

Maktoub

Arabs say that from the day of your birth the name of your beloved is invisibly engraved on your forehead. Perhaps this is true and explains the mysterious flicker of recognition I felt the day we met.

December 15, 1955 was a cold, overcast Thursday, and snowflakes were swirling down from dark skies, blown by gusts of biting, cold wind. I took the earliest bus into the city, and, as I hurried up the steps of the Main Building of New York University, I glanced at my watch. Eight o'clock. Good, I thought, three hours to review for my Russian exam at eleven. I had to do well because the possibility of a full scholarship hung on my grades this semester.

Looking back, I know it was actually fate that propelled me out of bed before dawn that day. Fate, destiny—the Arabs have a better word for it. They would say our meeting was *maktoub* or “written”. Omar Khayyam put it nicely: “The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,/ Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit/ Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line....”

I pushed open the heavy door of Reading Room 202, easing myself and my heavy load of books into the vast and quiet study hall. Pausing to shake the snow off the hood of my duffle coat, I headed for my usual table near the windows facing Washington Square Park. Suddenly, a student at this table got to his feet and said, “Mademoiselle, may I hang your coat?”

I handed him my coat wordlessly, stunned by his good looks, his French accent and his Old World courtesy. European, I thought, French, maybe Polish or Scandinavian. He hung my coat on the clothes tree, pulled out a chair and sat me down next

to him. I dutifully opened my Russian book but knew he was staring at me. I raised my head, and our eyes met. His gray-green eyes were shining.

He smiled and asked me with ingenuous directness, "Have you seen film *Bandora*?" I didn't answer immediately, not sure what he had said, so he leaned forward and repeated the immortal words that have become legend in our family: "Have you seen film *Bandora*?"

"No," I said.

"You look just like Ava Gardner in it."

"Ava Gardner?" I laughed at this absurd idea.

Years later, I learned that this movie was actually called *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, but, to this day, I have never seen it nor can I find the slightest resemblance between Ava Gardner and me. However, I have to admit this was a novel way to begin a conversation, and he had succeeded in getting my complete attention. I closed my Russian book and looked him over.

This strangely familiar young man was strikingly handsome. His fair, pink-cheeked face was topped by dark-blond, wavy hair and punctuated by a deep chin dimple. Not only his accent, but also his clothes marked him as a foreigner. He wore a gray turtleneck sweater under his suit jacket, somehow making me picture him on skis. The sweater looked either very expensive or hand-knit, and the shoulder pads of his jacket were too wide. And who wore a suit with a turtleneck sweater in the fifties?

As we smiled at each other, there was a *frisson*, a feeling that somehow we knew each other. Time seemed to slow down while somewhere, where these things are decided, signals flashed, gears were engaged and our lives changed direction forever. Unknowingly, I had taken the first step on the road to Damascus.

Our names were a mutual surprise. He balked at the name Mildred. "Meel-drrred," he repeated doubtfully after me, strongly rolling the r's. Then he frowned and asked if I didn't have any other name. Happily I told him my middle name was Elaine, and I have been Elaine from that day on. In turn, his name, Mohammed, was certainly unexpected, and I was now at a complete loss as to what his nationality might be. Syrian, he said, but that didn't help. The only thing that came to mind was Byron's *The Assyrians came down like the wolf on the fold*. Assyrians, Syrians—were they the same?

Damascus was yet another surprise. To me, it was a Biblical city. Did it still exist? The Middle East had not yet landed on the world stage in 1955, and, like many American college students then, I had only a dim mental picture of the area. I am ashamed to admit that I didn't even know that Syrians were Arabs. Arabs, I thought, lived in Arabia. Oddly enough, I had heard of Palmyra and Queen Zenobia and, of course, Damascus and St. Paul but had no idea all these were part of the history of Syria.

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We spent the entire morning talking, and I learned he was a graduate student who had arrived in New York only a month earlier and was currently taking an intensive English course. We talked about our studies—his, economics, and mine, English literature—our families—his large and mine small, and discovered we both loved cats. In passing, he mentioned that, being a Muslim, he did not drink, welcome news to me, the child of an alcoholic father.

Suddenly it was noon, and we had lunch together in the university cafeteria. Before parting we arranged to meet in the same study hall the next day. That afternoon I checked out a book from the library on Syria, but I did not take my Russian exam and I did not get the scholarship. However, that evening I told my mother that I'd met the man I was going to marry (she laughed), and seven months later I did just that.

When we had been married thirty years or more, Mohammed told me the startling fact that he had noticed me in the halls of NYU before we met and determined to get to know me. In the fifties, NYU was the largest private university in America, and we students called it "The Factory", so it is hard to imagine I had been noticed, let alone singled out even before the day fate brought us together. This only reinforces my belief it was no accident we met.

By the next day I was sure I had become an expert on Syria and showed Mohammed the library book. He wasn't impressed and looked dismissively at the pictures of tattooed Bedouin women, camel herds, tents and ruins. It was the kind of book that refers to Islam as "Mohammedanism" and had far more chapters on the Bedouin than on the peasants or city dwellers although the latter two groups, Mohammed told me, constitute an overwhelming 99% of the Syrian population.

"These are not Syrians, and this is not Syria today at all," he protested as he thumbed through the pages, and, true enough, the book dated from the early 1930's. Also, if Mohammed said the book misrepresented his country, you had to believe him. He had a quiet and very convincing air of authority about him even then. But at least, I told myself, I now knew where Syria was and that Syrians were Arabs.

Actually, I knew more about Syria than I realized. At home we had an outsized book by Richard Halliburton about famous ancient ruins. One chapter was devoted to Queen Zenobia with several large photographs of the ruins of her city, Palmyra. I remembered the story of Zenobia very well but had forgotten Palmyra was in the Syrian desert. Further, I had forgotten that Jane Digby, a woman whose story intrigued me, also ended up in Syria. In the summer of 1955, my librarian mother, handed me a new book she thought I might enjoy. It was *The Wilder Shores of Love* by Lesley Blanche and told of several nineteenth century women who found love and adventure in the Middle East. The best of these true stories was about the beautiful and talented Jane Digby. She was born into an aristocratic family in England and, as a teenager, was married to Lord Ellenborough, who later became Viceroy of India.

He was merely the first in a series of husbands and lovers she acquired in her tempestuous life, but her last husband and true love was, improbably, a Bedouin sheikh in—where else?—Syria. I had not forgotten Jane and Zenobia, but Syria had made no lasting impression on me. That failing was soon to be corrected.

Mohammed wanted to take me to a movie our first Saturday, but I said he had to meet my mother and sisters first. So it was that he agreed to come to Palisades on Saturday for dinner. Poor fellow, I'm sure he had no idea of the trip he'd let himself in for. Altogether, it would take at least one and a half hours to get from his hotel on 17th Street in Manhattan to Palisades by subway and bus. And that is if you know your way and don't get lost—which he did.

I gave him directions: "Take the subway—the A train Express up to the Red and Tan bus terminal at 168th Street. Once there, take the 12:20 bus, the 9A bus, to Rockland County. You'll get to Palisades at 1:00. I'll be waiting for you at the bus stop," I promised.

It was another cold day, and there were snow flurries when I went up to the bus stop on 9W. No Mohammed got off the bus. Back home my sisters ribbed me about my foreign boyfriend.

"Guess he stood you up," they said.

Somehow, I was still sure he would come.

Then the phone rang, and it was Mohammed. "Where are you? You promised to meet me at the bus stop."

"Where are *you*?" I countered.

"Palisades Park," he said.

"Oh, no! You're in New Jersey. You're twenty miles south of Palisades, New York. You took the wrong bus."

"Tell me what to do."

Amazing, I thought. He still wants to come. "Okay," I said, "take any bus back to the 168th bus terminal and then take the 9A bus, the 9A *bus* that comes every hour at twenty minutes after the hour. Sit up front and ask the driver to tell you when you get to Palisades. And call me before you get on so I know what bus to meet."

More than two hours later he arrived, smiling triumphantly and with a big box of chocolates under his arm. He handed me the beribboned box, and when I thanked him, he said it was nothing; he'd found it on the subway. Although I'd never heard of anyone finding anything so nice on a subway, I was naïve enough to believe him. Only years later did I realize that he had bought the chocolates for me. Gift giving, I discovered, is done in a very unobtrusive manner in Syria, and gifts are seldom opened in front of the giver. Often Syrians will leave a present in your house to be found after they depart. To attract attention to a gift if you are the giver or to make a fuss over it if the gift is for you is simply not done. Not for Syrians any of our effusive

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American giving and receiving—"I tried to find something special, something you would really like!"—"Lovely! Just what I wanted!"

But if he played a gentle joke on me, I did the same to him. My sisters and I had made a large batch of decorated Christmas cookies, something we did every year. There were stars, crescents, camels, Christmas trees and bells - the usual. Before Mohammed left, I gave him a large tin of the cookies and told him the camels and crescents were made especially for him, and he believed me.

He ate dinner with us, helped with the dishes and then asked where he could pray. Mother acted as if this were an everyday request and led him to the parlor where, she said, he could be alone.

We walked up to the bus stop in the dark, holding hands and although every inch of that familiar walk was imprinted on my brain, I felt I'd stepped into a new dimension. The same old stars swirled in the velvet heavens above, and, as I looked up, I saw Orion and wondered what my departed grandmother, who taught me what I know of the constellations, would think of my new friend. It was bitterly cold, but we two walked in an envelope of warmth past the stark tall trees iced with snow. His curls fell over his forehead and his eyes shone as we kissed goodbye. He murmured I was his "silver moon".

"How ridiculous!" I thought. "How wonderful!" Then the bus came, and he climbed aboard.

"See you Monday," I said, and he waved goodbye from the bus. I felt abandoned as the bus drove out of sight.

That was the first of hundreds of trips the two of us made on "Bus Number Nine". The bus drivers got to know us and smiled when we got on together, and when it was just one of us, they would ask about the other. They had a warm spot for young lovers.

Mohammed won over my mother and my sisters as effortlessly as he had me. He was charming and at ease with females of any age, maybe because he had grown up with five sisters. He was only insecure about his halting English. He said that he was "a cripple" in the language, and sometimes even I had to guess what he was trying to say. He would be starting his graduate classes in January, and this worried him.

I also wondered how he would manage in his first two classes, but there was no need for my concern. His determination was phenomenal, and his books from that semester testify to his persistence. On every page are the decorative squiggles that make up Arabic writing. He had patiently looked up the Arabic equivalent of many unfamiliar words and had written explanatory notes in the margins. He ended up getting an "A" in both subjects, and I stopped worrying about his studies.

That winter was a magical time. We were young, we were in love and the town of Manhattan was ours to enjoy. I recall—was it in January or February?—there was an unusual blizzard in the city. The snow fell all one day and the next night and the

city came to a standstill. Mohammed had never seen anything like it, and even for me, it was extraordinary. We walked from Washington Square Park up Fifth Avenue through virgin snow. The city was transformed. There was no traffic at all, and the snow was past our knees. All sound was muffled by snow, and few people were out in the blocked streets. We walked hand in hand, marveling at the enchanting world the snow had created. The ordinary had been transformed into a whimsical beauty. Parked cars wore thick capes of white, and lowly garbage pails were topped with a cupcake twist of white icing. Was it really that beautiful, or was it the eyes of young love that made it seem so? I know both of us will remember that day forever.

The next few months passed in a dizzying blur as we went everywhere together. In those days you could have a wonderful time in New York on a shoestring. We saw the panoramic views from the top of the Empire State Building and the Statute of Liberty and rode rented bicycles through Central Park. On a clear, calm night, the nickel ferry ride to Staten Island was very romantic. We would stand on the deck with our arms around each other, staring across the harbor at the brilliant lights of Manhattan. We checked out the Damascene room in the Museum of Modern Art and the dinosaurs in the Museum of Natural History. In Coney Island, we rode the roller coaster, ate Nathan's kosher hot dogs and, on warm summer days, we joined the thousands cooling off there on the beach. There wasn't a Chinese restaurant or a Jewish deli in Greenwich Village that we didn't try, but our favorite place for good coffee and sandwiches was the student diner just across from NYU. For a special treat, we took in a Broadway play or a movie at Radio City where we were dazzled by the elaborate shows and the Rockettes. That spring, I remember the two of us walking through Washington Square Park with our arms twined around each other, and a girl I knew who saw us commented later that I looked blooming, like a fertility goddess. I took it as a compliment.

After I took Mohammed around *my* New York, he surprised me by opening up a new world to me in the city I thought I knew so well. With him leading the way, I discovered new neighborhoods, new food and new music. He took me to Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn where whole blocks of stores, movie theaters and restaurants were owned by Arab immigrants. Every establishment had its name printed in the curlicues of Arabic calligraphy, the streets were filled with the sound of Oriental music and the grocery stores were full of unfamiliar items with enticing odors. We would eat in one of the Lebanese Mom and Pop places where menus were in Arabic and the food was divine. I seldom knew what I was eating, but I loved it all.

Then there was the office of the Organization of Arab Students (OAS) which was located near Columbia University, up on Broadway and 116th Street. This was the favorite hangout of all the homesick Arabs studying in New York, and soon I was as familiar with the place as any Arab. The voice of Ismahan singing insistently, *Emta, habibi, emta?* ("When, my love, when?") will forever conjure up this place

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for me. Arabic in all its myriad dialects swirled around with the clouds of cigarette smoke as earnest young students endlessly debated the merits of Nasser, unity and socialism and the threats of Zionism, colonialism and imperialism.

In February, 1958, Syria's president, Shukri Kuwatly, and President Nasser of Egypt, signed the document that created the United Arab Republic with Nasser as president of this newly minted country. Most Arab students, including Mohammed, were ecstatic with joy, and Nasser was their hero.

Unity was the grand ideal in the fifties, the banner around which all Arab students rallied, and they would argue for hours about what was the best unifying principle in the Middle East. Not Islam, for then the Christian Arabs would be excluded. Not Arabism, for then the Kurds, the Druze and the Armenians would be left out. In the end, it was the Arabic language and a shared history and culture that won out. It was agreed that those who spoke Arabic and were part of the history of the Middle East were brothers and sisters.

None of us suspected then how unity would prove to be a chimera which these young hopeful students would never achieve. Who would have imagined in 1960 that in 2007 the Europeans, with all their different languages and their history of centuries of conflict, would be living in a practically borderless European Union with a unified currency while the Arab countries would be more divided than ever.

It is strange, but true, that Mohammed never asked me to marry him. He didn't have to. Within a week of meeting, we were talking about names for our children, and he was introducing me to his friends as his fiancée. Every week we went to the movies, and, after all these years, remembering how his eyes shone when he looked at me in the dim light of the theater, can still constrict my heart. Maybe we saw too many films because we sometimes worried that love like ours could only end tragically. We were drawn to each other by an attraction so strong it frightened us both. We had no confidence then that we would be the lucky ones.

Our story began that December day when we fell in love at first sight, but what follows in these pages is not a love story. Or, perhaps I should say it is *more* than a love story. Without our love, there would be no story; love explains not only why I went to Syria, but also why I stayed. Before long, I also fell in love with Mohammed's family and his city so this is also a valentine to the Imady family and to Damascus.

My mother always thought our story resonated with the ancient tale of Naomi and Ruth. Of course, the difference is that I followed my husband to his foreign country while Ruth, a widow, followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Naomi's foreign country. But Ruth's words to Naomi could be mine to Mohammed:

"Entreat me not to leave you, or to return from following after you; for where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people,

and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if even death part you from me.” [Ruth:16,17]

Looking back after all these years, it is hard to remember that we started out as total strangers with different nationalities, different mother tongues, different religions and different cultures. How did we bridge all these profound differences so easily? To this day, I don’t know for sure. I can only say we simply never felt like strangers.

We found it easy to talk to each other, and we talked non-stop about everything, telling each other our life stories. My life was as exotic to him as his was to me. We talked while walking or eating together. We talked on the phone and ran up terrible bills. We never ran out of things to talk about (we still haven’t): his sisters and brother, my sisters, his childhood, my childhood, his dreams and ambitions and mine. He was charming and gentle with an old-world courtesy. He made me feel cherished. How different he was from the aggressive, crude, groping boys I had gone to school with, boys who, where girls were concerned, had only one thing on their minds. Mohammed had an innate kindness. It was foreign to his nature to knowingly hurt any one or any creature. He told no dirty jokes nor used any four-letter words but was romantic, chivalrous and loving.

Certainly, there was a powerful physical attraction between us. But there was more, much more to it than that. We both had the certainty that in finding each other, we had stumbled onto a path we were destined to take together. We knew our love was meant to be, was *maktoub*.

We got our first marriage license when we had known each other only three months, but I tore it up on our way to the justice of the peace because Mohammed looked like he was going to a hanging. The problem was that he hadn’t told his family, and he agonized over how to tell them since he was the favorite son on whom they had pinned all their hopes. He was afraid they would feel he had abandoned his studies and the bright future they hoped for him and might never return to Syria. To make it worse, he was on a government scholarship, and the family home was the collateral to insure his return. We sat in a coffee shop with the torn license on the table between us. Mohammed tried to tape it together, but I didn’t let him. The time wasn’t right, and the proper time would come.

We talked a great deal about Islam and, as a disillusioned Christian, I listened with interest. To tell the truth, at this time in my life, my understanding of Islam was quite superficial. I merely felt that if this religion was Mohammed’s religion, it must be good. I asked my mother (poor Mom!) to have my letter of confirmation in the Palisades Presbyterian Church removed and made the *shahada*, the profession of faith in Islam, in front of two witnesses. That is all there was to it. I was now a Muslim.

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Some time after this, I saw a film about the Middle East at the OAS. In one scene, there was a man in flowing robes praying in the desert while the voice-over—first in Arabic and then in English—recited one of the famous verses from the Qur’an: *Qul hua Allahu ahad ... Say, God is One...* The voice seemed to speak directly to me, and I was electrified. This was the moment of truth that sealed and affirmed my acceptance of Islam.

April came and, with it, my first Ramadan. I told Mohammed that I intended to fast, but the first day of the Fast he found me in the university cafeteria drinking coffee.

“I thought you were going to fast,” he said.

“I am fasting, I haven’t eaten a thing.”

“But you’re drinking coffee!”

“You mean you aren’t supposed to eat *or* drink? You didn’t tell me that.”

The next day I was caught smoking a cigarette, and the third day I was chewing gum, two more things that broke the fast. Finally, I got it sorted out. I remember one afternoon mowing the lawn in Palisades while watching the slow, the very slow progress of the sun across the sky. It wasn’t easy, but I fasted all that Ramadan without any more mistakes and was thrilled to have shared this special month with Mohammed.

Sometimes Mohammed took me with him to the Islamic Student Organization of New York, and we would join the small number of Muslims who gathered for Friday prayers. Half a century ago there was not a single mosque in New York City, and we Muslims had to make do with a chapel on the campus of Columbia University which we shared with Christians and Jews. On Fridays, we would unroll the beautiful Persian carpet donated by the government of Saudi Arabia and conduct our prayers. Students took turns being the *imam*, the one who leads the prayers and gives the sermon. Things were much more relaxed in those days. We girls prayed in skimpy scarves that did not really conceal our hair; only nylon stockings covered our legs and some of us even had bare arms sticking out of short sleeves. None of this would be acceptable today.

I had always been a rebel. In my very Republican high school, I was the student who shocked my fellow students when I stood up in our current events class and criticized my government for its part in overthrowing the popular Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. In my first year of college, I got in with a crowd of leftists, which explains my interest in Russian - not the usual choice of language for a student of English literature. At the height of the McCarthy investigations, I joined a student organization called, “Students for Academic Freedom,” which was protesting the firing of three NYU professors for taking the Fifth Amendment. I am still proud to have opposed McCarthyism but now realize it is quite possible that this

organization was a Communist front. My left-wing activities gave my mother a lot of grief, but they came to an abrupt end when I met Mohammed.

My life now revolved around Mohammed. Although I would have been insulted if someone had said it to me back then, rebel or not, I was very much a child of my time. For most of us women of the Silent Generation, love and marriage outclassed personal ambition. True, I was quite an outspoken member of this generation and my choice of husband was far from typical, but like many women who came of age in the fifties, I instantly abandoned my plans for a university degree and a career when the right man came along. I walked away from NYU with hardly a backward glance and helped Mohammed with his term papers and later his two theses even though economics was not my cup of tea. This was an era when a man earned a PhD and his wife contented herself with a “PHT (“put hubby through”).

Around this time, a young man I had dated who was away at another university wrote and very unexpectedly asked me to marry him. “Get rid of that Arab you are seeing,” he wrote. “You can’t really be serious about him.”

I turned him down without a second thought.

* * *

My father was always the outsider in our family, the one with the funny Missourian accent, who said “Miz”, “naught”, “bucket” and “skillet” instead of “Mrs.,” “zero”, “pail” and “frying pan,” who spoke slowly and who moved deliberately. We—Mother and we three sisters—were the fast-moving, fast-talking, mercurial Easterners who got impatient with Dad’s phlegmatic, Midwestern ways.

Dad only had his mother, our Grandma Rippey, but Mother, who had been a Post, had aunts, uncles, first and second cousins galore. In Palisades, everywhere you turned, there were Posts, relatives all. Actually, Dad’s relatives probably outnumbered Mom’s, but they were far away in Missouri and we only saw them once when they came east. So, as I said, Dad was an outsider.

He was also a drinker. At the end of our days with him, drink was more important to him than anything else in the world. He swallowed it down, and it swallowed him up. I’m not too sure he was very aware of our presence except when we got too rambunctious. Then he would take off his belt and strap us.

But before things got this bad, there were some good times and a few glorious days that shine out undimmed by all the years that have gone by. The first was when Dad took me to the World’s Fair in 1939 when I was five years old. I remember the thrill of being singled out for this trip, and though much of what I saw has blurred in my mind, impressions are left of huge buildings with bright lights where strange, shiny objects were on display—odd looking things like nothing I’d ever seen before. I remember the boxes that showed moving pictures, just like tiny movie screens. Dad said this was “television”. Even at that young age, I caught some of the grown-ups’

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enthusiasm for the future and the coming marvelous inventions that were soon to change our world. We ate hotdogs and drank soda pop (at least I did), and I was enthralled by everything I saw but most of all by just having Dad to myself for a whole day.

We got home near midnight, and Mother was worried. I was exhausted, but my flushed, happy face made her hold her criticism. This day might not be so vivid after so many years if it had been only one of many such days, but of course it remained unique. I never again spent a whole day alone with my father.

My father worked for the Bobbs Merrill publishing company at this time, and all our presents from him as young children were books. Some I still remember, and some I still have. Best of all were the Richard Halliburton books about the wonders of the ancient world and faraway places, including Palmyra. I remember being impatient to learn to read and, in fact, Dad taught me to read at four before I started school. Since then, I have hardly passed a day without a book in my hand. Dad taught me to read, and my mother, who also loved books, encouraged my sisters and me to read.

My half-brother, who last saw my father as an infant, says the only thing he owes our father is “good genes”. I was thirteen when my father sent my mother back to her father—and us with her. I used to think he’d given me nothing. My bitterness at his drinking and abandoning us blinded me for a long time to the earlier, happier years.

Mohammed met my father twice. The first time was in Pennsylvania Station where we were seeing my sisters, Jo and Jan, off to college in Ohio. It was one of those infrequent occasions when my parents met after their separation in 1948.

Dad said to Mohammed something like, “Take good care of her. She’ll do fine in Syria; she comes of good pioneer stock.”

Sure, I thought bitterly to myself, “Take her, she’s yours.” It sounded to me like he was relieved. Now I’d officially be off his hands.

The second time we met in Hoboken, New Jersey, where Dad lived, and Mohammed took us out to dinner. It was a disaster. Dad was in a provocative mood—I’d forgotten how mean he could be. He spent the entire evening talking about the Middle East, praising the Israelis and disparaging the Arabs. Mohammed, ever the diplomat, was unfailingly polite and would not allow himself to be goaded into an argument, but I was hurt and saw to it that they did not meet again.

Our first summer came, and Mohammed decided to move out of the apartment he had been sharing with four other Syrian students up near Columbia University and move to a place nearer NYU. This triggered our decision to marry regardless of his family, his scholarship—regardless of anything and anybody. Mohammed reasoned that if we kept it a secret from his fellow Arab students, the family back in Damascus would not find out until he was ready to break the news to them gradu-

ally. I wasn't too happy or convinced about the need for all this secrecy, but I went along with it.

First, we applied for a marriage license in New Jersey. I had not brought any proof of age with me, and to my surprise we were flatly turned down. The official refused to believe I was of age and warned me that Muslims could marry four wives. I insisted truthfully that I was twenty-two, but he was adamant and told me he could not authorize such a terrible mistake. We were insulted and decided to be better prepared next time.

The following day, I brought along my driving license, and we applied in New York City. Everything went smoothly, and we planned to marry without any fuss at city hall. But this was before my mother got into the act. She was incredibly understanding and supportive of our marriage even though she knew from the first—as did I—that Mohammed would be going back to Syria and that I would be going with him. Her only objection was to an impersonal city hall wedding. She told me she hoped I would not be the third generation in the family to marry without any friends or relatives present. My mother and both grandmothers had eloped, and all three couples had found some minister or other to marry them. In each case, the minister's wife was the sole witness.

"Why not get married at home?" said my mother.

Mohammed and I loved the idea and felt that this would be a much more auspicious beginning to our life together. We set the date for August 24th and, in contradiction to all Western wedding traditions, we went shopping together to buy my wedding dress. Instead of a traditional wedding gown, we chose a simple sleeveless red and white silk dress from Lord and Taylor. Mohammed would be looking elegant, as always, in his best suit.

Mother prepared a festive wedding dinner, but Mohammed and I couldn't eat a bite. I remember someone asked him to make a toast (with juice!), and he said some romantic and poetic words in Arabic and then translated them to the delight and merriment of my two younger sisters. My grandmother was present, as well as Margaret and Jim Anderson, good friends of ours. Margaret made the wedding cake, and she and her husband were our witnesses. We were married in the parlor, and Mohammed put his unique touch to the service. Every time Judge McCormack asked Mohammed a question, he looked at me lovingly and said "Surely" instead of "I do". At the end of the service the judge asked him if he would say "I do" just once, and he said yet again "Surely!"

The moment the judge pronounced us man and wife, my youngest sister, Jan, said, "I don't believe it! Do it again!"

Then my grandmother cornered Mohammed and told him how lucky he was to get the best catch among her three granddaughters, as if his only choice of a bride

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could be from the Rippey sisters! I'm afraid my sisters overheard, but they were used to Grandma Rippey and her tactless tongue.

Finally, it was time to go. My sisters showered us with confetti, and sister Jo offered to drive us down to the George Washington Bridge. We got a lot of friendly stares and smiles that night on the subway since our faces were radiantly happy and our clothes were sprinkled with confetti.

So, I had no elaborate wedding, no wedding gown and no honeymoon. What I did have is the most important thing for any bride—the right man. For eight days, I was the happiest woman in the world.

But nine days after our wedding, Mohammed set off with four of his friends on a car journey to Oklahoma! I can laugh about it now, but at the time it was no joke. I bitterly called it his “bachelor honeymoon.” The five young Arabs drove off to attend the annual meeting of all the OAS chapters in the United States, which was held in Stillwater, Oklahoma that year. I'd known for months that Mohammed planned to make this trip, but when the departure date turned out to be just a few days after our wedding, I thought he would change his mind and not go. But he went. He said if he didn't go it would look very suspicious to his friends: they would guess we'd been married, and then the news might filter back to his family. The trip was supposed to last ten days but turned out to be fifteen days, some of the longest days of my life.

At the time I was very upset, but, in retrospect, I can see how important this convention was to Mohammed. It was a great opportunity for meeting and sharing ideas with other students from various Arab countries. These Arabs studying in America were the elite young people of the Arab world and would, in the future, form an “old boy” (and “girl”) connection. Many of them would become prominent leaders in their countries: cabinet ministers, bankers, doctors, engineers and businessmen, and the friendships formed when they were students would endure.

The meeting only lasted three days, but the trip there and back by car took twelve. Mohammed's friends were determined to see everything they possibly could along the way. They told me later, after they found out that Mohammed had just been married when the trip began, that they finally understood his strange behavior on the way back. They say he sat in the car with a map on his knees and a ruler and a pencil in his hands, plotting the shortest route to New York City from wherever they happened to be. They claim he hardly looked at the scenery and couldn't understand his odd behavior. “What's your hurry,” they would ask him. “Do you miss your studies so much? Enjoy the trip!”

Every day he sent me a postcard with quaint romantic and flowery messages addressed to “Lulu”, his pet name for me to this day: “Lulu, my darling, I am remembering you in every step and wishing you were with me. – Lulu, my beloved, I am coming in a few days with my half heart to find the other half. – When I saw this waterfall I remembered your love which is flowing like this water from your golden heart.

– Don't think that I forgot you for one single minute. – Ask the silver moon about me, the man who loves you forever and ever. – I swear that I love you, and believe me that I wish I didn't go on this trip. Please forgive me, I was really wrong. – Lulu, my spirit, heart and mind, I am trying to make my friends drive quickly so I can see my love soon. Last night I couldn't sleep, not one second. I missed you and your blue eyes. – My beloved Lulu, I hope I will be in New York with you as soon as possible. All have become angry at me because I have tried to make them drive back fast."

Today the messages sound very loving, but they didn't mollify me at the time. Four days before he got back, he telephoned, and I cried. I also said some angry things, but my anger evaporated when he walked in the door.