kept me from being straightforward.

I drove down to Aurora, south of Denver, to Eman and Mona's two bedroom apartment after my Saturday morning drive thru shift at the bank. The streets were clear and spring was taking hold after a long winter's sleep. The grass was turning green along the sidewalk as I

walked from curbside parking to their first floor apartment. I pressed the black door buzzer just below the apartment number and peep hole. The sandstone stucco walls were dirty from months of blowing sand and salt from the snow removal trucks with the front mounted plows.

Eman opened the door and greeted me, "*Asalaam Aliakum*, Robin. Come in," she said.

I mumbled the appropriate answer, "*Wali Kumsalaam.*"

She gently kissed me twice on each cheek and led me into the living-room. I sat down on the low blue velvet floor cushions. It reminded me of the simple Japanese furnishings with the wide short legged tables and firm cushions. Mona came out of the kitchen carrying a silver tray with china cups filled with fragrant steaming cardamom milk sprinkled with crush pistachios along with a bowl of mixed nuts and a small saucer of delicate butter cookies. She sat the tray down on the pale beige carpet and bent down to greet me in the same fashion as her sister. They weren't twins, but were probably close in age. They moved with the grace of well-trained hostesses anticipating my every need. The sisters appeared as exotic to me as the porcelain geisha doll my grandfather brought back from Japan after his naval deployment.

"How is school?" Mona asked as she handed me the fragile cup with matching saucer.

"Oh, it's going fine. I'll be taking one class this summer so that I won't have to waste another year there for one class," I said while I tried to hold my cup steady on my knee. "Are you going to go home for a visit this summer?" I said.

"Our husbands will be finished this semester and we will be going home to stay," Eman said. She offered me a cookie and spooned nuts generously on to my saucer. "How are your parents?" she asked. "Have you told them about your conversion to Islam?"



“My mom knows that I have been reading a lot about Islam but I think she thinks I’m going through a phase like most teens do. I think she thinks it’s funny that I’ve started wearing long skirts. They’re just happy that I’m not out drinking and coming in late,” I said with a sad smile.

“My husband asked me to ask you if you might consider getting married,” Eman said. “He knows a really nice young man that is looking to get married and he thought you might be a good match.”

“Well, I don’t think that I am really interested right now. I’m just finishing high school. You know I’m seventeen and won’t be eighteen until the fall,” I said feeling rather taken back by her sudden change of topic.

“You’re not too young to think about getting married. He really is a wonderful person and a strong Muslim. I think you should really think about it. You can always say no,” Eman said encouragingly.

“Maybe you can meet him and then see what you think,” Mona said. “You wouldn’t be alone because our husbands would be there.” She tried to assure me.

“His name is Abdulhadi. He works for the Saudi Education Mission and is good friends with our husbands,” Mona said. “It is important that you marry someone that will teach you and help you to become a better Muslim.” Mona was the elder of the two sisters and spoke with a more authoritative knowledge even though she was exceptionally shy.

“Ok, I’ll meet him but it has to be in a public place,” I said. “Just know that I’m not really looking to get married right now.”

Eman excitedly got up and went to call her husband with my answer. They arranged for Abdulhadi to meet me at the public library in my neighborhood.

#

Almost a week had passed since I visited Eman and Mona and had agreed to meet Abdulhadi. I practiced saying his name over and over again with limited success. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror in the basement I brushed my wet shoulder length brown hair, slicking it back into a tight ponytail and then twisting it into a snug bun. This was as close to a conservative look as I could muster without actually wearing a scarf over my hair. I put on a thin line of black eyeliner and a light coat of mascara.

*Ab—dul—ha--di, Ab-dul-ha-di.* It was hard to get the name out in one breath. *Ab-dul-ha-di, Abdul-hadi.* Not perfect but a little better. I slipped on my long black jacket over my black leggings. Black had been my favorite color even after I had shed over fifty pounds. Anyway this wasn't a time to try anything colorful when I was already nervous.

Our meeting would be after school. I drove to school and parked in the back of the student parking lot. My schedule was full and didn't include a lunch period. My parent signed the letter allowing me to finish a year early by cramming my last four courses into my junior year with the addition of a summer school course. The day buzzed by bell after bell from 7:15am to 2:45pm. I hurried out the heavy school doors along with the nearly 3000 other students as they weaved through the parking lot to their cars or out into the neighborhood.

My blue car was waiting untouched or admired. It replaced the Mold-mobile, the old green Oldsmobile that my brother spilled beer in before it was handed down to me. The Mold-mobile served me well through two winter accidents and two broken windshields; one from the

first accident when the ice proved mightier than the highway light post; then the second when I was giving driving lessons when I should have been at tennis practice. The second hand blue four-door was a debt thrust upon me by well-meaning parents. There was no love or memories with this stick-shift. It was only a tool to get from home to school to work and home again. Today it would take me to meet a man that I wasn't sure I wanted to meet.

After making my way out of the parking lot, I drove the two blocks to the park and followed the street around the park to the public library. I parked and walked toward the library as I scanned the lot for Ala', Eman's husband.

"Robin, over here," Ala' called from a few aisles over. "*Asalaam Aliakum*," he greeted me, doing his best to avoid direct eye contact. "Abdulhadi is in the yellow car," he said. "We will be right here until you are done talking."

Shyly, Abdulhadi stood up outside his car and walked around to open the passenger's door for me. He too tried not to make direct eye contact. I slipped into the cracked vinyl bucket seat and he gently closed the door. He slid into the driver's side and closed his door. The car interior was clean, but clearly had seen many seasons. It had a popsicle stick ignition. The keys were only useful in the locks.

"*Asalaam Aliakum*, my name is Abdulhadi," he said with a gentle voice. "Ala' told me that you just took your *shahadah* a couple of months ago." He coyly glanced up waiting for my reply.

"Yes, February 12<sup>th</sup>. It hasn't been easy, but I'm trying," I looked at his fist length beard and his curly black loose afro. "My parents think I'm going through a rebellious phase. They told

me that I'm going to hell," I said. We both smiled and looked down. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I'm sure it isn't easy for them. What about your brothers and sisters?" Abdulhadi said. His full lips were bordered by a meticulously trimmed mustache with an upside down triangle tuft sitting below his lower lip. Abdulhadi's long curly black eyelashes outlined his large almond shaped black eyes. He wasn't beautiful but I couldn't help but be captivated. I had to refocus on our conversation.

"I only have one brother, Nick. He is in the Navy and is trying to get transferred back to Colorado," I said. "He and his wife, Jodi, are expecting their first baby. He doesn't care what I do. He has his own drama." I looked out the windshield at the tall mature trees with their new spring foliage. Thoughts of Nick were bittersweet. We existed in different stratospheres; he in an inner orbit of the beautiful people and I on the outer fringe searching for my true course.

We talked until I couldn't stay any longer. He gave me his phone number as I stepped out of the little yellow car. He got out too, giving me his salaams and letting Ala' know we were ready to leave.

I don't remember driving the few blocks home because my mind was throbbing with questions and exciting prospects that I had never considered before. We continued to talk over the phone about our families and what we wanted from marriage over the next three days. His words came out in fractured English. At times, it seemed that he was awkwardly unfolding his thoughts unable to fully express his point but we were both eager and infatuated, so it didn't matter.

On the third day, Abdulhadi offered marriage. “Robin, will you marrying me? I think we would be good together.”

“You’ve made it easy for me to say yes,” I answered excitedly. In a more serious tone I said, “But before you think about marrying me, I want you to understand that I have done things in the past that I can’t change. I can only move forward. If you are able to accept me as I am, then yes.” As a new Muslim, I wanted to shed my former self and be recreated. I freely stepped away from the church after trying desperately to reconnect with it feeling dejected and despondent. I went to church alone. My parents were in between churches and didn’t attend services regularly due to a split from the private Christian school affiliated with the church we had attended for a decade.

“Whatever happened before you converted to Islam is gone. Your past is gone. You are a new person,” he said enthusiastically. “Maybe we can have the *nica* and *walima* after Ramadan, in June?”

“What are the *nica* and *walima*? I asked.

“The *nica* is the marriage contract between me and your *wali*, the person representing you, like your father or brother. The Imam is the witness. The *walima* is the celebration party,” he explained.

“I guess I will need to find someone to be my *wali* since my dad and brother can’t be as non-Muslims. They would want to anyway. Ala’ and his family are leaving at the end of May. So we will need to think about someone else. There is a lot to do and you need to meet my parents too.” My heart began to race at the idea of telling my parents.

“We have time. Let’s just get through Ramadan and then I can get everything arranged,” Abdulhadi said. “All you need to do is come and invite your family and friends. I’ll arrange the place and the food.”

“That is one of the things I like about Islam. That you are responsible for the wedding,” I laughed. “My parents will like that idea.”

They’re going to think this is too fast. What can they really say considering that they married after knowing each other six weeks? Their parents thought they were making a huge mistake because they were so young and my dad had already been divorced once. They’ll think I’m crazy too.

Abdulhadi and I were too excited to worry about the details. We talked almost every day for a couple of hours till Ramadan started. We agreed that during Ramadan we should concentrate on fasting and limit our distractions.

#

Rumors began to circulate at school when I told a couple of my friends that I was getting married. One of the teachers asked me to talk in her sociology class about my new faith and about having an arranged marriage. I agreed to talk to the class and become the latest discussion among the school staff. Eventually it got around to Mrs. Burns, the school librarian and my mentor.

“Robin, what is going on?” demanded Mrs. Burns. “I heard that you are getting married and haven’t even told your parents yet. Why didn’t you say anything to me about this?”

“We haven’t set a date yet. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you. I just wasn’t sure how you would take it. We want to get married after graduation.”

“Robin, you have to tell your parents,” Mrs. Burns insisted. She pulled several books from the book return placing them on the dark wood lamen library desk. She started thumbing through the checkout cards searching for each library books signature checkout card. I thought about the three years I had spent working side by side with her in the high school library and how we talked about religion and world events but never about our personal lives. “Don’t you think they have a right to know? Postpone it until you finish school or I’ll tell them. What is it going to hurt to wait a few more weeks?”

“Ok, please let me tell them,” I said as I felt my face burn. “I was planning to let them know soon anyway. I just want to tell them closer to the time.” Mrs. Burns placed the checked in books on the return cart.

“Do what you want after you finish school. But if you do it before the end of school, I’ll be obligated to tell your parents,” Mrs. Burns said firmly. “I can’t believe that you didn’t tell me anything after we spent so much time working together the last three years. Even if you aren’t asking your parents’ permission, you owe them at least the knowledge of your intentions. If you want their respect, then you have to be straight with them.”

“You’re right, Mrs. Burns. They do deserve to know. I’ll talk to Abdulhadi and postpone the wedding until I am finished with summer school. I don’t want to live in the house with them angry all the time. I figured I could wait until just before the wedding to tell them.” Mrs. Burns hugged me firmly, held me by the shoulders. Her concerned silver-blue eyes searched my face for sincerity. She slipped off her navy blazer and hung it on the back of her wheeled clerk’s chair.

#

I called Abdulhadi as soon as I got home. “We need to wait until I’m done with school. I’m sorry. I hope you understand,” I said. The kitchen phone cord barely reached the dining nook where I could see all the incoming cars to the neighborhood. Our new house stood at the top of a hill that overlooked the neighborhood. I could see storm clouds bubble down from the Rocky Mountain foothills and roll out over the plains.

“What happened? You sound upset,” Abdulhadi said.

“I told a few of my friends and it got back to the librarian and she threatened to call my parents if I didn’t promise her that we would delay the wedding,” I said tearfully. “I’m sorry I messed our plans up. I want you to meet my parents but closer to our wedding.”

“It will all work out,” he said reassuringly. “Don’t worry.”

#

My graduation ceremony was at the end of May. Summer school would be finished mid-July. Abdulhadi and I met for lunch a couple of times after Ramadan and we decided that now was the time to let my parents know of our plans to get married at the end of the summer. I had the unpleasant task of asking them to meet the man I was determined to marry. Even though I was trying to do what was proper, I felt as if I was getting ready to confess an illegitimate pregnancy.

“Now that you are both sitting down, I have an announcement,” I said nervously. “I want you to meet the guy I’ve been seeing and that I plan to marry.”

“What are you talking about? WHO have you been seeing?” my dad said as his voice went from calm to accusing. His face flamed. He uncrossed his legs and moved forward on the overstuffed southwestern style couch. Dad’s steel toed work boots were speckled with paint from



years of construction. The light brown carpet gently encompassing the non-slip soles as he leaned forward.

“His name is Abdulhadi. We met in April through a couple of my friends. He is a really nice person and I want you to meet him,” I said as coolly as possible. The picture of Jesus caught my eye. Long orange candles were mounted on either side of the gold leafed frame. “He works as a secretary at the Saudi Education Mission in South Denver. I thought it would be good if he came over next Saturday so that you can get to know him.”

“What is the big hurry to get married?” my mom asked.

“Well, we are Muslim and we are trying to do things right, which means that we need to get married,” I said.

“How old is this guy? Where is he from?” she asked. Dad sat fuming next to her. His temples seemed to pulse with each breath. I didn’t want to look at his rigid expression. He was ready to explode. “Is he here legally?” Mom said.

“He is from Libya in North Africa. He is about 27 years old and came here as a student,” I answered. “Yes, he is here legally.”

“Isn’t he way too old for you?” said Dad.

“He is about ten years older than me, but you said that age doesn’t matter.” I said. “He is a really nice person.”

Mom said, “It’s not just his age, Robin. Where are you going to live? Are you willing to live in Libya? You know that these men don’t treat women well. You really need to think about if you can live with all this.” She put her slender hand on Dad’s knee. Her lightly feathered medium brown hair framed her ageless face. She stood up. “We’ll see how he is on Saturday.”

As awkward as it was, I was relieved that they agreed to meet him. I knew my mother would be doing most of the interrogating. My father would be there to back her up. At least this was a start.

#

The little yellow car with black pinstripes parked in front of our house. I stepped out the screen door and waited for Abdulhadi to climb the long stairway up to the house. He quickly scaled the stairs and handed me a box of baklava.

“Salaam Aliakum, this is for you and your family,” he said softly.

“Walli kumsalaam, thank you. You didn’t have to bring anything,” I said. “Inshallah, this goes well, so I hope you are ready.” Abdulhadi took a deep breath as we walk through the front door to meet my waiting parents.

My parents stood up from the overstuffed loveseat as I ushered him over to where they stood. “This is Abdulhadi.”

Abdulhadi extended his hand to my dad.

“Nice to meet you,” Dad said. He gestured for Abdulhadi to sit down on the coach opposite the matching loveseat. I sat down next to Abdulhadi, close but not touching.

“Robin told us a little about you, but we would like to hear it from you,” Mom said. Her tone was friendly but blunt. “She told us that you both intend to get married.”

“Ask me what you want to ask,” he said. “I came here to go to school. I started out taking English classes at Arapahoe Community College and then took a year of computer science. I didn’t come on scholarship so I’ve been working.”

“Are you still going to school?” Dad asked.

“No, I had to quit because of the cost. I hope to go back when I have the money to continue,” Abdulhadi said. “Right now I have a good job with benefits and am renting an apartment.”

“Do you plan to go back to Libya?” Mom asked.

“It depends on how things are. Ghaddafi has made it hard for anyone to go back. Right now my plans are to stay here,” he said. He went on to explain how Ghaddafi had demanded that the students come back to Libya or they would be choosing never to come back because they would be risking prison or worse.

As the afternoon wore on and refreshments had been served, the questions got more intense. “So, Abdulhadi how many wives are you going to have?” Mom said with a nearly imperceptible curl to the corners of her mouth. She put down her coffee mug on the end table and straightened the tatted doily.

“Well I don’t know?” he answered raising his eyes to meet hers. “I don’t know what life will bring.”

“Robin, what do you think of that?” she said turning to me.

“I doubt that will ever happen because he would have to be able to afford two wives and be able to treat them equally,” I said. This was a non-issue in my mind and didn’t detour me from thinking of marrying Abdulhadi. I figured that it wasn’t going happen and was just a fantasy.

The questions continued and discussion of family back grounds and histories. Abdulhadi came back two more times before our wedding to talk with my parents. They weren’t satisfied, but continued to be polite. My parents did suspect that he was interested in me for a green card.

#

There was an unspoken understanding between my parents and me now that my eighteenth birthday was nearing that there wasn't much they could do to stop my decision about getting married. They didn't say much about the short courtship. They ignored their parents' objections and warnings of impending disaster. My hardheaded stubbornness was much like their youthful audaciousness. In my mind this was perfect timing. They had often told my brother and me that when we were eighteen we would be paying rent or be out on our own.

A couple weeks before the wedding as I readied myself to go shopping for a dress and shoes for my wedding Mom stopped me in the kitchen.

"Robin, we won't consider you married unless you are married by a pastor and we won't approve of your marriage."

"That's ok. I'm Muslim now and won't be married by a pastor. Abdulhadi and I will be married by an imam in August and we will have a civil ceremony after my birthday in September," I was surprised by my own nerve. "I hope you will come but I will understand if you don't."

"Your dad and I won't be coming," she said sadly. "Let me buy your shoes for your dress." She pulled her wallet from her purse that was sitting on the counter and handed me a couple of twenties.

"Thank you Mom," I said as I folded the bills and slipped them in my purse. "I love you, Mom." She hugged firmly and held me. Mom wasn't upset or tearful. She offered no advice and was uncharacteristically quiet.

#

Our day had finally come. My overnight bag was packed with my essentials including the black lace negligée I chose for our first night together. The light purple dress and matching shoes were already in the car. I was excited and tried to ignore the fluttering I felt tripping around my insides.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said wishing they would change their minds and come to the wedding. I invited them again and also invited my grandmother and aunt who had no strong religious affiliations. My parents declined because it would be compromising their faith to attend a non-Christian wedding and didn’t want to appear as condoning my rebellious turn from Christianity. They also retracted my invitation to my grandmother and aunt. I didn’t bother to invite my mother’s side of the family because it would have been an act of disrespect or intrusion. I headed to my wedding alone. No one from my family came. Only a few friends came to support me and share this big moment with me.

