

Once Upon a Time in Baghdad

*The Two Golden Decades
The 1940s and 1950s*



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The City of Peace

The Cosmopolitan Baghdad of my Youth

Forget the Baghdad of today for a moment and step with me into a recent forgotten past. Let me show you the Baghdad of my memories, a city of about 550'000 inhabitants, spread on both banks of the 1400 km long river Tigris. The Tigris runs from the north of Iraq as does the Euphrates river to the south, before both rivers flow into the Persian Gulf, *Shatt al Arab*. It is the Tigris, the heart and soul of the city of the Caliphs that makes Baghdad, the cradle of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia of the Sumerian, the Babylonian and the Assyrian civilizations. The city structure is vast for those days and has several centres. On the East bank of the river is a large quarter called *Al-Rusafa*, here we find several shrines and tombs of famous revered Imams. *Al Karch* is another large quarter found on the banks of the Tigris with *Al Mansour Mosque*. On the western bank of the river are the orchards and walled in gardens. It is said that the word 'Baghdad' means 'God Given' a meaning derived from Persian, *Bagh* meaning God and *dad* meaning given. During the *Abbasid Caliphate*, 800 years ago, when Baghdad was the centre and the jewel of the Islamic world, a Poet by the name of *Ammu Ibn al Ala* wrote 'Consider the man who lives and dies in Baghdad. It is as if he moves from one heaven to another.' The Baghdad that I know from the 40s and 50s is a peaceful cosmopolitan city, flat and dusty, with an oriental exotic charm. Thick stemmed, tall, palm trees fan the clear blue skies above. During the season they are pregnant with bunches of honey coloured sweet dates, providing the natives with both food and shade

from the burning hot sun. Typical Baghdad houses have first wooden bays with latticed windows and inner open courtyards. Some of the nicest old town houses of Baghdad are found along *al Rashid Street*. On the West bank of the river are the more modern houses each with surrounding gardens and high brick walls. On the opposite riverbank are government buildings, hotels and middle and upper class mansions. The streets and alleys in the very old parts of the city are narrow and the housing is low and clustered together. As we move away from the old buildings and shops, we see a Mosque and then several *Kahwas*, coffee shops and restaurants. Occasional parks and trees and flowers line the wide streets allowing ample room for the maze of traffic. Automobiles, bicycles, donkey and horse-drawn carriages crawl or race down the road with no specific traffic order.

It is the right season and farmers are preparing themselves to climb up the palm trees to pluck the dates. They gather their *dishdashas*, long gowns, between their legs and tuck one end in front in their belt. With the help of a wide leather strap around the tree and around their waist they climb swiftly and effortlessly with their bare feet to the top to reach the dates. The poor natives' favourite food is the Iraqi *khibis*, flat bread with fresh sweet dates. It is both delicious and healthy. There are several varieties of Iraqi dates, dry or moist, large and small, hard or soft, but all without exception sweet, tasty and nourishing. Let's move on to look at the brightly coloured golden mosques and blue minarets, towering over other buildings. Church bell towers and high cathedrals topped with carved shiny crosses, stand proudly above the sea of flat buildings, to greet the rising golden sun every morning. Shops, schools, hotels, hospitals, cinemas, museums, libraries, cemeteries, commercial and public office buildings are scattered all over the city along both banks of the river Tigris and stretch out beyond, in all directions. Baghdad is a growing city buzzing with oriental sounds and vibration.

At dawn, the cocks crow with zeal to announce the beginning of another day in Baghdad, the city of *Ali Baba* and the backdrop to the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. I stir, to tear myself away slowly and reluctantly from the land of dreams, to find my way back to the land of the conscious. Faintly, we hear the chants of the Muezzin. Perched on a minaret of a mosque, the devotee recites verses from Kor'an, in a soft harmonious voice, calling everyone for morning prayers, reminding one and all, of the presence of God the Almighty all around us. My eyes still closed, I listen to the prayer, as I

I lie in bed warm and snug under the covers. It is soothing to my soul. Very slowly I stir, yawn and stretch as I sit up and just as slowly, the city of Baghdad awakes, yawns and stretches as we both, fully awake now, listen to the Muezzin leading this morning prayer with the words *Saddakka Allahul Addhim*. Praise be to God the Great. As the Muezzin's voice fades away, I make my way to the bathroom to prepare myself for the gift of another day. In the city, the faint din of traffic begins, softly at first, then gradually continues to grow into a loud mad roar of sounds, shouts, screeches and honks, clippety clop of carriage horses and donkeys braying, as everyone rushes to get to their destinations. Nothing to compare with today's standards of noisy cities for sure, but for those days it was loud enough. Hundreds of radios are turned on everywhere, one after another, full blast. There is the wailing of the ageless Arab classical singer *Um Kalthoum*, revered by one and all in the entire Arab world. Her voice mixes and blends with the voice of the most popular composer and male singer of the forties and fifties, *Abdel Wahab* blaring out from other radios farther away. Somewhere else rises the distinctive sad voice of *Asmahan*—a legend and a great favourite of all the Arabs. They say that she had a liaison with King Farouk of Egypt, but then she was suspected to have been spying for the British, so *King Farouk* had her killed. Or so the rumour goes. The car she was in fell off a bridge down into the river Nile. The story is told again and again still today, whenever there is a gathering of Arabs anywhere in the world and *Asmahan's* voice is heard. She was young, beautiful and famous, on her way to becoming a big star. Her sudden death made her immortal. Just about every Arab, even today, owns a tape of these three famous Arab singers. Amazingly, thanks to modern technology, all of them can be heard and seen on *you tube* today.

Shops, small and large, offering a variety of local and imported goods, cinemas, hotels, banks and offices line the streets. *Shareh al Rashid* is the main, busiest and longest street in Baghdad snaking through from the North Gate to the South Gate. It was the first illuminated street built in Baghdad in 1917 by *Khalil Pasha*. Scattered here and there are restaurants, kebab stands and of course, the inevitable *kahwas*, some with an open front, frequented by men only. Men sit, smoke and drink their tea served in *istikans*, small narrow glass cups without a handle. They sip sweet or bitter Turkish coffee in mini coffee cups, play *tawla* or *dominos* while they exchange small talk. Merchants of fabrics, carpets, antiques, grains, dates, leather and wood as well as farmers and

estate agents frequented the *kahwas*. Young and old engaged in heated debates; writers and journalists in one corner of a *kahwa* while painters, sculptors, poets and singers debate in another corner. My father frequents a *kahwa* near where we live in the early forties. He enjoys his game of *tawla* before dinner. Some men prefer to puff on a water pipe, *nerkile*, as they share their thoughts, business and life experiences. Music and songs from radios here turned to happy Arab folk music. Popular singers of the moment, like *Sabah*, *Feiruz* or *Farid al Atrash* who was *Asmahan's* brother singing love songs and ballads, make the background to the noisy busy atmosphere in the *kahwas*. 'Margo, go and fetch your father,' my mother says, 'dinner is ready.' Until I was about ten I didn't mind running over to the *kahwa* to fetch my father. After that I was too self-conscious to walk in to the *kahwa* with all the men staring me or teasing me, so my mother sends my sister *Laura* to tell him that dinner is ready. Sometimes it is difficult for him to tear himself away from his game especially if he is winning in which case we need to go for him more than once tugging at his sleeve to pull him away.

Tantalizing oriental smells greet all those who are on foot. Whiffs of coffee and spices, grilled kebab or bread baked either in *tannours* or bakeries blend with smells of the Tigris and fish, a whiff of scented flowers or sand from the desert. Occasionally the pleasant smells are interrupted by some pungent smell of horse dung or foul stench of garbage, depending on which part of the city we happen to be passing through. The diversity of sounds and street noises, music blasting away from every corner, loud shrieks of children playing on the streets and people talking with loud voices, does not disturb anyone. Arabs have a habit of talking at the top of their voices, which often gives the impression that they are shouting or quarrelling but in reality they're just communicating with exaggerated emotions and intensive passion, not different to some Italians or Spaniards. Arab eardrums have long accustomed themselves to the daily ruthless onslaught of a mixture of loud fervent chatter, traffic noise, donkeys braying, peddlers' cries, *arabana* bells, mules and music. As if that is not enough, at various hours of the day, we hear church bells, beckoning Christians to mass or the *Muezzin* calling Moslems to prayer. The heart-rending melancholic or happy rhythmic variations known to Arab music seem to blend in unison with all other day sounds.

As our taxi joins the line of traffic on the main road, we get lost in the confusion of cars and small buses as they zigzag their way through a maze of

streets, all without exception impatient to reach their goal. There is no meter, the price is set according to the distance by the driver which is negotiated before. Our taxi driver does what all other drivers do as they race through the streets with their vehicles. One hand is on the wheel and the other is permanently pressed on the horn as a warning for everyone to run for their lives. They are oblivious to the loud protests and curses hurled at them by some of the pedestrians who, annoyed at the stupidity and insensitivity of the drivers, shake their hands threateningly to express their outrage. Some of the drivers reply by taking their hand off the horn for a split of a second, to hurl back their own abuses at the pedestrians, as they wave their arm to emphasize their words, telling them in no uncertain terms, to go to you know where. Both pedestrians and drivers having given vent to their tempers, feeling all the better for it, carry on with their journey, muttering to themselves and shaking their heads each at the stupidity of the other, '*himar*' donkey, our driver mutters under his breath, '*he walks as if he owns the road, he can't help it, no brain poor guy*' and then adds one more time for good measure, '*himar*.'

Traffic policemen, clad in crisp white uniforms and hard tropical white helmets during the hot summer months change to black uniforms and black helmets in winter. They perch on high pedestals at every crossroad. Their chests inflated, they feel destined for their meaningful role in life. With great authority they vigorously wave their arms in every direction and blow their whistles, in an attempt to introduce some order into this mad chaos. To confuse everyone and upset the whole scene, along roll the *arabanas* carrying passengers, clad in western attire or *dishdashas* and *abayas*, who choose to travel to their destination at an old fashioned more pleasant pace. The long gowned *arabanchi*, coachman, his head covered with an *irkal*, is perched high in front in the driver's seat. He steers his two horses through the maze, a long whip in one hand that he uses ever so lightly, more to shoo off flies rather than to urge the horses to move faster. The carriage weaves its way in a slow trot through the city while he looks down at everyone, calm and detached, refusing to be swallowed into the frenzy of the modern traffic. The horses go to a slow rhythm of *clippety clop, clippety clop*, dutifully pulling the carriage, oblivious to the madness, action and noise around them. Now our taxi forced to slow down behind an *arabana*, tries to steer to the left and then go to the right in his attempts to overtake the slow horse drawn carriage, his left hand permanently on the honk. He is not the least bit concerned about us passengers at the back

being thrown from one side to the other, '*imshi yaba*' go on move, sticking his head out of the window, he screams in frustration to a pedestrian. Finally he manages to slip through and overtake. There are no traffic rules and anything goes where no traffic policemen are seen. In the late fifties, traffic lights are introduced in Baghdad but no one, no one takes any notice of them. After a while the traffic police give up in exasperation. They turn off the lights and policemen come back on duty again and I don't recall that the traffic lights are ever turned on again before I leave Baghdad in 1959.

People of all races, cultures and religions, go about their various destinations. Men clad in the traditional Arab long gowns, some of them wearing the *irkal* on their heads and *dishdashas*, walk along side by side rubbing shoulders with westerners and Arab *Effendis*, *gentlemen*, in western suits and their women dressed in the most modern fashions of the period. Amongst the fashionably dressed walk occasionally Moslem women covered with black *abbayas*. Here and there we might see a woman with a black thin veil covering her face but they are so rare they don't really stand out. The drab monotonous modern day strict Moslem fashion-wear including headscarves for women simply did not exist. The majority are dressed in western fashion style. A few Arab *effendis* wear suits but then have a red *tarboush* on their heads with a black tassel that swings from side to side as they walk. A headdress fashion for men taken over from the Egyptians, there are many pictures of King Farouk wearing a red *tarboush*.

Sometimes we see a few women wearing colourful saris and their men dressed in the neat Nehru suit look, their tunic jacket buttoned up to the neck. Across the street, a couple of Pakistani women with their traditional short dresses on top of slim legged pants, disappear into a large department store, probably run by their relatives. Over there are a couple of Kurdistanis, men with smiling wrinkled faces bronzed by the sun, dressed in their colourful native baggy pants pass by probably on their way to do heavy work somewhere. The fabric hangs in thick folds between their legs, thick brightly coloured sashes cover their waists and fancy turbans are wrapped around their heads. They look like they had just stepped out of an Arabian Night movie. '*You can drop us in front of the Omar al Khayam Hotel,*' we say to the taxi driver, pay him his fee and are happy to leave him. We walk into the oriental style luxurious hotel where we plan to have our lunch. As we walk into the hotel lobby, we have to look closer to tell the origins of the Europeans and other foreigners sitting or

standing conversing in the lobby. The lobby is packed with French, German, Italian, British, American and Egyptians, Greeks, Turks, Persians, Kuwaitis, Jordanians, Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians and Armenians not to mention the mixed races. The hotel management is usually Lebanese, Syrian, Kuwaitis or Armenians who've lived in Baghdad all their lives. The personnel who serve are usually Iraqi Assyrians, Kurds or Moslems. Jews, Moslems and Christians all mingle together. They eat, work and shop side by side in pleasant co-existence, accepting and respecting each other, their diversities, their different cultures and customs, each knowing their place and each minding their own business. If anybody has any unpleasant thoughts in their heads, they make sure to keep them to themselves for the moment and to vent them out perhaps later in the privacy of their homes. No one is interested in disturbing the peace.

Back to *al Rashid* street shops loaded with attractive goods to sell line the main streets. Everything is available in abundance. There are the western style shops and many more overfilled Arab style shops. Here is *Orosdibak* our department store on *al Rashid* street. It is our first large two-floor department store in Baghdad full of everything our heart desires to buy under one roof. The French introduced department stores in Damascus in the 1930s, but this idea did not reach Baghdad until the early 50s. Private comestibles run by Lebanese owners offer imported foods European style mainly for foreigners; tinned and pre-packed foods, cheddar cheese, crackers, corned beef, ham, bacon, and much more. Many locals accustomed to western cuisine who can afford to, also frequent these comestibles. My parents frequented this store for cheddar cheese and bacon and some other imported foreign goods.

Many Pakistani merchants own stores for clothes, fabrics, shoes, accessories and other imported goods. *Mr. Kothari*, as everyone called him, is a dark skinned Pakistani and a friend of my father's whom we often see at parties with his beautiful young ivory skinned wife. He owns a huge clothes store on *al Rashid* street. My father likes to shop at *Mr. Kothari's* store who is very proud and delights in showing off his Indian wife, who against all the rules has her hair cut short and wears it loose just below her ears. Her short hair reveals an inner rebellious nature that she keeps under control in public. In my imagination I have already understood their story, I decided, she was forced into marriage, there was no other explanation for me. She was so pretty and had such a kind face, and he was so ugly and had such an angry face. I am full of admiration for her. She wears exquisite bright coloured silk saris and her silky light ivory

waist is always left bare and she is always smiling. Poor *Mr. Kothari* in contrast is older and not pleasant to look at with big bulging red eyes, and he has the habit of using a coat of powder on his face and neck in an attempt to cover his shiny black skin. Sometimes, at parties, we children giggling couldn't help commenting. '*Look at Mr. Kothari. He's got an extra coat of powder on his face today,*' to which my mother promptly intervenes, '*shush, children, stop that immediately. He can hear you.*' '*But mama, he doesn't understand Arabic.*' Then my father interrupts, '*yes he does, be quiet now.*' So we swallow our giggles. '*Mr. Kothari is a good merchant and a good soul.*' '*He has a good head for business and makes a lot of money,*' people say with great respect in their voices. Some admire him and others envy him. He loves to show off his wealth for everyone to see. He adorns his wife with expensive jewelry, a diamond for her nose, gold and precious stones for her ears, forehead, neck, upper arms, wrists and fingers. She even wears golden rings on her pretty toes, always visible with her toenails painted bright red, in fancy expensive Indian sandals. During the months of July and August *Mr. Kothari* closes his large store and takes his wife back to India for a holiday. In spite of all their wealth *Mrs. Kothari* looks at the world with sad eyes and *Mr. Kothari's* laugh is artificial and loud. Perhaps that is because they have remained childless after ten years of marriage. Let's take a peak now at a visit to the famous local bazaars.

'*Yalla ya Margo hurry up, we're all ready to leave,*' my mother calls. *Yalla* means come on, let's go. I have to tear myself away from one of my favourite past times, listening to a play on the radio. My mother, sister and I hail a passing *arabana* and we're on our way to the *souk*. Rain or shine, *souk al Shorja*, the bazaar is crowded. Everything is available in abundance, where even the least privileged can find something to buy or then to steal. The *souk* is a large maze of narrow streets with arcades of shops and stalls hiding large warehouses and craftsmen's workshops behind, some built on lifted wooden platforms. A special quarter is assigned for each craft, goldsmiths, silversmiths, coppersmiths and jewelry are in the one alley, while carpet sellers, textiles, drapers and fabrics are in another. One or more long alleys are reserved for food, spices, kitchen utensils and perfumes are found with ladies' wear and cosmetics. Stalls and stalls of shoes for the whole family and all leatherwear are there too. We girls hold on tight to our mother's hand, it is so easy to get lost in this labyrinth. Exquisite silk for dresses or elaborate brocades for curtains, handmade carpets, saffron, fruits, nuts, tailors and letter writers, not

do not forget the vendor selling fresh drinking water. He carries the water in a large sheepskin bag with the strap slung over one shoulder and across the front of his chest, with a connecting hose under his arm. The water bearer flips four or five copper *tassas*, bowls, in his hand so they roll like a pack of cards. He bangs them against each other to make a loud clanging noise to catch the attention of the passers by as he calls out '*maii, maii,*' water, water, who wants a drink of fresh cold water. '*Mama, ana atshana,*' I'm thirsty my sister says. My mother calls the water bearer. We all have a drink, it's fresh, clean water. It tastes good. Bottled water does not exist, only local sweet lemonade soda. We prefer to drink a lot of fresh plain water.

In one of the stalls sits the letter writer cross-legged on the wooden floor of his small booth. He is busy writing with feather and ink. An illiterate woman in a black *abaya*, including a black thin veil covering her face, sits in front of him at the edge of the stall with her legs dangling. All we can see are her hands covered with henna and her feet also covered with a design of henna in open slippers. As the letter writer dips his feather in the ink, he listens intently above the din as she tells him what to write. The letter is addressed to her son who has left home to live and work somewhere else and from whom she has not had any news for weeks. I hear her explain the address to the letter writer and he writes down on the envelope: To the hand of *Aziz Khaled*, who lives with his uncle the honourable *Hadji Hamid* in the village, opposite the bakery of *Abu Adnan*! In some old villages there were no street names, but everyone knew everyone else, so the letter was sure to arrive to its destination. The letter writer's services are in demand, as there are many illiterates who want to send private letters to far away relatives or perhaps to send the occasional official letter to a government department.

The concept of the *souks* of the Middle East, which still exists to this day, is the pre-runner of the modern malls, as we know them in the West, minus the bargaining bit. From dawn to dusk people bustle around, selling and buying while swearing their sincerity. They bargain and haggle and *Allah's* name is mentioned a thousand times over, his ears must ring non-stop. Beggars beg in the name of *Allah* and sellers swear they are giving the buyer the best bargain, in the name of *Allah*. Buyers swear in the name of *Allah* that they cannot afford the price demanded. *Allah*, I suppose, is well aware that they are all lying but he forgives them all for using his name in vain because they are at least thinking of him. No one would ever dream of denying the other the pleasure of bargaining.

Both the salesperson and the customer enjoy the exchange of wit. It is a part of the game and everyone gladly indulges in it. My mother often buys fabric at the *souk* to sew dresses for us. She's very clever with her hands. I've been with her and with my father many times to the *souks* so I can say bargaining, like backgammon is in my blood. A modern business term for bargaining is negotiating, but in the West they've limited that to the big business world. Let's listen in on a typical bargaining transaction in an Arab *souk*.

'Greetings to you,' my mother greets the salesperson as she nears a stall.

'*Ahlan wa sahlan. Sabah al khair.*' Welcome, good morning, the salesman quickly replies with a respectful smile coming slowly to the front of the stall.

'*Yaba, how much the meter?*' She points to one roll of fabric that takes her fancy.

'*Wallah, for you especially lady,*' scratching his chin, '*I have a very special price. How many meters do you need?*' And as he answers he follows her eyes, and reaches over to the roll of fabric of her choice and flips it fast between his two experienced hands, unrolling meter upon meter of the fabric. Then he reaches out again and again and flips open several other rolls of similar colourful fabrics in his eagerness to hold her interest.

'*I like this one here. I'll need about six meters. But it depends on how much you want for a meter,*' she says as she points to one of the rolls of her choice.

'*I swear by the name of Allah the Great, for you I shall make it two dinars per meter. Allah is my witness,*' and he points with his index finger to heaven to emphasize, '*I am earning nothing on this. That makes twelve dinars for six meters ya khatoun.*'

'*No, no, that's far too much. I'm going to have to look elsewhere then.*' And she makes as if she's turning away to go.

'*Wait, wait, where's the hurry? For you khatoun, lady, I shall give it as a gift. Ten dinars then for the six meters, now that is really a rock bottom price and I won't tell my partner at the back, or he will think I'm crazy.*'

'*I don't have that much money on me. I want to make dresses for my little girls. I can give you six dinars not one fils more.*' She, knowing very well that no such partner existed at the back of the stall, and he, knowing very well that she could afford it.

'*Wallah, you are one smart lady,*' smiling '*you're going to bankrupt me. But because you have such beautiful eyes, dear lady, I shall accept nine dinars. You must have pity on me. I have children too.*'

'May Allah bless and protect your children and keep them healthy. Eight dinars, not one penny more.'

'May Allah bless and protect your children too lady. Your wish is my command. Eight dinars, it shall be then,' he says in exaggerated resignation. *'I shall cut six meters for you and I will give you a little extra as a gift even though, Allah is my witness, I am making no profit on this.'* My mother nods in agreement and smiles to show that she is pleased. True to his word he cuts a generous twenty centimetres extra, folds the fabric and wraps it.

'Mabrouk' he says, enjoy, as he hands the packet to my mother. Money is exchanged as agreed.

'Shukran. Ma'assalaama.' Thank you and goodbye.

'Ma'assalaama.' Go in peace.

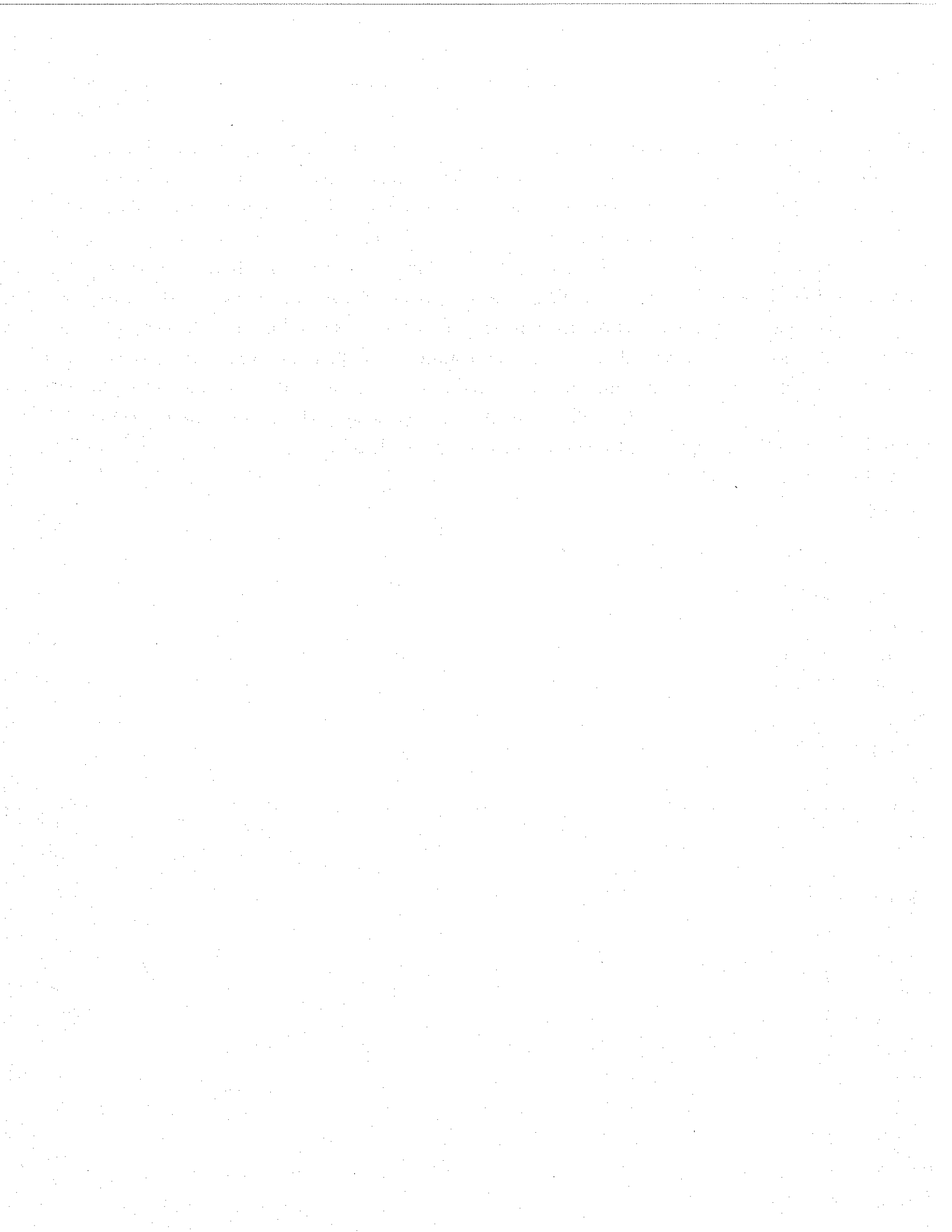
The whole transaction is carried out in slow motion, words are exchanged in a sing song fashion elaborating on the words *Allah* as each one sizes up the other before they speak.

Customers who buy expensive things such as carpets are often served tea or coffee while choices and discussions are taking place. Like magic a boy appears from nowhere who takes the order, disappears for a few minutes and reappears with a small brass tray bearing small glasses of sweet tea or mini cups of strong sweet or bitter coffee. Extravagant rich words of thanks and praise are exchanged all the time and always with a mention of *Allah* who is present, blesses and protects everyone concerned, present and absent family members too. A simple dry hallo or goodbye does not exist. In the Arab world people meet and part with much ado, coming and going in peace, always blessed, protected and accompanied by or then in extreme cases when in a fight cursed by God. Arabic is an ancient flowery rich language existing since before B.C. and has not really evolved much. My mother walks away smiling, happy with her purchase and all the sweet talk that she received, very well aware it is all nothing but a game. The shopkeeper smiles because he in reality, has received a good price for his goods. Neither feels cheated or short-changed and both enjoyed the pleasant friendly interaction. Bargaining takes know-how and finesse. It demands sensitivity, to know how far to go and when to stop, or else both would separate annoyed with each other and the world. After the long drawn-out interaction both parties should feel happy, the salesman with what he receives as fair payment for his goods and the customer departs thinking the purchase was a real bargain.

Summertime is the time for a variety of melons. We eat a lot of iced watermelons to satisfy the thirst in the hot weather. My father buys a fresh giant size watermelon every day on his ride home from work with the *arabana*. The *arabanchi* stops the carriage and waits while my father steps down to do his purchase. When its the season, Arab farmers set up shops at every corner, full of watermelons, small and large, stacked from floor to ceiling, to be sold by the day's end. Not one fruit is sold unless a little slice is cut and given to the buyer to taste for approval. The farmer digs the knife-edge into the melon and cuts out a little triangle piece and gives it to my father to taste. My father tastes and shakes his head in disapproval, 'not sweet enough' he says. The farmer does not argue, he discards it on a smaller heap to the far side, picks up another and cuts out a small piece again and hands it over to my father who tastes it and this time he nods with pleasure 'hei zeina' this one is good, he says. Shops full of a variety of other fresh fruits and vegetables of the season grown locally are plentiful everywhere. Sweet melons, bananas, oranges, apples, pears, grapes, sweet lemons are available in abundance. A large variety of plums and berries, pomegranates, figs, peaches, apricots, plus a large selection of vegetables and salads, whatever is in season is aplenty. The one-man kebab stands are on every corner. There is nowhere else in the world that I know of where kebab tastes as it does in Iraq. The Iraqi large round flat bread baked in the earthen *tannour*, the native round earth oven, is wrapped around minced lamb meat on a skewer grilled on an open fire, with fresh greens and *simak* spice. All Iraqis make an attempt to reproduce this particular taste at their homes when away from Baghdad but it is not possible to replicate the original scrumptious Iraqi *kebab*.

Baghdad owes its existence to the Tigris river and the riverbanks are accessible for all the people to enjoy. The fishermen cross the river in their round *Quffas* transporting their wares from one side of the riverbank to the other. Earlier on, at the beginning of the century, larger *Quffas* were used to transport people from one riverbank to the other. On beautiful cool summer evenings, families, lovers, poets, artists wander on the open embankments and stroll on the riverbanks. Ordinary people live by and on the river, which is a communication highway, a source of food and a playground for the Baghdadis. The capital's *Abu Nawas* Avenue is well known and celebrated for the fish restaurants overlooking the Tigris. The only time Baghdad is ever quiet is during the month of *Ramadhan* when the city looks like a ghost town during

the day and comes to life after sunset. A popular saying comes to my mind as I write this. In Arabic we say, '*Layali Baghdad ma ahlaaha*,' translated to English, the sentence word for word means—the nights of Baghdad how beautiful they are. What is meant in these few words, includes the cool breeze, the pleasant temperature, the clear skies, the twinkling stars, the river, the moon and the people with a joy for life. Continuous aggressive loud recitals of the verses from the Kor'an from the minarets of Baghdad do not dominate the sounds of the city and we do not see men prostrate themselves in prayer on the streets at all hours of the day. This is reserved to the mosques and private quarters. The Baghdad and its people of the 40s and 50s is a far cry from the demolished and anguished Baghdad and its tormented people of today.



Destiny at Work

Love comes to Baghdad Spring 1938

When my thoughts wander back to Baghdad, the romantic tale of how and where my parents met takes on a life of its own, showing how destiny sometimes weaves and plots events with a specific purpose in mind. Their story dates back to the late 1930s when my father, a young adventurer from India travelling through the Middle East, finally settled down in the yet undeveloped but progressing city of Baghdad. My father was always happy to talk about his past and tell us stories of how he met our mother, so aided with my gift of vivid imagination, I feel I can easily reconstruct here the happenings based on his many detailed tales.

It's Baghdad in the late 30s. Imagine two young men, in light summer suits, strolling down al Rashid Street, the most famous street that snakes for miles from north to south, through the heart of the city of Baghdad. Stores, large and small, bulging with native and foreign tantalizing goods, owned by salesmen eager to help passers by lighten their purse, line both sides of the long narrow street. The atmosphere hums with the noise of traffic, loud music blaring from many radios and people chatter. Passers by, drawn to the young men's magnetic energy, turn around to stare with obvious pleasure at the two men strolling down on one side of the pavement. The young men were obviously in their best element, exuding health and prosperity from every pore. This does not go unnoticed by a bunch of barefooted, thin waifs who stand in a corner of a dirty dark alley waiting to pounce at their next prey.

Mischievous dark eyes sparkle from dark smeared faces as they study their approaching victims. Clad in tattered light clothes they run to the young men to surround them. With smudged faces beaming they chant as loud as they can in unison: *'Allah ykhalik, ya sayed,'* May God protect you sir, just one coin and God will be merciful to you. Their hands outstretched, little palms open to the sky, they expect coins to drop from heaven through the hands of these two men. The young men in deep conversation are accustomed to this kind of intrusion, they stop good naturedly reach into their pockets and when their hands emerge with some small coins, shrieks of delight from the waifs make passers by smile. With elaborate gestures the coins are distributed between the elated boys. *'Shukran, shukran,'* thank you, thank you. That done, the well dressed men continue on their way resuming their conversation, while the boys quickly hide away their new earned coins, retreat back to the corners of the dark alley and prepared themselves to attack their next target.

The young men walk on to carry on with their conversation before the interruption. *'William Bernard Mukund Kirtikar, so tell me, how does that sound to you Alexios?'*

'Sounds impressive, a bit long, but definitely impressive. I must say.' Both men spoke perfect English with a British accent.

'Well, that's my official name on paper. I am now known as William Kirtikar for short.'

'Why didn't you change your family name too? Kirtikar sounds Indian and very foreign.' Alexios wanted to know.

'I have no intention of denying my origin. I mean how can I? I look Indian after all and besides, I am proud to be Indian. But as a first name, if I want to settle down in this part of the world, and to continue to work with the British, William is easier than Mukund. I have a Commonwealth British passport remember.'

'Yes I suppose, you're right.'

'How about you, your name is a mouthful too. Alexios Portokalos!'

'No, I'm keeping my name. I have no intention of spending the rest of my life in Iraq. I'm Greek and I intend to go back to Greece when I'm good and ready to settle down and to marry a nice Greek girl.'

It was early afternoon. With an air of confidence, hands in pockets, the two young men were on the way back home. They had finished with their work for the day, had enjoyed a local dish of kebab in a nearby restaurant and

were ready for their afternoon siesta. William had confided in his friend earlier of his desire to get married.

'You know William, if you are serious about getting married and settling down in Baghdad, then you really need to go to Damascus.'

'Oh, why Damascus?'

'Damascus is well known all over the Middle East for its girls. Syrian girls are not only beautiful they are educated and intelligent as well, and what more they are excellent cooks. The Syrian cuisine is famous. Everybody knows that.'

'Really, I didn't know that. I haven't made it to Syria yet. Why don't we go to Damascus for our next vacation? If you promise, that is not to look for a wife for me. I am the romantic type you know. I have to fall in love. You know heart pounding and all that.'

'OK, I promise,' Alexios laughed, *'I'll arrange for the tickets and hotel for both of us then, shall I?'*

'Come to think of it Alexios, I know an English lady, a missionary, who recently moved to Damascus. I'd completely forgotten about that. I met her in Basrah two years ago and we've been corresponding since. I can write to her to reserve accommodations for us.'

'Excellent, sounds good to me. You take care of that then and I'll take care of the tickets.'

Alexios and William walked back home for the obligatory afternoon nap. Home for them were rooms rented in a boarding house run by an Iraqi Christian widow. Her husband had died of a heart attack, leaving her alone in a huge house, which she had promptly turned into a boarding house and a flourishing business. Later that day William sat down to write his letter to Miss Strong, his elderly missionary friend in Damascus, while Alexios made his way to the travel agency to purchase the tickets for their trip to Damascus.

And so it came to pass that William travelled with his friend Alexios to Damascus. It was spring 1938. At the age of thirty-three, William had had plenty of time to enjoy a bachelor's life. He, like many other young foreign professionals, now had a good job as senior accountant with Balfour Beatty, a British Oil Company established in Iraq after World War One. He had a secure income and a promising future stretched out before him. It was an excellent time for him to settle down and raise a family.

Every family in the world has the odd child, the rebel, who doesn't fit in the mould and who doesn't live up to the parents' expectations. My paternal

grandparents, who were from Bombay, India, it seems had three of them, three of their seven offspring who opposed all traditional values, went against the tide accepting all the consequences that followed. The first-born was known to the family as *Dada* which was a title given to the eldest son, as a sign of respect. *Dada*, who was gentle and kind and of a placid disposition, had run off and without his parents' consent, had married a Christian girl, a Eurasian, whose mother was Indian but whose father was German. Not only was she not a Hindu but to make matters worse, she was of half European blood. This was considered a double insult in those days, as half-castes, were looked down upon, both by the Europeans and even more so by the Indians. The offspring of mixed races floated in between accepted by neither one nor the other. Those of Indian and British parentage were known as Anglo-Indians and since there were not that many Indians who married Germans in those days, Doris *Dada's* wife was considered Anglo-Indian. The family was horrified that *Dada* had also decided to embrace the Christian faith. My father who was conservative and proud to be an Indian was the first to reproach his older brother *Dada*. They had a fierce dispute. There was an exchange of angry and deep wounding words ending with them swearing never to speak to each other ever again. Their unforgiving traditional mother, angry and heart-broken disowned her eldest son. Soon after that, her second eldest son *Prabakar* came home one day to announce that he was leaving home to marry a widow, older than himself, who had two children. This was even a bigger scandal for the family, and one that the unforgiving mother could not accept. Widows in India in those days were outcasts. *Prabakar* was in turn, disowned by the angry and relentless mother. My father, religious and conventional in his youth, could not understand his brother. The same angry scene was repeated as with his eldest brother and another brotherly bond was forever brutally severed. My father had his own good reasons for being angry with his two older brothers. He was the one next in line, which meant as the oldest boy in the family, according to their custom, he was now left to carry the responsibilities of the family on his shoulders.

In the early twentieth century there was a strong caste system in India. My grandfather came from the *Kshatriyas* caste, which was the second highest in Hinduism, traditionally a caste of rulers, aristocrats and warriors. Their origin was from Rajasthan in the north of India. My grandmother who was from the *Brahmin* caste, traditionally the highest caste of priests and scholars,

had married him in spite of the fact that he was considered to be below her caste. He was a wealthy man so that must have made the difference in class palatable. The family was in the cinema business, during the first decades of the twentieth century. My grandfather's brother, *Siddhart*, was addicted to gambling and one fine day he did what chronic gamblers eventually do. He gambled away everything the family owned. He then ended up in prison for not being able to pay other debts that he had incurred. The whole family was thrown overnight into the arms of shame and poverty. The calamity was the cause for my grandfather to die of a heart attack. His weak heart could not bear the shock of financial ruin and the burden of shame. My grandmother was left alone, furious, penniless and bitter with the remaining seven children. With the two older brothers gone, my father was the oldest at twenty and the youngest sister just turned eight.

But it was not over. The next blow came when my grandmother demanded that he, *Mukund*, my father, should now pledge his life to the temple and become a Hindu Priest as befit a Brahmin. This was her most innermost wish, she told him. My father, however, had no such ambition. He had a fit, he refused and it was now his turn to have a nasty scene with his mother. He informed her of his intentions to travel, to see the world. According to him she was enraged and felt so let down by her three older sons that she cursed my father and swore never to speak to him ever again. He tried to plead with her, to understand, but she would not budge, she refused to have anything to do with him. He decided it was best for him to leave his birthplace Bombay immediately. With a saddened heart but armed with enthusiasm for life and his love for adventure, my father left in search of his luck. At least, this way, he could contribute to help relieve the family's dire economic situation, he thought. He never saw or spoke to his mother ever again. He left India, travelled far, worked hard and was to send his mother regular monthly payments for the next twenty years until she died. She never forgave him and my father was to live the rest of his life, with the thought of his mother's curse forever present at the back of his mind. Until the day my father died, he really believed every misfortune that befell him, or us his family, was due to his mother's curse. Healthy, tall, dark and handsome in the true sense of the words, my father at twenty-one left his beloved Bombay in search of the unknown. His mother had forbidden his younger brothers and sisters to speak to him. So he was surprised when at the last moment, his younger brother *Raghu* turned up at

the station to wish him goodbye. *'Mukund, take care of yourself and be sure to write to me.'* *'I will, Raghu, I will. You watch your health. Take good care of our mother and our little brother and sisters. Have patience with her, she's old fashioned and stubborn. I will send you money as soon as I find a job. I promise.'* *'Will I ever see you again Mukund?'* *'Only God knows Raghu, I don't.'*

This was the time in India when Mahatma Ghandi was striving for India's independence. There were scenes of fighting and bloodshed, in spite of all Ghandi's attempts to have a peaceful agreement with the British. My father was a peace loving man, who abhorred all violence. I came to know my father as someone who could not bear to see anyone hurting and in that respect, later, he was of no help or support to us as kids, if and when we had an accident no matter how trivial, or were seriously ill. At any sign of blood or any kind of pain or suffering, he would disappear and only re-appear when the coast was clear. For a long time, I could not understand this, as it was contrary to his kind and nurturing character. He could not bear to see anyone in distress physically as he suffered their pain along with them. He was of no help at all to those who really suffered. Just as well my father never had to serve in any army. He would have made a bad soldier. He was much too sensitive. At the age of twenty-one my father journeyed north, with no specific goal in mind and stopped along the way in all the major cities where he could find work. He had also inherited a gambling gene, but contrary to his uncle, he was able to keep it under control and was always prudent when he did gamble. When he could not find work, he gambled to make the money he needed to send to his mother. His twelve-year journey, as I can piece it together from the bits and pieces that I heard from him and from my mother over the years, must have taken him to Hyderabad, Karachi, Baluchistan, Abadan, Afghanistan and other exotic cities. Then on to different cities in Turkistan and in Persia where at Bushire he crossed the Persian Gulf to Bahrain. He lingered for months sometimes years in each of these cities. From there he continued heading north to Kuwait and Basrah and finally arrived in Baghdad. I had often heard him talk about all these places as he delved into his past while drinking his early morning *istikan chai*.

The discovery of oil in Iraq at the beginning of the twentieth century had brought several British Petroleum companies who established themselves in the main city of Baghdad and they needed educated employees with a good command of the English language. My father, like many Indians, was

a mathematician and had a great mind for numbers. With a brain equal to a computer it was not hard for him to find work. He was also a linguist. In addition to the many Indian languages he spoke, some of which I remember were Hindi, Urdu, Gujarathi and Marathi, he had an excellent command of the English language as well as Persian and Afghanistani which he had acquired over the years as he lived and worked in Afghanistan. He later learned Arabic as well. He was able to converse, translate and conduct business easily in any of these languages. My father was a self-educated man as he had never completed university and because of his gift with numbers he always worked in finances. With his gift for languages, he often was the mediator between the British and the Arab Sheikhs. Being an avid reader of philosophy, history, religion and politics he was a lover of the written word and owned a large collection of books. He slept little and spent the early hours of dawn each day with God, his books and his thoughts. I do not recall my father ever doing any manual work. I have never seen him change a light bulb. His beautifully shaped strong hands were always soft to the touch, his nails always perfectly manicured. My mother found this detailed attention to his appearance amusing. I was accustomed to seeing my father admiring himself in the mirror, a vain streak that we all inherited from him in particular my younger brother Zuzu, who used to admire himself in the mirror in the habit of saying, 'look at me I'm so handsome!' I don't recollect seeing my mother ever admiring herself in the mirror.

The young men William and Alexios, travelled to Damascus to spend their two-week vacation. Miss Strong, the missionary friend, met them at the station and accompanied them to their lodgings. Dressed comfortably in white summer shirts and linen pants, dashing à la Clark Gable style, they were eager to tour the ancient oriental city with its many historical sites. It was during this vacation and on such an outing that my father saw my mother walking with a girlfriend on the street in the old city of Damascus. The very moment he set eyes on her, Cupid, who I do believe accompanies all those who secretly and genuinely long to fall in love, shot his arrow. He hit home and my father was smitten from the first moment he laid eyes on my mother. Later on he enjoyed telling us this part of the story over and over again. He delighted in telling us just how enraptured he was, how he had followed her home and made a note of her address. His eyes shone and his face actually looked younger and glowed, as he told us how he hurried back to Miss Strong, announced that

he had found the girl he wanted to marry and begged her to help him. Now that he had found her, he hadn't the faintest idea what to do next. And, Miss Strong, his missionary angel agreed to do whatever she could to help him. Through her local contacts she found out who the girl's family was. She found out the girl's name, age and ascertained that she was indeed free. She then arranged a meeting with the family, to ask for her hand in marriage, according to the local customs of the time, on behalf of the handsome exotic foreigner.

My mother was eighteen, a shy pretty girl educated in French schools, as Syria was then under French rule. She was from *Beit Nahat*, House of Nahat, an old Syrian family, who were Greek Orthodox Christians. Her father who had recently died, was an *Oud* Craftsman by profession. He built *Ouds*, the Arabic equivalent to a guitar, by hand. My Syrian grandfather according to my mother also loved to play the *Oud* and sing. He was easygoing and a romantic. The family was comfortable but not wealthy. He left a legacy though that was not to be appreciated until several decades later. His hand-made *ouds* are considered to be treasured antiquity. I know this because in the eighties, when I was living in Manhattan, my mother came from London to visit me with her younger sister, my aunt Georgette, who lived in Washington. We three went out one day shopping for Arabic food in Brooklyn, where there is a large Arab community. When Arabs meet anywhere in the world, regardless of whether they know each other or not, they immediately enter into a conversation about home and families, exchanging names and news. We walked into one store and were sharing our delight at finding a variety of familiar Arabic foods, discussing what we wanted to buy and what quantity. The owner of the store obviously recognizing our Syrian Arabic accent came over to us and greeting us politely, said, *'I hear you speaking Arabic, where are you from?'* *'Shaam'* my mother replied. *'Ahlan wa sahlán. Welcome. I am from Halab. From which house are you?'* *'Beit Nahat'* my aunt answered. *'Beit Naht,'* he said rubbing his chin. *'Tell me, do you know Antun Nahat by any chance, the oud maker?'* he asked with excitement. *'That was our father!'* Both my mother and my aunt replied simultaneously. *'Ya Allah! I don't believe it! What an honour!'* He couldn't hide his thrill. *'Wait, please wait, I must show you something.'* He ran to the back of the store and up the stairs to where his family presumably lived. He reappeared in a few minutes beaming, with an instrument in his hands, holding it gently, as if it were a precious baby. He handed it to my mother to look at. It was an old *oud*, shiny, polished clean and obviously well cared for. We smiled and admired

the *oud* sharing his pleasure. 'You don't understand,' he said 'look inside, look in here!' Pointing to the hole in the front of the *oud* he handed it to my aunt. My aunt looked through the hole in the front. She gasped in surprise. 'Yvonne, look, look, it's baba's photograph!' She handed the *oud* to my mother who in turn looked through the hole. 'That's our father's photograph, that's his signature.' She cried, she was so touched she burst into tears of joy. This particular *oud* was hand crafted by my grandfather *Antun Nahat* in Damascus over half a century before. We could see his photograph and name inside. Naturally we wanted to buy the *oud* from him but the storekeeper refused to part with his antique *oud*, not for any price, he was so proud to own it. He invited us for Turkish coffee and *baklawa*, while he told us the story of how he had gone to great lengths to acquire it. He mentioned something about four of such *ouds* made by my grandfather that he knows of, which are still in circulation amongst the antique musical instruments collectors. This was all new for us we had no idea. Many years after that episode in Brooklyn I discovered that there is a website *Nahat Museum* on the internet today about the famous *Nahat* family of *oud* makers, in Damascus, and my grandfather *Antun* is mentioned there of course and there's even a photograph of him on this website, moustache and all! Incredible!

My grandmother whose name was *Zekiyeh* and who was destined to play a big role in my life, was left alone to fend for herself and her five children. The eldest son, my uncle *Fouad* was considered to be the head of the family now. He was in his early twenties and he took his unexpected role of power very seriously, exercising his newly found authority on the family, and in particular on the younger girls. The eldest sister, *Marie*, who was the odd child of this family, had married a young man whom she had fallen in love with, but she was unhappy with him and she had returned to her parent's home with her two little children. Soon after she filed for divorce. In the thirties, in Damascus, this must have caused a scandal. Women were supposed to marry for life for better or for worse. But she was having none of that nonsense. Her young husband turned out to be a playboy and a gambler, and what more he was abusive. She was granted her divorce but she lost her children. Her husband's family were wealthy and his parents managed to get custody of the two children. My mother's two older brothers had to find work while *Yvonne* and her fourteen-year old younger sister *Georgette* went to school.

In those days, Indians were rarely seen in Syria. When this exotic stranger turned up to ask for the hand of young Yvonne in marriage, in a way one could say, it came as a blessing to the family. For her it was a chance to get away from the clutches of her overbearing authoritarian brother. The foreigner from India was little older, at thirty-three, but he was a gentleman, handsome and he made a favourable impression. He won everyone's heart with his charm and impeccable manners and all were in agreement that the marriage takes place. There was, however, one little obstacle. When the family heard that he was a Hindu, they demanded that he convert to Christianity first. He had no problem with that, so he agreed. Miss Strong the missionary, who had already influenced him to change his name, helped him. My father became an Anglican, English Catholic, because that was the only Church that existed in Damascus, where the Priest could speak English and because Miss Strong herself was Anglican. The obstacle to the liaison was thus removed. The eighteen-year old, ingenuous girl was swept off her feet, starry-eyed she was flattered by all the attention she was receiving.

There was an episode though that my mother liked to tell us children about, but mostly when my father was not around. On the day of their wedding, which was taking place in Beirut, Lebanon, my mother already in her wedding gown, shortly before the ceremony was about to take place, when she suddenly got cold feet. *'I changed my mind. I don't want to get married. I don't know this man, I can't marry him.'* She turned to her sister Georgette, taking off her ring. *'Here take this ring and give it back to him. Tell him the marriage is off.'* Georgette confused but feeling important to be caught in the midst of this turn of events, did as she was told. She ran off to deliver the message to the bridegroom but soon came back running back breathless. *'Yvonne, Yvonne, come quick, come and look he's standing out on the balcony and is going to jump.'* *'What do you mean?'* *'If you refuse to marry him he says, he doesn't want to live. He prefers to die. He's going to jump to his death!'* All this was taking place in the hotel where everyone was staying and where the ceremony was to take place. It pleased my mother to tell us this story with a twinkle in her eyes. She'd smile and say, *'I felt sorry for him. What could I do? I had no choice. I had to marry him or else he would have killed himself. I couldn't let that happen.'* When we asked our father if this were true, he just grunted, smiled and changed the subject or walked out of the room. As I grew older it became clear to me from whom I had inherited my passion and love for drama so I can get my way.

Over the years and in the course of his travels, my father had quite obviously lost his myopic view of the old traditions, superstitions, religious and belief systems that he had been indoctrinated with. He had evolved, ridding himself of heavy chains that held him back and had acquired new thoughts, beliefs and habits. He was much more open-minded and tolerant than when he had left India so many years before. He felt guilt and remorse for having been so harsh and judgemental with both his older brothers and he wished he could see them again to make amends. Over the years the brothers exchanged many long letters. December 28, 1938 charismatic and worldly William married young and demure Yvonne. Family, relatives and friends, all attended the church ceremony and celebrated together for the rest of the day. The young couple spent a two-week honeymoon in Lebanon and soon after they were on their way to their new life together in Baghdad, The new foreign member of the family was welcomed into the bosom of the Syrian family. He proved to be a very generous and kind cousin/brother/son-in-law and the whole family loved and respected him. They saw each other often. Members from the *Nahat* family were invited to visit in Baghdad every year and just as regularly my mother with us children, visited her family every summer.

I arrived on this planet in 1939 in Baghdad during the cold winter month of November. The very same year the then King Ghazi who was anti-British, was killed in a car accident. Some believe to this day it was a foreign conspiracy and during an angry demonstration in Mosul the British Consul was killed. In 1941 British troops landed in Basrah but the Iraqi government demanded that they leave the country. Instead Britain re-invaded Iraq and martial law was declared. About 150 Jews were killed and Arab nationalist leaders were hanged or imprisoned. The British asserted themselves in Iraq. I was baptized in the Anglican Church and Miss Strong was my Godmother. I was to correspond with her until her death many years later after she had retired back to England. Once a year at Christmas time, my father helped me write the obligatory letter. *Margo, it's time to write your letter to your Godmother.* Needless to say I did not look forward to that, but dutifully I fetched paper and pen and sat down to write a letter to someone I hardly knew. In those early years my father helped me to word my letters. Later on when my English improved I managed it on my own. Just as regularly I received one letter a year from her. