

A Thousand Sighs, and a Sigh:

An Arab American Education

1. Openings

Beginnings

Here I start and, since I am the one writing here, I will begin this my way (since, of course, that's the best way):

Bismillah ar-Rahman ar Rahim;

which means:

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate;

and is the way any account is Supposed To Begin.

And having a simple way of beginning, a formulaic one, if you will, saves some troubles. I set myself a task: make sense of contradictions and explain myself to me. But to do that, I

realized, I needed to understand the parts that make me. If I were to do that well, I decided that I wanted to explain ourselves to us and asked everyone who we were and everything seemed endlessly complicated. Every beginning led to another tale, every answer another question.

Where to begin? is just the first of those questions. Should I start at some randomly chosen day in my life or at the time of some great epiphany? Should I start with my birth or my earliest childhood memories? And, when I've shared that, paste together those other remembered things ...

Or should I begin with some intricate formula: perhaps, I'll set the tone by beginning each section with a new letter like so:

“A: am Amina Abdallah Arraf, an Arab and an American. All along are adventures and amusements Amina asks an audience's attention and Amina articulates Arab activities and American assimilation. Amina arrived at Atlanta after awesome adventures around Aleppo ...”

But other people have done that sort of writing better than I have and, amusing though it might be, it's not exactly the most natural way of writing (and not all 'A's are A's; some are alifs, others are ayns ... and so on).

Or I could start by simply giving the basic stats of myself, like you'd find on a baseball card, in a résumé, or in a personal ad:

“Amina Abdallah Arraf, Syrian-American Muslim Princess, born Staunton, Virginia, October 1975. Father: Abdallah Ismail Arraf, Syrian Arab. Mother: Caroline McClure Arraf, American Christian by birth. Second of four children. Lived in Damascus, Syria (1976-1982), Riverport, Virginia (1982-1991), Lilburn, Georgia (1991-1999), Chicago, Illinois (1999-2002), Atlanta, Georgia (2002- present). Married in Damascus, 1999. BA, MA from Georgia State University ... devout Muslim, geek, perpetually confused ... I love Hank, Marcel, Dolly and

Fayrouz and I have Shakira on my iPod ... I like watching NASCAR and parsing Hadith and you can take me to meet your Jiddu or your Daddyjack ...”

But, while giving the facts in reasonable order, does it say anything, really?

Perhaps, then, we can start this account as though it were a fairy tale; “Once upon a time, there lived ...” or “Kan wa ma kan”; it was and it wasn’t” ...

But this isn’t a fairy tale or an Arabian night’s tale; instead, what I’ve written down is a “True History”, of everything that happened (and most of it is true) with only minor embellishments, confluations, name-changes (to protect the guilty), and a few event made up out of whole cloth (do recall that I – as well as some others involved -- am an Arab and, if you’ve read much of the current, how shall we say it, more ‘Orientalist’ press, you’ll know that it’s axiomatic that Arabs are unreliable and prone to lie (if not to lie prone), so, if you buy that whole reasoning – and why not? It is the dominant paradigm – you’ll expect me to lie at every turn. I won’t but what’ll it matter? And the rest of us come ultimately from Ireland ...and there are other stereotypes there that invalidate our truths).

It’s a true story told here, more or less, so, to my eternal regret, a fairy tale beginning won’t do ...

Instead, perhaps, I could begin at the very beginning, “The Earth cooled, the Dinosaurs lived and, then, an asteroid wiped them out, etc.” or, if you prefer, “God created the Heavens and the Earth ...” But both those seem a little impersonal, regardless of the presence of a Deity.

So, instead, in the manner of an old chronicle, I want to begin by talking of ancestors and such. I’ll show how my two sides diverged and, then, how they rejoined to form me.

Family matters

Where do you begin in tracing family matters? Do you start from the beginning? It would, I suppose, be easy enough; I've relatives on each side that can recite the names of ancestors (some real, some who probably never lived at all) all the way back to Noah and the Flood ...

And, I suppose, that would make a good enough starting point; after all, my father's family got off the boat and went one way, my mother's the other: Shem and Japheth, both determined to keep down Ham and his descendants, right? That's what I've heard when Muhammad Speaks ...

But, what would be the point?

If I look in an older book, I'd see that my mother's people could trace through long lists of strange names; there are other ones that dispute those accounts of Brutus and Hiscion and so on and talk about Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures, leading to the Wessex Culture as well as North British Picts and so on for my mother's tribe while others dispute that my father's tribe descended from Father Abraham and speak of mercantile elites descended from nomads. And those books that rely on the facts of archaeology and history usually don't give very many names so they aren't much use for those who'd research their own family trees.

All those mountains of facts will tell you what, exactly?

They were born, they lived, they died ... and what does that show? It explains nothing, reveals nothing and says only that we have ancestors and we're related to other people. That you and I are probably cousins somehow and that you have other cousins and, if you traced far

enough back, you could show that everyone of us was endlessly related and that we were all cousins and what would it matter?

No more digressions ... let me begin!

Mother's Family: An American Tale

My mother's family is a long time in America, far longer than my father's. They are that sort of people whom, when you say 'American' to a lot of people around the world, comes first to mind: white, fair-skinned, lots of blue eyes, plenty of blonds (though with a red head or two as well as plenty of brunettes); English-speaking from as long as anyone recalls; whatever relatives are on the other side of the ocean long since forgotten so 'ethnicity' beyond American is theoretical. British with a trace of German, Protestant and so on ... So I'll start with them.

And, for some of my readers, there's will be a familiar story of old white America, redneck America if you want to be rude about it. I owe have my make-up to these people yet I am a Muslim which sets me apart from them. This is the Red America half of me comes from but my banner is green.

Or maybe not. Maybe half of me is from here and everything else is confusion between those two sides, the stranger and the native, the believer and the infidel.

So, I should speak of them plainly and with respect. Now, I've heard my Syrian father claim that my mother's family was still swinging from trees while his ancestors were building cities and writing books so that might have something to do with it; if you're brachiating through

the jungles of Scotland, it's hard to pause and write down your family tree ...

So, that's where they began and got the name McClure: it's supposed to be from Gaelic and means 'son of the Pale Youth' so, I suppose, I must have had an ancestor known as the Pale Youth; living in the west of Scotland, getting that nickname would take some doing so I'm going to assume that this fellow must've been either an albino or about as close as you can get. Certainly, had he gone visiting my father's kin, he'd've gotten sunburn so, I think, it's safe to assume he was solidly a redneck ...

Anyhow, one of this Pale Youth's descendants went from western Scotland bound for Ireland in 1608 to join in the Plantation of Ulster. The Catholic nobles who'd been fighting the English had all run off to Spain and forfeited their lands so the English government determined that settling the Northwest of Ireland with hardnosed, hardheaded Scots Presbyterians would bring peace to an unsettled land (and, like a lot of British government schemes, that one went so very well ... but that's another story, not mine). So, anyway, John McClure and his family joined Montgomeries and Pattons at the point of the Protestant sword and went off to begin farming just outside the town of Raphoe in County Donegal; when I was in high school, I went there looking for them ... and found not much at all.

Of course, Ireland wasn't exactly peaceful so these McClures spent most of the rest of the century fighting Catholics and trying to make it, reproducing and growing ever more numerous. Eventually, crops failed and some of these transient Scottish Presbyterians decided to move on from Ireland. Some had gone ahead and wrote back about the wonderful land beyond the sea. So, in 1730, Halbert and Elizabeth McClure took their children and what little they had and headed down the valley from Raphoe to Londonderry, got on a ship and left the waters of Lough Foyle for Philadelphia.

In the year 1742, Halbert, his wife, and their son, James, arrived in the Parish of Augusta in the Dominion of Virginia and set out to build themselves a cabin and all of that. There, between the Blue Ridge and the Allegheny, they would prosper for more than two hundred years. The whole land soon filled up with others who'd come over from Ireland along with a few English and Germans.

The Presbyterians built themselves a fine stone church and when, a little later, the French and their Indian allies came down from over the hills, James (who was now grown up) holed up in it and fought them off.

It's still there; there're family graves near it and I, the head-scarfed Muslim descendant, go there when I can.

And, when I do, I think of how I'd like to see this place one day: it is built of bluish limestone, sits on a hill and is strong as a fort, built for ages. Sometimes, I imagine it redone in some future day, a day when all the distant cousins who still farm around here or work in one of the towns slowly growing closer will believe as I do ... and my Christian ancestors will rest outside their descendants mosque. And, when I think of that, I'm happy; I believe that, someday, all these hills will be home to a circumcised nation when, in the fullness of time, all America comes to accept Islam

But I digress. I was speaking of my Presbyterian ancestors. They stayed in the Valley, generation to generation: they went over the Blue Ridge and fought at Yorktown (earning me the right to be in the DAR); though they owned no slaves (not from any principle but because, like most of this family before and since, they didn't own much of anything) and probably were opposed to secession, but, when Virginia left the Union, so did my McClure ancestor. He joined up with a unit of his fellows that quickly picked up the name of its commander and was called

the Stonewall Brigade; Jackson marched them up and down the Valley, over it and up to Sharpsburg and Gettysburg. When the war was over, he returned to a ruined land; the North had fought a total war in the Valley, burning all the fields of wheat and all the barns so, presumably, the McClures had to spend a good while rebuilding and getting back together but still hung on.

And more time passes but no one goes far.

Now, we leave archival stuff and come into the realm of memory; my civil war ancestor, Ephraim, named his son after his old commander and he named his the same: Thomas Jackson McClure I & II. Tommy Number II was, from what I've been told, a big strapping man who'd run wild as a youth but, when he had gotten a few years on him, attended a revival meeting and heard the altar call. He responded and soon joined up with a Methodist Church. He took 'the Pledge' and never drank another drop but threw himself into his godly activities whenever his farm would allow him.

Tommy was quite fervent in attending tent revivals and would sometimes travel to nearby towns. One of these took him all the way into the next county. There, he met a young woman who'd also been caught up in the fervor. She, though, wasn't Scotch-Irish or even English at all but was from a family of Mennonites. Her people had been Amish but, in time, had left them. Now, they farmed west of little town called Dayton. Anyway, this woman, Barbara Stoltzfus, was tall and blonde and, even if her clothing was plain, immediately caught Tommy's eye. He talked to her and soon began courting her. Her family was none too pleased by the attentions she was getting from outside their community but, Tommy was still a good Christian man and Barbara was quite headstrong so, she broke with her family and married him and became a Methodist.

Barbara McClure wasn't the last headstrong rebellious woman in this story; her

descendants count more than one, I think, women who went off and did what their families wouldn't have wanted, women of courage and strength. She did, I've been told, have a trace of a sort of dutchified English common among Mennonites and Amish back then even when she was old ... she lived to be quite old, almost ninety, and outlived two of her own children and almost met me. I think, sometimes, I must have inherited some traits from her, even if not her particular faith.

Anyway, Barbara and Tommy settled down on his farm and set about raising corn and cattle, chickens and vegetables. She would bake lots of pies – especially the Shoo fly pie she'd brought with her from her own people – and so on and so forth. They had four children in quick succession; another Thomas, Vincent, Frances, and Robert. When war came, Tommy stayed home despite his own wishes. Afterwards, the children collected pennies and helped their parents make relief packages for the starving, suffering children in far off and exotic places with names like Beirut, Damascus and Aleppo.

Thomas, who was called Stony, was the oldest; when his father died, he took over the farm and carried it on before passing it on to his son, another Thomas (or Chip), who farms it still. Vincent left home early, moved to Richmond, and, after several missteps, died there in 1970. Neither of them plays too much a role in this story so we can move on.

Frances was always called Minnie – I have no idea why; no one has ever been able to quite explain it – but she always thought one of her brothers had given it. She was an odd one, perhaps, for her generation. She married three times: the first one never came home from the Pacific, the second one took off after some tremendous fight in the 1950's, the third died from a heart attack. All were gone before I was born. She had no children of her own but took in her brother's kids and his kids' kids. She taught high school and wrote letters to the local paper and

taught her students that segregation was wrong; the Klan burned a cross in front of her house so she moved to a new school and a new town. When I was young, I wanted to be like her; maybe, I am?

Robert, her brother, was a drunk according to Minnie; my mother denies it but it explains a lot. Robert Lee McClure, as he was legally known, or “Sleepy” as his friends called him, grew up on a farm near a little Virginia town in a conservative pious environment, discovered that he liked the bottle, a lot, and passed on his screwed up genes to us.

He wasn't a perpetual drunk though and went through long periods of sobriety, like when he got married to our grandmother. He had two sons, Robert Lee McClure, Jr. (“Buck” as they called him) and Charles David (“Dave”) and then, December 9, 1941, left them behind and volunteered for the US army, landed at Omaha Beach and, late in 1945, came back from Europe, found his wife and two little sons waiting for him, had another child, Caroline Anne, my mother...and everything was supposed to be happily ever after.

Buck was the model child: Eagle Scout, baseball star and, when he was eighteen, he went off to West Point and everyone was so proud. His father put a picture of the son he was proudest of up on the dashboard of his truck and endlessly bragged about him. He'd stayed sober all this time but ...

One day, men came to their little wooden house and told Sleepy and Ruth McClure that their eldest son had been killed in Southeast Asia ... and Sleepy McClure went out and got good and drunk and came home and yelled at his wife and his daughter in high school and cursed his living son for going to college and graduate school, skipping the draft and not backing up his brother ... and never quite sobered up ever again after that.

A week or two later, he drove his truck off the old highway going over the Blue Ridge;

he was supposed to be heading towards Charlottesville ... and, when his truck was found, he was already dead. It was listed as an accident; back before they built the interstate over Afton Mountain that happened a lot. It still does. But, though he left no note, I'm sure he killed himself; he'd gone through Rockfish Gap a thousand times before ...

I don't know if he knew that Viet Cong or whatever hadn't killed his son; Uncle Buck got fragged. Apparently, the soldiers with him didn't really care for the all American Boy Scout ... or, at least, that's what my cousin Rob told me when I asked him. He says he heard that from his father who ... Though, I'm not so certain ... it was the summer of 1967, what the media calls the Summer of Love that year, and fragging didn't get common until later ... at least not from what I can find ...

But if it is true, if I start there, with the drunken father killing himself and the son being killed by his own men, I could look at how that doubly screwed up everyone who survived; maybe, it's that moment, that summer of love where everything really gets started, not just for the Seed of Sleepy but for another family ...

So, Virginia, summer 1967:

My other uncle had gotten married, got his doctorate, had a son and was off on his first teaching job at a third rate state university. Within two years, he had a son named Rob after our dead uncle, the same one who says he's named after an officer who was fragged; their mother died within a week from a hemorrhage that would have been staunched had they not been in the back of beyond of North Carolina, way up in the Smokies, somewhere near the University of Rocky Top. So, they had a triple tragedy, brother, father, and wife to deal with and two little sons ... so Charles moved back home to Riverport, got a job teaching in one of the colleges and let his sons run wild ...

My mother was a lot younger that summer and she was just finishing high school, dreaming of college, with a year to go, when she lost her brother and her father ... and Caroline's mother sat silently, mourning them both, staring out the window and over the rolling hills and pastures towards the blue mountains on the horizon and barely noticed that her daughter was even there.

So, Caroline moved into town at seventeen and lived with her father's maiden sister ... and they'd sit up at night, niece and aunt, wondering why; Minnie encouraged Caroline to think out answers for herself and not just take those that were given her, whether by her teachers or by the minister at the white clapboard church down the street. So, Caroline read and questioned and wondered ... and eventually, went off looking for answers and found them in a new faith and married into it ... and wound up back in Riverport with a bunch of non-English-speaking kids ...

and everything twists and turns and comes back around and those deaths of people we never knew haunt us in our generation (and I know that my brother is named after both the same uncle as my cousin and after another uncle who died around the same time on another battlefield; more twists, more turns).

Father's Family: An Arabian Tale

The way to begin this history of my father's family is by reading al-Fatiha:

“Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim, al hamdullilahi rabbi'l alamin, al Rahman al Rahim, maliki Yum al Din; iyyaka na'budu wa iyyaka nasta'in. Ihdina al Sirat al mustaqim. Sirat al

ladhina an 'amta 'alayhim ghayril maghdubi 'alayhim wa lad dalin. Ameen."

This is the touchstone and the key. Then, I can begin to sing of myself.

Let it be clear and written down on the next line:

I am an Arab, I am a Muslim, and I can never deny that.

Having done that, then I should make clear how our family begins: how our ancestor was an infamous persecutor of Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and the Companions but, when he was told that his sister had become a Muslim, he went to her and took the Surat she was reading and recited it:

“Ta Ha! 'O beloved! We sent not this Quran upon you that you may be put to trouble. Yes, as an admonition to him who fears. A sent down by Him who has made the earth and the high heavens. He, the Most Affectionate, is established on the Throne (Befitting to His Dignity).”

And he saw the beauties of the religion there and then and testified that he had become a Muslim and was, after that, the greatest of the Companions of the Prophet, so much so that, after that, he was no longer known as Omar ibn al-Khattab ibn Nufail ibn 'Abdu'l-'Uzza ibn Riyah ibn Qart ibn Razah ibn 'Adi ibn Ka'b ibn Lu'ayy ibn Ghalib ibn Quraish but as Omar al-Farouq, the Distinguisher (between truth and falsehood).

Then, I should tell some of the other famous stories about him, about all the battles he fought to help spread Islam and how he liberated Jerusalem and dealt justly with all the people that were living there, invited the Jews who had been sorely persecuted by the Romans to return and the pact he made with the Christians and how he would not pray in the Church even though it was time to and so many other famous things.

Then, after this, I might make mention of how he was murdered by the Persian slave of

Ali ibn Abu Talib but only after he had spread the religion to all Syria, Iraq al-Arab and Egypt as that might serve as foreshadowing. Next, I might talk about all our famous ancestors down through the ages and of how I am a Daughter of Quraish, of Bani Adi, of al-Umari, al-Farouqi, and so many other notable names.

Then, in best Bedouin style, I might make a list like this of my ancestors, perhaps chanting it like a mu'addan might:

Amina bint Abdallah ibn Ismail ibn Musa ibn Muhammad ibn Arraf ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Ahmed ibn Jamal ad-Din ibn Muhammad ibn Omar ibn Salim ibn Abdallah ibn Hisham ibn Omar ibn Abdul Nasser ibn Amr ibn Abdul Qadr ibn Yahya ibn Ibrahim ibn Omar ibn Abdallah ibn Hassan ibn Ibrahim ibn Tariq ibn Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Musa ibn Ismail ibn Omar ibn Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Jibreel ibn Adel ibn Salim ibn Abdallah ibn Omar ibn Hisham ibn Ahmed ibn Abdul Rahim ibn Qusai ibn Amr ibn Muhammad ibn Yahya ibn Abdallah ibn Omar ibn Abdallah ibn Salim ibn Abdullah ibn Omar ibn al-Khattab.

Then, after that, I could write about some of these distinguished ancestors and their deeds. I'd also write down some other stories of the families we are related to, of how our great-grandmother was Cherkessk and how her family fled the persecutions of the Tsar, and so on down to the recent past and then write about how our family was affected by all the upheavals of the past ninety years. Write about how our grandfather saw the French overthrow the Arab kingdom and how my father saw the French go and write about how his brother, Amr, was killed by the Israelis when the Lion refused to roar. Then, I might write about how they came under false guises and persecuted the Muslims here and we had to flee to America. Write all this down as a way to begin. That's what I could do.

Or, I could write as a way to brag about past glories, rattling off the names of the villages

my grandsire and his grandsire before him had the rent from or the wealth they gathered and nicknames they earned back in feudal times, times that only ended fully when my father was a boy. But what good does that do except to bore?

And, maybe, if I am writing in this format, among these famous stories told a thousand times before and better, I could also tell some of those that aren't quite so well known. I could write about how the fathers and brothers and husbands made the decisions for the women of this family without asking them, of how they were made to marry men they didn't love and abandon men they did. I could start with our many times great aunt Hafsah and how her father put his love for the Prophet above whatever love he had for his own daughter and spoke harshly to her. Then tell of all the generations that came and went of all the bartered brides and all the men that struck them, about how it is related that Omar argued with Muhammad (peace be Upon Him) that striking one's wife ought not be a crime and the cursed legacy our ancestor gave us.

Or, I could write about the ones that refused the husbands chosen for them and the ones who took off their veils, the ones who refused to be submissive and the ones who were like Hind bint Utbah and were even fiercer than the men.

And, if I tell all this, of how, in spite of being a distinguished and ancient family, still many of the women were beat down and had their happiness denied, then when I come down to the present day, then all the truths of our lives will be revealed, of how we must choose between honor and happiness and how some of us were broken and of how I escaped.

Father's People: Life in the Dream Palace

When the long Nineteenth Century ended, my father's people were living in Damascus as they had done for centuries. Over time, the city rose and fell and rose and fell but still abided. But life for my people stayed much the same generation to generation; the life of 1870 wasn't so different from 1770 or 1570 (and even 1570 wasn't that different from 770 or 570); sometimes, Damascus, or Sham as we call it sometimes, is like a dreaming city that hasn't awakened from a long dream of ten thousand years.

My great-grandfather at that time was accorded the seventh richest man in the City and had a magnificent old house to prove it (built, if I remember rightly, around the time Saladin was ruling there); it still stands and still belongs to us, though little else does.

Outside, this house was almost featureless, save for the alternating rows of black and white stone and tiny windows with little wooden screens. The walls were thick, built in the old style as a way to stay cool, there on the edge of the desert. Inside were rooms upon rooms, all surrounding a lush garden centered round a fountain. Each room was filled with richly woven carpets, hangings and paintings, carved and inlaid furniture ... old books written by hand filled much of one room ... the kitchens were immense and had their own vast oven. Huge jars filled with oil and all the other produce of the land filled rooms. Everywhere, in those days, there were members of the family, servants and hanger-ons. Some of the servants had been slaves not that long before; some of those slaves, in days that weren't yet forgotten, had been brought from the south and were dusky-skinned like the folk of the Zanj. Others had been brought from the north and still had the look of those lands.

I have a picture of my great grandfather, Hajj Musa Muhammad Bey. It must have been taken some time around 1890 or so and was placed in a gilt frame not long after. He sits by

himself in a magnificently carved chair. On his head, a fez sits at a jaunty angle with a tassel suspended to the left. He is wearing a western style suit, vest and pocket watch and all, and has a thick, waxed mustache. His photograph could be that of any local gentry across the empire of his time, taken anywhere from Basra to Sarajevo.

Hajj Musa collected the wealth of dozens of villages; I have heard he held the leases for something like 20,000 dunams of farmland. He also had mills, shops, and other properties and had, I believe, invested a great deal in the Hijaz Railway. So, for all this wealth, he (and his father and his grandfather before him) had never done a bit of work; rather, he was what one would call an almost feudal lord. If there was 'work' that they did in that family in those days, beyond collecting rents, they were judges and jurists, experts on the law which their ancestors had done so much to write in the first place. Did the wealth from those rents allow them to be judges and preachers, muftis and imams? Or did those positions allow them to accumulate lands? I have my own suspicion.

When he was a young man, Hajj Musa Muhammad had married his uncle's daughter as such was the tradition in those days. She gave him three daughters and a son who had a weak heart and died before he had even learned to pray. Hajj Musa grew angry with her and refused to touch her. But he did not leave her for she was his kinswoman and he could no more put her out than he could put out one of his daughters.

Instead, he looked at one of the servants in the house and laughed and joked with her. She, he thought, was of strong spirit and had great beauty. She told him her name was Nashqua; he said that sounded strange to him. So, she told him her story:

Nashqua had been born far away in the north, in a green and mountainous land where the women were beautiful and the men all brave and strong. And they had lived there since before

time began, on the slopes of Caucasus, under a sky that stretched away forever to the North. But, then, the Christians had come down from the farthest north and the Tsar had ordered all the Muslims driven forth. So, Nashqua had fled along with her family down from the mountains and to the coast of the sea. Behind them, their home and those of all their people were burning; before them was nothing but exile. So they had run.

And the Sultan had sent ships to fetch them, remembering once in his centuries long sleep that he was also Caliph and friend to all Muslims. He had sent some of these Circassians to all parts of his realm. Nashqua and her mother and her brothers and sisters had come, penniless, to Damascus and found themselves in this dry, brown land, so much hotter and stranger than home; their father had been left behind with others from their clan, killed by the Tsar's brutal warriors, buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in that sad land.

Now, Hajj Musa tried to take Nashqua to his bed for she enraptured him. She refused him, saying that, though she was a servant now, she had been born free in her own land and was of an ancient noble lineage; if he would have her, he would need first to ask for her hand and do all things properly. She was no slave and would be no man's doxy.

And, despite himself, Hajj Musa did as she asked for this young girl from a strange land had stolen his heart. He couldn't think of anything save her strange gray eyes and pale skin, her thick dark curls and the shape of her. So, he went to her brothers who were little more than boys and were themselves barely more than beggars and asked them for her hand. Then, he went with her to a qadi who was his cousin and they were wed.

Now, Hajj Musa had two wives and the older one hated the younger for she saw how a servant had displaced her in her own home ... and, where she was descended from nobles and famous men going back centuries, with the blood of Caliphs and Conquerors in her veins, the

other wife had come penniless from a barbarous land. And the house was filled with tension. And the tension never left; years later, her kinsmen and her daughters descendants still nursed grievance.

But Nashqua, or Najah as she was now called for it was easier on the tongue, soon gave Hajj Musa a son and then another shortly after that. And her sons and her daughters were healthy and clever and were the delight of their aged father's eyes. Now, Nashqua the Cherkes refugee was called Umm Ismail for she had given birth to the son of the house. And this name seemed most appropriate for they all recalled our ancestor of the same name and his humble birth to a serving woman.

When the Kaiser visited Damascus alongside the Turkish Sultan, my Great Grandfather posed in pictures with them; on the wall in his house, there is still a picture of him looking stern in his fez and western suit as he stands with the two emperors in a crowd of dignitaries. Life seemed good then; the provinces ruled from Damascus – what they called the Bilad-i-Sham (Land of Sham) – were prospering in 1898. The Germans and the other Franks were all investing heavily in a land reawakening from a slumber.

And, then, everything changed. First, revolution – and the Sultan was no longer real ruler but, instead, there were Young Turks who wished, it seemed, to move away from Islam and away from Arabic. Then came war; the Caliph of Islam, Sultan of the Turks, Commander of the Faithful and Qayzar-i-Rum sided with the other two Kaisers in Vienna and Berlin against Tsars, Franks, and English.

Musa and Nashqua's eldest son, Ismail, volunteered as soon as he could to defend his land against the Christian invasion; his mother had often told him tales of what manner of beast served the Tsar and what sort of savagery they would doubtless inflict upon any Muslim that fell

into their hands. But, instead of sending him north to meet that enemy, the Enemy whose blood Ismail dreamt of drinking in vengeance for the grandfather they'd slain, Enver Pasha's officials felt it better to send him south to meet the enemy coming up out of Egypt.

As he was of an old family, Ismail Bey was made an officer of horse though he was only twenty two. He rode south with other sons of the old families of Damascus and their servants, down past Mount Hermon and the Sea of Galilee, through Jerusalem, praying at the Mosque of Omar (where they recalled Ismail's ancestor who'd liberated it a thousand two hundred seventy nine years before and traded verses), and on to Gaza. From there, it was off to the Front.

All them with him were in high spirits; they laughed about what they would do when they liberated Cairo, whether they would go first to al Azhar or see the Pharaoh's pyramids. Like endless travelers before them, they spoke of the fleshpots of Egypt with envy. They spoke of how the Christians would collapse before them, how the Egyptians would welcome them as liberators when they cast off the English Yoke ...

But they'd never make it. Instead, on the banks of the Canal, the British army met them, held them, and pushed them back ... and Ismail, in his very first battle, caught a bullet with his thigh.

He lived; but Ismail's war was over. Instead, he returned home and watched mutely as campaigns went on without him, leaning on the cane he'd always walk with, as the tides of war rose and fell. The streets of Damascus became filled with refugees from the north; Muslims fleeing the Russians, as Ismail would expect, and others, Christians but Christians of the Empire, fleeing from the Turks and Kurds up by the front.

And Ismail began to question the rightness of the war. He gave money to the Armenians when he saw them and wondered how someone supposed to be the Commander of the Faithful

could let such things happen. And he began to think that, perhaps, the problem wasn't so much the invaders but those who had invaded long before; the Turks had been a yoke on the Arabs for too long and, now, they were abandoning Islam and talking of sacrifices needed to free the Turks of the East rather than defending Islam ...

So, Ismail began meeting now and then with other young men who had similar thoughts and arguing with his father about what use there was in fighting for a state that cared more for Turks in China than for the Arabs or the Religion. And his father scorned these ideas, saying that talk of an Arab nation was treason and was a dream of the Christians, not fit for Muslims. But Ismail grew closer to those who spoke of a reborn Syria ...

But all he did was talk, even when the Governor hung some of the young men for dreaming of a day without the Turks.

And, then, on the Plain of Armageddon, the Turkish army was destroyed; barely had the news sunk in than foreign soldiers entered Damascus. The next day, October 1, 1918, in came Arab soldiers, proclaiming that they were there to establish an Arab kingdom ... and my grandfather was thrilled, rushing to join them. He and his friends were ecstatic that, finally, an Arab ruler from the House of Hashim had come. The future seemed, after the devastation of the war, bright; a new dawn for Syria and the Arabs had come.

In that same year, Ismail's father died and he became head of the family. Walking on his cane, he surveyed the wreckage and looked to the future. King Faysal sat with him and took his counsel as Ismail sat with those other notables from Damascus along with the army officers, Hijazis, nationalists and such who gathered round the new king.

But this idyll wasn't to last; after less than two years, the dream was over. The French came from the West and Ismail Bey leaned on his cane and watched the little army head off to

meet them. Outnumbered, they were slaughtered by the French, even though daughters of Damascus had rushed to the Kingdom's defense. The king and many of Ismail's friends fled to Baghdad or south to Amman; my grandfather stayed behind to tend his own lands. And to try to survive the alien rule.

The French didn't take his wealth or his patrimony. But they imposed new ways and new laws. And, so, the notables gathered quietly and whispered and, before long, the people rebelled and the French shelled Damascus, destroying parts of Ismail's house. But, he rebuilt and went on.

One evening, they tell me, Ismail was sitting in a café with some of his friends, discussing politics and the future of the nation and all such things over tea and coffee and tobacco. Among the group gathered that night was a recently married teacher and the two of them were deep in conversation. In rushed another man, the teacher's much younger brother.

"Come home, come quickly! Our sister needs you!" he insisted, though the older brother was reluctant to break off conversation.

So, Ismail accompanied him, leaning heavily on his cane as they moved as fast as they could, deep in conversation, to the teacher's home. There, they found his sister, nearly shaking with rage and asked what had happened.

"At twilight," she said, "I was walking home, down our own street, and a French gendarme saw me and began to call out to me; 'Fatima, Fatima, show me your charms!' But I ignored him and he followed me, saying all manner of things. I was almost before the door and he accosted me, grabbed my veil and pulled it off!"

"In our own street?" he brother said and shook with anger.

"Yes, yes," she explained. "It was so ... "

And she spoke long about how she had been attacked. And Ismail and her brother listened as she said that, if she would choose to go unveiled in the street, that would be her choice but never that of the Franks. The three of them sat there, talking long into the night about this outrage and how another rebellion was needed and what would happen when the Franks were expelled.

And, when it was nearly dawn, she said how she wondered whether after this disgrace any man would ever consider her.

Then, Ismail laughed and said, “where is your father?”

She asked him why and he said that he wanted to ask for her hand. She smiled and said that she wanted him to do so.

And less than a month after that day, Ghada bint Hassan and Ismail ibn Musa went before the Qadi and swore out the wedding contract, though she was barely more than a child and he was already nearly into mid-life. From that day, theirs was always a solid enough union; Ghada was considered clever and well-read – for a woman in those days – and, despite having an education, she stuck a bit longer to the old ways. The photographs from those days show her dressed in almost western clothes but still wearing the veil for at least a few more years.

Soon, they began having children: Musa, Omar, Abdallah, Amr, Hani, and Hamza were their sons, Zainab, Lena, and Ibtisam were their daughters. Musa, who was the firstborn, died when he was still a baby; the others save one are still alive.

And, when the French left, after again shelling the city, these children waved them off ... and new times seemed to be ahead. Damascus now ruled a reduced land but, still, the Syrian Republic had a brilliant future. The old families still had their role and most of them were easily elected to the parliament; Ismail Musa Bey took his seat along with the rest, just long enough to

vote for yet another war, one that brought more refugees to Damascus; now, though, they were Palestinians. Ismail was shamed by the failure of the army against the invader; he sold off some of his lands to raise money that he could give as relief, gave space in his house for distant relatives from the South and old business partners until they could find their own way.

And, elsewhere, others thought that the problem, again, wasn't the invader but rather a problem of the government. So, they overthrew the young republic and turned Syria into a dictatorship, ruled forever after by one clique of officers, their children or their friends. And they looked to Russia as a model now, taking the lands of the old families and giving them to those who had worked them for years and never earned a profit or giving them to their own people.

And where his father and his father before him had been great men, now Ismail found himself a pauper, barely able to manage his own house let alone his former estates. Few now used the old titles of respect; no longer was he referred to as bey or pasha and rarely even as effendi. Gone were most of the servants, gone was the gold. But, still, he held on to his house.

Where he had been a gentleman without need for work, now his sons would need to learn trades. Amr went off to the army and trained to be an officer; they always said he'd been the fiercest of them. Though he was only a child, Amr had pledged in 1948 that he would go, personally, to free Palestine and avenge the Arabs or die trying. When he was older and rising through the ranks of the army, the family half-joked, half-whispered that, one day, Amr would be the officer seizing power for himself.

Omar went off to Beirut and trained to be a scholar of the past; he, the family said, was the one when they were young who'd most loved walking through the city and seeing all the places where the heroes of the past had lived. Sometimes, he'd write long poems in the old style;

when his older brother first received a commission, Omar wrote a poem for him hailing him as the new Salah ad-Din.

Hani followed Omar to Beirut and studied medicine while Hamza studied the law in Damascus. Abdallah, though, had a gift for numbers and designs so he began training as an engineer; they say that when he was a child, he was forever building models of things exactly to scale.

Their sisters, meanwhile, went off to University too, leaving the modes of a thousand years behind, just as they now went out in the streets bare-headed. A photograph from those days shows them all, all the brothers and sisters on the Corniche in Beirut, maybe when Omar finished university. The women all have their dark hair piled up and coiffed, their arms and legs bare. Some of the brothers wear sport coats though Amr wears a tie. Omar gazes off in the distance. Looking at them, you might think that this family is from Naples or Barcelona; hardly any of them are those that I recall.

In the university, the sisters found husbands from other old families and settled down in the city; Ibtisam's husband, Muhammad, was a classmate of Abdallah and, later, was an engineer in the Gulf. Lena married 'Adil, a merchant from a family that, though younger than ours, had been wiser in the recent past; somehow, every change of ruler and government always seemed to bring them up a small bit until they owned factories, hotels, and other new things throughout the country. Zeinab, though, married the opposite; her husband, Hassan, was a scholar and a holy man but never a good supporter for he always needed to be right rather than successful. And Hassan was always close to Omar ...

As he was a Sunni and from one of the old families, Amr's advance in the army was slow. Officers who weren't Muslims – Druze and Alawis and Christians, mainly – and who, no

matter what religion they'd been raised, rejected religion, had come to power over army and over state. They said that they were the Party of Rebirth (or Renaissance) – the Hizb al-Bath in Arabic – and claimed that they stood for “Unity, Socialism, Freedom”. But, as often as not in years to come, they would appear to belief in rule by one man, stealing from all, stomping on freedom.

By 1966, Amr had become a lieutenant in command of an artillery barrage on the southwestern border. And there he sat with his soldiers in a strongly built look out post, watching and waiting for the Invader, sometimes sending shells down on them when they violated the ceasefire lines.

When war came the next year; his commander, Hafez al-Assad – literally ‘Guardian of the Lion’ though we used to call him the Lion of Golan – had the radio broadcast that the Heights, al Arraf, had fallen. And there was panic in all the units; some thought that they must be the last unit left and decided that they would do well to flee. Others, though, thought that they would live and die as Arabs and as free men, defending their homeland.

Amr was one of the latter; he and his company stayed and fought when the Israelis came with their planes and tanks. But, they were hopelessly outnumbered and hopelessly outgunned. And they died at their post on Tel Faher, every single one ... heroes, perhaps, maybe even martyrs but definitely dead in a lost war.

And Amr's father who had survived battle himself and watched as other outnumbered armies had been destroyed knew that it was his commander's decision that had failed his son. The Heights there should have been impregnable; only a mad man or a traitor would have pulled troops away and left Amr to die.

And Ismail heart was broken. His living children sat with him as he stared blankly when representatives of the Party appeared. They, the surviving sons felt, had taken their father's lands, his dignity, and his pride in his son. And all of them said nothing. And Ismail lived out the rest of his days in near silent mourning.

Now, Omar Ismail was the oldest of the living sons so he took over his father's house. In those days, he was teaching at the University, teaching about the days of the Prophet and the first Caliphs. And, as he taught and studied these matters, he became convinced more and more that, if the nation was to prosper again, it would need to return to the old ways, the ways of the religion, and abandon all the imported philosophies and corruptions that had grown up. The heathen would need expulsion from government and the state could be reborn. Quietly, he began meeting with others who thought as he did, organized study groups of students to discuss these ideas.

Meanwhile, he married the daughter of one of his colleagues, Saffiyah Abdul Rahman. Saffiyah had stood out from among the girls her age; where others embraced the latest fashions from Paris and Beirut, she steadfastly refused and insisted to dress as a Muslim woman should. They say that, once when she was in school, the teacher objected to her wearing a covering and told her that she must come to school the next day bareheaded or she would be expelled. And when the next day came, all the other girls were covered as well for all stood by her though they didn't share her belief. Others smoked and drank in cafes; she sat at her prayers. And, when she was done with university, she was willing to marry Omar. Together, they'd have many children: Ridwan, Raghad, Rania, Reem, and Ramzi, all born in the house of their ancestors in those years.

Meanwhile, Omar's brother, Abdallah, had finished a degree in hydrological engineering and had been working for some years for the state, helping to plan and build new wells, dams,

and waterlines. He was good at it and only his lack of a membership card in the Bath Party held him back. Omar urged Abdallah to marry but no one took his fancy. Instead, he decided that he would leave Syria and seek further education.

It had been centuries since any of them had traveled beyond the lands of Islam, if not all the way back to the beginning, so this was a bold thing for him. But, he was able to get a visa and set off to enroll at a school with a name that sounded good to him, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, in a Masters program.

The End of the Beginning

When her brother and father died, Caroline McClure was seventeen. Her mother could barely take care of herself or the small country house she'd lived in with her husband. So, Caroline went to live with her great aunt in town. Soon enough, her mother had sold the house and followed, moving into a small apartment by herself.

Caroline meanwhile finished high school and started college. Her plan when she began at Madison College was to be a high school teacher, rather like her aunt and housemate. Caroline was a day student rather than a boarder and, while she was in college, worked as a waitress in one of Riverport's few restaurants.

As a student, Caroline read widely on religion and spirituality and such; I suppose some of that was in the zeitgeist in those years of the Nixon Administration and some of that zeitgeist seeped even into small towns in the hills of Virginia. Then, too, Caroline was, I'm told,

intensely curious and interested in first and last things even before the men in her family started dying.

Somewhere in these years, Caroline decided that she didn't believe in the incarnation and the trinity and quit going to church; her mother was scandalized, her aunt said there was no reason to do something just because that was what was expected of you. Caroline announced she was a Unitarian. Unfortunately, there was no Unitarian Church in those parts so she was a congregation of one.

I suppose she must have dated but no one terribly seriously. She was, I suppose, a rather somber young woman ...

One day, as she was finishing up class work and only had her student teaching left to do, Caroline went to work at the little restaurant she waitressed at. The usual locals of Riverport wandered in, had the usual conversation ... and around lunchtime, in came a familiar face along with two strangers.

She greeted the town's water manager, gave menus to his companions. One, she barely noticed. The other immediately had her full attention. Handsome in a swarthy sort of way with a thick mustache and neat trimmed hair, she could barely keep her eyes off him ... and he of her.

Abe, she learned quickly, was his name; he and the other stranger were engineers in town to look over upgrading Riverport's water and sewers. Dull enough ... but there was something unusual about Abe. He had an accent Caroline had never heard before ...

and over the next few days, he came in with his companion for almost every meal; there were few restaurants in Riverport and that one was closest to the office they were working in.

Caroline made casual conversation with him and, after what seemed forever, he asked her out on a date. And when they went out to see a movie in the next town, they never made it to the

film but sat and talked about God and their older brothers killed in battle five years before. They spoke of dreams and journeys. Abe – whose driver's license read Abdallah Ismail Arraf – described his home in Syria and told her how he'd come to Virginia for a Master's degree then stayed on to learn skills. And, when the evening was over, she refused to kiss him, saying that she wasn't the type of girl who did such things.

And Abdallah realized he'd met the woman of his dreams. As his project was wrapping up, he proposed to her ... and she agreed ...

and, New Year's Day, 1973, they married before a justice of the peace. No one from Abdallah's family was there. From Caroline's, only her aunt and her brother came ... and some in Riverport wondered why even they had come to see her get married to some kind of negro ... Everyone said it would never last.

But it did. They had a daughter late the same year; Caroline stayed home to raise baby Aisha and never, ever used her teaching degree. And, two years after that, they had another daughter, born in the same town that Woodrow Wilson had been born in eighty years earlier ...

And, thus, after however many interminable pages, we reach my own birth (you'll of necessity admit I'm far more concise than Sterne at reaching this point).

2. Sham

October 1975 – March 1982

I am Born

How should I tell it? I don't remember any of it ... but I can say that come October 1975, I came into the world in the usual way, in the hospital down the street from the house where Woodrow Wilson was born, a normal birth unspectacular in any way ... and a seven and a half pound baby girl was taken home and nursed by her mother and watched by her father ... and sometimes I wonder, what would have happened if I had been switched at birth? What if instead of writing down on my birth certificate "Amina Abdallah Arraf", they'd written something more usual for that hospital on that day, something like "Amanda Lynne McClure" that would never have looked odd or been strange ... and would I be anything like myself? Does what we inherit in our blood make us who we are? Or is it what we inherit in other ways from our parents and all the rest in that mountain of names that came before? Would I be writing this, would I be happier or sadder or more confused or less confused if I'd been that Amanda?

Amanda, in my mind, that twin that isn't, would have long golden hair and bright blue eyes ... not hair that's wavy and dark and was always out of control or eyes that are dark. I was the darkest child of my parents; Aisha got brown hair and almost hazel eyes while the two you

haven't met have green eyes and the youngest is really blonde ... but life is unfair and, maybe, if I had looked more like my mother's folk than my father's, I would have been stuck forever somewhere where those marked me as an oddity.

Syria

But my memories haven't yet begun before I leave Virginia for the first time; I'm less than a year old when we leave and go to Damascus.

There's a tradition that, when he was leading caravans north, Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) refused to enter Damascus for he said that it looked to be too much like paradise. Back then, the city must have been just the old city, a sort of gem of a city in the midst of an immense oasis, blooming green in all directions. And, then, the oasis simply stops and desert takes over.

That oasis comes from the Barada river, flowing down from the Lebanese mountains and losing itself in what must once have been marshes. If you are coming into the city from the west or the south, you come up over the mountain of Qaisouyan and suddenly ... you are looking at the city. Nowadays, it's not the wondrous oasis Muhammad must have seen; urban sprawl has eaten up most of the oasis and is even spreading out into stretches of what were once desert. Out that way, the city runs out in poor, refugee camps built for the Palestinians and working class suburbs and, beyond those nowadays, more dusty slums for Iraqi refugees ... but I get ahead of myself.

How can I describe Damascus? In some ways, it is almost like writing about how your own mother looks; you love her and see perfection but could you describe her to the police? Sham is like that ... smell of jasmine in the summer, stone walls blankly looking out on narrow, twisting ancient streets of the old city, new quarters beyond

Our house opens on a narrow alley, in the heart of the Old City, where the sounds of the minarets of the great mosque roll through like gentle breeze. Once, this was a neighborhood full of the Old Families in their great houses; most of the rest long since moved out to more modern homes in newer streets as have many cousins, But my grandfather was stubborn and wouldn't leave, staying on as neighborhood drifted from former wealth to creeping poverty, now turning the wheel again as houses like ours become hotels and restaurants.

Oranges grow in the courtyard; the scent of orange blossoms and the sound of splashing are my first memories. Around that courtyard and its fountain rise the open rooms of the house, seeming endless to the child. Some were long forbidden to me, like the men's diwan where my grandfather in ancient days heard his clients complaints or had iced glasses of whiskey served up when his Christian and Druze friends came to call – one must always be hospitable, my father will tell me when I ask about that, and Sheikh Atrash was Jiddu's closest friend and ally ... and who in their right mind would want to offend *him*? – while others were empty save for broken furniture and dust. Kitchens, baths, pantries seeming within out end stretch off and pile on top of each other. Electricity clearly came late; the wires are outside the walls, while indoor plumbing is modern.

Narrow cobbled street outside the heavy steel reinforced wooden door leads with twisting bends to the endless covered suqh and its stalls going one way, to the other, our alley leads to a Street Called Straight.

Circling birds rising on warm air seem to drift on the notes of the muaddhan, coming from the minaret that, for our roof, seems almost close enough to touch. Someday, they say, Jesus will come back and arrive there; we will, we joke, be the first to greet him. Coffee? Tea? Cigarette? And when he's refreshed, off for the War of the End of the World ...

Birds of Passage

And maybe that war has long since begun; sometimes when I cannot sleep when I am older and in America, I'll watch late night programs where a man with eyes that don't blink explains that, Hallelujah!, we are living in the End Times and Jesus is Coming ... because of events that week in June 1967 when 'ammi was killed on that hill.

Maybe, maybe a clock was started. Certainly, the course of events that took us back to Damascus began then. After Amr died, my grandfather mourned the death of his sweet son. So did Amr's brothers and sisters. But Amr's next brother, Omar, he started to wonder why. And, like those TV preachers, he found answers in scripture.

In the Year of the Elephant, when Abraha came up from the south and invaded the land of the Two Cities, his forces were everywhere attacked and harassed by the much smaller and weaker forces of Quraish and all the other Arabs. All that is except the Banu Thaqif, a people utterly without honor. Abu Righal, a man of Banu Thaqif, revealed to the advancing army the way to Mecca. When Abraha was at last overcome, his people were disgraced and his grave was ever afterwards pelted with stones.

Omar read that and thought, A-ha! The new Abu Righal and the Banu Thaqif that live up in the mountains by the Sea, they did this treason.

When first he proclaimed this to his father, Jiddu nodded his head and clicked his tongue, “Omar, don’t be a fool, the Arab are still waking up ... and to say that the Minister of Defense would conspire with the Enemy and sacrifice his own men is madness.”

But, while the awakening did not come and Abu Righal grew in power, Omar and his circle became more and more aghast at the crimes down by the Banu Thaqif. When the Palestinians called out for promised aid in 1970, Abu Righal stabbed them in the back and seized power in Sham for himself. And Omar began meeting more and more often late at night with his fellows, or sitting for long hours discussing hadith and Quran crosslegged on the carpeted floors. Something, something must change, no more shame of a nation, but honor, no more rule by worshippers of idols ...

1975, when I was in womb, over the mountain, they said, the revolution was beginning in the streets of Beirut; majority rule would soon come to Lebanon and a new age might dawn. And if the Muslim no longer was second class in Lebanon, how long before the Muslim of Sham came to have rule in his own home? How long before the Muslim of Jerusalem and Jaffa?

Abu Righal, of course, could read these things as easily and feared that the next corrective movement would truly correct things. So, before the people of Syria could be inspired, Abu Righal sent his forces into Lebanon on the side of the separatists, Zionists, and Crusaders, and savagely attacked the National Movement just as it seemed on the verge of victory.

Omar and his companions looked out in the streets of the cities of Syria and in the villages and saw that from one end to the other, there was disgust and outrage at Abu Righal.

Now, they thought, was the time to rise up and return the governance of Syria to its people, to establish a government based, not on imitating the Christians but on our own Islamic heritage. So, in 1976, they announced that they had been on their knees too long, now it was time to arise.

And arise they did.

But again, Abu Righal and his people were clever. No one would cast them aside so easily. A long and bitter war began between Abu Righal and Abu Ridwan, between, as they saw it, Islam and Ignorance, the People of the Example against the Polytheists and Atheists. And, when those first attacks occurred, the Security Services began snatching up the men they thought were leaders, for they were trained by the East Germans and knew infiltration well.

Omar was one of those and, when he was snatched up, a call was placed halfway around the world,

“Please come home, you are the third son but your oldest brother is dead and the second one may be soon.”

So, we went back, heir of the house, foreign bride and two half-breed baby girls ...

Child's Eyes

Memories of my own start to emerge when I am five or so. Before that, there are only incoherent bits and pieces; Rania and I sitting baby Amr down in front of us and pretending he is a doll, dressing him, tickling him, Rania pointing out that he is misshapen and has a little ‘finger’

growing from his stomach; playing in the garden and the street; not knowing where Uncle is nor picking up that we should be worried.

I remember running through the house on a summer's day, finding pots as tall as we are filled with oil and dropping pebbles into them and laughing when it splashed, drawing in chalk on the walls of a room where old things go and saying that I have written words, though they are only scribbles ...

And, then, I go off to school; Rania is too little, she can't come with me. I remember telling her that was because she was a baby and had to stay with the other babies, Amr, Alia, Reem, and Ramzi: I am a big kid, so I will go to school with the other Big Kids, Aisha, Ridwan and Raghad

Rania is jealous ... and I am smug, even as I struggle along behind my older sister and cousins ...

I learn my letters and I teach Rania: alif, baa, taa ... going over and over with her. She is a slow student, I tell her ...

I like school, like my teacher, Miss Su'ad, like my classmates ... Zeyneb, Salma, Randa, I remember now and wonder if they recall me at all ...

Life seems happy enough to me.

Winter comes; it is gray and cold and I recall it raining and raining; I wonder if the sky is falling. I hear noises at night that scare me.

I walk out of our room; I can hear my parents talking, talking in the way they talk when they don't want to be understood, in the secret code I think I am beginning to follow.

Something about leaving, my mother's aunt, Uncle Omar, other things that make little sense to me ...

My father opens the door and sees me cowering in the light.

“Have you been spying on us?” he asks, almost smiling but I can see something is wrong.

“No, daddy,” I shake my head, “but why must we leave?”

He looks at me strangely, then at my mother. Now, they both stare at me.

“You heard us talking?” my mother asks.

I nod.

“And you can understand?”

I nod again.

“Amina, Amina,” my father shakes his head, reaches for me and picks me up, then speaks to me in the way he only ever talks to my mother, “you are a clever one. How long have you been listening to us when we talk like this?”

“As long as I can remember,” I say.

“And can you speak like this?” he asks.

“No, sir,” I shake my head.

He and my mother look at each other; they are speaking without words now, I think.

“Amina,” my mother says and strokes my hair, “would you like to go somewhere where everyone speaks like this?”

My eyes grow wide; I can't imagine such a place where everyone talks in code.

“Yes?” I offer, frightened.

“And meet your other cousins?” she asks.

“Yes?” I offer again. I am scared.

And my father sings to me a song about a gazelle and he carries me back to bed and I fall asleep, thinking it was a dream.

But, the next day, is even stranger. Uncle Omar is back again after his last absence ... but he is changed. I can't tell where he has been and no one will tell me. He has bandages around his eyes and he is thinner ... he talks strangely ...

None of us go to school; I complain and see this is an injustice. It is Saturday, I insist, so I must go to school. I am told to be quiet.

Then, uncles Hamza and Hani are around and everything becomes more confused. We children are shunted off and are given candy even though we haven't had a meal. Uncle Omar kisses everyone except my father, my father does the same, then they leave. Aunt Saffiyah starts crying loudly; my mother hugs her. Hamza stands uncomfortably.

"So many children," he keeps saying and I don't understand why, pacing and looking at no one.

My mother and aunt watch him.

"We go," he says.

And, in minutes, we do; I know they have gathered up papers but little else, just a few bags. I look around and I am confused. The adults herd us like animals as we go down our little alley, out to the street called straight. There, Hani has found two taxis, cars made in Europe before my mother was born, for us; I am put in one with my mother, my siblings, in the back, Hamza sitting by the driver. Aunt Saffiyah is with Uncle Hani and her children in the other.

Uncle Hamza talks rapidly with the driver, shows him something, something I should know later must be a lot of money. We leave. My mother, I notice, is crying. I don't know why. Hamza tries to tell jokes but they fail.

Farewell to That

I have never seen my mother smoke and I will only see her smoking one other time the rest of my life, but, today, she is smoking, furiously. My father's youngest brother is also smoking furiously; so is the cab driver. And, in the back seat with my mother, I am getting choked along with my infant sister, my toddler brother, and my older sister.

I can barely stand it. All three adults are barely speaking. I complain about the smoke loudly as we go down an almost empty street. Stores have drawn their doors closed. No one is about though it is Saturday.

My mother waves me to silence.

My uncle suggests another route.

The driver nods, takes it. I am scared and I hate this cold, damp, smoky air.

We go down a street, empty like the others. The car stops.

The driver says something I don't understand then. My uncle repeats it softly. My mother says, 'Shit,' the first time I've ever heard that word; I guess from her expression that she is upset.

I think now I can get out of the smoky car. No one notices at first; my mother says my name in warning but I ignore her; I am excited to get out of the car.

Instantly, I wish I hadn't: there is a powerful, pungent stench in the air, a smell that reminds me of Alia's diapers and rotting garbage only much, much worse. It is a smell that will stay with me forever, the smell of death, loosed bowels and putrefying flesh.

I look up.

At once, I wish I hadn't. Hanging above the street, on a sign that probably repeats some Party slogan, are four men. Their clothes are bloody and torn; two are wearing stained robes, the other two western styles. Their bearded faces are broken and bruised. They are limp, lifeless. Three of them are barefoot, the fourth wears one shoe. Their feet are swollen. I stare at them in horror. One of them seems to stare back at me from his protruding, bloody eyes, his tongue sticking out at me in defiance. This will be the stuff of nightmares for years; their faces will never be forgotten.

Uncle Hani gets out of the car, grabs me, pushes me back in and gets in the front seat.

"DO NOT DO THAT AGAIN!" he says to me and I am more afraid; I feel like I have made these bad things happen.

The driver puts the car in reverse and we go backwards for a long way down the narrow street.

We turn onto another road and then another and then another. The tight-packed alleys give way to wider roads; we pass blocks of tall, hastily built apartment buildings. Still, hardly anyone is out.

Then, we begin to go up into the mountains and the City is behind us.

"Don't look back," Hani says to her, then recites, "Fanajaynahu wa ahlahu ajma 'aina. Illa ajuzan fi al ghabirina."

My mother looks at him and laughs, the first time today.

"Don't worry," she says. "I don't have any intention of being Lut's wife!"

The driver laughs at that; the children are mystified.

And we leave Damascus.

Flight

That winter of '82, I'll learn later, was a terrible time in the Land of the Left Hand. Abu Righal, as my uncle would call him, or the Lion as he's better known decided that he'd had enough of the Society of the Muslim Brothers and it was time to finally suppress them. Things had been getting worse for a while and my uncle was deeply involved.

The year I was born, the Lion of Jaulan sent the army into Lebanon to take sides in the civil war; against the Muslims, against the nationalists. At the Hill of Thyme in that land, Muslims were massacred for, so we believed, doing nothing more than trying to achieve equality in an Arab land. And the Lion of Jaulan had suppressed them on behalf of the splitters, the French speakers, the friends of the Zionists, the Christians ...

So, Muslims in Syria began to agitate against the Lion and the rest of his tribe, began saying more loudly that an Arab nation with a Muslim majority shouldn't suffer under the polytheists' rule ...

And my uncle was loud among them in the capital. So, he was picked up and jailed. And, when he was, my father decided it was time to return and care for the family, as he was now eldest brother. So, we'd gone back.

And my uncle had been released soon after but wasn't able to teach at the University any more so my father stayed on and supported him and his children. And Uncle Omar worked for the brotherhood instead.

And he was jailed again, taken off to Palmyra for a longer time. There, they killed most of the Brothers in the prison. My uncle was lucky; we have a cousin who was well placed in the Party and, for his sake and for the memory of Omar's father and brother, his life was spared, as he'd done nothing more than agitate. But he was tortured; he left an eye in Palmyra.

And they released him again in the days of massacre, when the law that all members of the Brotherhood would be killed. Laws are one thing; family another, so even a Renaissance Man like our cousin could be moved by ties of blood to let a kinsman go.

Omar returned ... and he and my father and mother and aunt and uncles knew it was time to go. We knew we had hours only. So, we fled, fled with nothing but the clothes on our back and the papers and money on our persons.

This is how I left the seat of my fathers. This is how our clan's diaspora began. Two brothers to America, a sister to Kuwait, a brother to Saudi Arabia, another to Denmark ... wherever would take us. We go where we have passports and visas, leave the keys to the house with Hamza who will stay to take care of my grandmother and to tend the memories and keep the papers intact for the rest of us.

The Road From Damascus

I don't remember ever being out of the city before that day; I have seen a photograph that shows a very young me picnicking somewhere in the Barada Gorge but I don't recall it. So, everything is new and comes in a rush; I see cattle and sheep just standing in ... emptiness. I

can't quite understand why the horizons are so large, why there are no buildings to hem us in.
There are mountains that we twist and turn past.

We enter Lebanon, and cross the first of many checkpoints. Men with guns make us get out of the car, look all through it, everyone's papers are in order.

"Americans," I hear the Syrian soldiers who let us go towards Lebanon say.

I don't quite understand why; the little that I clearly understand about Americans is that they live far away somewhere and give comfort to the enemy. Or so Miss Su'ad has told us, told us when she has us practice what to do if the enemy launches a new attack on us, for the enemy is filled with hate and greed and jealousy, hates us for what we have and wants to take it from us, as he has done so many times before.

Another checkpoint, it happens again Slowly I make a connection; I recall that Father brought mother from America. Maybe they mean us? I remember that Aisha and I were born outside the city, to our great shame.

I ask my mother, Are we going to America?

Yes, she says.

I ask, is America near the sea? I'd like to see the sea ...

Yes, you will see the sea ...

More checkpoints; Syrian army, Lebanese ones, the country is a crazy patchwork in the beginning of 1982 and the short ride to Beirut by car takes many hours, made even longer by crying children, hungry children, children who need to pee ...

At last, we come into the outskirts of the city and still more checkpoints before, finally, we reach the docks and I see the garbage strewn oily water that is the Mediterranean, smell the rich funk of rotting fish and garbage and saltwater ... and I am entranced ... here is the Sea! If

I'd known the words, I'd've shouted thalassa! Thalassa! Every time we glimpsed it coming down the mountain had I known it was there to glimpse.

We leave the taxi and hani goes and buys tickets on the ferry for all of us. The second taxi comes ... I wonder where is Daddy? My cousins wonder the same but no one will tell us. We'll see them soon, they reassure us.

Hani buys candy for us. I notice it is warmer here than at home. And then we are made to line up, led over a creaking gangway onto a ship that's seen better days.

A boat ride? I'm a little scared but excited. Rania is starting to cry in fear.

But somehow, we are all on the boat before too long, then off over what I suppose must have been a wine-dark sea to Cyprus as the sunsets, then nervous waiting crowded all in a single hotel room. My mother rushing around, taking charge of things a bit more easily now as her language is talked by many here ... Aunt Saffiyah does more of the child-herding ... Hani is still with us and he is rushing around too ...

And, after three days of confusion, Hani comes back from the dock and thrills everyone; with him are my father and my uncle. They tell a story that makes little sense, mountain roads and backtracking, finally coming through a checkpoint into the Bekaa with Omar in the trunk and catching a ferry in Tarablus.

Yes, Hamza will be able to get the car ... if he can get to Tarablus. He has a key ...

More days of stress and ... tickets are ready for one half of us;

Omar had said he'd go to Khurasan and join with the Black banners being unfurled there but my father convinces him otherwise; a camp in Peshawar is no place to raise a family ... and many calls and much wrangling and somehow there are visas for Omar and his family so we will all go to America ...

And we go to the airport ... and we fly! First to Europe, then switching planes in some country where everyone looks sickly pale, then a flight that goes on and on and Alia is screaming most of the time from the pain in her ears ... and I am running through the plane having the time of my life ... until the mean lady in pale blue tells me I can't anymore ...

And we are landing; we six fly in to Dulles and hit the tarmac and walkout , pass so fast through customs ... we carry so little, we are citizens ...

And there, standing to greet us are faces that are bright and excited and happy and completely alien ... someone who calls himself an uncle, two gangly giant boys, an aunt, someone who says she is my grandmother ...

And they all terrify me ...

3. Amina to Amy

April 1982 – September 1990

Virginia

We arrived (or returned depending on who was calling it) to Virginia on April Fool's Day, 1982. It was spring and all the flowers were blooming; as I remember it, it rained a lot, certainly more than I thought I'd ever seen before then.

We stayed the first few days with my great aunt, someone who was almost a stranger to me but, it seemed, very quickly, we had a place to live of our own; a big house, an old house for America, though on our old street, it'd've been the newest by far; built at the end of Reconstruction by a colonel in the former CSA. It was strange to have so much grass and trees about; that took me a long time to adjust to. But, my great aunt was nearby; she had found this house for us and, just as she had taken in my mother all those years ago, now the prodigals had returned.

Aunt Minnie was not quite directly across the street; her much smaller bungalow faced the empty lot on one side of our house. Other relations weren't too far away; my mother's mother lived at the far end of town in an apartment, my mother's brother and his two sons were less than ten minutes walk away in their somewhat overgrown house ... and second cousins and

farther were all around. My American Grandmother was already beginning to slip into her long decline; soon, she'd move from her apartment to the retirement community.

My American uncle, Charlie, was around a lot in those days; he made fairly strong (and reciprocated) efforts to befriend my dad (including the two of them trudging off in the woods every autumn to go deer hunting, along with assorted offspring; Charlie, even if he had a doctorate in history, affected to be a 'good ole boy' and made it his business that every niece and nephew would learn to shoot straight.) Charlie's sons, Jim and Rob (or Jimmy and Robby as they were still trying to shed when we arrived), were raised virtually motherless and seemed a little wild to us; perpetually shaggy and dirty, but, also, incredibly appealing and 'cool' – though some of that was probably age (Jim was thirteen and Rob eleven when we arrived).

While he'd been 'only' the Second Assistant Director of the Municipal Water System in Damascus, he was now the boss; he'd been hired as director of Water Treatment for the Town of Riverport. On paper, of course, it looked like a promotion but, while one was a city of millions, the other was little more than an overgrown village.

Riverport exists, as the name would suggest, on the bend of a river – the North Fork of the South Branch of the Shenandoah – though if there's a port, it only exists for the smallest of craft; even canoes would have a hard time maneuvering through there. Like Damascus, there are nearby mountains and steep hills (including an extinct volcano) rising nearby but, unlike the Barada valley, the Shenandoah Valley is almost excessively green; everything not actively farmed, it seems is covered with hardwood forest. At first, I remember being a bit confused by the colors; instead of dusty duns and tans, everything seemed almost overly bold and florid.

Where we'd lived in a rather closed space with twice as many people in Syria, suddenly, we were in a big house, a white clapboard structure looking dangerously outwards set in the

midst of greenery. Our new house had been built by a Civil War colonel a decade after the war but Riverport itself had been the site of a battle (a totally insignificant one but a battle nonetheless) in 1864 and, earlier, Stonewall Jackson had passed down Main Street a few times with his Brigade. Once, we found a civil war bullet in the yard; my father still has it somewhere.

I had my own room for the first time and I could look out from my window onto neighbors' yards and gardens, houses and horse barns. In the alley, there were hitching posts, not a mere relic but put there for the convenience of the Old Order Mennonites who'd drive their buggies in to town and need somewhere to tie them up. The first time I saw these plainly dressed people, I mistook them for our own; I proudly announced to my parents that I had seen Muslims going into the Bank; I got so excited ... and confused my parents ...

School

And I started school again. I was excited the first day; it had been more than six weeks since I'd last been in class and I worried about whether I'd fall behind. My mother dressed Aisha and me in new clothes (well, most of our clothes were new, or, at least, new to us) and walked with us to the school. She took me to my classroom and said goodbye.

As I stepped in, I was excited; so many new faces (and how different they looked!). The teacher stopped what she was doing and introduced me to the class (calling me 'ay-my-nah', but I barely noticed). Everyone smiled at me. She asked if I knew how to read; I nodded, still not

having said a word. She asked if I'd write my name on the board ... so I did. This would be easy; we had done this at my old school.

I stepped up, took a piece of chalk from the teacher, looked at the board and began writing from right to left and said the letters as I wrote:

“Alif ... meem ... noon ... ta marboot!” I said in triumph. “Amina!”

And stepped back ... and the teacher and whole class stared at me.

“What is that?” the teacher asked.

“Name my,” I said, smiling proudly.

“Do you know ABC?” the teacher asked.

I looked at her blankly.

She sighed, took me by hand and led me from the classroom, then to the principal's office. She went in and spoke to him ... and he then took me to another classroom, one better suited for me ... filled with toys and younger children; I had just been 'demoted' to kindergarten ... until I could learn to 'talk right.'

I survived – and learned rapidly to speak correctly. Every day, I learned new words for things, new grammar; my English vocabulary was probably growing by a hundred words a day. I stopped mangling things and was able to talk to my classmates more and more every day.

After school, Aunt Minnie made a habit of sitting for hours with Aisha and I, going over our English, correcting us; I'd get to go and play faster than Aisha as she had far more catching up to do (she was too old to send back to kindergarten so, the first year, she had been placed in the 'special ed' class).

And by the time summer came and school ended, we were both speaking English without accents (unless you happen to consider Shenandoah Valley English an accent) and playing with

the other kids in our neighborhood without any problem; it took a little longer to catch up socially and on pop culture but, in no time at all, it seemed, we were catching on. True, we didn't realize why our friends scorned Coy and Vance as impostors but, soon enough, we were aware of Star Wars and Superman and everything else; we went to see ET at Roth's 1-2-3 in the summer as well as Annie, the Dark Crystal, and the Secret of NIMH. At first, we wore old clothes over and over again, but, gradually, our clothes became new; we went to the mall with my grandmother and aunt and they dressed us until we stopped looking like foreigners.

I missed my old friends, though, missed Syria terribly ... missed the smells and the sounds and the family and the food ... so, in the summer, when my cousins came, I was thrilled. They'd landed not in Virginia but in Georgia; my uncle was working now, but not as a college professor. He washed dishes in a restaurant, worked himself to the bone ... and then led prayers at a house-mosque on Friday. My aunt Saffiyah also worked, stocking shelves in a grocery store at night and mopping floors. And all the cousins lived in a tiny apartment ...

So, Ridwan, Raghad and Rania would come up to stay with us for most of the summer. Rania shared my room and we'd lay side by side every night whispering in what was mostly Arabic in grammar but was probably half English in words. We would play with dolls all day out in the green grass, staring in awe at rain in the summertime and taking fright from lightning and thunderstorms. I remember my father loading us all in the car and taking us to see Star Wars at the drive in when it was re-released and everyone but me fell asleep before it was over as it was very, very late and we all had to be carried back into the house. I recall watching the fireworks over Silver Lake on the Fourth of July ...

and, in August, my father left with the cousins, taking them home to Georgia and I cried. But, I was almost American by then.

Reading down dreams

I started back to school at summer's end. Every morning, I walked alongside my sister as we made our way across the street, past the little post office and behind the bank. We would have to watch out for horse droppings as we passed by the hitching posts where, sometimes when we were lucky, we'd find that an Old Order family had left their buggy while they were about their business.

Aisha loved horses. I thought they were nice enough and, of course, I wished that I had one of my own, wished that I could ride but she, she really loved them. When one was tied up, no matter how late we were or if it were cold or raining, she would insist on stopping and talking to it, stroking it. She begged father to get her a horse or, at the very least, sign her up for horseback riding lessons.

We lived in rural Virginia, not quite in horse country, but close enough, so such a dream could easily be had: we might have lived in a small town, but, even there, in the town, there were people with horses on the next street. In the countryside, there were many stables. Aisha and I were signed up for riding lessons; my father told us when he signed us up that horses are in our blood, that we must never forget that we were Quraysh and the grandchildren of a cavalry officer. My mother laughed.

Every week, we would go out to the stable where older girls work, grooming horses and leading ones our size through basic skills. Aisha was always better than me; she was always far

more in love with horses than me, knew more about them, understood them better than I ever did.

Looking back, I think that I can guess some of the reasons why she had such a love for them and I did not. Certainly, the fact that her horses didn't care that her English in those days could be fractured helped her at a time when she was teased far more than I ever was for butchering English. But it was more than that; she didn't just like them she *loved* them, dreamed about horses, covered her bedroom with pictures of horses, knew everything there was to know about horses.

Later on, she would be in a few shows and, when she was on the verge of womanhood, she'd be one of those glamorous teens sweeping the stables and leading the little girls through basic skills and making them laugh in delight. Maybe, horses held some allure for her that they never did for me; I've heard that girls who love horses long for freedom and crave masculine presence. I don't know; I never did ... but Aisha was good- with horses; she still is ... they love here, she loves them and, take away her horses even now, and she might die ...

Later, too, she would show far more musical ability than I ever did; she could sing, she could play instruments.. I've always been lucky to be able to play the radio.

My dreams were always a bit stranger than hers and it took me years before I could even try to understand what all was in them. The first week of first grade, our teacher separated the class into different reading levels. The same teacher who had kicked me out just a few months earlier now placed me in the 'high' group as I could already read simple English and was one of the oldest girls in my class.

I took my textbooks home with me and I finished everything but the math book in the first week. I brought them back to the teacher and asked her for more; she didn't seem quite sure what to do with that.

She asked me if I had had any problems reading any of them.

I answered, yes, and showed her where I am confused, by contractions (what does this *can tee* mean? I remember wondering.).

She shook her head and then she showed me the books in the back of the classroom; I started reading through them all, Dr Seuss and other first readers, more complex ones and even a children's encyclopedia.

From the very first days of first grade, I loved the class trips to the school library. I read everything I could, taking out as many books as they'd let me. I remember finding a book called "Trolls" and loving it, reading it over and over .. and then the same authors' books of Norse Myths and Greek Myths, then other ones on similar themes.

The next year, I discovered the land of Narnia and the Mushroom Planet and Oz and Matthew Looney ... and kept on reading and reading ... I devoured the adventures of the Boy Scouts in their time machine and then of Tom Swift, found a book called The Hobbit and started eating up books of history, one after another, Van Loon, R J Unstead, Everyday life in ..., everything I could find, just gobbling up one after the other. I read book after book about the American Revolution and the Civil War, because that's what was in the library ...

At some point, I found a book with a photograph of a girl on the cover and, after thinking that she looked like me, decided to read it: The Diary of a Young Girl. I started writing my own diary for a while after reading that, and found myself wishing, not for the last time, that like her, I wished that I had a true friend I could talk to about everything. Rania was the closest, I

thought, but I could only see her a few weeks a year and among the girls in my classes, I was, I feared, still too much an outsider. I dreamt of having that perfect friend who would understand me when I babbled about books and stories and history and so on and would always want to play the kind of games I imagined playing but that no one else was ever interested in ...

I didn't notice that most of the books I loved most were written for boys; I did, however, notice that few had girls as heroes (and none half-Arab Muslim girls) but it didn't bother me. Instead, I imagined my own stories, full of action and heroics, magic and so on.

My closest friend at school, David, was a boy and, when we'd play, we played fighting with swords or were superheroes. We'd sit under a tree at recess and play such things while the boys played kickball and the girls played house games. Sometimes, we'd play together outside of class. Behind his house, there were little old, rundown buildings that we would use as fortresses (I don't quite realize what it means that they are slave cabins; later on, it'll strike me as bizarre in retrospect).

I got older steadily; I found myself having trouble reading the blackboard and my teacher recommended that my parents take me to the eye doctor. And, if I weren't already awkward and self-conscious, I had to wear glasses, thick heavy ones that would leave red marks on my nose when I took them off. At least, I told myself, they made my nose look less enormous; I was already conscious that it was bigger than the little button noses the girls with golden hair all seemed to have.

I had few troubles with class work; if anything, the opposite. I was almost always the first one done with tests, the one who had her hand up first with the answers and so on. (If you've ever seen the Simpsons, I was a lot like Lisa though with less self-confidence.) I took standardized tests and did ridiculously well on them (I'm still more than a little embarrassed

about my listed IQ). My parents petitioned to have me skipped ahead a year, back to being among my actual age mates; the school decided not to as I was too small and wasn't 'socially mature enough'.

Around my fifth grade year, a little shop opened up a few blocks from us selling nothing but used books and records. The day I first saw the sign, I was excited to go in it and explore; paradise! I would find endless genre books from decades before there; one book I recall finding the first day caught me with a stunning picture on the cover: a man carries a dark-haired woman, barely dressed, through a magical archway. I wanted to read it and, when I saw that it was about a man from Virginia, I knew this book had been placed there for me. I read it fast, staying up all night reading, and I was both disappointed and excited to find out that there were ten more sequels to this "A Princess of Mars". When my parents saw it, they looked disapprovingly at the cover art but they told me that, if I want to be a Martian princess, I can be. I was taken a bit aback at that; when I'd read it, I had imagined myself to be the rescuer, not the rescuee! I was strange ...

I know that sometimes, then, I wished I was a boy; not a lot, though, considering. I read stories for boys and imagined myself in them, though never as the fairy tale princess, always as the knight on horseback. I wrote a very bad pastiche of a Barsoom adventure, starring myself. All I recall is the opening (I lost the rest long ago):

"I don't remember ever being young and I think I have been alive forever. I am Meena of Barsoom, formerly of Virginia."

And then I told of adventures fighting through hordes of green men, blue men and so on to retrieve some treasure and take it back to Helium. I think my heroine even rescued a member

of the Imperial family ... and never really noticed that she was female! Maybe, I should have written it as a boy ...

More, though, I wished that I wasn't Amina but Amanda. I wished that I didn't have dark, wavy hair and imagined myself with straight, golden hair, wished I had blue eyes rather than dark ... and wished that my father didn't have an accent. I wished that, when I was asked what church I went to, I didn't have to say 'none', that, when it came time for weekday religious education (WRE), I didn't have to stay back with the other odd balls (a Jehovah, a Mormon, a Catholic, a Jew, and me). I wished I didn't have to avoid certain foods ...

I imagined myself 'Amy McClure' and thought how much better life would be ... how much more popular and happier I would be, how I would have a zillion friends and be picked first for teams ...

When I'd first come to school in Virginia, I'd been called ah-meh-nah ... and that was quickly shortened to ah-mi, like the French word for friend ... and, more and more, I wrote my name and said it as 'Ay-me'; Amy ... and dreamt that I was her ...

I imagined that, when I was older, how I would dye my hair golden yellow and get colored contacts, thought about a nose job ... and wished only that I were pretty and blonde and just like everyone else ...

Naomi

Next door to us, when we first arrived in Riverport, there lived an old couple in another old, wood frame Victorian house. I can't recall their names these days and all I remember of them was that, once, the woman gave me candy. Not long after we moved in, the man passed away and the woman went to live in a home. For a long while after that, their house stood vacant; I could see it empty from my bedroom window and, sometimes, I wondered if it might be haunted, or, maybe, I just hoped that it was; then I could go and have adventures there, find a ghost or some treasure ...

Eventually, it was put on the market and, as I remember, sat empty for a long while more with a 'for sale' sign in the front yard. Finally, though, it was bought by a childless couple close to my parents in age. Mr. and Mrs. Davies, as I knew them, had moved up to Riverport from Richmond though neither of them had, as I recall it, very strong Tidewater accents. He was a college professor; she was a food chemist who worked for one of the huge turkey producers at the far end of town from us.

I was startled when we met her and she insisted that we – my sister and I – call them by their first names (Susan and Gary) and when she told us that she was a vegetarian (based on her experience in slaughterhouses); both were bizarre things to me in those days (as well as to Riverport's conservative sensibilities). He was odd; he would lay on their porch staring at nothing or work on his old MG for hours. My parents took a liking to them; they still keep up. I suppose it wasn't that odd as my parents were also somewhat hippie-ish by the standards of Riverport; neither couple fit very well into the town's social life.

After they'd lived next to us for a couple of years, Susan got pregnant ... and, when the baby was born, she hired an Old Order girl to help her with the baby and housekeeping. I remember seeing the young woman (who was only a few years older than me) arriving when

Gary would go and get her some mornings from the farm that she lived on. Sometimes, she'd stay overnight with the Davies; I could see her bedroom light from my room in what had always been dark until then.

Our house rose up almost immediately over their yard but, on that side, only my bedroom window looked down into their back garden as they had a high wooden fence making it almost blind from our house otherwise on that side and invisible from the street. In those days, I used to like to sit atop the hot water heater under my window and read; my perch was warm in the winter, breezy when I had the window open. From there, I could see out across the backyards and rooftops of Riverport and daydream.

And, from there, one day, I looked out into the Davies's yard and saw that their nanny was sitting in the back garden – but, instead of her usual dowdy print dress and head covering, she was wearing a bikini (or so I assumed) and she was reading a book. I found myself staring at her for a long while and, eventually, she must have felt my eyes on her ... so she looked up and waved at me and I waved back.

“Hey!” I called and she called back and we exchanged mild pleasantries but I couldn't quite hear her so, I climbed down off my perch, scurried down the back staircase, and clambered out a window into their backyard.

She greeted me and waved me to sit in another lawn chair by her. I introduced myself as Amina, the girl who lives next door; she said she was Naomi Weaver, the babysitter. I told her I knew. We laughed that our names were similar and we talked about the baby (who did have a name: Madeline Davies) and so on.

Naomi told me she was seventeen; I asked if she was in school, she said, no, her people didn't usually finish high school. And I, nervously, told her that I was twelve and would go to Roger Sappington Junior High School next year.

We talked for a long time about this and that. The whole time, I was noticing how mature and pretty she was; long, wavy golden hair tied up in a bun, bright blue eyes, an almost pinkish face and a woman's body, just the way that I wished that I looked. But, even though she was grown up and pretty, she was talking to scrawny, gawky me like a peer.

Finally, I asked Naomi what had happened to her clothes; she laughed and said she was working on her tan and thought no one could see her until I had spotted her. She'd been out sunbathing here for weeks! I laughed and so did she.

Then I asked her about her covering and her plain dress and she started telling me what they represented, that women were enjoined by Jesus to cover their heads when they prayed and that they should always be praying, and, once she'd been baptized, she had to dress that way.

I asked if that meant when she was a baby she'd had to wear a covering and she told me, no, only after she'd joined the church last year and told me about their beliefs in adult baptism and such.

Then, she asked me where my family and I went to church and I said that we didn't; I explained that we weren't Christians at all but Muslims and that was why my mother covered her head. She didn't seem bothered by that but, instead, she only asked if I would and I said that, maybe I would, when I was older. She laughed at that and said maybe we weren't all that different.

We quizzed each other on religion and talked about the book she was reading; it was some sort of Christian novel. And we talked about other things and then my mother was calling me so I crept back home.

The next day, I was up in my window reading and I saw Naomi out there again; she waved me down so I went and joined her. This time, I thought ahead and brought my book. She asked if I was going to try and tan too; I said I had no bikini. She laughed and told me she didn't either; she was just in her underwear! I laughed at that and, after a second, copied her, pulling off my jeans and laying out beside her under the afternoon sun in my underpants and t-shirt, wondering if I should take off my t-shirt even though I wore nothing under it.

Naomi told me she wished she had skin like mine for then she could tan easily; I told her not to be silly, she had much nicer skin than me. And we read and laughed and drank lemonade. And I thought I was intensely cool for having a friend who was a real live teenager ...

We did this a lot and talked about a lot of things; eventually, Naomi invited me to come to church with her. I told her that I had to ask my parents' permission and I wasn't sure if they'd give it.

Surprisingly, they did; apparently, they weren't as close-minded as I'd thought (in fact, they were fairly committed to us finding our own paths, but more about that later). So, Naomi wrote out directions and, very early the next Sunday morning, my father drove me far out into the countryside, past the cider press, and down a few dirt roads and to a clapboard building with no sign and no steeple. It was hardly what I expected a church to look like; none of the churches in Riverport were anything like so simple. Outside, plain dressed men and women got out of horse-drawn buggies and stood around talking to each other as they wandered in. The whole place had the sweet, fresh rotten scent of healthy horses, like a stable.

Naomi came up and greeted me profusely when she saw my father's car and, taking me by arm, led me into the church. Inside, men sat on one side in bare wooden pews, women on the other. No cross or flag or anything marked the room as anything special.

All were clad in modest clothes, plain dress clothes, all the gown women covered. Then, they said some prayers and sang some songs without instruments and read long passages from their Bible. After that, one of them, a man dressed in a long frock coat, got up and gave a long sermon about how you were supposed to love your neighbor. I paid close attention to everything as I had seen few things like this but much of it was lost on me. The whole service went on for several hours and, when it was done, everyone left, talking gladly among themselves.

Naomi introduced me to many people and, when they asked where I was from, I told them Damascus originally and I was startled that they all seemed to know of it, asking me if I knew the Street that was called Straight and other things like that.

Then, Naomi invited me to come to lunch with her family; we rode in a buggy driven by her father back to their farm. He let me take the reins for a moment and told some corny jokes. When we reached the farm, we ate far too much food (chicken and bread and too many vegetables, then pies of various type) while everyone quizzed me about my religion and what we were allowed and not allowed to do and I realized I knew less than I should.

After lunch, Naomi showed me the farm: cows and horses in large number (her father was mainly in dairy) as well as chickens and sheep and hogs ...

I was fascinated; when my father finally came and got me, I couldn't stop talking about how much fun it had all been. He laughed when I said that, maybe, I would be a farmer and an old Order when I grew up.

I hung around Naomi for a long time after that; I thought she was intensely interesting and cool and everything else ... and I thought I was especially lucky to have a friend who was older and more mature than me. Eventually, of course, Naomi stopped working for the Davies. She got a job in the farmers' market off the main highway north of town, working at the counter for a cousin of hers. I would always look for her whenever we were there. Not long after that, she got married to an Old Order man who had a farm on the far side of the county ... but, even now, I still get long letters from her, telling me she's praying yet that I might become a Christian and giving news of her children.

Mosques

When we first came to Virginia, Muslims were few and far between, mosques even farther. The first few years, the Greater Riverport Islamic Community consisted of my family with, occasionally, a foreign student or two from one of the colleges. Later on, a Pakistani doctor took a job in the next town, then a professor at one of the colleges, and another and another ...

But, for many years, praying meant praying as a family, my father leading prayers or, if he was at work, my mother. Sometimes, we'd drive to Washington, DC or northern Virginia and link up with Muslims there, especially around the holidays. Early on, my parents found a Coptic Egyptian family in the next town; we'd sometimes visit with them and, whenever we or they were going to an Arabic store in Northern Virginia or DC, they'd call the other.

My parents didn't drink or buy pork products but, from necessity, rarely kept strict hallal; it simply wasn't an option unless they either did their own slaughtering or did all their meat buying far from home. Later on, they did begin keeping an ever stricter hallal but that was in another state.

They did conscientiously keep the Ramadan fast every year but, until I was in high school, they refused to let me do so as I was too young. For Eid, most years we would go to DC or elsewhere where there were Muslims in large numbers; my mother had had to make quite an effort to get our school to allow us to be excused but, from sheer persistence, she succeeded. After Eid prayers, we would hang around with the other Muslim kids ... and everyone would talk about their Eid gifts. And, when I went back to school, I'd have to explain how it was our 'Christmas' (and every year, one of the four of us would ask why we had no Christmas tree or why Santa never visited us).

By the end of the 1980's, though, the Muslim community had grown large enough that they began talking about having a mosque; up until then, when there were organized prayers, it was mostly my parents or one of the other Muslim families hosting everyone else for dinner, prayers and discussion. Typically, they'd do this on Sunday nights (as no one needed to work). I recall dinners of Pakistani, African, and Arabic dishes all mixed up and sitting around half bored with the much younger children of the other Muslim families.

From weekly dinners came talk of a mosque; it wasn't realized until after we were gone but it stands now ... and grows, along with hallal shop and Muslim cemetery ...

Things change ... nowadays, our old town has a Russian church and a Kurdish cemetery. ESL classes in my old school are filled to overflowing, mostly with Latinos but also with people from all over the world. People who look more like me are no longer so strange on the street ...

Sometimes I envy the children growing up there now ... or anywhere in the US, maybe. Back in the 1980's and even early 1990's, we'd get strange questions, like "Is a Muslim that thing you all wear on your heads?" ... and, in Virginia, no help for learning English or being darker ... Nowadays, I guess, there are worse things ...

I never was asked if I was Mexican or spoke Spanish then; now, it seems every Arab I know gets asked that. Or if they know Osama ... and now they have peers, not just siblings ... which maybe is better and maybe is not; I had to become American fully by diving in and being as American – Redneck American at that – without any alternative. Maybe that was better ... maybe it wasn't ...

Holidays

From the first year that we were in Virginia, the same pattern was set for the 'holiday season'. We celebrated Thanksgiving, as do, in my experience, most non-Christian families in the USA. The first year, simply as our house was the largest, we played host. And over came my Great Aunt, my Grandmother, my mother's brother, and his sons.

Every year after that was basically the same people with slight differences in faces (my uncle brought a serious girlfriend a couple of times; later, so did his sons) while dishes were steadily refined. A couple of times, in addition to turkey, we had venison, shot by Uncle Charlie or my Dad (Charlie tries to get at least one deer per year and makes his own sausage and burgers from it). But, basically, a very American meal was always had.

Thanksgiving, the first year, wasn't terribly mysterious to me. It was explained clearly in school as to its origins, traditions and so on ... but, after Thanksgiving 1982, I became increasingly mystified as Christmas approached.

The name of the day meant nothing; Santa Claus meant nothing. Classmates and teacher were startled that I had no idea who he was. When I asked my parents, they told me he was just a story. But so many of the other kids seemed to believe in him ...

I couldn't figure out why; it was obvious to me that Santa Claus was no more real than the Cat in the Hat or Mighty Mouse. I told all the other kids I came into contact that, that Santa was a fake, argued it, and disproved him ... and they told their parents what I had said. Some parents complained to mine about what I was doing ...

And when they saw we had no Christmas tree or decorations, it was even more upsetting ... someone called my parents 'communists'!

The next year, I was less inclined to share my disbelief. Instead, I was anxious that we should have a Christmas tree ... and my parents sat me and my sisters and brother down and explained the *true* story of Jesus (how his mother was a Virgin and gave birth to him under the palm tree, how he prophesied as a baby and was a great prophet, ascended living into Heaven, and will return at the end of time, proclaiming his humanity and the One-ness of God, to the Great Mosque in Sham).

Seventh Grade

When Seventh Grade started it was, I hoped, a chance for new horizons, more than just the same tired kids from elementary school; now, I was going to be a middle school-er and, finally, I hoped, people would forget my once broken English; new teachers, new classmates, all of that. There'd be 300 students in my grade instead of the same 60 or so; the county combined five elementaries into one.

Come the end of that summer, I went off to an evening of orientation; my parents walked with me through the halls so that I could see where all my classes were; here was homeroom, here Pre-Algebra, there Science and so on. All the children, as I remember tried to remain calm as the teachers talked about what they would do and we met each other, often for the first time. We exchanged shy greetings or, when we'd gone to elementary school together, pleasure at seeing old faces among the new.

Everything went fine enough until we got to my fourth period class: Gym. As soon as the teacher, Coach Wiley, had made his presentation and asked for questions, my father raised his hand, wondering if it was necessary that I need to wear gym-shorts and t-shirt and shower in public and so on. Of course it was, the coach began, then paused, and asked my father if he had another daughter ...

“Yes,” my father proudly answered. “You gave her an exemption from dressing out for gym.”

So the coach went over the exemption rules; medical excuses would have to come from a doctor, religious issues would need to be cleared with the principal ... and so on ... but I would have to wear my gym uniform over longer clothing.

I was humiliated, naturally; here was a classroom full of people most of whom I didn't know and my foreign father had to go and, in his funny accent, announce to them that I was 'different'. I felt, at the time, like I could have died.

And when school started, I felt all eyes on me, dressed like a fool; sweat pants with shorts on the outside and having to explain to everyone why ... getting dressed and undressed in a room full of other girls and becoming aware that some, at least, of my classmates had begun to develop; some had breasts and wore brassieres, some were beginning to get hair on their bodies and not just on their forearms (like me) ...

I was, I thought, envious; I wished I had round breasts – any breast whatsoever actually at that age and for years after – and found myself paying too close attention. So, the staring half-foreign girl with the 'special' clothes and heavy glasses ... my self-consciousness quotient was too high.

At least, it turned out that I wasn't the only girl with a special status in fourth-period gym; there was also Lori Armstrong who was asthmatic and had one of those precious doctor's notes. So, on the days when the rest of our class was to be in the gym, she was stuck sitting in the bleachers; I noticed that she was reading my kind of books. At that time, if I recall correctly, she was plowing through the Lord of the Rings.

Sometime that first week, I ended up sitting by her in cafeteria and that, fairly quickly, became a pattern. So, we gradually got to know each other; we were in most of the same classes and were almost always seated in alphabetic order so even our lockers were side by side.

Lori had gone to Pleasantdale Elementary, but only since fourth grade, she told me; after her parents got divorced, her mom and her had moved here from Pennsylvania. She did, I thought, have just a trace of a northern accent; distinct from everyone I'd known in real life (who

either had a variety of Virginia English or an Arabic accent), almost like some glamorous film or television star. It sounded really appealing to me; I even tried to copy her every now and then. It was, I thought, ultra-cool to sound like a sophisticated Northerner, instead of a Virginian or an Arab.

Lori could draw really well; she made sketches in her notebooks of characters from novels or of our teachers or cartoons of animals in clothes talking and doing things. Somewhere, I still have a picture she did of me; heavy glasses, long, stringy hair, and all ... but definitely me as I was then. She also, at my urging, drew me as I imagined myself; an adult woman in jeweled but scant clothing and armor waving a sword, like something off the cover of one of the books we both read.

I loaned her my Martian novels; she shared various fantasy novels with me – The Elfstones of Shannara, Thomas Covenant – and we read Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton, and the Silmarillion together. Pretty soon, we were thick as thieves.

Sometime that fall, Lori invited me to spend the night at her house on a Friday. I asked my parents if I could; my mother saw no reason not to but my father needed persuasion;

“We don’t know these people,” I can still hear him saying. “What kind of family does she have?”

And so on.

But I talked him around with sheer persistence. I went home with Lori on her school bus and we were let out by the townhouse she and her mom shared. We sat up all night, talking and watching TV (she had cable so I think this was the first time I’d ever actually seen MTV). We discussed every guy in our grade and agreed that most of them were vomit-worthy. We made fun of the bands and ordered pizza delivered – I had to explain to Lori why I wasn’t allowed to

eat pepperoni or sausage. And, when my father came and picked me up in the morning, I was exhausted but happy. For the first time I could remember, I had a 'best friend' who was my own age and was in my school.

All through Junior High, we followed the same pattern; usually, I went Friday to Lori's but sometimes, she came to our house. She didn't have any siblings so it was a lot more exciting for her, I suppose. I recall her being impressed with my mother's cooking; it never occurred to me that other kid's mothers didn't cook everything from scratch or bake their own bread or anything like that.

And we'd sit up nights talking, at each other's houses or on the phone. We talked about school and music and books and boys. And, when everything was said and done, were just about the biggest nerds among the girls in our school.

I found some pictures of us from back then. I'm too skinny and small, with thick wavy hair that's a little under combed and a little snarled and big glasses. Lori was a full head taller than me, a little chubby, with curly blonde hair and glasses. I remember telling her that I was jealous that she'd gotten a figure before me; she looked a lot more like a girl than I did even on the day we met.

We both, if I remember, were always behind the fashions and always were way too self-conscious. Neither of us were ever cool or trendy, even by the behind-the-trends standards of a country town.

We'd spend hours dreaming up ways we wished we could get in trouble but never did and, then, we'd share her big Queen size bed and keep talking almost 'til dawn. We made prank calls, bought or stole cigarettes, learning to smoke them like the cool older girls we saw, practicing blowing smoke rings like the sophisticates we believed ourselves to be. Sometimes,

we'd sneak wine or liquor from her mom's cabinet. Usually, we'd wander around the mall which wasn't too far from her house, maybe play a video game or two, try to flirt with the older boys, or watch a movie. So, passed seventh and eighth and much of ninth grade.

Desert Storms

The summer between eight and ninth grade began like almost every other. Lori and I hung out some; Aisha rode her horses, worked at the stable, and practiced for the high school band; Amr and Alia were underfoot and annoying; my cousins came up to visit for a few weeks in the summer; Rania and Lori met each other and I thought that each one was jealous of the other. I was disappointed that they weren't thick as thieves right off ... but when I left the room and came back, they were whispering and laughing and wouldn't tell me why.

By now, the Georgia side of the family was doing better. They'd moved up from apartment to rented townhouse to owned house in a better suburb (my father had helped with the downpayment). Uncle Omar had moved up from dishwasher to cook to restaurant manager as his English had gotten better; meanwhile, he was also leading prayers in what was starting to become one of the larger mosques.

Lori and I were both very interested in what Rania reported to us about big city styles and such; for the first time, I was aware of myself as the country cousin. I was also very aware from talking with Rania about school and friends that she went to classes with lots of yellow and

brown and olive kids, with names like Geeta, Rosario, Su Jin, and Linh, and had lots of Muslim and Arab friends ... while I was ever so much more isolated.

My father and hers meanwhile sat up late into the night, discussing something big, looking over drawings and sketches and wouldn't tell us a thing ...

Summer got even more interesting as July ended and August was about to begin. My father's sister, my aunt Ibtisam, and her husband, Uncle Hamuda (really, Muhammad al Sibayi), came to visit us along with their children. Hamuda had been a friend of my father's when they were in University in Syria; through him, he'd met my aunt. After they'd gotten married, though, he'd taken a job working for the Kuwaiti water authority and had done well for himself. Now, their oldest daughter, Zainab, was about to start college in the USA; she'd been accepted at a private women's college in Virginia. Her parents decided that, if she were to go to the USA, they'd come with her and use it as an excuse to visit the American relations.

So, uncle, aunt, eighteen year old cousin Zainab and her two younger brothers (Ayyad and Laheb) and much younger sister (Salma) came to visit us, bringing the total in our house to twenty! A crowd, even if it was just for a few days ... the boys were sleeping in tents in the yard, girls in the house, everyone talking a mile a minute in Arabic ...

The parents discussed all manner of things; everyone was excited in those days that, soon, with the end of the Soviets and the success of the Intifada, a Palestinian state would come and, as well, freedom would return to Syria; it was just a matter of time, after all ... all the Russian puppets were falling. ...

And we, the children, had other thoughts. Zainab played for us the latest popular Arabic music and let us make copies from her tapes and showed us how to dance like an Arab woman; thrusting shaking hips and all of that. Aisha took her and Raghad to the mall. The boys –

Ridwan, Ayyad, Laheb, Amr, and even Ramzi – played endless pick up games of soccer. Reem and Alia did little kid things; Salma tagged along with them.

Rania pointed out to me that Ayyad was the same age as Aisha, that he was our fathers' sister's son, and was not bad looking ... I told her that even thinking about that was gross ... she nodded, shrugged and left it at that.

Meanwhile, one of *my* cousins, Rob, was back home for the summer after his first year in college in Atlanta. He'd looked up Omar and family a few times since he'd been down there (they'd been coming to Virginia every summer so they were hardly strangers) and dropped in to visit as well ... and I felt a slight tinge of jealousy when, instead of spending time playing soccer with the boys or even talking to his 'real' cousin (me), he seemed more interested in chatting with Zainab, taking it on himself to give her "American University 101".

And, just before one set of cousins was set to go back to Georgia, the phone rang in the middle of the night ... and I heard my dad and my uncles half-yelling in excitement ... my aunts and my mother joining in and every one making noise, cousins stirring and running around ... Rania still slept so I got up quietly ...

I stumbled downstairs and found them watching television, flipping between stations filled with fuzz or off air, desperate for news.

"What's going on?" I asked as bleary I wandered in.

"The Iraqis!" Uncle Omar said excitedly. "There's war!"

And, in bits and pieces as others of us kids wandered in, I figured out what had happened, or what was known to have happened: the Iraqi army had invaded and overthrown the government of Kuwait.

My father was saying how this was probably a bad thing; my uncle wondering why Saddam didn't take out Assad instead. Someone said that, next, he'd sweep down through the Gulf and take out all the corrupt rulers. Why was that good? Saddam was a Baathi and an Aflaqi; they were Muslims, weren't they? But Saddam wasn't a Nusairi ... and on and on ... speculation, excitement, anger, pleasure ... and my uncles and father were all excited and bewildered and seemed very foreign right then ... and only my mother pointed out that Kuwait was a US ally ... (Uncle Hamuda even voiced the idea that maybe, now, the Kuwaitis would know humility if they had to win back their land in jihad ...)

And what about the cousins? Uncle Muhammad had been the one who'd received the call; it had been a friend of his who'd called. What would they do? They weren't sure whether to head back towards Kuwait and their lives there or turn around for Damascus or stay in the USA; right now, they would stay with us until they figured out what was going on ...

Everything would be all right for everyone in a few days, everyone said ...

So, I went back upstairs and back to bed ... and Rania stirred and I told her everything and that everything was fine.

But it wasn't.

4. First Loves

August 1990 – May 1991

War Drums

In the days and weeks that followed, things seemed to get worse and worse.

A diplomatic crisis erupted and American troops were deployed to Saudi Arabia. My father as ‘prominent local Arab’ appeared on the local news and was called by the paper; my Kuwaiti cousins got interviewed too. Some local church people came out to suggest that they could lend a hand ... and Uncle Hamuda gently refused, explaining he was hardly poor and had put *his* money in banks outside Kuwait.

Eventually, the Georgia cousins headed back home; the Kuwaitis stayed on for a while, until it began to look like they might be here a long time. Uncle Hamuda applied to the Kuwaiti embassy for some sort of pay; nothing went out as what there was was reserved only for ‘real’ Kuwaitis. Zaynab started college (and Rob dropped by to bid her farewell). Her parents decided that they would be better off in a city than in a small town; they followed Omar and his brood to Georgia, found a short term lease on a house ... and, eighteen years on, are still living in Georgia.

School started; I was in high school now. People talked about the possibility of war in the halls; teachers discussed it in class. In world history class, my teacher asked me to explain the situation to my classmates. I tried as best I could, stumbling only a few times as I tried to get across the basic concepts. After class, Mr. Perez asked me to stay a moment; he said he was impressed, wondered if I'd ever considered joining the debate team (which he coached). I said, maybe, both my cousins had done well ... he was startled and impressed as Jim and Rob had been state champions (or master debaters as they preferred), told me to think about it ... and I felt smart that I'd actually impressed someone with my intellect.

Not every student was so impressed; someone I didn't recognize called me 'rag head' in the hall the same day and a lot of people laughed (while I turned crimson).

Meanwhile, local National Guardsmen were called up, a couple of guys who'd graduated a few years before went to the Gulf ... my cousin Jim, Rob's brother, was in Navy ROTC at Virginia Tech with only a few months left before graduation; we all wondered whether he'd be sent out the following summer if a war dragged on. A second cousin went to sit in a tent in Saudi Arabia ...

Yellow ribbons and American flags sprouted ... people speculated what would happen in event of a war, how many thousand dead Americans and so on ... I saw 'no blood for oil' spray painted on a wall ...

And, for the first time, I began to be acutely conscious that I was an Arab and a Muslim and an American all at once. And, when people asked, I'd point out that we were Syrians and that Syria was now an ally of the USA and that Syrian soldiers served alongside American ones ... though I knew that was something I ought to be ashamed of.

I wished intensely to be normal; most things were normal. My family generally got lots and lots of support from our friends and neighbors, even if, more than once, we all (well, maybe not Alia) had the experience of someone saying something like ‘well, between you and me, you know this war is really being manipulated by Israel’ or other Anti-Semitic conspiracy stuff (something that rather annoys me to this day as it happens often enough; some Anglo assumes that, since I’m an Arab, I must share their antipathy for Jews; as you’ll see, eventually that was proven quite wrong).

Homecoming Weekend

Even under cloud of coming war, life went on. And my life was that of a gawky high school freshman girl who’d rather be reading history books or adventure novels than in school, with only one really close friend.

After Lori and I had been friends for what seemed forever and mooned over countless boys who were about 0% likely to give either of us the time of day if they even knew our names, we got ready to start high school and pine away for even older guys who wouldn’t care a whit about either of us.

Now that we were in High School, we knew that we were supposed to get boyfriends – or at least, pimply-faced boys to take us to the big homecoming dance. We speculated on who would ask us, each of us guessing that so-and-so would and how we’d respond. Of course, no one asked either of us, certainly not any of the ones we were fixated on. Naturally, those guys

were star athletes and popular guys while we ignored the boys who were more like us as hopeless dorks. When I had suggested to her that we should join the debate team together, she dismissed the idea as the debaters were all losers ... the guys worse even than the girls. And, if we wanted boyfriends or, at least, dates to a high school dance, that was the worst thing to do so we shouldn't ...

I remember, as a joke, saying to her, "You know, Lori, it's too bad we can't just take each other!"

"Yeah," she laughed, "I bet we'd have more fun than with any of these loser boys!"

That Friday night was the night of the Big Game; I think we played Western Albemarle, but I'm really not sure. If it mattered, I guess I could go look it up. Lori was spending the night at my house so we had gone with my parents and my siblings; my older sister was in the high school band, my brother was off running around with other junior high boys, my younger sister was reading while my parents greeted neighbors and friends; you could tell easily who was from Riverport, who wasn't by whether they greeted my parents.

A few, at least, of the people from other towns did do double takes on seeing my father; he had dark, wavy hair, dark eyes, Arab features, a thick mustache ... and looked a little like that fellow in Iraq (many, many people have noted that over the years). Saddam, of course, wouldn't have been caught dead in a high school booster club jacket or baseball cap ... but ... (my dad was asked in seriousness to 'play' Saddam Hussein in a mock trial at a local college and had the decency to refuse.)

Lori and I walked around and around ... looking backwards, it was very much the picture of small town Americana and probably one of my most "American" of memories from that time. Honestly, I would say that that was about as 'unforeign' as I ever felt back then.

After the game, we all went back to our house together ... Aisha was talking on the way back about her homecoming plan; a group of her friends – mostly band girls (and, if I remember correctly, several of them were from the larger conservative religious groups, Mennonites mostly, around) and a couple of harmless boys – were going to go to dinner and the dance together. My father had already given her permission, over, he said, his better judgment. I was jealous that she'd go and I said so ...

“You'll take Amina and Lori?” my mother asked Aisha immediately and, reluctantly, she agreed.

Lori and I were ecstatic; we'd get to go with upper classmen and we were going to our first high school dance! When we got back to our house, Lori and I were discussing nothing else ... the only break we had was that she called her mother and told her the exciting news and got her mother to agree to pick us up after the dance.

We talked about what we'd wear and on and on ... whom we'd dance with and all sorts of silly stuff like that. Finally, we weren't going to be the nerdiest females in the whole ninth grade; that honor would have to pass to someone else ...

After we'd headed upstairs to my room, we kept talking about everything. What would we do if so-and-so asked either of us to dance or what if everything went perfectly and one of us got invited by a boy to wander off ... what then?

“Well,” I said, “I guess I would kiss him.”

“OK,” said Lori, “but, tell me the truth, have you ever really kissed anyone?”

“Just relatives,” I mumbled.

“Well, that doesn't really count,” she said. “I mean have you ever kissed a real live boy?”

“No,” I blushed, embarrassed, “you know you’d know; I’d’ve told you if I’d kissed some guy over the summer ... what about you?”

“Me neither,” she sighed. “What do you think it would be like?”

“Really nice? Maybe?” I suggested. “Well, if the boy was really cute ... but, what if I made a mistake ... and he decided that he hated me or made fun of me ...”

“Yeah, I know,” Lori nodded. She paused for a long time, looked at me a little funny. “Y’know, I’ve got an idea ... what if we tried out with each other, I mean not as a real kiss, but just as practice so we can make sure that we’re doing it right? And that way, neither of us will do anything wrong ...”

“That,” I smiled, “sounds like a good idea, ‘cause if it turns out that I’m like a really bad kisser (or you are), it won’t really count and you won’t hate me or anything, right?”

“Yeah, of course not, you’re my bestfriend,” she smiled nervously and sat closer to me on my bed. Neither of us was really sure how to go about this.

“Maybe we should be standing up,” I suggested so we did and we were standing face to face. I felt really nervous and tried not to giggle.

“I think you’re supposed to close your eyes,” Lori said.

“Yeah,” I said and closed mine, tried to relax and felt Lori’s lips against mine as she bent slightly to kiss me. I remember that I was really surprised at how soft her lips were, but warm. After about a minute we stopped.

“That wasn’t so bad!” I laughed and she did too.

“You tasted nice,” she said.

“You did, too,” I said shyly. “Do you know what French-kissing is?”

“Uh huh,” she nodded. “It’s lke with your mouth open?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, “maybe we should try that ...”

“That’s probably a good idea,” she said so we tried that and it was even better.

We kept practicing for a while, and, I remember, it felt really good. She asked me who I was thinking about and I lied and named one of the boys in our classes and she laughed and said she was too ... so we kept making out and sat on my bed and tried some more but, eventually, realized we’d need to go to sleep ...

We talked as we were lying in darkness about how we’d both be really good kissers and all the boys would want us both ... and, eventually, fell quiet ... and as I drifted off to sleep, I remember thinking, why would I want a boyfriend anyway if I had Lori to kiss?

Saturday

Lori’s mom came and got her in the morning and took her shopping for her first high school dance; she brought her back to our house late in the afternoon. When Lori got out of their car and walked from the driveway to the backdoor, I thought she looked absolutely beautiful; I know my heart fluttered a little looking at her. She was wearing a new dark red dress (or at least one that I’d never seen before) that left her shoulders bare and gave a hint of her ample-for-a-freshman cleavage. Her legs were shown off and she was wearing heels. She wore the necklace I’d bought for her in the summer and her long golden curls were neatly styled. Obviously, her mother had helped her look so nice ...

As her mother walked up behind her, I was terribly self-conscious; I knew I looked nowhere near so nice; a long skirt and a nice sweater ... nothing fancy or revealing, just plain-old, square-old Muslim me. I knew Aisha was dressed in the same dull manner but I wanted to be all glamorous too.

But both Lori and Mrs. Armstrong were all smiles. My mother came out and talked to hers. Cameras appeared and they took photos of each of us and, then, both of us standing together.

My father came racing out; he'd gone out and bought corsages for both of us (and for Aisha and a couple of her friends) and insisted on pinning them on us each in turn. In these photos, everyone is smiling and young ...

My father pulled me aside before we left and warned me sternly:

“Remember, Amina,” he sent, waving a finger, “if the young man and the young woman are alone together, the Shaitan makes three!”

“Yes, dad,” I nodded. “No Shaitan, I got it.”

“So,” he continued, “don’t go off alone with any boy; if someone asks you too, take Lori with you ...”

“OK!” I started to blush, embarrassed ...

But he let us go and we – Lori and I – piled into the Arraf family van; Aisha was driving (since we’d both been ‘held back’, she was the first of her friends to get a driver’s license) and her friends all piled in ... and Lori and I were both overwhelmed by all these older girls and felt ourselves to be very mature just to be included, even if these older girls were just as much dateless nerds as we considered ourselves to be.

Aisha's friends were all dressed nicely, even if with little fashion sense; nice blouses, sweaters, skirts ... though, as far as I was concerned, Lori was far better dressed than any of them. All of us, in those days, had spent hours with hairspray, mousse, and curling irons working to puff up and out our hair, trying to get as big as possible; everyone would look hopelessly dated and silly now.

We went to a decent, medium priced restaurant; I can't even recall where now; there, we met up with more of Aisha's friends (including several guys, at least one of whom – Dan – I was fairly certain was gay even then; I googled him as I was writing this and, no surprise, found his MySpace page listing him as 'single, gay, and looking'; he sat across the table from Lori and I and he joked with us through dinner and was flirty in way that felt to me like a pretense even then) ...

And, then, we headed towards the high school ... where others were already wandering in to a gym filled with balloons and crepe paper while some unknown to me class officer was collecting money for tickets ... paid up and entered ... and I was at my first real live high school dance!

Which was far less exciting than television, movies, and adolescent fantasy had previously suggested it would be. A few dozen students dressed slightly better than normal stood around the edges of the gymnasium or sat here and there ... fewer actually danced in the dim lights (and that dancing seemed more like inept shuffling than dancing even to square old me). Bad top forty music played: Vanilla Ice or MC Hammer or some other pop rap alternating with other, equally dismal music (this was the golden age of Milli Vanilli).

I suppose, in my mind, I had envisioned (if I'd considered it at all) such things as being like what I saw in films or, at least, what I had seen at Arabic weddings I'd attended (but whiter,

less ethnic and cooler): people moving perfectly in time to the music, everyone grinning maniacally, and, when I arrive, the crowd parts for my entrance ... dancing boys and girls compete for my attention ...

I don't know if Lori sensed my disappointment but she pulled my arm and half dragged me into the gym ... and we stood for a while watching people nervously, hoping that someone would approach us and ask us to dance ... and no one did ...

Time passes, I feel a bit foolish; I can tell that Lori does too. Aisha's friend, Dan, came over and talked to us about nothing; a record started playing, "Groove is the Heart" (Dee-Lite), if I recall.

"I love this song!" Lori said.

"Me too!" replied Dan.

And he grabbed our wrists and half dragged, half-led the two of us to dance with him.

Now, I had often danced growing up; you can't be an Arab woman and not. But almost always to Arabic music and with Arab friends and family around ... and I started dancing enthusiastically along with the music, doing all the steps I'd learnt from Zainab and Rania and so on ... arms in the air, hips moving ... a mix, I suppose, of biladi and debke steps ... my eyes closed as I enjoyed the music ...

And opened them to see both Dan and Lori (and several others) watching me rather oddly. What they must have seen was a scrawny, geeky girl suddenly gyrating in a hyper-sexualized bellydance of the sort rarely, if ever, seen in the gymnasium of John Singleton Mosby High School ...

My eyes widened and for a moment I felt embarrassment but ... they started imitating me ... and I was thrilled ... and danced and danced ...

And, eventually, I was feeling parched so Lori and I went looking for a soda or juice. As we walked up to the punchbowl in the cafeteria, Vicki White, an older girl I'd never spoken to was filling her cup. I recognized her as one of the more 'popular' juniors; I knew she was dating a football star, was a cheerleader, etc., etc.. You know, the basic Ms Popularity ... She saw us, made eye contact with me and spoke.

"What was that spazzing you were doing?" she asked me, scorn in her voice.

"Um," I mumbled, "it was Arabic dance."

"Arabic?" Vicki repeated. "What are you, some kind of Iraqi terrorist or something?"

I looked at my feet, felt myself about six inches tall and melting into the floor. I couldn't speak.

"Actually," I heard Lori saying as she stepped closer to the older girl, "Amina is Syrian. And the word is Iraqi, not Iraqian. But, even if she were Iraqi, she'd never be a total bitch to someone she didn't know!"

I looked up; Vicki was almost shaking with irritation. She slammed down her cup and stormed out of the lunchroom. Lori laughed.

"You didn't have to do that," I told her.

"Yes, I did," she said as she put her arm over my shoulders. "Nobody insults my best friend in front of me!"

I thanked her; we danced a little more, even if we looked like spastic Iraqi terrorists. And, then, the dance ended and we sat outside on the school steps, looking up at a thousand stars in the cool night air until Lori's mother came for us.

On the way home, we both babbled about how great everything was ... and I gushed about how brave Lori was ... and when we got to their apartment, we went up to her room to keep on babbling.

“You were wonderful,” I told her for the hundredth, “showing Vicki up like that!”

“No, you were!” she said.

“Too bad,” I said, “that we didn’t either of us end up kissing any boys!”

“Yeah,” Lori said and looked right at me. “Maybe we should try to practice some more?”

“Yeah,” I said and I just melted into her, my hero and my friend.

The two of us made out far longer with far more passion than the night before, hardly even pausing to pretend we were thinking of boys, until we were both so groggy that we fell asleep with our limbs all entangled.

Autumn

Days moved quickly. My father rushed down to Georgia a few times and back again but I barely noticed. Life seemed to be quickening and I knew I was getting older. For too long, I thought, I had been a little girl, with a little girl’s mind and a little girl’s body, but, at last, that was done.

One October morning I woke up and my gut hurt in a way I couldn’t understand; I thought maybe I had the flu or maybe an ulcer or I was getting some kind of cancer. I’d never hurt *there* before, certainly not like this ...

And when I went to the bathroom just after, I saw that there was blood in my underwear ... and blood in the toilet ...

And I was so excited; I was a week short of fifteen and I'd been expecting something like this for years and years, at least since the day in fifth grade that all the boys were sent out of the room and we had to watch a stupid filmstrip ... and, when nothing had happened and nothing had happened and nothing had happened for long months turning into years, I'd begun to have a growing anxiety in the back of my mind ...

What if I were somehow *different*? What if I never got my period, what if I never grew breasts or curves? What if I stayed a physical child forever?

But, at last, the day had finally come ... and I could begin to think of myself as a woman. Legally, I knew, under Muslim law I could now be married ... and, at some point, a slight fear ran through me that what if, contrary to everything I knew about my family, my parents decided I needed to be married off and sent for a suitable boy? Would I refuse?

And I knew, too, that I was now old enough to fast Ramadan, to start covering even when I wasn't praying and to start becoming a woman in dress as well as in theory. Back then, covering seemed just one more of the weird backwards ways of my Arabic family ... so I didn't quite yet.

But, oddly, I noticed that I did start changing in other ways. The breasts I prayed for didn't show up but ... I started caring more about clothes and hair and make-up, probably for the first time in my life actually caring ...

But I was a weirdo ...

My last class of the day was Freshman Honors English. I loved that class ... Lori was in it, of course, but so were the other kids in our grade that I actually liked and the teacher was great and we had fun and we wrote poems and had discussions ... and then there was Ms. Peterson ...

Just remembering her makes my heart skip ...

Julia Peterson, our student teacher, twenty-two or three, always dressed in black and always wearing laced up boots ... rather 'Goth' and sophisticated and cool ... pale skin, almost milky, bright red hair, pale blue eyes ... from Alexandria and about to graduate from Madison. I hung on her every word. She was the coolest person I had ever met until then and, when I saw her, I thought, I want to be like her ... I even deliberately got in trouble so I would have to stay after class as 'detention' as she would have to sit while Mrs Warner was off doing whatever English teachers do at the end of the day ... and I'd just talk to her about whatever ... she told me about bands she'd seen and music she liked; I copied all that ... she talked about going to Goth clubs in DC and poetry and on and on ...

Yes, I had a crush ... I had a few dreams about her; we went to club together, she combed my hair ... she kissed me ... and I woke up sweating and tingling ...

I started dressing more like her; no more clueless nerd girl. Now, I abandoned tennis shoes for Doc Martens I bought at the mall ... started wearing more and more black, no more jeans, but long skirts ...

I dyed a bright blue streak into my hair and came to school and everyone looked at me like I was crazy ... but Ms Peterson told me it looked nice I started wearing eyeliner and silver jewelry from back home ...

I turned in a composition I'd written on the fly, a morbid poem ... and Ms Peterson insisted it be published in the school's literary magazine ...

Maybe I should have been worried, crushing on my teacher, maybe Lori should have been, I don't know. Eventually, though, that autumn passed into winter like a dream. Lori and I were as close friends as we'd ever been but were now, suddenly, closer. I think we passed more notes, called each other more often and so on; we were practically inseparable in school and, when we were alone, we kept 'practicing' kissing each other ... a lot.

Fridays, if we were going to her house together, almost as soon as we were inside the door, we'd be making out ... and almost all the time that we were together alone passed that way. And, while we were practicing kissing, we began touching each other -- because this was just 'practice' too ... At least that's what we said to each other so we could justify fondling and nuzzling each other's breasts, groping each other, and finger banging.

I remember admiring her, her breasts, her soft curves, her long curly hair, her bright blue eyes ... and thinking of them when we were apart. I know that even then I knew that we were only pretending that it was all about getting ready for some future boyfriend but, when I was fifteen, I couldn't handle the thought that I might be a lesbian or bisexual, couldn't handle that only women were in my dreams.

But, however it was, a lot of Saturday mornings (and some Sundays) I'd wake up in Lori's arms after a night of kissing and holding each other. And we'd sometimes lay there naked, touching each other, and talk about some heartthrob or other unattainable male in the vaguest of ways; I was pretending – if I weren't thinking of her, I was thinking of Ms Peterson – and I suspected she was too...

January

School ended for the Christmas break. New Year's Eve 1990, I spent with Lori like we'd spent most every New Year's, watching the countdown on TV and eating chips. Just before midnight, she reminded me of that When Harry Met Sally movie, so, at the stroke of midnight, we kissed lightly, said "Happy New Year!" and then kissed long and hard after that. Just practice, y'know?

Classes started back and things got tenses at home ... my Dad was watching CNN continuously if he wasn't at work, arguing with the television, constantly on the phone talking in Arabic ... and my mom was nearly as tense ...

Last minute peace deals and so on all fell through and ...

Then came the war.

Up all night glued to television. My father's face is wet with tears. He's on the phone to Omar in Atlanta ...

Minnie comes over; she couldn't get through on the phone. I hear her and my mother talking in hushed voices, they don't want my father to overhear or any of us children. What if thousands of Americans are killed? What happens to us? My mother says no one in Riverport would ever bother us. Minnie tells her don't be so sure ...

My mind races ... I remember Anne Frank ... she looked like me ...

And it goes on and on for a month. My parents likely wouldn't notice or care what I did ... I get a second set of piercings in my ears ... and it's months before my mother mentions that. I come home from school late and I know I stink fo tobacco and cheap perume ... nothing.

In school, the teachers are *so* nice to me. Mr. Perez asks me to stay back after class. Have I reconsidered debate team? No, I tell him. Has anyone bothered me because of ...? The war? I ask. Yes.

I tell him, no ... and he says that's good, but if anyone does, please tell him ... he knows what it's like to have an odd name and be a little different ...

I leave in a hurry.

Ms Peterson is gone now but Mrs Warner asks me the same, suggests maybe I should write about being an Arab at Mosby High ...

And I leave in a hurry.

They don't, I think, get it. I don't want to talk about being different, I don't want to talk about being an Arab, I don't want to discuss being an Arab in wartime ... I want to talk about becoming a woman and being good looking and how not to be a nerd ... tell me how black makes me seem deeper and more poetic ... but please ...

Aisha gets it even worse; she's in US history and her teacher keeps putting her on the spot, asking assinine questions like 'why do you support Saddam?'

I want to dig a deep hole and hide. Someone calls me Towelhead behind my back as I walk through the hall ... I hear Lori telling whoever it was to stick it but I don't turn and just keep walking ...

February

Lori is my guardian angel then and so many times ... I can't imagine life without her and our games are getting steadily more possessive. But ...

One Friday night came; it was the first week of February, if I recall ... I was, I know, already thinking about Valentine's day coming up and wanting to do something for Lori for it ... and knowing that I was thinking that tells me that I knew what I was about; at fifteen, I wasn't wholly innocent even if I were virtually virginal; it's amazing how much one can glean from books and films and television ...

We were playing our usual late night games and were both just about totally nude. These had been progressing slowly over the past few months; at first, we just kissed and kissed, then one time, Lori had kissed down my neck and pulled off my shirt and kissed my nearly non-existent breasts while blood had rushed through me ... and I'd done the same. And we kept pushing the boundaries farther, touching and kissing and holding each other.

That night, I recall, she had straddled me and stripped me while we kissed ... and, when I was naked, Lori had slid a few fingers inside me and, as she was getting pretty good at it by then, had me really turned on; I was a woman in love and was lying nude entwined with my lover in her bedroom, having sex, even if I couldn't have stated any of that clearly then.

"I want to try something new," I whispered to Lori and got her to lie flat on her back.

I started kissing her breasts, then down her soft belly, and, then, at last, went down on her. Obviously, I was utterly inexperienced but she really seemed to like it ... after about ten minutes of my kissing, sucking, licking her, she was shaking and shuddering, pulling my hair and moaning ... it was the first time I'd seen a woman orgasm and, I think, was probably her first time, too. I thought she was more beautiful than ever ... and I was touching myself like crazy and came about as close as I could come then to crazy. I nearly thought her thighs would crush

me at one point but I'd never been happier – and, when we were both through, we lay for a long, long time just holding each other...

I didn't know quite what to say and said the most obvious line anyone had ever thought to say, "I love you. Lori"

She didn't say anything but just started sobbing. She cried herself to sleep and shoved me away when I tried to comfort her ...

The next morning, we acted normal and, when my mom came to pick me up, Lori said she'd call me later on. She didn't. Ever.

Monday

Monday, I missed my morning classes because of a dental appointment; I had no cavities but still needed my teeth cleaned. The dental hygeinist asked me how I'd colored my hair, said it looked good ... So I was late coming in to school and, when I did, my whole world came crashing down.

Before I'd gotten to school, Lori had told some other girls that I was a pervert, a lesbian. When I'd walk through the halls, I thought I heard people saying 'lesbo', 'dyke'; I could feel the stares burning me...

I went to Lori's locker to wait for her, but she ignored me as best she could. As soon as I got home, I called her. No one picked up so I let it ring and ring, ten, twenty, thirty times. At last, she answered, "Hello?"

"Come on Lori," I told her, "it's me, Ami"

"I don't want to talk to you anymore."

"Why not?"

"Cause you're sick!"

"What?"

"What you did to me!"

"But you liked it!"

"Just don't bother me anymore!"

And that was that; she hung up and wouldn't pick up when I called (or the five hundred times I called after that). She ignored me at school no matter what I did; I left her notes and letters; love letters and apologies and pleas and promises I'd never do 'it' again and everything I could think of. Soon, she had other friends and I was sure I overheard her telling them, when I went by, that I was a sicko dyke...

Minnie

I went home from school with my head hung in shame, that Monday and every day after that. I was miserable and wanted to die. I'd go up to my room, listen to the same mournful cassettes over and over (mostly second generation ones of Marcel Khalife, Fairuz, The Cure, The Cult, and so on ...

I was ashamed, I was disgraced, I felt like I wanted to die. I hated myself and was

disgusted by the idea that there was really something wrong with me ...

I was also heartbroken and mournful; the only really close friend I'd had, that I thought I could share everything with had deserted me ... I scrawled:

“If only I'd thought of the right words, I could have held on to your heart. If only I'd thought of the right words, I wouldn't be breaking apart all my pictures of you. Looking so long at these pictures of you but I never hold on to your heart. Looking so long for the words to be true but always just breaking apart my pictures of you There was nothing in the world that I ever wanted more Than to feel you deep in my heart. There was nothing in the world that I ever wanted more than to never feel the breaking apart ll my pictures of you.”

I wrote horrid poems, filled with self pity and anger and desire for death ... I scrawled on my notebook: “I'm waking up I can not see that there is not much left of me. Nothing is real but pain now. Hold my breath as I wish for death. Oh, please God, wake me!”

My immediate family didn't notice much; we were Muslims, Arabs, living in the USA ... and these were the days when the worst images were coming from Iraq, of round the clock air raids and slaughters in bomb shelters, 'turkey shoots' and highways of death. I drew pictures of grim scenes ... piles of dead bodies, ruined landscapes ...

My parents watched CNN incessantly and had trouble sleeping; they were irritable and depressed, angry and outraged and no way to express it in the outside world. If they even noticed that I was walking around looking like death, they likely assumed I was also feeling the pain of two hundred thousand dead Arabs.

I could barely eat; if I looked at myself in the mirror, I was disgusted by the grotesque blob staring back at me. No wonder people hated me, I thought. I quit buying lunch at school,

saving my money for cigarettes from the Seven Eleven (which I smoked only in great privacy). I lost weight – and there hadn't been much of me to begin with.

I wandered into my great aunt's house one day, collapsed on her couch; I didn't want to go home. Minnie had always let me (and my sisters and brother and our other cousins) come and go as we pleased ... and, now, if anything pleased me, it was not being at home.

She looked at me and knew I was in distress and asked me in her smooth, seventy odd year old way, what was wrong ... and I told her in one long, gushing breath:

“Everything, everything, everyone hates me, she hates me, and I didn't do anything, all I did was be her friend and tell her I loved her and do what she wanted and she kicked me away and made me like dirt and I just want to die and everything is horrible and I don't want to live and ...”

and, and, and ...

and Minnie just listened and nodded and when I ran down, said to me softly:

“Amina, a broken heart is a terrible thing and it feels like the world is ending and nothing could ever be worse, but it will get better.”

“You don't understand!” I blurted.

And she shook her head and said, “Child, I've been married three times. I buried two husbands. And, believe me, there isn't a day I don't think of both of them. And it hurts every time. But I go on. And the other one? I loved him ... and he loved me, but sometimes love isn't enough ... and, even when it is, it doesn't always work the way we want it. You might love someone and they don't love you back. And nothing you do will make them love you. So, you've got to go on.”

And she took my hand and held it. And I wasn't quite so sad.

(And I didn't think until a long time afterwards why she was the only one around who made the connection that I was heartbroken from a failed romance – and didn't seem bothered by the object of my affection's gender. When I did, I did wonder ... Aunt Minnie was an odd bird for her time and place; she was ridiculously progressive and liberal and always had been ... and *she* had had a best friend for years and years, another older, childless widow. And the two of them went to Hawaii and Florida and Montreal together; Minnie had pictures up of the two of them in all those places ... and Ellen was a little butch ... and when I wondered about that, or why she had books on her shelf that I read later on – Rubyfruit Jungle, Wells of Loneliness, Orlando – whether my Great Aunt wasn't totally straight, it was way too late to ask about ...)

Ramadan

That year, Ramadan started in the middle of March. For the first time, my parents allowed me to fast ... and I was excited to have a reason not to eat or drink. Even when it came time to eat, I was still reluctant to eat.

It was a time of brutal images; the Uprisings and their suppression were underway in Iraq, bringing mixed feelings as well as recollections to us. People with names or ancestry like ours were being strung up, tortured and killed in the South of Iraq; an Omar or Aisha in the family tree was as a death sentence to the Shia groups. Yet, the repressors were from the same party (even if a different, less sectarian branch) than that which had repressed the Muslims in Syria. Images of the Kurds fleeing were horrible; we gave money to groups to help them and

tried to get others to care (in a very short time, many of those Kurds would start arriving in our area).

My parents thought that I wasn't eating well and walking around depressed for the same reasons they were; that the torment of watching all this, of hearing endless gloating by the Americans at a 'bloodless' war that had brought the death of hundreds of thousands, had gotten me down.

It did, but my own internal misery was far worse. I would sit and think that I wished I could explain my heartbreak to ... well, Lori. And, she treated me, if I were lucky, as non-existent. I couldn't help but think of myself as evil, foul, a sinner, and a corrupter ... I hadn't realized how utterly my life had centered on Lori and, when she was gone, I had nothing.

And I ate little, stayed up at night ... stumbled through school. The first of the year, I'd weighed 108 pounds; by May, I had shed sixteen of those. I could see my ribs clearly, my hips were jutting points ...

I thought about running away, about suicide, all of the depressed teen stuff; I'd lock myself in my room and listen to depressing music or write bad poetry, spent my lunch period sitting alone chain-smoking near the art students ...

The only light in my tunnel came when my parents decided to move to Georgia; my dad had been having long conversations with Uncle Omar and they'd decided to go in business together. Later, he told me that he was also concerned that we were too far from other Muslims, from family (even if we had a thousand cousins in them thar hills), that we were getting too American; he'd told his brother about Aisha and I going to school dances and Omar had been shocked; "Next thing you know," Omar had told him, "they'll be marrying Christian men."

And they had other ideas ...

End of April, it must have been, my Dad says over dinner to Aisha and I,

“Would you like to go home?”

We both look at him blankly.

“What do you mean?”

“Sham, Damascus ... I talked to Omar and Hamza and they want Raghad and Rania to go home for the summer. Would you like to go?”

“YES!” I almost shout.

Aisha’s more thoughtful, but nods ...

“What happens if we don’t?”

“You’ll have to help us pack.”

“Pack?”

And it all comes out ... we’re moving ... and Aisha and I will leave one house and return to another ... I am ecstatic.