“Be careful and don’t stay out late,” Mom said even though she knew that I wasn’t really spending the night with my friend after the wedding. With my purse and bag at the door I hugged and kissed my parents goodbye. They stood at the door and watched me get in my car and drive away.

Abdulhadi was a hardworking man of limited savings. I didn’t ask him for money for a bridal gown that would only be worn once. As it was, we were sharing our wedding with another couple as a way to cut costs being that the same people would likely be invited to both weddings. My only responsibilities were to arrange for the pick up the cake and go get ready for our wedding party. With my purse and bag at the door I hugged and kissed my parents goodbye.

For my dowry he bought me a simple gold band with a small diamond, a Quran, and two sets of hadith books about the life and actions of Prophet Mohammed. I didn't ask for money even though it is customary in most marriage contracts. I was advised against asking for an after dowry that would be paid if there was a divorce. This practice of having an after dowry was to discourage divorce. I was told by Sana's husband that one should go into marriage expecting it to be forever and not be planning for the divorce before there is a marriage. It was implied that I should have faith. He said that Abdulhadi and I should pray *istikara*, asking for God's guidance. If we both felt comfortable and didn't feel any reservations, then we should get married. Abdulhadi and I did pray with the intention of receiving direction from God. I tried to pray with a pure heart and an open mind. I believed that Abdulhadi was the right man for me and felt sure that we should get married.

Even though my family wasn't attending I was excited to finally be getting married. I drove up to the Denver University Family Housing and parked. I grabbed my bags and climbed the cement staircase to the third floor apartment of my new friend, Sana. Her husband, Mohammed, was a close friend of Abdulhadi and would act as my *wali* in our wedding ceremony. He would oversee my interests and explain the contract to me before I signed it. Yes, one could say that his friendship with Abdulhadi was a conflict of interest, but he truly was doing me a service by being there for me when my father and brother couldn't be.

Sana was an American convert from Louisiana. She had helped me get ready to be married over the last three months. Sana met me for the first time at an IHOP for lunch. When I walked in, she was waiting at a corner booth for me with a friend. She stood to greet me and towered above me at nearly six feet tall and was at full term, ready to deliver any day. She was

covered head to toe in black. Her scarf, *nikaab*, and *jilbab* were coal black. Since that day we were good friends. She spent time teaching me about what is expected of a wife and what I should expect from a husband.

“*Asalaam Aliakum*,” Sana said as she greeted me at the door of her tiny two bedroom apartment. I walked inside and was greeted by two Libyan ladies, Fatima and Hend. They came down to Denver from Fort Collins to help out with our wedding. They hugged me and congratulated me as if we had been long time friends.

Sana slid open the old aluminum front room window and the dining nook window letting the late summer breeze in to cool the apartment. Foil pans lined the kitchen counter piled high with spicy ground beef stuffed potatoes and crispy fried triangle meat pies. Sana’s apartment was sparsely furnished. Floor cushions lined the front room with slate blue back pillows. Sana’s three month old baby boy slept in a bassinette in the corner away from the window. Fatimah’s new born was snuggled in her carrier not far from where her mother stood ironing her scarf.

“Robin, go put your dress on and we’ll fix your hair and make-up,” Fatimah offered.

“Ok, but not too much make-up,” I went into the cramped bathroom. I shut the door and stripped down to my underwear. My purple dress hung on the back of the door. I looked at it and wondered if it was just too simple or showed too much leg. Applying the cold cream, I massaged it over my black eye liner and wiped away my usual look. Nervously, I brushed my teeth and hoped I wouldn’t vomit out of anxiety.

The bathroom was bare of any decoration. Shampoo sat in the corner of the tub and an eroded bar of green Irish Spring soap sat in the soap dish above the navy blue baby bath sitting in

the tub. Pin by pin, I freed my shoulder length brown hair from the tight French knot. I brushed out my slightly damp locks hoping that it wouldn't frizz and would be dry enough to style.

When I finally emerged dressed and ready for make-up and hair styling, the sun was burning orange as it began to drop below the mountains. Henda sat to work on my hair ironing tight spirals with the quarter inch curling iron. After pinning back the sides of my hair, Fatimah arranged Baby's Breath flowers in delicate crescents. Henda decided to use her make-up to create a fresh youthful look being that the only make-up I brought was black eye liner and mascara and a really natural shade of lipstick that could have passed as a tinted Chapstick. She carefully used a lipstick brush to apply a dark rose lipstick to my lips. Finally ready to go, we all headed for our cars with bags and babies.

Mohammed came and took the food down for transport to our venue, the Saudi Students Club. It was a suite of two large rooms with a connecting shared kitchen, but with separate bathrooms and entrances. This was perfect for a Muslim function where women and men don't mingle. Abdulhadi's boss had arranged for us to use these rooms at no charge.

When we arrived I found, Koubra, my friend who introduced me to Islam, and her sister decorating the women's room. Large plush *mandars* lined the walls with thick upholstered back cushions screwed in place on the walls. A green Saudi flag was pinned to the pale green walls. Long tables were set up for the food and paper plates, cups, and white plastic utensils. The cake sat on a separate table ready to be cut. Koubra picked up the cake and made sure it arrived undamaged from the bakery. The cake was the only thing I was responsible for other than getting myself prepared.



I felt sad that none of my family would be with me at my wedding, but I was relieved that I wouldn't have to deal with their intolerance and discomfort with the unfamiliar. Everything about my wedding was foreign except the cake. They wouldn't have been comfortable I told myself.

Guests started arriving and finding their way to sit down after dropping their coats and gifts in a separate large cloak room lined with hang racks. It didn't take long for the room to be crammed with women and children. Most were the spouses and children of Abdulhadi's friends and co-workers. There wasn't any music or dancing, just the steady sound of conversation and playing children. This was a more conservative crowd that frowned upon instrumental music other than a drum or dancing because of the provocative movements that weren't considered appropriate for even a segregated gathering.

Dinner was served buffet style after the second bride arrived. She wore a full-skirted long sleeved wedding gown complete with veil and tiara. She looked like a traditional American bride. This was her second wedding party because she had one a couple weeks before with her family in California. She didn't know anyone but was treated as an honored bride. I thought that most of the people at the wedding probably don't know I'm a bride too because I'm not dressed like her.

After everyone had their fill of couscous, lamb, salad, and the sumptuous appetizers, the other bride and I cut the cake and served up three layers of divine chocolate cake with a white buttercream frosting and raspberry filling. As I was mingling with our guests, I picked up a young toddler and followed his mother back to her seat. Before I could set the boy down he smeared his chocolate covered hand across the front of my dress.

“I’m so sorry. Let me help you clean that off,” the woman said and she reached for her napkin.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go clean it off in the bathroom,” I said walking away with a grateful grin that I didn’t have a \$2000.00 dress on that would need dry cleaning and special spot removal. I didn’t imagine that I would ever have a fancy church wedding with a flowing bridal gown. My childhood dreams were to run away to elope. I was running away and eloping without my family. Before I could get to the bathroom to thoroughly clean the spot off the front of my dress, my new husband had come to take me to our apartment for our first night together. I said salaams to all my guests and walked with Abdulhadi across the parking lot to our apartment.

He opened the security door of the doughnut shaped building and we rode the elevator to the second floor. He opened the door to our one bedroom apartment. He held my hand for the first time and escorted me into the home he carefully prepared for me. He showed me our living room with a fireplace and walkout balcony. The kitchen faced the living room with a half wall of dark wooden spindles to the ceiling. Down the short hall was a vanity and sink with a bathroom to the right and our bedroom to the left. Throughout the apartment were small arrangements of plastic flowers. He didn’t know how much I hated plastic flowers. The thick hard unrealistic flowers reminded me of my grandmother’s bathroom and the rolled up washcloth animals that sat in a soap dish. I knew he was trying to make our apartment welcoming for his new bride.

“This is our bedroom,” Abdulhadi said in his quiet voice. I saw my bags near the room length closet opposite the bed.

“This is beautiful,” I said. “Let me change out of this dress.”

“I’ll be back,” he said as he headed toward the kitchen. I changed into my long black lace negligée. I removed the flowers and pins from my hair. I brushed my hair and then my teeth. I stepped into our bedroom where Abdulhadi sat with a tray with one glass of orange juice and a small plate of dates. He handed me the glass and I took a drink and put it back on the tray. Then he took a drink from the same glass. Then he split open a date and fed me one half and then ate the other. Abdulhadi placed his hand on my forehead and whispered a *dua* of blessing for me. Then he nervously pulled me close and pressed his lips against mine kissing me for the first time. The eagerness of the moment made up for the rigidness of our first embrace. He put the tray aside and turned out the light.

## A Change of Plans

“Hadi, I need to come home. Please just tell them that it’s time and I need to go home,” I said to my husband as I carried the tethered phone around the corner of the kitchen for a little privacy away from the conversations in the courtyard. It wouldn’t be long before my mother-in-law, my children, and brother-in-laws would quietly make their way in for a turn to speak with Hadi.

“Ok. Are you sure that you can’t hold out until after *Ramadan*? Jamal wants you and the kids there for his wedding,” Hadi said, while I traced the crack running down the whitewashed cement wall next to the phone jack.

“I’ve had it. I’m tired and I need to see a doctor. Every time I cough, I nearly wet myself because I cough so hard and every time I vomit I have to make a run for the apartment,” I said feeling my stomach clinch tighter with each word. “We aren’t getting any school work done either. We all need to get back to our lives and so do they.”

“Fine, I’ll call you in a couple of days. Hand the phone to Jamal,” he said in his distant tone, the same tone he used when I’d confirmed my pregnancy three months before. Another layer of guilt settled in my already weary mind unleashing the physical fatigue with such force that I could no longer hold it in. My head ached and I felt my cheeks blaze red as they always did when I was upset. Um-Fergiani would know as soon as she had her turn on the phone and I would have to face her. I wanted to run to the apartment with my kids and lock the door. I hated confrontation and knew it was unavoidable.

“Jamal, telephone,” I called to my husband’s youngest brother. I stepped through the rust red iron doors of the kitchen. I could hear Jamal’s usually jovial voice drop to a low worrisome

chatter. He emerged from the kitchen with the touch tone handset dragging its long beige cord and handed it to my mother-in-law. I sat down next to her with my back against the stucco wall and my legs stretched out on the woven mats we rolled out each evening in the courtyard. Her tiny four and half foot frame tensed with every word. She pulled her bright floral scarf back from her ear as if she hadn't heard correctly.

I didn't need to understand their word for word conversation; I knew the moment that she was told that I wanted to go home. Her voice took on an argumentative tone. She turned toward me with a flash of anger jetting from her weathered eyes. Her chin dropped and her voice quickly shifted to sorrow. She waited so long to get to know her grandchildren and I was taking them away before our trip's planned end. I was stealing her precious time with her beloved son's children. Her normally cheerful countenance deflated deepening her wrinkles with disappointment. She closed the line with my husband and turned to me with tears welled up in her eyes as she asked me why in Arabic.

I struggled with an answer in my broken Arabic, "I'm tired and sick. I need to see my husband." I felt my sinuses swell, pressure building across my forehead. Tears pushed down my cheeks. I nervously twisted my gold wedding band with the tiny diamond around and around my finger. It sat on top of the wide gold band that Jamal sent me when Hadi visited them after his cancer treatment. I pulled them easily back and forth over my knuckle. The morning sickness had stripped away thirty pounds making everything I wore loose.

"But what about Jamal's wedding and Ramadan? You can't miss the wedding. At least stay for Ramadan," my mother-in-law, Um-Fergiani, pleaded. Her hand shook as she grabbed for

mine. The intensity of her voice pulsed through her knotted fingers as she implored for more time.

My sister-in-law erupted into frantic tears. Her eyes probed me with disbelief. She shuttered with despair. Hameeda pulled my daughters to her as she wilted with my news. She had grown so attached to both Khadijah and Maymuna that my announcement assaulted her as if I drove my chubby hand deep into her chest and pulled out her weakly beating heart. I knew at that moment she might never forgive. She and her husband were childless and they both were enjoying the affection of all my children.

I knelt on the woven mat next to Um-Fergiani and tried to explain my condition and how much I just needed to be back with my husband and in my own environment where I could take care of myself and deal with whatever came.

Truly I was fatigued with morning sickness and fearful of my rising blood pressure. I had a cough that wouldn't go away and was causing urinary incontinence; a detail I concealed out of mortification. I missed my husband and needed to be under the care of a doctor and a medical system that I had confidence in.

#

I had visited the local family doctor, Dr. Farelle, the Fergiani family doctor for nearly thirty years. She was an incredibly generous and kind woman often seeing patients after hours in her own home. She was from Egypt and was a practicing Christian. Dr. Farelle was married to a veterinarian that specialized in large animals. He was also from Egypt. Dr. Farelle spent the last thirty years raising their four children and maintaining a home and practice in Mslata and another home in Egypt. She was a very devoted physician, making herself available to her patients nearly

twenty-four hours a day. She was a thoughtful physician, but her hygiene practices frightened me. She didn't wash her hands between patients.

One night Hameeda was suffering with a stomach virus and was taken to Dr. Farelle's home in the middle of Msalata. It was already past 10:00pm when we pulled up at an old apartment building. Mansor went up the uneven steps to check if Dr. Farelle was home while Hameeda and I got out of the car. The area was not a place I imagined a successful doctor would live. The outside of the building was unkempt and in need of fresh paint. Mansor led us up the narrow stairs. Dirt and garbage coated and littered the cement stairs. We carefully navigated the passage. The door was wide open when we reached her apartment.

"Come in," welcomed Dr. Farelle from inside the weathered wooden door. She ushered us in after giving us the traditional hug with air kisses over each shoulder. We walked past a small dirty kitchen with watermelons sitting on a heavily soiled floor. Dr. Farelle led us to her sitting room. The windows were open letting in the night breeze. Dark finger prints were prominent around the window latches. We sat down on two wood framed couches that faced each other across a wooden coffee table. This was not at all what I expected her apartment to look like. I imagined that she would have nice furnishings and a spotless home with beautiful things that would tell of her travels.

She offered us an orange Kool-Aid like drink in smudge glasses. I too had fallen to buying canisters of Foster-Clark drink mix rather than excessive juice to stretch my budget and keep my kids drinking in the sweltering summer temperatures. We all accepted and said a necessary *Bismillah*, asking God's blessing and protection before consuming.

Dr. Farelle took Hameeda and me to a make-shift exam room she had set up in one of the bedrooms. There were two metal framed hospital beds reminiscent of hospital beds I'd seen in movies from the thirties and forties. The walls were dingy with a dull pale yellow paint and pictures randomly plastered to the wall. On the first bed was a very pregnant young woman. She was quite talkative and asked me to come visit her. I told her *inshallah*, which was the non-committal polite answer; an answer I would later regret using too often. Dr. Farelle examined Hameeda, pressing her abdomen and asked her about her symptoms. After she finished, Dr. Farelle determined that Hameeda likely had a virus combined with her normally severe menstrual cycle.

“Mrs. Asya, do you want me to check you now to see how the pregnancy is coming along?” she offered.

“Thank you. I just saw the doctor in Tripoli last week.” I was afraid that if she examined me I might catch something beyond the recurring urinary tract infections that I kept getting. Clearly, even the worst medical clinic I had gone to in the United States was more equipped for the hygienic care of patients.

My OB exams in Tripoli weren't as thorough as the check-ups I had throughout my pregnancies in Colorado. My husband's cousin's wife, Mona, took me to the Al Bushra Clinic for Gynecology, Obstetrics, and Pediatrics in Ben Ashour, Tripoli, where she had gone during her last pregnancy. The procedures and protocols were very foreign to me. The doctor usually saw patients in the late afternoon and evening.

When we arrived at the clinic for my first OB appointment, I was already into my second trimester at the beginning of September. I was amazed at how clean and modern the outside and



inside of the building was. The paint was in vibrant blues and greens. The carpet matched with dark blue and green loops. Comfortable dark forest upholstered chairs lined the waiting area. A large television was tuned to the Arabic Food Network. I signed in and paid the ten *dinar* fee for my visit before we sat down. The appointment wasn't at the time scheduled. Everyone was given a general appointment time of either late afternoon at 4pm or evening at 6pm. The waiting room began to fill up with women in various stages of pregnancy.

Finally, the doctor arrived about an hour after we were seated in the waiting room. Patients were seen on a first come first service basis unless they knew the doctor on a personal level. A nurse called each patient up and gave her a cup for a urine sample. When the urine sample was presented, the nurse either told them to sit down or sent them to have any blood work that needed to be done.

When I was called in to the exam room, I was weighed and my blood pressure was taken and recorded in a little green book. Then I was told to lie down on the exam table. The nurse helped me to modestly expose my growing abdomen. She applied ultra-sound gel and placed an ultra-sound wand on my stomach to locate my baby and the heartbeat. During this whole process the doctor never touched me. His nurses performed any action that required a human touch. The doctor observed the edema of my feet after the nurse applied pressure on my foot and ankle leaving a finger sized indentation behind. My uterus was never measured. There was no routine pap smear or pelvic exam.

“Mrs. Fergiani it appears that you are in general good health. Your blood pressure is high. You need to rest and drink a lot of water to help bring it down. Make an appointment for next

month,” said the doctor in perfect English as he handed me the little green notebook with his general notes and the stapled in ultra-sound picture of my nine week old fetus.

“Thank you,” I said and walked out baffled that there wasn’t more. Mona made an appointment for me for the next month. At this point I knew that I didn’t want to give birth in Libya. I had many concerns that wouldn’t be addressed in a timely manner here in Libya. My blood pressure was a chronic problem that usually became a serious issue at the end of my pregnancies. I was scared and didn’t want to make my soon to be five children orphans because I didn’t get the necessary medical care for my condition.

#

Four months prior, my children and I arrived with my husband to see his family for the first time. We had been married for eighteen years. I had agreed to stay with his family in Msalata for five months so that our children could really get to know their relatives; while my husband went back to the U.S. to continue working. It was understood that if I called and said that it was time to go home, there would be no questions, just a change in our itinerary. I knew Hadi would need time to find a house to rent before we could come home. I really didn’t care about what the house might look like. All I longed for was a hot shower with ample water pressure and my bed with my husband next to me. Even though my in-laws provided us with a wonderful apartment, I missed being in my own home and being in control of my own everyday activities. I was in limbo waiting to go home.

Our homeschooling was also on hold. It was hard to maintain a good homeschooling routine when the summer family routine was so laid back. Our day started with preparing breakfast, eating together, and cleaning up. Then Hameeda would fix lunch. The girls would do

dishes and everyone would go take naps during the heat of the day. I often did laundry at that time. We would all emerge back into the compound in the late afternoon and make a simple meal of salad or a stew of potatoes and meat to be eaten with bread. Then we would sit on the patio talking until midnight and head to bed.

When school started for the Libyan children in late August, my sister-in-law, Hameeda, went back to work as an elementary school teacher. She went to school early and came home in the early afternoon. This term she was assigned to the substitute pool. She explained that teachers in Msalata rotate through the grade levels ending the cycle as a substitute for one year before starting the rotation again. My brother-in-law, Mansor worked at a different school as a record clerk. He went to work for a few hours and came home at different hours in the early afternoon.

I had the convoluted idea that I would be able to get my children started on school-work at the same time that the Libyan students started. This turned out to be futile because with Jamal's wedding coming up in less than a month. There was breakfast to be made, rooms to be thoroughly cleaned, shopping to be done, and endless things to be done. I gave up. We were only going to be there a few more weeks. The point of our trip was for our children to spend as much time as possible with the family. Keeping them in our apartment for the majority of the time studying was counterproductive.

Hadi called a couple days later at our usual time, toward late evening. I answered the phone knowing that I would only have a couple of minutes before everyone would be crowding into the small dimly lit kitchen to give their *Salaams* to their long departed son/brother.

“Asalaam Aliakum, how are you?” I said in the most cheerful voice possible.

“I talked with Jamal and he is going to see about moving the wedding up before Ramadan. Do you think you could hold out till mid-September?” He asked. “I’m going this weekend to look at houses, but it is going to take time. How are the kids?”

“The kids are fine. I already told Jamal we would stay if he could move it up before Ramadan. We all miss you and are ready to come home. We need to get home to get school going again.” I entwined my fingers through the coiled phone cord. The feral cat, Gigi, pawed at the inverted bowl that loosely covered the leftover eggs and tomato leftover from breakfast.

“I’m not trying to make anyone upset. I am just at my end and need to see a regular Obstetrician soon. I’ve been getting headaches even though I’ve been trying to drink more water.” I reached over to shoe Gigi off the wooden counter. She averted my sweeping arm and jumped off the counter and ran out through the red iron doors.

It was hard for me to tell from Hadi’s voice how he was feeling about the pregnancy or our change of plans. I needed to see his face and watch his movements to be able to understand how I should react or what I should say next.

As an American it was difficult for me to lower my gaze when talking to men or anyone because for me communication was a multifaceted process of reading the eyes for truth and watching the mouth for ticks. Communication requires not only verbal presentation of words, but also an array of body language. After more than eighteen years of marriage, I had trained myself to avert my eyes and keep an appropriate distance between my body and unrelated males. Sometimes if the conversation required more than a few polite phrases my eyes would track up to the face. I detected sincerity most often through the non-verbal cues.

He tried to assure me. “Go visit Mohamed’s family and Khalti Aisha for a couple of days after you go to Jamal’s brother-in-laws wedding. That will give you and the kids a break and you can see a doctor in Tripoli,” I agreed and gave the phone to Um-Fergiani who waited on the other side of the iron kitchen door.

Why couldn’t I tough it out till the end of our original trip? The children hardly ever complained. Ammar was happy as long as we had corn flakes. He was my six years old son and a finicky eater. If he couldn’t stomach what was served, he would have corn flakes later or Nutella and crackers. I made breakfast for the whole family every day and Hameeda made lunch. Lunch was the heavy meal of the day with rotating menu of macaroni, next day rice, then occasionally couscous or a stew eaten with bread. Often the food was too spicy for Ammar so he would only eat a couple bites and a piece of meat.

My oldest, Asim, lost nearly thirty-five pounds because the spicy food didn’t set well with him. He was transformed from a chubby teen into a tall thin young man with a Lincoln like beard by the end of our stay. His mustache sprouted months later. It was hard to see him loose so much weight. We were both thinning out, me from continued morning sickness and he from gastric distress. Hameeda tried to cook milder food but it was hard to avoid the food at the other homes we visited. We had to oblige our hosts by trying to eat especially when we knew that they had spent of their meager means on our behalf.

Meat was very expensive and was used to flavor the food. Ground beef was a true luxury item costing around ten dinars a pound. I dreamed of beef in all its possible forms: steak, kebabs, hamburgers, etc. If my sons came home smelling of a barbeque, it would set my salivary glands to work and my stomach to rumbling. I longed for meat, meat, and more meat and a strong long

hot shower. A dishwasher and western style clothes washer and dryer weren't far behind on my list of desired conveniences that I had once taken for granted.

The brand new Daewoo washing machine provided for me in our apartment was reminiscent of the early clothes washing technology of the 1940's. It had two separate tubs. The larger tub had an agitator and the smaller tub spun the laundry. Washing clothes was a multi-step process that I looked forward to as a reason to be alone. The Daewoo had to be lifted into the bathroom and placed over the squatter toilet that was basically an open hole with water in it with no flushing mechanism where the drain hose could be emptied. The personal sprayer next to the American style toilet was used to fill the main tub of the washer. I would sprinkle about a fourth of a cup of powdered detergent over the water and start the agitation with the timer. Hameeda taught me to start with the whites first and change the water as needed. I could only wash a few things at a time. After about fifteen minutes of agitation, I would squeeze out the clothes and spin them in the spinner. Then they would be hand rinsed in a big plastic tub of water I filled up in the tub. After rinsing the clothes as thoroughly as possible, I re-spun the clothes. Often my son, Asim or my daughters helped me ring out the rinsed clothes before putting them in the spinner. We had to be careful because the marble floor got wet during washing. I slipped several times and deeply bruised my legs and arms on the tub or the toilet. I tried to squeegee the water down the floor drain often.

After the laundry was washed we climbed the two flights of open stairs to the roof to hang the clothes on the lines my brother-in-laws strung for me. I insisted that my children stay single file against the wall all the way up to the corrugated steel door. I liked going on the roof even though it scared me to climb the open stairs. The roof was like a patrol tower. We could see

for miles around. We could see the neighbors' compound up on the hill across the road to the north and to the west was the city of Msalata. To the east the road continued to the next town over the hill. I couldn't see the town but I could hear the *athan* calling Muslims to the prayer at the masjid. To the south was the rising hill where the original Fergiani home stood in ruins after decades of brutal sand driving winds and heavy rain. The *beer* with sweet drinking water was twenty yards to the right of the old house. Every couple of days my children and their uncles hiked up the steep hill with a wheel barrel of twenty or more liter sized soda bottles and drew water from the well filtering it through nylon swatches held over a funnel. The water was refreshing without the mineral taste of the trucked in water that filled the underground tank we used for every other task that required water.

#

A few days later from my announced change of plans, we piled into the little dusty blue Datsun to drive to Tripoli. Before Jamal slipped behind the wheel, he gingerly placed a live lamb packed in an open cardboard box into the trunk. Its legs were bound so that it couldn't jump out of the box. At the time, I didn't consider the discomfort the lamb may have endured during our drive. There was no room for the lamb to ride with us in the passenger cabin with us. The alternative may have been worse if it had been able to freely move in the cramped trunk. Jamal and Asim sat up front. My two daughters, Khadijah and Maymuna sat in back with me and my youngest son, Ammar who sat on my lap. Then we were off at the only speed Jamal went, fast.

Ordinarily, I was not the sort of person who that suffered from motion sickness, but morning sickness combined with Jamal's driving made my new constant companion, *Sadiqua*, the small beige trash can, a necessity. With the stifling heat of the late North African summer the

un-air-conditioned micro-car made for a nauseating ride. I wore a long heavy navy blue polyester-cotton *jilbab* and scarf over my long skirt and long sleeved shirt. I didn't own a thinner *jilbab*. For days, temperatures had hovered in the low 100's, only cooling to the mid 80's at night. I longed to take off my *jilbab* once I entered the inside of the home where the wedding would be held.

My sister-in-law, her mother, and sisters squeezed into her brother's little tan sedan for the trip to the wedding. They wore the traditional white sheet-like *holi*, clutched in such a manner as to only reveal one eye over their *jilbabs*. I thought how stifling the heat must be to them. We often traveled in a caravan of economy cars and small pick-up trucks from Msalata, to events in Tripoli. Jamal eventually would break away from the caravan to drive at his normal speed, fast.

The drive to Tripoli took us northwest through rocky, sedimentary layered hills to the Mediterranean coastal highway. The hills were speckled with low growing evergreens and wild oregano. Almond and olive groves were the most common signs of life where ground cover refused to grow. Buildings sprouted up much like the wild oregano, wherever a land owner decided to build.

As we got closer to the coast, the land smoothed out into sandy plains with the occasional barley field bending to the fitful sea breeze that ebbed and rushed in like the waves, giving relief one moment and leaving stagnant humidity the next. Tall date palms and patchy woodlands studded the coast with beaches glimmering with colored broken glass and fluttering shredded grocery bags, even next to well-groomed resorts. Scenes like this made it hard to imagine the reign of Libya's King Idriss. My husband told me that in the 1950's and for the



most part of the 1960's before the successful coup of the young Mummar Ghaddafi, the streets of Tripoli were washed down nightly. There were never piles of uncollected trash left to ripen until the trash truck driver chose to come by.

I was shocked by the lack of municipal sanitation. Libyans in general kept their homes white glove inspection clean. Dishes weren't left in the sink for the next day. Floors were swept if not washed down daily. Pride of ownership was evident on the inside of peoples' homes but not in these public areas along the streets and highways or in the neighborhoods where trash was not be collected regularly. Even the historic sites like Leptis Magna, one of the Roman ruins that we visited, was overgrown with thistles and tall grasses.

As the token Americans, we were invited to almost every *henna*, wedding, and *akika* within two hours of the family compound. As life went on, so did the celebrations of the milestones of life. The Libyans' lives skip from one social event to the next. The summer tended to be the busiest time for weddings only breaking for Ramadan, and beginning again after the holidays ended. School only seemed to slow the pace of events.

Illness and death visited just as often as weddings and births. It is an important *sunnah* and social obligation to visit the sick or the bereaved relatives of the dead or dying. Hameeda and I made these social calls without my children. I was stunned by the numbers of women that would come at one time to visit a sick person or a grieving family. It seemed to be orchestrated with many women coming and going throughout the day.

I would find it a burden to host people while trying to care for an ill relative or grieving for a loved one. This was purely my western mentality seeping out. After observing these events,

I learned that the extended family served the guests tea and a savory *kak* or piece of bread. The guests brought companionship and distraction to mourning relatives and the infirm.

Upon our arrival at the newly built two story home of my brother-in-law's future in-laws, Jamal vowed that he would return later that night to take us home to Msalata. It was made clear that we didn't want to spend the night even though my mother-in-law was already staying as a guest for the whole week. The car came to a stop in front of a boldly colored tent with orange, red, and black stripes, somewhat reminiscent of the Navaho woven rugs of the Southwestern United States that I remember from my youth in Colorado. It was used to shelter the compound entry, allowing the women to enter the compound without exposing the women inside. We all spilled out of the car in no condition for a wedding. Ammar vomited right outside the car door onto the red dusty soil splattering his new white open heeled shoes. I took tissues from the box Jamal kept in the car and cleaned Ammar's pale face. I empathized with him feeling sweaty and nauseated myself.

Asim helped Jamal remove the not so chipper lamb from the trunk. A couple of the groom's relatives came to greet Jamal and Asim. The older men wore the traditional Libyan *thobes* that came just above the knee over matching cotton drawstring pants. This combination always reminded me of pajamas because they were made of the same light woven cotton fabric. The younger men wore European street clothes, t-shirts with long shorts or jeans.

After handing off the frazzled lamb to our hosts and seeing that my younger children and I went inside the house, Jamal and Asim left to go where the male guests were being hosted. Men and women are regularly segregated in Muslim culture, especially in rural Libyan society.

I lead Ammar by the hand and followed my girls into the household compound with *Sadiqua* nestled under my arm. As we enter the outer walls of the compound, we were met by the bustling activity of many women and girls steaming couscous in generous two tiered pots called a *kiskas*. Chunks of stewed camel and potatoes in a rich tomato sauce were in the bottom pot and the couscous steamed in the upper level semi covered with a lid. Several women sat in and around the outdoor kitchen that was covered with a corrugated steel roof. The sides were open allowing the sea breeze to carry the sweet scent of onion topped couscous throughout the neighborhood.

Small plates of home pickled vegetables and olives were being plated to be served alongside huge covered bowls of couscous. Enormous stainless steel bowls of water full of peeled red and white onions lined the outdoor kitchen. Women in their everyday traditional bright patterned cotton *gradaes* tended the industrial cooking pots over individual large gas burners. Their hair was pulled back under square bandanas tied behind their heads.

When our hostess became aware of our arrival, we left our shoes at the door with nearly two hundred other pairs of shoes and sandals and we were quickly ushered into the house. My Walmart tan sandals stuck out in the pile of leather soled *shipships*. I knew my cushioned leather sandals were likely to be tried on and worn around the compound by curious guests. The padded soles and thick rubber tread wasn't a familiar style. They offered a pillow like comfort on the hard cement or tile walking surface that most of the ladies had never experienced. It became a game of finding our shoes when it was time to go home because they were never where we left them.

Our hostess motioned for us to remove our *jilbabs* and scarves in a small room that I would liken to a mud room. She then led us past a bathroom and down a wide hallway to a long high-ceilinged room. It was lined with custom made *mandars* in luxurious colorful fabrics. The matching custom valances and drapes shaded the double shuttered windows that were on each of the outer walls. The afternoon sunlight dimly lit the thirty or so ladies napping or fanning themselves around the edge of the room with their small children and infants by their sides.

The steady hum of the slender wall mounted air-conditioner struggled to keep up with the summer heat and the many bodies inside the room. Each of the *salons* or *marbowas* had its own air-conditioning unit, since central air conditioning would be impractical for the open style of these Mediterranean homes.

Ammar and I gratefully found a comfortable place right in the direct airflow of the air-conditioner to station ourselves with our belongings. Our hostess sent a plate with a welcome helping of roasted camel meat and a couple of small loaves of bread for Ammar and me to eat after our long car trip. As nauseated as both Ammar and I were after our roller coaster ride to town, we gratefully consumed every morsel of the tender-roasted camel and the fresh doughy white loaves. This was the first time either of us had ever eaten camel. The meat was like a lean roast beef without the gamey flavor that one might expect. After we polished off our sumptuous snack and cleaned our hands over the finger bowls, we settled into our spot at the *mandars*. Ammar got out his notebook and pencils and quietly drew pictures of dragons, monsters, and the occasional skeleton, while I tried to lie down in the best possible position to keep my meal down and receive as much direct air conditioning as possible.

Khadijah and Maymuna came to find us after searching out their aunt and grandmother. The girls frequently came to check on us no matter where we were or how much fun they might be having with their newly acquainted cousins.

My mother-in-law arrived at these events a day or two before the main merriments and generally would return a couple of days after most guests had gone home. This was the norm for the elderly women of the Fergiani family. Even her mother, my husband's hundred plus year old grandmother, would make the rounds as a much beloved guest at all these family festivities. Um-Fergiani would usually return home tired but happy to be home.

I didn't like the idea of staying for days at the home of a relative that I may have just met especially with my children in tow. Thankfully, my in-laws respected my desire to return home no matter how much a hostess might ask them to have us stay overnight. The hostess may have thought that my husband had made that stipulation as a condition of our staying in Libya without him. Regardless, I was grateful to return home to our little apartment and to the privacy that it ensured with its out and inner locking doors. My husband insisted that a lockable door be installed in the hall to the two bedrooms and bathroom inside our apartment off the stairwell before he returned to Florida. Every night from the time we arrived I barricaded the opening because I was afraid that Ammar would sleepwalk or try to find me during the night and fall down the stairwell. We also needed to leave the bedroom doors open in order for the air conditioner to cool both rooms. The door helped to keep our sleeping area cool without over working the air conditioner.

As the evening progressed, dinner was served in large metal lidded bowls. It was customary for several to sit around and eat from one dish. As a visitor I complied with most of the expected

practices except sharing my water glass with others. Most often a tray with a pitcher and two or three glasses would be placed nearby for any and all to drink from. I was sure that this practice was the source of many serious viral outbreaks. Considering my pregnancy and morning sickness, my dear in-laws provided me with bottled water. Everywhere I went, I brought my own water that I shared with my children only.

In every culture there are rules of etiquette when eating. In Libyan society one always eats from his or her side of the bowl, being sure that the most generous pieces of meat are in front of the most honored guest. If the guest appears to be unable to debone her meat herself, it is incumbent upon the hostess to debone the meat for her and flick it into her section of the dish when she is not paying attention or is distracted by others. An honored guest is expected to eat and eat in order not to insult her hostess. If one is eating *sunnah* style with one's right hand, she must be careful to only use her thumb, index finger, and middle finger. To use the whole hand would be considered rude and without class or manners. It is always important regardless of if you are right handed or left handed to use only your right hand for eating or drinking. The left hand is regarded as being dirty because one is expected to clean him or herself with the left hand in the bathroom. Hand washing is also a vital part of the rituals of dining. Usually, a wide flat bottomed bowl and pitcher of water are brought with soap and towels to allow guests to wash their hands dining-side before and after eating. All of these rituals are performed with the highest respect between host and guest. I learned most of these etiquettes long before our trip to Libya as part of our daily family life and our interactions with other Libyan families in Colorado and Florida.

My unsettled stomach had no mercy on me after only consuming a few bites of the spicy couscous. I excused myself carrying *Sadiqua* close and rushed to the bathroom. IT WAS LOCKED. A familiar voice came from inside the bathroom. It was my mother-in-law. Somehow she had locked herself in the bathroom and couldn't unlock it. Time was running out as my eyes began to water and my stomach rose with familiar action. I grabbed the first family member I recognized and pointed her to the bathroom telling her with my fractured Arabic that my mother-in-law was locked inside. At first she thought she misunderstood me. Once she heard Um-Fergiani's voice, she got the extra key to open the door.

Now that the bathroom was free, I was already embracing the sink mounted outside the bathroom as the contents of my stomach forcefully ejected and violently convulsed. When all had been expelled the heaving stopped, leaving my muscles aching. I turned on the water and washed my mouth, only to be tapped on the shoulder by one of our hostesses who wanted to introduce me to a close friend. Trying to be as polite as possible, I turned to face them with bloodshot eyes and tears coursing down my cheeks. I offered my wrist and greeted her with all the graciousness I could muster considering that I just lost everything that I had eaten or drank since my arrival that afternoon. Kindly, she took my wrist and embraced me and air kissing both my wet cheeks in the traditional fashion and went on her way to greet the other guests. I felt lucky that my stomach held steady through this introduction. It only reinforced my urgent desire to go home where the social occasions and formal situations were rare.

I made my way back to my children and did my best to just nibble at anything else I was served, explaining that I was not well. I had successfully maintained the family honor by following all the social protocols and greeting each person who was brought to meet me with the

politeness and hospitality my husband's family was known for. My children also behaved in a like manner, which was beyond most peoples' expectations. I enjoyed meeting new people, but found it exhausting to spend several hours away from home and the privacy of our apartment especially when I was feeling ill or needed to use the bathroom without worrying about the nagging knocking of others.

Soon after the wedding dinner was finished and cleared away, the bride was delivered by an entourage of her relatives. She emerged from a white sedan wearing a white hooded cloak over a western style wedding dress. Once inside the compound the women began to make a loud celebratory *ziggurat* by moving their tongues back and forth quickly with a high pitched zing that announced the bride's arrival. Her cloak was removed revealing her lace overlaid wedding dress embellished with tiny crystals. Delicate dark red henna floral designs decorated her hands and feet conveying the traditional promise to treat her husband kindly. She was escorted into the house to a throne like seat that her new in-laws decorated with white roses and lilies illuminated with white twinkling lights. The rest of the evening she sat in the seat with a stoic smile-less expression to show her sadness about leaving her family. The wedding guests sang and danced in her honor.

The tradition of a stoic bride was difficult for me to grasp. I was raised to believe that a wedding was supposed to be the happiest day of a young woman's life. Even though my family wasn't present at my wedding, I was happy and smiling. I was ready to begin a new phase of my life with Abdulhadi. We celebrated our decision to be together as husband and wife.

I learned later that the bride's mother traditionally doesn't accompany the bride to her husband's home during the wedding party. It is thought that the mother would be mourning the



loss of her daughter. She is expected to visit her daughter a week after the wedding accompanied by a group of female relatives. The groom's family is required to prepare a special dinner and cater to the needs of the bride's mother and female relatives. They spend the night with the bride and return to their homes the following afternoon. I hadn't heard of this tradition before visiting Msalata.

Jamal and Asim arrived after midnight to collect us for our trip home. We said our far-wells, hugging and kissing my mother-in-law good-bye and thanking our hostess for her kind generosity. We wearily stuffed ourselves in the car welcoming the long ride home with jovial Amu Jamal. He was beaming with the anticipation of his own wedding after sharing the celebration of his future brother-in-law's happy nuptials.

The girls and Ammar melted into a heap like tired kittens nuzzled next to and on top of their mother. With the windows down and the cooling breeze tickling over us, Khadijah, Maymuna, and Ammar quickly gave in to sleep. Asim and Jamal laughed as I told them about my perilous adventures at the wedding with Um-Fergiani locked in the bathroom and me vomiting in the sink just before being introduced to a special friend of our hostess. I stared out the window into the star light night. The stars grew brighter as we sped away from Tripoli and away from the city lights. As we turned southward off the coastal highway the businesses and homes became farther apart and so did the street lights. The houses with strings of lights indicated the recent arrival of a new *arosa*. They reminded me of Floridian homes decorated for the holidays with no snow for thousands of miles to the north or the south. Soon the Fergiani house would be draped with lights welcoming Fatima into our family.

## Nuptial Necessities

With a new departure date and airline reservations made for October 3<sup>rd</sup> for my children and me, Jamal moved his wedding date up to mid-September. This would make it two weeks before our return trip home to Florida. The Fergiani house sputtered into action with endless arrangements and preparations to welcome a new *arosa* into the family.

Mansor and Jamal brought in three large burlap bags of the recently harvested barley from the fields surrounding the house and across the road. The Fergiani land was cut by a road that linked Msalata with the neighboring town just over the hill. The barley would be sorted and prepared for milling by all the women of the house including me.

Mansor and Jamal leaned the bags against the white washed cement wall of the unfinished cinderblock room my mother-in-law liked to use to wash the dishes in. In the corner stood a weathered cabinet with peeling pale blue paint where household chemicals were kept. Daily we sat on a woven mat near a simple wood framed bed with a barracks mattress that was under a small iron window that we opened for light and a breeze during the day. Along the wall stood four or five heavy blue plastic barrels of olive oil and other household staples.

My daughters, Khadijah and Maymuna, carried buckets of water to that room to do dishes after lunch and dinner every day. Hameeda explained that my mother-in-law insisted that the dishes be done that way in that room. So we would abide by her wishes just as Hameeda had for the last fifteen years of her marriage to Mansor. I had a hard time understanding her reasoning considering that there was a small kitchen with a sink and indoor plumbing in the main house. The only reason I could think of was that she wanted to insure that the water wasn't wasted.

They had to have water trucked in and stored in a large underground tank during most of the year. The well on the hill would only flow with clean drinking water in the summer months.

Um-Fergiani, her older half-sister, Salima, and her mother, Hani-Lalaham spent hours combing through trays of barley grains removing pebbles, dirt, and burrs. The barley flour would be transformed into *bazeen*, a boiled dough kneaded into a smooth cone shaped mound covered in a rich beef stew with boiled eggs. This would be the featured dish served on the *areese's* day, first day of the three day wedding.

I had only eaten *bazeen* a few times over my eighteen years of marriage. It was eaten using the three finger method. Because everyone ate from the same large bowl, everyone washed their hands before eating. It was standard for a water pitcher, soap, bowl, and towel to be brought around to each person to cleanse their hands before eating and afterwards very much like the pitcher and basin used in homes before the invention of indoor plumbing in Western society. I never tried to make *bazeen* on my own simply because barley flour wasn't readily available even in the natural grocery stores where we lived in Colorado and Florida. It is also rather labor intensive and required a paddle and pot that weren't easy to come by in the States.

The elderly women straddled metal trays while sitting on thin faded floral cushions on a large woven mat. They laughed and bickered as they told each other stories or gossiped about the neighbors. I often sat with them and picked through my own tray of cornels while sipping dark cups of strong heavily sweetened green tea.

Hani-Lalaham grabbed my hand and pulled me close to her. Looking directly in my eyes she started telling me about my husband when he was a boy. She rattled off numerous family tales in rapid Arabic. I only understood a familiar name or place. She expressively waved her

thin boney arms as she narrated some story of my husband's youth. I caught his name and his brothers' names and something about school. She laughed hardily and her large old eyes beamed from behind the thick lenses of her standard black framed glasses.

My understanding was directly related to whether or not I had the mental sharpness to decode the Arabic. The later in the day, the less I understood, but I smiled and gave the appropriate verbal responses at the right time giving her the hope that I understood most of what she was saying. My mother-in-law and Khalti Salima gleefully continued their sorting. Because of my pregnancy I was discouraged from helping with the heavy cleaning that had to be done before the wedding. They allowed my help only with activity that could be done while sitting. I felt like a wimp.

Khadijah and Maymuna helped Hameeda deep cleaned each room of the main house and the added rooms around the compound. The original part of the house was truly an open concept, five rooms built off of a square court yard open to the sky. This was the ideal home for the arid Mediterranean North African home without air-conditioning. Over the years, the open courtyard was roofed over leaving only a small four-sided raised windowed vent in the center of the ceiling. A small thrush had found the open vent. She made her nest in a gap between the rebar and cemented ceiling inside the courtyard. Four baby birds had hatched. While I sat the thrush flew in and out the windowed vent bringing food to her hungry chicks. Hameeda told me that the thrush had nested there for a couple of years. The nest was well out of reach of our agile farm cats. The loose ceiling cement needed to be knocked down before the *walima*, the last day of the wedding when my brother-in-law was supposed to bring his bride home. Jamal, assured me that

the thrush and her clutch would be gone before his wedding and before he would knock down the nests resting place. I thought about how the thrush wouldn't have a place to return next year.

After Khadijah and Hameeda removed the *mandars* and dragged out the rolled up carpets from the *solon*, the room where female guests were welcomed and entertained, Maymuna swept the tile floor. Hameeda dumped a bucket of water and vigorously scrubbed the floor with the broom. As she finished a section, Khadijah squeegeed the dirty water out the door into the checkered tiled courtyard toward the floor drain. Maymuna wiped the two shuttered windows on either side of the door and straightened the off-white ruffled sheers. They repeated this process with each of the five rooms that opened on to the central compound room. Everything had to be made ready for the wedding and all the guests. Our in-laws expected all the relatives from Tripoli to come and stay the whole week of the wedding along with close relatives and friends from Msalata. The house was relatively small so there would be people sleeping in every room. The men would stay in the *marbowa*, a living room built in an area outside of the main house and compound.

Our apartment was built on the backside of the *marbowa*. We had a kitchen, bathroom and two small bedrooms. I was instructed by Mansor and Jamal to always keep the apartment locked and that we were the only ones allowed inside during and before the wedding. I didn't understand why they insisted on keeping our apartment out of view of guests. It was beautiful even though it wasn't finished. Jamal and Mansor had done an amazing job constructing the building. The ceilings had crown molding with multi-colored pulled cotton that matched the multi-toned texture on the walls. The boys' room was in a pallet of white to navy blue and the girls' room was in a pallet of cream to dark coffee. Jamal had used a texture gun to apply a

speckled texture with individual colors over the white or cream base coat. I slept on a *mandar* in the boys' room because I could position myself in the direct airflow of the air-conditioner. The stairwell wasn't safe. There were no railings and it was open from the roof to the ground floor entrance. The walkway from our bedrooms to the kitchen was only four feet wide with a drop off to the ground level of ten feet. It was open all the way up to the roof. I was worried that one of us might fall taking the laundry up to dry on the roof and drop to our deaths three floors down to the concrete.

I stood out of the way and watched Hameeda and Mansor pour buckets of the soapy water and gasoline on the carpet and work it in with a stiff brush to kill any possible pests carried in by all those semi-feral farm cats. Mansor and Hameeda wrestled the carpet over the cinderblock compound wall and left them to dry on the wall. The arid desert breeze would quickly dry the carpets in a few hours.

The smell of gasoline and soap frightened me. It brought back the memory of a woman in Colorado who tried to treat her neighbor's daughter for lice by washing her hair with gasoline. Someone lit a cigarette near the child before the gasoline had dissipated and her hair caught on fire. The little girl survived but was total disfigured by the burns. My brother-in-laws used gasoline to de-tick the dogs and poured it down the toilets to control flies and mosquitoes. I wouldn't allow Mansor into our apartment to treat our toilet because I was afraid that there could be a freak accident and one of my kids could get hurt.

With the house undergoing massive cleaning, Jamal decided that he needed to finish the shopping for his bride's *bedlah*, an array of lingerie and intimate apparel. As his American sister-in-law, he determined that I would be a good shopping advisor. Asim, my oldest son, and I

accompanied Jamal to Sleeton, a city an hour and a half away that specialized in the clothing industry. Asim sat up front in the little blue four door. I always got in the back and started each trip with a short *dua* of protection that we would return safely since there were no seatbelts or enforced speed limits.

The shopping experience in Libya is like no other that I have encountered. Regions seem to be industry specific. To shop for furniture my brother-in-law traveled to Khoums, a city hugging the Mediterranean Sea. He bought the bedroom suites for our apartment and his bride. Khoums was also home to Leptis Magnus, an old Roman city. Even in Tripoli, there are districts focused on particular items. There are the shoe markets, textile zones, automotive, home furnishings districts, and farmers markets that span for several blocks. Jamal worked for years in the shoe district of Tripoli. He could look at a person's feet and bring back the right size shoe without taking any measurements or asking for a customer's current size. One afternoon Jamal returned from running errands and surprised me and my children with sandals, all the proper size and width. When Jamal took me and my children to the old market, housed in a structure that was hundreds of years old with low arched ceilings and thick heavy wood doors, we found every trinket that a tourist would desire.

I gladly accompanied Jamal and my oldest son on these shopping missions because I was rather useless in my gestational condition for heavy cleaning. I wasn't allowed to do more than our personal laundry or cook breakfast for the whole family. Morning sickness remained my constant companion. My bucket was at my side in the car or at the house. I carried plastic shopping bags in my pocket just in case the smells of the markets sent my stomach into pummeling knots. I wore doubled pads just in case the heaving and slamming of my stomach

proved too violent for my five pregnancy bladder. They saved me on many occasion from an even worse embarrassment that I wouldn't have wanted to explain. At home in the family compound I could usually make a run for our apartment bathroom. Thankfully, I always made it to our apartment or at least out of the sight of our family or any guests that might be visiting. I never wanted anyone to see me vomiting or with a yellow puddle at my feet. It was enough that my children saw me at my most humiliating moments.

On these shopping trips I came prepared with crackers and water. I tried my best to focus on watching the passing scenery to avoid car sickness from Jamal's Libyan driving. The way to Sleeton took us west toward Khoums in the opposite direction from Tripoli. We passed one of the a few cement plants in North Africa. The massive stone pulverizer stood high among the mounds of crushed sedimentary rock. Jamal explained that the plant wasn't always in operation, especially during the peak temperatures of the midafternoon. In the summer they often had night shifts to keep up with the construction demands.

As we drove into Sleeton, the main street was lined with trees sculpted into uniform cube shapes. Jamal parked along a broken curb near a suit shop. In the window I saw traditional Libyan three piece suits in blues, grays, black, and browns with intricately sewn rattail designs appliqued on every edge and down the outer sleeves and pant legs. They were just like the wool navy suit with shiny black looped hand stitched design that Hadi wore to our wedding and to every special event in our eighteen years together.

"Jamal, I want to get suits for Asim and Ammar for your wedding," I said in my poor Arabic as we walked past the suit shop.



“We’ll come back after we finish at the wedding market,” Jamal said. He led Asim and me down the block toward an indoor shopping mini-mall that contained everything one would want for a bride: the *gradae*, the traditional silk wrap dress, matching embroidered slippers, Western wedding dresses, formal party dresses, henna, lingerie, panties, bras, perfume, hair accessories, purses, etc. The shops ranged in size from an average boutique to a walk-in closet packed from floor to ceiling with the latest in current fashion.

Jamal led us into a boutique with the heavy silk traditional *gradae*, a must have for every Libyan bride. Entering the shop I was hit by the intense odor of chemical preservatives that reminded me of the stench of a frog ready for dissection in a biology lab. The striped uniformly folded bolts of silk came in a range of colors from deep burgundy to pastel baby blue. Some had silver stripes and others gold. Carefully staged displays paired matching *gradaes* with hand beaded slippers, custom embroidered shirts with uncomfortably stiff sleeves, and wide leg silk pants with string ties at the ankles and waist.

I wondered if this was where my mother-in-law had purchased my baby blue silver striped *gradae*. I was so happy when my husband brought it to me when he went to visit his family for the first time after his cancer treatment was over. It was a sure sign that she was welcoming me into the family. It came complete with a simple light blue cotton and lace shirt, cream and gold wide leg silk pants, matching square head kerchief, and a gold dipped broach with a 1944 quarter mounted in the center of a pin that was used to hold the *gradae* in place after it was properly wrapped around the wearer. I wore the broach often and felt it was a way of carrying the love of my mother-in-law with me. I was lucky because I was accepted from the beginning of our marriage. My mother-in-law was grateful that her son found a Muslim wife and

had someone to take care of him in the United States. She was more worried that he would be alone in a non-Muslim country and lose his faith.

The shop attendant stepped around the glass showcase and greeted us. “Salaam Aliakum, let me know if I can assist you,” he said with little enthusiasm like he had been at work all day with few sales and just wanted to go home.

Jamal responded, “Walikum Salaam, we’ll let you know if we need anything.” Jamal always did the talking. Asim and I learned quickly that if the clerk detected our English the price would rise and there would be no room for negotiations. Jamal had already bought Fatima a complete *gradae* to wear the night of the *walima*.

She wanted to wear a western style wedding dress but Jamal insisted on tradition for his days of the wedding. Fatima’s father got her the white wedding dress to wear at the henna party that would be at her family’s home in Msalata. Her family maintained a home in Msalata and had recently built a home in Tripoli because her father was working in Tripoli.

We moved on to the next shop in search of lingerie for part of the gifts for the bride and formal dresses Fatima would need for events in the months to come. An *arosa* needed several formal gowns to wear to the other weddings throughout the first year after her wedding. Often the new brides spent as much time as the actual bride primping and preening themselves to be honored guests at any wedding they attended soon after their own wedding. Some used almost a ghostly white powder on their faces and necks. My daughters and I referred to these women as the vampire brides. It gave them such a corpse like appearance. It was not the porcelain white of a geisha. They seem to believe that white was beautiful, even an unnatural white.

In a back corner hung out of reach was a pastel pink transparent nightgown with matching robe trimmed with feathers. It was light and angelic. Jamal called the clerk to lift it down with his long metal pole.

“How much is it?” Jamal asked as the clerk handed it to him for his inspection. I kept my mouth shut and stood close behind Jamal. He handed it to me so I could signal whether or not it was made well and worth the price. It was beautiful and would make any young woman feel like a powerful sexual goddess. I wished I owned one, but maybe not in pink.

“Fifty *dinar*,” the clerk said as he looked toward me curiously. I turned away not wanting to give him time to question my origin. Jamal casually took the nightgown from my waiting hands. I glanced at him and nodded approvingly.

I learned to whisper or keep completely quiet when we went shopping. The price could double and the clerk would be a stubborn negotiator if he was not trying to make a quick sale if he heard our English accents. Frankly, if the clerk got a glimpse of my Anglo Saxon face with my sharp nose, high cheek bones, and light hazel-brown eyes, there would be no question that we would receive a higher quote. Most well-mannered shopkeepers would avoid eye contact or the appearance of checking out any woman accompanied by two men.

“Do you have stockings and gloves?” he asked the clerk.

“Over here. We have stockings five for ten *dinar*. Do you want long or half-length gloves? They’re three for ten *dinar*?” he said.

“What can you do for me if I buy the *bedlah* set, five stockings, and three pairs of gloves?” Jamal prodded.

“I can give you the gloves for six,” offered the clerk.

“Can’t you do a little better? I can get the stockings and the gloves for ten in Tripoli,” Jamal countered.

The clerk hesitated. “Okay, sixty for everything,” he conceded. Jamal pulled sixty *dinar* from the roll of colorful bills he kept in his front pants pocket and handed it to the clerk. The clerk carefully folded and wrapped Jamal’s purchase in tissue paper before placing it in a bag.

“*Jazacolahare*, please come again,” said the clerk as we walked toward the exit.

As we went from shop to shop making our way through the indoor mini-mall, I thought about how my husband got off easy with our wedding. He was too bashful to shop for my wedding night lingerie. He told me that he made it to the mall and into Sears but couldn’t walk into the nighty section with the manikins dressed with lacy bras and the tables displaying silky lace trimmed panties in every color. Hadi was raised to lower his gaze and never look an unfamiliar woman in the eyes let alone touch one. The only women he was in close contact with growing up were his mother, grandmother, and aunts. As a boy he was discouraged from even playing with his female cousins. All the schools were separate, boys going to the boys’ school and girls attending the girls’ school.

I bought my own lingerie, a black lace draped nightgown with a matching transparent robe. The wedding dress I wore was a light purple knee length dress with matching flats my mother bought for me. My hair was done in tight ringlets with the sides pulled together in the back. Babies’ Breath was tucked like a fairy’s crown in my carefully tied back brunette locks. My make-up was simply light blush, black mascara, and lipstick. I was a vision of purity like a girl going to church on Easter Sunday as I took Abdulhadi’s hand and walked to our apartment after our wedding party.

Jamal led Asim and me outside to a perfume and makeup shop. This store was lined with brand name perfumes and similar knockoffs. My nose was assaulted with the scents of perfumes and creams along with the heavy smell of *'ud*, incense and *bacuur*. The spicy musk smells of the costly *'ud* wood chips and the cakes of potpourri like *bacuur* competed with the perfumes for the buyer's attention. My mother-in-law made her own *bacuur* that she burned to not only fill the room with a pleasant odor or drive out cooking smells, but *bacuur* was also used to protect from *eyen* or the evil eye. The tiny shop also had black and red henna, and eucalyptus oil to help intensify and set the henna's stain. It made me light headed with a feeling of my chest tightening, but it didn't drive me from the cramped boutique.

"Jamal, ask if they have henna and *lezga*," I whispered to him as we looked at the perfumes in the glass case. Jamal asked the sales girl if they had henna and the black tape floral designs for the feet and hands. She pulled several sheets of black tape designs from under the glass showcase. Some were stars, paisleys with hearts, and others with butterflies and flowers.

"How much?" Jamal asked and pointed to the design sheets.

"Two *dinar* per sheet and two packs of henna for three," she answered. I pulled five sheets and motioned for ten packages of henna.

"You need eucalyptus oil to make the henna dark," she said as she pointed to three ounce bottles of the pungent oil. "It's only one *dinar* each," she said knowing I was an easy sale. I grabbed four bottles and handed her the money. She rolled up the *lezga* sheets and rubber banded them and handed them to me with my bag.

We walked out into the stifling afternoon. The smell of rush hour exhaust pressed down on us with the super-heated stagnant air. The evening breeze hadn't reached Sleeton yet. At

home in Msalata, the evening breeze would come almost as predictably as the setting sun around 6pm. We would lay out the woven mats and all of us would migrate out of the poorly lit rooms or saunter out from a late afternoon nap in the *marbowa* where the kids watched old Tom and Jerry and quirky Arabic cartoons of *Sindibad* the Arabic Sinbad, Simba the Lion Cub, or Captain Majed and his soccer team. I sometimes brought out mending or my counted cross stitch to work on in the remaining day light. Hameeda heated the tea and Mansor served it with crusty pieces of bread. The whole family would stay outside in the courtyard well past mid-night. Asim, Ammar, and I would be the first to head to bed. Khadijah and Maymuna would follow a short time later locking the apartment door behind them.

Jamal led us down the block past an open coffee shop and an internet café. Women were rarely seen hanging out at coffee shops or internet cafés. Even in Tripoli it was thought to be undignified for women to be seen at places that were frequented by men. In Msalata, one of my brother-in-laws would take Asim and me to the internet café once a week so that I could send emails to my family since calling them was expensive and the phone lines were often unreliable. I was always accompanied by Asim and the fact that I was American and had legitimate business to attend to made it more acceptable for me to be there. It also helped that my husband asked his brothers to make sure that I was taken to the internet café weekly to check in with my parents. My relationship with my parents was close after long years of learning to be patient and not take to heart every disagreement. We learned to avoid the topics of religion and politics. It was hard moving to Florida because we couldn't see each other often. This separation gave me a taste for how my mother-in-law must feel not having Hadi near enough to visit regularly.

Jamal stopped in front of a men's clothing store with European style clothes and suits. We walked in and he headed toward the suits. He turned to Asim and seemed to be guessing his size. He pulled a jacket off the rack and handed it to Asim to try on.

"Jamal, I don't want a Western suit for Asim and Ammar," I said. "They want Libyan suits for your wedding." I could get them western styled clothes easily when we went home but there wasn't any where that we could get a Libyan suit in the States. They would wear it on our Eid holidays to the Eid prayers and to weddings. It was a symbol of their Libyan culture that I wanted them to have.

"Oh, I thought you wanted like this," he said surprised. Asim handed the jacket back to Jamal.

"Let's go to the shop by the car," I said. We left the store and walked back toward where our car was parked. Jamal took our bags and locked them in the trunk of the weathered little blue compact car. It had a spacious trunk for being a tiny four-door. In Florida, I drove a minivan with four bucket seats and a long bench seat in the back. It was easy to make a trip to Sam's Club and fit the bulky paper towels, toilet paper, and laundry soap in the back with whatever else I had piled in my cart.

We returned to the suit shop. We could see the sales associate through the tall store windows steaming a *thobe* for exhibit on the front display stand. He was dressed in the traditional Libyan thigh length *thobe*, vest, and pants. His light blue sleeves were neatly rolled up to his elbows with a measuring tape hanging around his neck. The bell on the door jiggled as we walked in. The clerk abruptly turned toward the door and warmly greeted us.

Asim and I walked toward the back wall where many wool and heavy cotton blend suits were hung from floor to ceiling. Jamal talked fabric, price and sizes with the middle aged salesman. He selected a couple different suits for Asim to try on after measuring his outside leg, neck, and arm length. Asim tried on a fully lined brown suit with a cream colored *thobe*. The salesman wrapped up a jacket, vest, and pants with a *thobe* for Asim and a smaller version for Ammar. I handed Jamal nearly four hundred *dinar*. The sales associate then pulled two black felt *fez* hats complete with long black silk tassels from behind the counter.

“Only fifteen *dinar* each,” he said looking from Asim to me.

“Okay,” I agreed. Jamal proudly handed the clerk my money and helped Asim carry the two suits and large bag to the car. Jamal was pleased with our choice of the Libyan traditional suit over the European suit. His smile broadened as we stepped through the door and headed to the car.

“Jamal, you know the last Libyan suit Asim was when he was four years old; time to get him a new one now that he is nearly sixteen,” I said as I climbed in the back seat for the long drive home.

The little blue car lurched out into the afternoon rush. Traffic in the cities was always congested until we reached the outskirts of town. Traffic lights were rare and only added to the dysfunctional traffic with impatient drivers honking and yelling as they pushed through intersections. Jamal navigated like an aggressive New Delhi cab driver only honking when truly necessary. I was grateful to have my bucket by my side for the drive out of town. I leaned my head against the back seat and closed my eyes as we reached the open highway. I listened to the Quran recitation on the car radio.



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I was jostled awake as the car climbed the steep rocky drive way up to the house. The red iron door swung open as we reached the top of the hill. Maymuna, Ammar, and Khadijah came out to help us carry in our things. Um-Fergiani, Salima, and Hani-Lalaham were already sitting outside of the kitchen on woven mats enjoying the cooler evening breeze. They excitedly waited to see what we had found on our long shopping spree.

Asim held up the new suits and received an approving greeting from his grandmothers and great aunt. Jamal handed Um-Fergiani the bags for Fatima. She took the delicate pink night gown from the bag. Hani-Lalaham ran her fingers over the fluffy pink feathers and they all gave a celebratory call of excitement for the gifts for Jamal's young bride. Many *mubrook* and *mashallahs* were said. My children chuckled with a little embarrassment for Amu-Jamal because of the excited fuss the old ladies were making over the lingerie he brought for his bride. Everything Jamal brought for his wife to be was neither private nor intimate.

In such a sheltered society I was astounded by the blunt discussion of the size and physical attributes of my new sister-in-law by the older women. Sexuality is a vibrant undertone in everyday life from the country to the city. The way that Hani-Lalaham and my mother-in-law laughed and congratulated Jamal about the powder pink nighty for his bride wasn't crude or overly intrusive but rather that of experienced women who want for him a wholly satisfying marriage. Sex between husband and wife is a private matter; not to be discussed outside their bedroom door. But as with women everywhere things are said appropriately and inappropriately.

The older women of the family often have no restraint when they talk. One day my 20 year old nephew, Mohammed came to visit. As I came out of the kitchen I saw him get up rather

abruptly with averted eyes and crimson cheeks and make his way to the *marbowa* on the other side of the compound. Hameeda brushed by me snickering as she carried the tea tray into the kitchen. Maymuna and Khadijah were sitting outside with their grandmothers with shy grins and muffled laughter.

“What did I miss?” I said to Khadijah.

“Oh Hani was talking about Fatima’s bra size,” she answered trying to contain the explosive amusement of the situation.

“Poor Mohammed. He always shows up at the right time,” I said. “More information about his uncle’s wife than he would care to know.” Mohammed seemed to come around at the moments which would turn his olive hues to ash or pomegranate.

No one was left unscathed by the open broadcast of personal information. My sister-in-law and I had gone to visit the family of a sick neighbor when a woman that I had never met came directly up to me across the patio and told me that it wasn’t my sister-in-law’s fault that she and my brother-in-law were childless. She boldly stated that it was my brother-in-law who was infertile.

I was shocked by the brazen way that this stranger took it upon herself to inform me of what I assumed was a sensitive private family matter. This clashed with the basics of polite conversation of my upbringing. My parents made it clear that one should never ask personal details from a casual acquaintance. The topics of wages, mortgages, or medical issues were out of bounds. What was more surprising to me was the lack of reaction from Hameeda. She led me into the *salon* where we joined twenty other women who had come to visit the ill neighbor.

Equally surprising, Mansor was very open about his infertility and told me about his efforts over the years to find out what was the cause. In the first couple of weeks of our visit, he visited a specialist nearly two hours away to find any possible solution to his infertility. The results of all the exams and a thorough examination of his medical records brought no hope or treatment. He had a congenital birth defect that might have been treated before the onset of puberty. His mother wouldn't have easily detected that there was anything wrong with her baby boy without knowing what to look for. Sadly, due to a highly modest society and poor economic situation, children do not receive regular checkups that include a peek at the child's private parts. Mansor wasn't diagnosed or treated at the most optimal age to have any chance at fatherhood. He became aware that there might be a problem when he joined the Army. Even then he was not advised of future health risks of possible cancer development because of undescended testicles.

Mansor handed me his thick beige medical file to read as we sat in the open court yard one evening. Most of the records were recorded in English. As an average American with a general knowledge of human anatomy, the facts of his case obviously left no hope for a biological child in his future. It was clear that Mansor understood the gravity of his diagnosis. A deep sadness weathered his white face. He explained the theory his wife and mother held as the true cause of his condition. They believed that he had fallen as a toddler severely injuring his testicles. Infertility only added to the strain on his marriage and family life. Hameeda's exam revealed no reason that she couldn't conceive and endure a normal pregnancy. She was in prime condition to become a mother.

Unlike Mansor and Hameeda, in preparation for the wedding Jamal and his bride both underwent extensive physicals to confirm that neither he nor Fatima had any health or fertility

issues. Jamal didn't want to repeat the same situation of a childless marriage and the sorrow that whittles away at the happiness of the couple.

Fertility is highly prized in the Libyan society. Having wide child bearing hips is an asset not only from the biological functionality stance but also as an allure of beauty and sexuality. From the moment I got off the plane in Tripoli I was aware of carnal curiosity. Even though I wore a long *jilbab* and a large floral *hijab* covering my hair and shoulders just like any other Muslim woman walking through Tripoli's airport, I was instantly detected as an outsider. I hadn't felt lustful glances for years. Now I was the exotic foreigner. My plus-size silhouette was not a deterrent but a desirable attribute. This attitude about girth only increases in the rural tribal areas like my husband's home town of Msalata where there is less influence from western media.

Hameeda once told me how beautiful I was with my white skin and extra curvy figure. She was trying to assure me after I had explained that I failed my husband by being overweight and not taking better care of myself.

"Asya, don't say that. Here it is beautiful to be *simeen* and *bytha*. Men like a woman with fat and egg-white skin. A fat woman is happy and well cared for," Hameeda said.

"In America, you are the ideal. You're skinny and have stunning almond eyes with long eyelashes, and light olive skin. You are the exotic beauty that Americans spend thousands of dollars every year try to look like," I said. "Americans think that being fat is a sign of depression and laziness. They try to tan their skin and lighten their hair in the pursuit of attractiveness and sex appeal. The skinnier you are without your ribs showing, the more appealing you are. Most American women can't achieve your level of beauty no matter how hard they try."

Hameeda stood with a deeply baffled stare as she folded the clothes she removed from the clothes-line that ran the length of the courtyard. It was as if we both realized that we were born on the wrong ends of the world. Our attempts to console each other's' insecurities only seemed to deepen my disappointment in myself and my marriage. Neither was what I had imagined for myself. My children made my disappointment bearable. At least I had them. Hameeda didn't even have the pleasure of motherhood to get her through unendurable times. I placed my hand on my stomach knowing that sheltered deep within me was my growing child, an experience Hameeda likely would never know.

Every time I would pass my mother-in-law or her sister, Khalti Saleema, in the first couple of weeks we were there, they made *dua* for one more baby from me. They were pray that I would bare one more baby for the Fergiani family. At first I was annoyed and kind of laughed it off. Later, I too made *dua* for a pregnancy to cool my desire; while my husband and I were apart. I didn't want to feel too much long for him because we were going to be apart for so long.

## Bittersweet Beginnings and Endings

Beef, beef, beef...The crisper drawers were full of beautiful freshly slaughtered fist sized chunks of beef. Jamal crammed plastic tubs full of deep red meat into my refrigerator. He had already packed the juice and milk cartons on to the door shelves and put the butter into the freezer before I reached the kitchen.

“Asya, don’t tell anyone that there is meat in here. Even if your husband calls and asks if you have meat, tell him no!” Jamal said. He smiled and tried to fit the big block of mozzarella on the top shelf between two bulging tubs.

“What’s going on?” I said rubbing my tired eyes. It was early Tuesday morning, the first day of Jamal’s wedding. My girls had already left the apartment to join the guests and help with the preparations for the men’s party. Asim and Ammar were still sleeping.

“This meat has to last for the whole wedding. If the women know there is more meat, they will cook it all,” He explained. The meat wasn’t the only thing Jamal was trying to ration. He stocked a whole pallet of soda and a big cooler inside the front entry at the bottom of the stairs. Our apartment was the only area that was always locked. No one had access except for Jamal, me, and my children. We had the only keys.

For over a week the Fergiani Bank and Trust was stored in our apartment. It was an unfinished wooden lockbox about the size of one of our carry-ons. Every time they needed money Jamal or Mansor would pound on the iron door until one of us rushed into the kitchen to let them in. Hameeda explained that during weddings and *akikas*, sometimes things go missing. She said it was best to secure anything valuable out of sight and reach before guests start to

arrive. The apartment was the most secure location being that it was out of the way behind the *marbowa* and kept locked.

My children also took it upon themselves to secure Gigi and her new kittens. They were afraid that Gigi and her three calico kittens might be abused by the children who were expected at the wedding. On many occasions we stopped children from throwing rocks and being aggressive toward animals on the Fergiani property. Libyans don't look at dogs and cats as being pets for human companionship. Dogs and cats are there to perform a service. Dogs provide protection and cats are pest control. They also eat the leftovers.

The idea of purchasing special pet food was ludicrous. Hani Lalaham found it absurd how some Americans pamper their pets. She couldn't stop laughing when we told her about stores dedicated to pet care with doggy fashions, toys, and elaborate pet beds and carriers. We explained that some dogs and cats go regularly to the groomer to have their hair cut and nails trimmed. Hani Lalaham found it difficult to accept that some owners built air-conditioned dog houses with TVs and provided gourmet foods for their pets. It was easy to understand how hideous our descriptions sounded to Hani Lalaham, a woman that had endured poverty most of her life and had seen children die because they didn't have access to basic medical care.

The Fergiani's kept three guard dogs on their property. One dog was on a long tether chained to a large olive tree outside our apartment closest to the road. Another dog was tethered up on the hill as protection from intruders coming over the hill off the back side of their land. The third dog was old and wandered freely on the property. These dogs didn't have names. Dogs are thought to be dirty and their saliva is unclean according to Islam. Every day my daughters scraped the leftovers into a large beat up stainless steel pot that hung on the lower branch of a

tree outside the compound. Mansor instructed the children and me that the utensils and dishes that we were scraping off should never come in direct contact with the pot or the ladle used to dish the food into the dog bowls. He explained that if that happened the soiled item would have to be cleansed by scrubbing it once in dirt then washing it seven additional times. The dogs were not treated affectionately because it was important to limit contact in order to encourage a wild unfriendly demeanor expected of guard dogs. My brother-in-laws were the only ones to feed the dogs so they would be the only ones that the dogs were really familiar with.

For the duration of the wedding the dogs were stationed on the hill and outside the window of our apartment under the canopy of a large olive tree. Occasionally I would toss leftovers to the dog from the window. My in-laws sent food to our apartment regularly to make sure that we had plenty to eat in addition to the three meals we ate together as a family. They worried that we weren't getting enough because Asim and I had dropped a lot of weight since we arrived.

The latest gift was a huge slice of beef asban. This was a homemade sausage with the natural casing from the cow slaughtered for the wedding. Asban is a regional delicacy that I could only bring myself to eat if it was made by someone I've watched make it. I was concerned about the cleanliness of the process, how they dice the organ meat, and how the filling was prepared. The liver, kidneys, heart, and select cuts of meat were cut into very small bits then combined with uncooked rice, spices, tomato paste, jalapenos, and copious amounts of finely chopped onion and parsley. My sister-in-laws and their sisters worked together hand stuffing the mixture into the thoroughly cleaned cow intestine. I had never seen asban made with cow



entrails. The asban I had in the U.S. was made with sheep intestine that were at most the diameter of a common knackwurst. The beef asban was the diameter of a softball.

The sight of this Libyan delicacy when I opened my refrigerator was not welcome. I appreciated the gesture and knew the watch dog outside under the olive tree would appreciate it more. Alone in the apartment, I promptly carried the uncovered plate to my room. I opened the wooden shutter style window, lifted the rebar post and swung the red painted steal shutters open against the outside of the house. There the dog raised his German Shepard like head toward my window. Treats had often been pitched to him from the window when I was inclined to clean out the refrigerator and didn't want my in-laws to know that I couldn't eat. He rose on all fours and waited for my offering. I threw the softball sized piece as hard as I could and hoped I would get the asban within his chain's circumference of the tree. There were times that my aim was poor and I had to go outside and retrieve my gift and throw it to him at closer range.

The clattering of pans and the steady hum of conversation filled the morning air. Jamal headed back down to help set up the tent for the men on the lower part of the hill outside the compound. I dressed, brushed my hair into a tight pony tail knot, and brushed my teeth. My stomach knotted with the tooth paste foam. I rinsed my mouth to stop the lurching of my aching stomach. Once the foamy tooth paste was gone, I was able to regain control and calm my reeling innards. I washed my face to cool my flaming cheeks and watering eyes. After patting my face dry, I loosely pinned my scarf under my chin and woke up the boys before heading out the door. I reminded them to pull the door shut to lock it when they came out.

During the wedding I was relieved of breakfast duty, so I slept in and my children ate cereal or bread and tuna. We all were getting sick of eggs because we ate them in some form at

least five days a week. Cereal was a luxury item along with real fruit juice. Juice boxes and snack cakes were special treats I bought for my children and had to ration to make them last as long as possible. A refrigerator full of beef was my dream come true. Jamal said I could take a little meat for myself and the kids. Medium rare steak bites would be my reward after I returned from making the rounds of greeting the female guests and relatives who had already arrived.

With the key pinned inside my shirt pocket I stepped out the narrow red iron door. I pushed it closed listening for the loud click of the engaged lock. The corridor was empty as I passed the *marbowa* and the outdoor bathroom for guests that was the nearest to my father-in-law's room. Two walls partitioned off my father-in-law's room from the rest of the compound and the *marbowa*.

He very rarely ever left his room except to go to the bathroom. He was nearly blind now because of a botched cataract surgery a decade before. Abu-Fergiani was unable to walk but insisted on dragging himself to the bathroom without using the wheelchair his son's had provided. His days were spent listening or reciting the Quran or sleeping. He rarely had visitors. Um-Fergiani and the rest of the family stopped in periodically throughout the day. The children and I also sat with him sometimes. We didn't stay long because he would fall asleep and had a hard time hearing us. I felt like we were disturbing him even though he never complained.

I hated using the phone in his room because the connections were shoddy and I had to raise my voice to be heard. The cats loved to come help him eat his breakfast every morning. As soon as our kitchen door clicked open Gigi and three or four other cats would be there to escort whoever was delivering Abu-Fergiani's tray of Turkish coffee, *sahlib* a cup of creamed

buckwheat, boiled egg, and bread. We shoed the cats out if they got too aggressive and helped themselves rather than letting him toss leftovers their way.

Gigi birthed her kittens in Abu-Fergiani's room a few weeks before in the serene and quiet with little guest traffic. Khadijah and Maymuna found one stillborn kitten lying silent and still as if it were waiting to be carried into the haphazardly piled pillows in the corner where Gigi nursed her two ravenous new born calico kittens. Today, the first day of the wedding, the pillows and *mandars* were arranged around the room ready for the many guests to drop by and offer their respects.

I walked on past Abu-Fergiani's room toward the main patio where clusters of female relatives and friends worked making *fittat*. This layered flat bread was stretched in thin sheets over a large flat griddle. With each turn of the bread the women flatten an oiled golf ball of dough hand stretching it into a thin sheet and placing it on top of the recently flipped bread. After about six layers have been added, they start a new one. Trays and trays of steaming *fittat* were carried by Asim, Ammar, and their cousins down to the many male guests that had started arriving. Inside the compound young girls delivered the hot flat bread to the female guests along with amber cups of sweetened green tea served in mini clear tea cups that reminded me of the tooth pick mini mugs that were for sale alongside the cow shaped porcelain creamers at every gas station from Indianapolis to Denver. This was the first day of the wedding, the groom's day to host his guests at his family home.

Jamal greeted his guests as they arrived at the lower end of the property. A tent was set up on the side of the house to accommodate the men. A few women trickled in to the main compound from time to time. Today wasn't for the women; it was about Jamal and his male

friends and relatives. My sister-in-laws and the close and not so close female relatives set to work making *bazeen*, preparing plates of pickled vegetables, and bowls of fruit to be served to Jamal's guests. The pots of boiled barley dough were worked with large wooden paddles that looked like miniature boat oars. The women sat on the floor bracing the hot pots against the wall with towel covered feet to hold them firmly in place. The ladies worked in teams adding more dough or boiling water to achieve smooth, firm dough. When the *bazeen* dough was the right consistency, it was rolled and shaped into large rounded cones and anchored to the bottom of large metal mixing bowls. One of the women would carry it over to the industrial sized pots filled with a rich beef tomato based stew with vegetables. Ample ladles of the stew are placed around the base of the *bazeen* mound and generous ladles of sauce are poured over the pinnacle of the cone giving it a glossy reddish orange color.

All I could really do was walk among my busily working relatives and sit with any guests. My children were mingling and serving the Fergiani relatives and friends. Being that the men and women were segregated I had no idea if the bride's male relatives were there. This day was solely for Jamal.

The covered bowls of *bazeen* were handed out the compound's main door into the waiting hands Jamal's cousins. They carried them down the hill to the tent where most of the guests were waiting to be served. Asim said that groups of four to five men sat around each covered bowl and waited the hand washing bowl to be brought around. Several young boys brought a small flat bottomed plastic bowl with a pitcher full of water sitting in the middle with a small floral scented hotel sized bar soap. Each person took a turn washing their hands and rinsing their hand with the water drizzled from the small pitcher over the bowl. Then they were offered a

hand towel to dry their hands before eating the *bazeen*. Hand washing wasn't just a casual formality before eating; it was a necessity because *bazeen* is eaten without utensils. It is eaten in *Sunnah* fashion, using the thumb and first two fingers.

They pushed their fingers into the sauce covered mound separating a bite sized ball of barley dough against the side of the bowl. Using only these three fingers, they worked the sauce into the dough and then pinched bite sized pieces of the tender cooked beef, potatoes, and pumpkin. Each person carefully observed the unspoken rule of eating only from the part of the dish directly in front of them. After the men finished eating, they washed their hands and mouths again using the basin left with them from before the meal.

While Jamal's guests finished their food, endless kettles of sweetened green tea were prepared and tended to by one of the older ladies who could no longer help with the demands of heavy cooking. They had a tea making station set up in the inner court yard of the main house. Boldly patterned woven mats lined the walls of the court-yard topped with mismatched floor cushions. I sat down next to the lady tending the tea kettles. She was a neighbor from across the road. She lived in a large family compound with several separate family homes that were attached by a high un-textured and unpainted cinderblock wall.

"*Keifhalick, Asya?*" She said asking how I was as she washed and rinsed the shooter sized tea cups in the two small wash tubs next to her.

"*Humdillah. Keifhalick inty?*" I said as I adjusted my long blue skirt. I smiled and answered the usual polite questions about the well-being of my parents and Abdulhadi. I was grateful for my lacking Arabic skills at moments like these because I found it awkward to ask

about other people's extended families and it was also mentally fatiguing if I did ask and received a lengthy response.

I was content to watch her prepare the tea on a small propane burner with a beautifully crocheted cover over the kick ball sized gas tank. A large kettle sat on top cradled its blue flames. Our neighbor strained the tea into a medium sized tea pot and returned the pot to its fiery nest. Then she mixed the sugar into the tea by pouring it into a stainless steel mug that had at least a half cup of sugar and then she proceeded to pour the tea back and forth from cup to pot. She would raise the pot higher each time she poured it into the mug creating a thick foam. She poured the bubbles into the two dozen cleaned tea cups filling them to the top with the amber bubbles. She worked quickly. When all the cups were filled with foam, she poured the heavily sweetened tea into the clear tea cups. They reminded me of the child-sized mugs of Root Beer at the A&W restaurant where my parents took my brother and me after church. I missed my brother, Nick, even though I hadn't spoken to him in years. I longed to have him in our lives. He chose to stay distant not just from me but from our whole family. He called my parents maybe once or twice a year. He never called me. I called him unless I called him and left messages. I stopped trying when he called to say he wasn't coming to visit and he didn't offer a reason. What could I say? Ten year old Asim ran up to his room and cried. Nick didn't know that the kids and I spent two days getting ready for his visit. We baked, made snacks, cleaned the house, and mowed the yard. He didn't know that he broke Asim's heart and denied himself the love and loyalty of my children. I still missed him.

Every round of tea had a slightly different preparation. Sometimes she would add fresh mint or geranium leaves giving the tea a pleasant yet not overwhelming floral flavor.

My favorite was the green tea with geranium or with fresh roasted peanuts floating in steamy sweetened tea. The Libyans transformed the making of loose green or red teas into a fine art reaching beyond my limited experience of hot water poured over an individual bag of Lipton Orange Pekoe or Celestial Seasons herbal blend.

The brewing of tea was continual and a major part of the social interactions throughout the wedding. It was also an essential cog in the everyday life of the Libyan people. I think American society has lost a great deal when the European tradition of afternoon tea was stripped away to embrace a progressive industrial phase. Slowing down to have a cup of tea with a crust of bread or a hand full of newly harvest almonds allows a time to share the events of the day or a forgotten family tale.

I was surprised that this night was not an evening to dress up. Even the groom wasn't wearing anything special. Everyone was wearing their everyday street clothes. As the evening wore down and the *bazeen* bowls were brought back up to the main house, the left overs were salvaged as much as possible and the rest was dumped outside where the animals could get to it. The dogs and cats ate hardily along with whatever creatures made their way over the open oregano studded hills by star light.

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Every fly in the region had arrived days before the wedding and were likely to stay long after it was over. With so many children and guests milling about every space in and outside the house, it was impossible to leave out the damp sugar and poison laced burlap bag. Throughout the summer this method proved quite attractive and lethal to the biting and common house fly. It brought us much relief from these persistent nuisances.

I tried to help with dishes and cleaning up but was shoed away and told to go rest for the sake of the baby. I was useless. I wanted to help do something.

In the late afternoon, the men loaded the caravan of cars and pick-ups with the gifts for the bride. Asim and Ammar would ride over with all of the Fergiani family to deliver the gifts. Even though there were still guest at the house, we, Fergiani women also got ready and went to the bride's family home to offer our own gifts to the bride. I thought how different this was from my own wedding. I didn't receive baskets of gifts from my husband nor did I bring any gifts for him other than the cedar chest that I had filled with linens and kitchen stuff for my future life. Even at our wedding, I didn't take home any gifts. I assumed that the other bride took home all the gifts brought to our wedding. Any gifts I got were given to me after or before our wedding during personal visits.

As we road to the brides home, the caravan honked and beeped announcing the arrival of the *areese* to the home of his future *arosa*. The boy cousins threw lit fireworks adding to the excited honking and lay on of the horns. It was organized chaos and I had little control over when we would come home. I just hoped it would be early.

When we arrived we were quickly ushered into a big room with a covered water well in the middle of the room. As the baskets of gifts were passed in to present to the bride, the women made celebrative loud calls. The baskets were open so all could see the gifts of clothes, high heeled pumps, perfume, and gold. The idea was to show that the groom's family would provide amply for the bride. In some ways I felt that it was sort of showing off the groom's wealth and that he was paying a lot for the privilege of marrying this girl. Most of the time it wasn't



apparent who had money and who didn't because most Libyans that I interacted with didn't flaunt their financial status. Under Ghaddafi no one wanted to draw the undue attention of government officials for fear that their property could be confiscated.

The bride came in followed by her sisters and mother. She was wearing a western styled wedding dress. This was the dress her father bought for her because Jamal refused for her to wear a non-traditional dress during his part of the the wedding. He told her that if she wanted to wear a white wedding dress, she could at her home.

Weeks before the wedding, I was told that I should buy the bride a gift of gold to present to her on the first night of the wedding. On one of our trips to Tripoli a longtime friend that I had known for over ten years in Colorado, kindly took me shopping in the gold shops to find my new sister-in-law a gift. I struggled to pick an appropriate gift that I could afford.

My friend kept picking out jewelry that was way beyond my means. Already I felt awkward for being such a spend thrift. My friend's husband was clearly irritated that my husband had left me and the kids with so little money to maintain us when he went back to the States. He had to transfer more money to me from my husband just to help us get through the next few weeks. Being without free flowing cash was the norm for our family but appeared negligent to our friends.

Finally, I settled on tri-gold medium band hoop earrings with snap locking closures for eighty *dinars*. They were beautifully versatile, dressy enough for any occasion, yet simple enough for every day. I still wanted to get her something more but having enough money to get through the month was more important than an impressive gift.

The bride's family and close friends filled the room. The ceiling felt low and the winter mint green paint added to the cool mood of the dimly lit room. Even though this was a celebration I felt subtle air of tribal animosity that continued through the wedding. Without a full understanding of the Arabic language I relied on observation. As members of the groom's family, we were welcome but there was a feeling that we were taking something precious away from them.

This totally clashed with how I perceived marriage as being a union of two families. I knew from talking with other Arab ladies over my eighteen years of marriage that Arab culture viewed the groom's family as gaining a daughter and the bride's family as giving away one. This was the first time I really felt that this was true. In the States, I had attended many weddings and observed the American norm of the happy newlyweds making a home for themselves independent of their parents.

The only one who was able to fully be part of both groups was Amti-Lalaham. She was my father-in-law's only sister and the grandmother of the bride. She was exceptionally tall like her brother but age had cruelly bowed her back. At one time she was an envied beauty with her pale *bietha* skin and light colored hair. She, like Mansor, looked as though she had been plucked off the streets of Dublin.

We were seated facing the bride and served tea. Women sang accompanied by the handheld *tarbuka*. The rhythmic voices and the beating drum brought a break in the tensions. This helped to distract me from my self-consciousness since I felt out of place and wasn't sure what to do or what would be next. I was concerned about not offending anyone so that my in-laws wouldn't have to defend me or make excuses for my naïve American ways.

I had the habit of saying *Inshallah*, God willing, to every kind invitation with the knowledge that I wasn't in charge of my social calendar except for my trips to Tripoli to see my friends or if I asked to go to see Gumera, Fergiani's wife and first cousin, or other family members in town. *Inshallah* is neither a yes or no. If my husband used this term I followed it with, "*Inshallah* yes or *Inshallah* no?" This ambiguous answer soon got me in trouble with Howa, the wife of one of his first cousin, at a welcome home party at Gumera's sister's house.

"*Lash inti mush numshu ana houja?*" she said in rapid angry Arabic. My eyes widened with only vague understanding of what she said being that I hadn't ever been addressed with such unforgiving tones since my arrival four months ago. Hameeda was immediately by my side followed by her sister. She drew Howa off like a mother bird pretending to have a broken wing. Howa continued to scream her irritation that I hadn't visited her home, especially since she had suffered a miscarriage a couple of weeks ago. Other guests were drawn to the room by Howa's shouting. I had deeply offended her without even knowing it. It is expected decorum that one should visit the sick and the families who have suffered the loss of a relative. I felt tears rush down my burning cheeks.

"*Ausfa*," I said repeatedly. All I could do is say I'm sorry. I hadn't heard about her miscarriage. She came over so many times and never extended a specific invitation to come at a particular time, I didn't consider it more than a casual polite "come over sometime." My mother-in-law handled the necessary social calls. She let Hameeda and I know if we needed to make a visit to anyone for whatever reason.

Hameeda and her sister cooled Howa's fury giving her the excuse that I didn't understand what she was saying and informing her that I wasn't aware of her loss. She stayed away from me

for the rest of that evening. I was grateful that she left me alone. This altercation sent ripples of nausea through my already sensitive stomach.

I wanted to act in accordance to the Fergiani high standards and protect their reputation. Even though my husband's family wasn't financially well off, they were greatly respected as a family of quality. I tried to always be gracious and polite. Even when I knew that it would likely send me frantically searching for a bathroom, I ate some of everything that was put before me. I knew that my hosts had gone to a great effort on my behalf and it would be rude to refuse their efforts. It was a difficult balance between self-preservation and the conservation of family standing in the community. Both were tough to sustain.

Gumera, my eldest sister-in-law, went up to the bride to give her the ring she bought for her. Then I gave Fatima the earrings and Hameeda gave her another ring. Gumera wrapped her arms around the bride's waist from the back and lifted her seven times. We all chuckled. I didn't understand what she was doing. It was comical to see my petite, late fiftyish, sister-in-law lift our eighteen year old *arosa* up seven times without losing her balance.

"Hameeda, *lashe*?" I said wanting an explanation for Gumera's actions.

"*Inshallah Fatima qwaise jouse Jamal,*" Hameeda said. She explained that this was a way of expressing the hope that Fatima will be a good wife for Jamal and showing that we are accepting her as one of us, *selfetti*, wives of brothers. We left shortly after presenting Fatima with our gifts. Our caravan returned to the Fergiani compound.

Toward midnight I made my way around the house to say good-night to all the guests staying on the women's side of the compound. It was especially important that I said good-night

to my mother-in-law, her mother, her sisters, and my sister-in-laws before I slipped out past my father-in-law's room and down the narrow hall to our apartment.

*"Tisbillah-hair,"* I said as I bent down and kissed Um-Fergiani. Her eyes were bright. Joy filled every tired well-earned line on her face. She was in her element and clearly caught up in the building excitement of the wedding. She was truly enjoying the company of all those that came and were coming to celebrate her son's wedding. Most importantly her mother and her sisters were by her side. Her daughter-in-laws, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews were all there helping in every way possible.

#

I slipped on my thin pale yellow cotton night gown that was stiff from being line dried on the roof. It's freshly laundered fragrance was welcome after washing away the sweat and cooking stench of a long day. I brushed my teeth with baking soda to remove the tea stains and followed with the minty tooth paste that made me gag with its frothy foam. The boys were already ready for bed and reading or doodling as they did every night.

I heard the door clank shut against its metal frame as it snapped the lock into place. I assumed that the girls had come in for the night as I had requested.

"Mom, Hameeda is here to do your henna," Khadijah said as she issued her into our bedroom area. I was surprised that she remembered with all that was going and how busy she had been all day. Hameeda carried a bowl covered with a plastic bag and a bundle of fabric scraps.

*"Lesga?"* Hameeda asked. She wanted to know if I wanted the floral designed tape or the traditional Libyan design where the hands and feet are wrapped.

“The Libyan traditional, *minfudluck?*” I said as I sat down on the *mandar* I slept on directly in the flow of the air conditioner. Khadijah and Maymuna helped me adjust pillows to support my head, arms, and feet while Hameeda sat next to me on the short looped blue blend office grade carpet. She cut strips of black electrical tape and stuck them on the side of the henna bowl. She carefully wrapped a piece of tape around the top knuckle of each of my fingers and then placed a thinner strip below each one. Hameeda took longer lengths of electrical tape and made a simple crossing strap design on each of my feet that would give my henna stained foot the appearance of a delicate slipper. After all the tape was in place she applied the henna to my feet and hands smoothing it with her index finger. As she finished with each foot or hand, Hameeda wrapped a fabric square gently over my henna coated limb tying it loosely. Then a plastic bag was placed over each hand and foot to keep the henna from bleeding through on to my sheets and pillows.

Hameeda wanted to add a strong smelling oil to intensify the absorption of the henna to dark amber-brown. I asked her not to because I was afraid of what it was and didn't want to endanger my growing baby. It might have been eucalyptus oil but I wasn't sure. She understood and hoped that the lemon and strong tea she mixed in with the henna would have the same staining power.

I was always vigilant about possible additives and chemical dangers. It was difficult to know what was what in a cavern of unfamiliar brands and manufacturers. Thankfully, many labels had English or French along with the Spanish and Arabic. I know my in-laws thought I was a hypochondriac about medicine. They weren't surprised that I came with my own pharmacy of antacids, fever reducers, sore throat lozenges, antidiarrheal, antihistamines, and

motion sickness tabs. I even brought a variety of Band-Aids, anti-itch cream, and first aid ointment.

A prisoner of henna and unable to move in my snazzy yellow and blue striped grocery bags, Hameeda advised me to keep it on as long as I could stand it. I wasn't thrilled about doing henna. My skin never took the color like I'd seen on other ladies. It usually came out orange not the deep reddish brown I was hoping for and the design wouldn't look as defined. My feet look diseased when I tried henna before because the henna takes to my calluses like ink on a white shirt. The henna soaks into dry skin and takes weeks to completely exfoliate. My toe nails also take nearly a year to grow out the henna crescents. I think henna is beautiful and exotic; just sadly not on me.

Hameeda was so excited that I agreed to the henna. I was her project and she was going to make sure that I had the full Libyan wedding experience. Tomorrow was the henna day for the bride at her family's home. Tomorrow we, Fergiani women, would get dressed up and go to the brides house. Khadijah, Maymuna, and I were curiously looking forward to the henna party. In the States, we had attended several weddings that usually mimicked the one day affairs of the American wedding reception with the main difference of being segregated, men in one location and women in another. Very rarely did the weddings include a separate day for a henna party. Often if there was a henna party only the close family and a few close friends would come to the bride's home for a dinner and an informal application of henna. My girls and I usually attempted doing henna before our Eid holidays just for fun. We were excited to go to a real authentic henna party with all the cultural nuances.

#

After a simple lunch, Hameeda escorted me to her room in the main house to dress me in the Libyan silk *gradae*. This was the first time I had been in her room for more than a couple of seconds. Her room was the only place in the house that she could claim as her own. Tradition viewed her as a newlywed until she had children even if she had been married for nearly fifteen years. There were probably a lot of reasons that Mansor and Hameeda still only occupied one room. I could only speculate. I couldn't bring myself to ask her because I didn't want to whisk up her long held resentment. I was certain that the weeks after the children and I would leave, these thorns would work themselves deeper into her heart especially with a new young *selfetti* that may not remain an *arosa* long.

I sat down on her queen sized bed with the radio head board and yellow satin bedspread. Her matching bedroom set was beautiful. The wall sized stand-alone closet had his and her wardrobe with a mirrored section in the middle with several drawers below. It had large storage cupboards above the wardrobes. Libyan homes were not built with closets or cabinets. All the rooms are bare and have to be furnished like some older houses in the U.S.

Hameeda kept the wardrobes locked. All her treasures were hidden inside and protected from view. Her gold, money, and photos were archived out of reach much like her true self. She concealed her thoughts, desires, and good nature. Sometimes I felt that she had forgotten who she was and how to be happy. She seemed stifled by the dynamics of her relationships with her husband and our mother-in-law. I suppose that there wasn't much for her to be happy about or to look forward to in her everyday life.

One afternoon the neighbors from across the road came to visit and my mother told Hameeda to get up and go clean something like she was dismissing the domestic help. I told her



to sit down. From what I understood from her she tried to spend as much time at her family's home as permissible. She was an elementary teacher and would stay at her father's home in town during the school week to be close to her school.

While we were visiting she stayed home to be with me and my children. Hameeda found that we loved her. We supported her and encouraged her to speak up for herself. She was surprised that we wanted to work alongside of her and tried not to add to her burden. I think she expected us to be spoiled and complaining. She came to love us as much as we loved her.

In the early weeks of our trip, I purchased a hand held mixer. Hameeda and my daughters were making a cake that required a lot of mixing in order to be light and fluffy. Five minutes into mixing the lemon cake, the mixer started to smoking and stopped working. Hameeda got really upset because she thought I would be angry with her for breaking the mixer. Khadijah and Maymuna told me what happened explaining that Hameeda was worried that I would be angry. When I found Hameeda sobbing in her room, she came out and repeatedly apologized. She looked broken more so than the mixer. I hugged her to reassure her that the mixer wasn't a quality appliance and it didn't matter. She was relieved but baffled that I wasn't angry. We loved Hameeda. I wished that I could buy her the best appliances and cooking gadgets.

My brother-in-laws complained that Hameeda didn't bake cakes for them. Seeing the situation from an outside perspective I asked them how could she make cakes for them if they didn't bring her the equipment or ingredients? They withdrew their complaints and were stunned that I pointed out that their lack of cake was their own doing. Hameeda was gifted with many talents that could only shine through if given encouragement rather than criticism.

Hameeda laid a carefully folded red and gold striped silk *gradae* on her bed. From a blue shopping bag with gold Arabic letters, she pulled out a matching red lace sleeved blouse with a ruffled collar and a pair of cream colored silk pants with string ties at the waste and ankles. She had me first put on the pants and blouse while she turned around. Then she helped me get on a heavily embroidered white vest. Already I felt the heat and the weight of hundreds if not thousands of years of tradition. The silk fabric was heavy and the stiff sleeves forced my arms straight with little room for full range of movement.

“Hameeda, *cam saw fil housj*, Fatima?” I said hoping that the time at Fatima’s henna party would be minutes not hours.

“*Swaya. Mush helba*,” Hameeda said informing me that it was not going to be a long time. She placed several open safety pins in her mouth and motioned for me to raise my arms. She reached around my growing girth and strategically wrapped and pleated the long silk fabric around my body. Somehow she formed a sari like dress with a waist and torso enveloping hood that could easily be brought up to conceal the wearer. Then she brought out the appropriate gold jewelry that included a necklace with nine large medallions that were arranged like a loose net from my shoulders to my thighs. She added matching earrings, and a ring-bracelet set that was ornately connected from my wrist to my middle finger. I hoped that I wouldn’t have to go to the bathroom or vomit due to the weight and the heat of outfit. I tried to focus of walking gracefully without tripping over the bulking *gradae*. Hameeda wasn’t finished. She pulled my hair back and tied a matching bandana on my head. Then she put kohl and mascara on my eyes and a cherry red lipstick that matched the stripes in the *gradae*.

Now that she was done getting me ready she rushed to get herself ready. I pulled on my *jilbab* and *hijab* over the *gradae*. I tied a *burqa* around my forehead to cover my made up face being that I could not appear in front of my brother-in-laws or other men with make-up on. I also wore gloves over my hennaed hands and socks over my feet. The henna was a medium red-orange color. It didn't take in the desired red black tones. Khadijah and Maymuna were both dressed and ready to go in brightly colored tunics with matching long skirts and scarves that we bought in Tripoli on our last visit.

I supposed the room we were in was the enclosed courtyard that was roofed over just like the Fergiani's home. The room was wall to wall white plastic chairs arranged in rows facing the front of the room where a decorated chair sat for the bride. The walls were a cool mint green that soothed my tired eyes. The room was more illuminated than on our first visit. The room was full of Fatima's friends and relatives. We slipped off our over-clothes and scarves. Then we sat down awaiting the bride. We were served tea and sweets while we chatted with the other guests.

My father-in-law's sister went around the room greeting the guest. When she got to me, she didn't recognize me and greeted me as one of the other Libyan ladies. I had been transformed into a Libyan and wasn't recognized as the token American. I was dumbfounded that I didn't look or sound foreign to her. Maybe she was in hostess mode and was just trying to greet all her guests. I sat back down with the *selfetties*, Hameeda and Gumera. Khadijah and Maymuna stayed close by sitting with their cousins.

Fatima was escorted in by her sisters wearing a beautiful pink *gradae* with rich colorful floral embroidered sleeves. I wasn't sure if this was the one Jamal bought for her. The thick silk *gradae* was pinned closed over her face. I was already sweating under the weight of the *gradae* I

was wearing. It made me sweatier just thinking about how Fatima must feel with her face covered. I hoped that she wouldn't be pinned in there too long. Her mother led the precession carrying a large bowl of prepared henna with lit candles.

The women were singing and drumming. Their songs were ancient rhythmic chants, some asking for the blessing of God, and others declaring the hopes and desires of both a bride and groom for a prosperous life with many children. The singing rose and fell with the preferences of the crowd and with what was happening with the bride. A jawbreaker sized ball of henna was placed in Fatima's palm and it was bound up gently. Then she was led back into the main part of the house where she could be helped out of her dress. The songs kept coming and the guests were given small bags of nuts and candy before they left. Some guests were given a small golf ball sized bag of the henna to use when they got home or to freeze for later.

"*Highya, Asya,*" Hameeda said letting me know that we should hurry because our ride was there waiting to take us home. I was ready to go home and slip out of this heavy silk and into my cotton nightgown. It had been a long day. Hameeda crippled my thoughts of rest when she reminded me that she was coming to reapply my henna before I could go to sleep just as she had done the night before in hopes of making it darker. Sleep came at one or two after Hameeda finish. Three hours later I staggered to the bathroom trying not to lose my balance in my plastic grocery bags while semi dried clumps of henna squished between my toes and from under my soles. I tried to last until fajr time or as long as I could tolerate. Sadly, three hours was about all I could take. After I cleaned off the henna, I tried to sleep until fajr prayer time with hopes of quickly returning to sleep. Morning came and the preparations for the last day of the wedding were underway long before I emerged from our apartment.

#

The warm reddish glow of a long risen sun greeted me when my eyes snapped open at the sound of my girls leaving the apartment. Asim and Ammar were still sleeping and could sleep through almost anything. I got up and quickly showered not bothering to wash my hair because I didn't want to take the time to stand under the low water pressure and rinse the shampoo out. I still wet my head before I shut off the water so I could pull my frizzy hair into a smooth ponytail and wrap it into a bun. I dressed and put on my scarf. I was ready to exit the apartment.

I found the boys awake and eating corn flakes in the kitchen. They fed Gigi and her kittens a can of tuna with a chopped up boiled egg from yesterday's breakfast.

"Make sure you help Amu Jamal and Amu Mansor. Today is probably going to be the busiest day of the wedding," I said as headed toward the door.

"Don't worry, Mama. We will," Asim said.

"Keep a good eye on Ammar. There are going to be a lot of people here and I don't want anything to happen," I said. Asim knew what I was warning him about.

I had long talks with all the kids about being safe and avoiding being alone with anyone. I couldn't keep my eye on all of them all the time. I had been warned that molestation of little boys was more prevalent. To compromise a girl's virginity was considered a devastating taboo. I think that the idea was no evidence no harm. I never heard this subject discussed directly among the Libyans. My husband and American friends that had visited or lived in Libya at one time or another cautioned me before our visit to never let my children go anywhere alone. Either way I wanted my children to be mind-full of the potential danger. Ammar just turned six years old

before our trip and he was immature for his age. For that reason we all were vigilant about his safety.

Asim had the primary responsibility of taking care of Ammar since I couldn't be on the men's side and Asim couldn't be on the women's side now that he was considered a man in the sight of God and others. He was sixteen years old and a towering six feet tall. His beard was coming in slowly and his mustache hadn't appeared yet. Most of his cousins shaved. Asim was trying to follow the example of his father and the *sunnah* of the Prophet Mohammed to have a beard and not shave it. Asim didn't complain about watching over his brother because that was really the only thing he was asked to do other than help me with the laundry or the dishes in our kitchen. Khadijah and Maymuna were expected to help out with a lot of the domestic chores. Asim knew he had it easy.

The summer was hot and Hadi's brother's hired a man to tend the animals and his cousin hired a man to tend the barley on his father's land that was adjacent to Hadi's father's land. I didn't like these arrangements because the children and I could no longer walk out to the back without concern about encountering these unrelated men. One of the men built a small one room structure out of salvaged cinderblock sized bricks from the old house where my husband was born. It sat up on the hill overlooking the house and the tin shed where Jamal and Mansor stored the hay and animal feed. The man slept there overnight. Sometimes we saw his family there and we wondered if they sometimes stayed there too. My brother-in-laws asked them to leave during the wedding. I was relieved that we would be free to go outside and walk around if we needed a break from hosting and serving.

From the moment I clanked the door closed, the reverberations of many moving around the court yard and other areas of the compound could be heard from every direction. Cars rumbling to a stop to drop off supplies or more guests, and then speeding away on the two lane road that split the hill side cutting the Fergiani land in two. I made my way down the corridor flanking the *marbowa* where my husband's male relatives had been sleeping, then past my father-in-laws room making my way to the main courtyard of the house.

The women were already peeling onions for the *busla* that would top the couscous and stewed beef. They dropped them into huge metal bowls of cool water to lessen the tear effect of so many onions. The ladies worked together with the giddy excitement of the culmination of this three day celebration. Today would be the day the bride would come home to her husband and his family.

Even I was excited. Each day was filled with something new and unexpected. I had been to many Libyan weddings in the States but none to the scale of this one. This was a minimalist wedding with just the necessary elements without the frills and flowers. It was still a massive undertaking. A truck arrived to deliver more stackable white plastic lawn chairs. Our cousins swept and mopped. Some were doing dishes and setting them to drip dry on an old cot frame. It was perfect for the industrial sized pots and group serving bowls with lids. I was amazed with how they converted common household items into useful tools to fit the current need. If there were complaints, I never heard them. Everyone was cleaning, prepping food, or chatting with a cup of tea in hand.

Jamal returned in the early afternoon from the barber. He had a complete make-over. His hair was cut with the sides trimmed slightly shorter than the top. His sideburns and neck were

squared off. He was clean shaven and his skin had a slight pink hue. Jamal was nervous and cranky. He didn't like that I laughed because he not only had gotten a facial but had his face waxed. I couldn't stop. He reminded me of the metro-sexuals we saw in Tripoli or back home in Florida. Jamal never struck me as the sort who would go to the extreme of facial waxing. I was impressed that he did want to look his best for his young bride.

I was certain that Fatima had undergone even more extensive preparations for her first night as a wife. My sister-in-law Hameeda told me of the *halawa* procedure. Brides usually removed all body hair in preparation for the wedding night. This includes arms, under arms, legs, face, and pubic area. Taffy like candy is made by boiling honey with a little lemon juice until the softball stage. The honey will have a dark amber color. When Hameeda made halawa she poured it out on a plate and let it cool. She explained that this was not a pain free experience. She said that one of our nieces slapped her and another passed out. Still most of the Libyan women prefer this method over shaving as a monthly maintenance practice.

As an American I preferred to be somewhere in the middle between European and Arabian. My mother allowed me to start shaving up to the knee when I was eleven years old. She instructed me that once you start shaving or plucking there was no turning back. This was wise and true advice. When I became Muslim I added only the necessary removal of pubic and underarm hair. This is required of both men and women as part of cleanliness. Plucking and shaping the eyebrow is discouraged but often ignored. That is considered altering God's creation. I'm still personally conflicted with both ideas considering that they are in direct opposition with each other.



Jamal rushed off with the boys to get dressed at his uncle's house. There were so many people in every room inside and outside the house, even the garage, that it became necessary to go somewhere else to get ready. He could have used our apartment but I think he didn't want to bring men into my private domain.

The rest of the afternoon was spent tending simmering industrial sized pots of beef in a spicy tomato based sauce with potatoes, carrots, and squash. There were also huge pots of slow cooked onion slices with garbanzo beans in a similar spicy tomato sauce. The pots stood on individual gas burners that were designed to hold each pot about a foot off the ground. Some were inside the two unfinished rooms and others stood outside in the patio. Enormous plastic barrels of lightly pickled vegetables and olives lined the wall ready to be plated. The ladies stirred the vats of stew with the oar like bazeen paddles. Even though it was late summer the sun brazed all that tended the pots sending rivulets of sweat trickling past their faces.

I wandered in and out of the house observing and making small talk with those I knew. Outside were close family and friends working together to make the food and keep the dishes done. On the inside were guests that were expected to sit and be served. I felt more comfortable outside with the women I knew or inside by the person preparing the tea.

Inside the main house, Khadijah, Maymuna, and their cousins helped ready Jamal's bedroom after the cousins from Tripoli moved their things into another room. They swept the carpet with the broom and hung the red pepper string lights over the marital bed. The canisters of sweets were moved to the storage room where the chest freezer was kept. The collage of snapshots of my children from babyhood to preadolescence was straightened on the wall above the

headboard. It had been on the wall for many years above my mother-in-law's bed. She moved to the sitting room across from Jamal and Fatima's new room.

"Hameeda, can we move the picture of the kids from Jamal's room?" I called to her in Arabic.

"No, no, it looks fine," Hameeda said as she entered the room.

"But, it isn't very nice to have my kids' picture there on the wedding night. Not very romantic," I tried to explain with my poor Arabic.

"Jamal likes that picture. If he didn't want it there it wouldn't be there," she said with a knowing giggle.

I was grateful that my wedding night had been thousands of miles away in the privacy of our apartment without the helpful yet intrusive assistance of my in-laws. Everything in Jamal's room had been inspected and handled by nearly everyone who came in his room. I would have wanted to wash and sterilize everything before I moved in. Even though the doors and windows to Jamal's room would be locked, it wouldn't be sound proof from the guests staying outside his room in the adjoining rooms. Complete privacy wasn't possible.

The cousins from Tripoli made all the cookies, baklava, and *magrooth* that would be served during the wedding. Each one was a hand crafted delight with attention to perfection evident in each piece. The *kak* were light brown crisp rings with a little anise seed dispersed throughout. I was told that these tea biscuits could last for months in a tightly closed container as would the syrup soaked *magrooth*. The *magrooth* was a date filled semolina cookie with a delicate design pinched on its outer mantle. The cousins also prepared the Libyan baklava with ground blanched almonds rather than the commonly known walnut or mixed nut variety. They

brought about five hundred pieces of at least ten different confection to serve throughout the wedding.

As evening approached more guests started to arrive. Everything was ready. The couscous with the beefy stew and *busla* was waiting in covered serving dishes. The pickled vegetables were dispersed on small plates. The almond drink was mixed and ready to be served with the *bumber* almond macaroons when most of the guests were seated. My sister-in-laws and other relatives were changed into their finest formal wear including an appropriate ornamentation of gold jewelry. The girls and I were dressed in our best, which meant simple and clean.

I used to think that I chose to dress simply because of our financial condition and my learned frugality. In truth, I am uncomfortable being dressed up and don't have a natural ability to accessorize. I'd rather work in the garden than maintain manicured nails. I suppose that is part of who I am. I always felt at my best barefoot creating something in my kitchen or tending my garden with my children helping me or nearby. My gifts are not in my ability to be fashion savvy but in what I can coax, nurture, or create with my hands. I don't mind makeup. I looked like a Goth through my high school years with my thick black eyeliner and dark lip gloss. Now I wore a thin black eyeliner and black mascara. I brought lipstick but felt foolish and clown like wearing it. In the last eighteen years of marriage, I wore makeup mainly to private women's parties or when I wanted to seduce my husband. My husband and I followed a more conservative view of modesty in our Islamic practice.

"Asya come here," Hameeda said as she pulled me into her bedroom. On her bed she had laid out her pearl white silk *gradae* with gold stripes. It had matching silk pantaloons, a vest, and a blouse with heavily quilted sleeves. She motioned for me to put it on.

“No, no, Hameeda. This is Fatima’s day,” I said. I already felt like there was too much focus on me and not the bride. They moved up their wedding date for me.

“*Mush helba, Asya. Wahid sura bus,*” said Hameeda as she motioned toward her bed again and shut the door. She just wanted one picture of me in the traditional wedding *gradae* since I didn’t have a big wedding party. She said it wouldn’t take much time. I couldn’t refuse Hameeda anything because we were leaving in a week and she had taken such good care of me and my children over the last few months.

I quickly slipped out of my skirt and pulled the pantaloons on while Hameeda faced the door. I tied them over my pregnant belly thinking how these pants were wide enough to fit two pregnant women. I laid my shirt next to my skirt on her vanity and quickly slipped the blouse on over my head. The sleeves were stiff and dug into my armpits. It wasn’t tight but wasn’t as generous as the pants.

“Okay, Hameeda, I’m done,” I said. She turned around and helped me put on the vest carefully threading the stiff sleeves through the armholes. Then she picked up the long piece of fabric that was the main part of the *gradae*. She twisted one end of the fabric placing it over my shoulder. She placed the end in my hand to hold on to and she began to fold and pleat the remaining fabric. Somehow she tied it around my waist just under my breasts creating an empire waist. Then she took the piece from my hand and pinned it to the pleated skirt. The back was folded in such a way that I could pull up the draped fabric up over my head and pull it together to cover my arms and face. Hameeda took a square bandana folded into a triangle and tied it behind my head leaving my bangs and a few curly wisps of hair around my face.

She stepped back to inspect her quick work. Then she pulled a bag out from the back of her wardrobe. She took out a velveteen box and opened it. Neatly placed inside was a ten medallion gold loose webbed necklace. The medallions were each the size of my palm. She placed it around my neck. It was like a golden net cast across my whole abdomen all the way down to my upper thigh. She took a small bag and unwrapped a gold ring bracelet set. Hameeda slipped them on my left hand. Lastly, she handed me a delicate white fan. Hameeda smiled as she looked me over again.

Then she looked at her yellow satin bed spread and shook her head. She pulled off the bedspread and threw it in the corner.

“What’s wrong?” I said, not sure what she was doing.

“*Obied quase,*” she said when she dragged out a white satin bedspread from the bottom of the wardrobe. I helped her make up her bed. Hameeda point to where she wanted me to sit. She straightened my bandana and placed the open fan in my left hand. She took my camera and shot a couple of photos before she dismantled her creation. I felt awkward because I didn’t want to take the attention away from the bride, but I couldn’t refuse Hameeda. She was the sister I wished I had. We only had a few fleeting days left together and then we had to leave. If she wanted me to try on a *gradae*, I would indulge her. Khadijah knocked on the door to let us know the bride was almost here. I quickly redressed as Hameeda folded and put away her *gradae*.

We could hear the approach of our new arosa and her family from miles away. They arrived in a honking caravan of compact cars and pickup trucks. Our house stood out on the hillside with strings of white lights as a welcome to our new bride. Fatima came into the main compound surrounded by many of her female relatives. *Zaggarting* erupted as she entered the

house. Her relatives removed her cover and lead her to a chair that was set up in front of Jamal's room in the central room of the main house. The *zaggarting* didn't stop until she was seated. Fatima was wearing the traditional silk *gradae* just as Jamal had requested.

She was regal and so grown up from the girl I saw months before in Tripoli. I almost didn't recognize her because she was heavily made up. She was beautiful. Fatima held a somber face as all good daughters should to show that she will miss her family. This gloomy tradition was compounded when I noticed that her mother didn't come with her. Hameeda said that for some families it was traditional for the mother not to come the final night of the wedding. I was still stunned even though I remembered hearing something about this before. The idea of being left home on one of the most important days in my daughter's life wasn't thinkable for me. She tried to soothe my shock by telling me that Fatima's mother, aunts, and sisters would come spend the night with her after a week.

Hameeda, Gumera, and my nieces tended to Fatima's relatives and helped get them seated. Then the almond drink was served with the *bumber* to all the guests. The women began to sing and clap. Groups of four to six guests were served dinner. A small table cloth was laid out and one of the girls went to each diner with the hand-washing bowl. The woman washed her hands over the bowl while the girl slowly poured water over her hands. Then the girl offered a towel and moved on to the next guest. One of the girls delivered the covered serving dish to each group filled generously with couscous topped with beef stew. This was accompanied by a tray with drinks, pickled vegetable, and a spoon for each person. As soon as each group finished someone would return with the hand-washing bowl and clear the dishes.

The dinner was cleaned away almost as fast as it was served. Nothing was wasted. The animals ate as well as the people during the wedding because there was so much leftovers that couldn't be salvaged or reserved. There were teams of friends and family that kept washing dishes. It seemed that everyone took a turn prepping, serving, or cleaning.

I was limited to socializing or wandering from room to room upon the orders of my mother-in-law. Every time I tried to help out I was kindly distracted or diverted. This annoyed me because I felt useless and a burden. I had four full term pregnancies with healthy outcomes. My high blood pressure went away after previous deliveries. I knew my pregnancy was different this time. I was over 35 years old and wasn't being effectively treated for repeated urinary tract infections, my blood pressure, or the cold virus that was working deep into my lungs. My in-laws were just acting out of concern for me. I didn't like feeling inadequate. I was clearly being treated like a delicate, fragile American. I thought they viewed me as a weak, infirm, soft American who lived in a pampered society. There were plenty of other pregnant women helping out. Even Lalaham, Hameeda's sister, was doing everything from dishes to scrubbing carpets. She was nearly three months pregnant and everyone referred to her as the dinosaur because you could hear her Jurassic roar across the compound every time she vomited.

The evening went by quickly. The women continued to sing accompanied by an hour glass shaped *tarbuka*. There wasn't much dancing because my husband's family was rather conservative and shy. The women were served tea and offered tray after tray of sweets.

Fatima continued her stoic look throughout the evening. At times I felt that air of animosity between the bride's family and ours. It wasn't something spoken. I felt it mostly when I was near her sisters. Their expressions were that of disapproval like they may have thought that

she was marrying down. Maybe they were right. I had a hard time discerning if the attitudes were cultural or personal.

The guests began leaving around eleven o'clock. As they made their way out to the patio, the girls gave them a bag of roasted nuts and candy. By twelve o'clock most had left and those that were staying overnight were making their way to an area to sleep.

I was exhausted. I gave my salaams to everyone and went back to my apartment. I didn't stay long enough to see Jamal claim his bride and whisk her off to their bedroom. I couldn't imagine how they could consummate their marriage with people sleeping in the next room. My bed was calling me, the *mandar* right in the direct air flow of the air conditioner. When I got into our bedroom area, the boys were already in their beds. The girls came in after an hour or so. There was nothing better than getting into my worn out nightgown in the complete privacy of our apartment. It was just me and my children. I could get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom or go into the kitchen without worrying about disturbing or tripping over anyone.

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Morning came calling long before I was ready. Most of our relatives from Tripoli were leaving early so I made myself get up and get out early. The girls were already out helping Hameeda and the other ladies make breakfast. I woke the boys before I went out and told them not to take too long since their cousins were leaving soon. As I walked toward the main kitchen I heard women chatting in the main house and out in the court yard. I was surprised that a lot of people had already left even most of the cousins from Tripoli. Only Khalti Aisha was still there from our relatives from Tripoli.



*Zaggarting* erupted from the main house. I went into the house to see my husband's grandmother raising her cane and letting out another round of celebratory calls. The bride and groom were awake and ready for breakfast. It was conveyed that the couple had successfully consummated their marriage. Hani Lalaham excitedly told how it took my oldest brother-in-law nearly five years to perform his marital duties.

I was embarrassed for Gumera because Hani Lalaham was broadcasting details of her private life to all those in hearing range. Gumera's three adult daughters were standing there hearing about their father's failed performance. I cringed when Hani Lalaham caught sight of me and reiterated the story again for my benefit.

I was relieved that they didn't parade a bloody show proving Fatima's virginal state. At a wedding earlier in the summer Hameeda, Khadijah, Maymuna, and I had to wait to go home while the grooms deflowered their brides. Our scarves and *jilbabs* were in the rooms with them. The mother of the grooms said not to worry, it wouldn't take long. She was right. In about twenty minutes both grooms had completed their first intercourse and the bloody show was brought out for all to see. I thought this was a long forgotten tradition that had been put aside to welcome a more progressive society. Clearly, some still held on to the old ways along with a tougher mentality. This wasn't an Islamic tradition. It was a cultural moray that some still clung to in spite of the rapid westernization of much of Libya.

Fatima and Jamal finally came out of their room near midday. They weren't feeling well. It wasn't a surprise that Jamal was sick. The last several weeks had been riddled with stress and Jamal usually came down with something if he had a difficult time. A couple weeks before he was down with a stomach bug. This time it wasn't just Jamal. Several were complaining of

stomach aches. Luckily, my children and I were spared this round of food borne illness since all of us had been eating and snacking on what we had in our apartment. What a way to spend their first days together.

For the first week of their marriage we didn't see much of Jamal or Fatima. Meals were dropped off at their door and a radio station with Arabic music played almost non-stop. Just as predicted Fatima's mother, aunts, and sisters came to visit on their one week anniversary. My sister-in-laws and my nieces worked hard to host them properly. Meals were delivered to Fatima's room. They spent most of their time in her room with the doors closed. They didn't choose to interact with us much. Jamal slept in the *marbowa*. The awkward impression that there was a rivalry continued, which surprised me because they were second and third cousins to my husband and his brothers.

Fatima's family left the next morning before noon. This was our last full day in Msalata with Abdulhadi's family. Fergiani and Gumera were there with all of their children and grandchildren. Mansor and Hameeda along with Um Fergiani, Hani Lalaham and Khalti Saleema spent every moment they could with us. Jamal was in and out tending to his new wife, Fatima. She was very shy and didn't sit with us. I'm sure that she didn't feel integrated into the family yet and trying to communicate with my children and I offered another stressful challenge. That evening Mansor took us to give our salaams to their three uncles and their families. There were many tears, hugs, and last minute pictures.

The next morning we dragged out ten check-in bags and four carry-ons and placed them by the outer door of the compound. Gigi raced back and forth from the patio to the apartment. She and her kittens seemed aware that we were leaving. The children and I gave our final

salaams to Abu Fergiani in his room before saying good-bye to everyone else. Tears filled my eyes. I felt tightening of my chest and pounding in my head. We were leaving and might not come back.

There had been so many births, deaths, and marriages this summer. I could no longer go untouched by so many transformative events. At home in the States, death was not a frequent visitor and celebrations of births were far between. Marriages weren't every couple of weeks. I sobbed as I hugged Hameeda and told her that I loved her. She quaked with sadness. We were leaving her. Everyone was in tears, even Mansor. He kept turning away to hide his tears. Um-Fergiani was sobbing too as she hugged and kissed all of us good-bye. Even Howa who I had made so mad weeks before stood at the door crying. She came early that morning to see us off along with her husband and seven children. This was the hardest moment in my life, saying good-bye to my in-laws knowing we might never see each other again. They had shown us acceptance and generosity far beyond my expectations. I didn't expect to feel so attached to them in such a short time.

Our bags were packed into a pick up. The girls, Ammar, and I got into a car with Jamal. Asim rode with Fergiani and my nephews in the truck. With guilt and a tired, broken heart, I wept almost all the way to Tripoli. I felt so torn. I desperately wanted to go home to my husband and a world that I knew and could navigate. But at the same time, I loved my in-laws and felt like I was cheating them out of time with us. I felt weak physically and mentally.

We spent five months living in the same home, eating, and working together. They shared their very best with us and welcomed us without reservations. I don't understand everything about the Libyan culture or its people. I do know that they are generous, full of

passion, and are as diverse and opinionated as any American. They share the same dreams and hopes for their lives, children, and country. My children and I are forever changed.

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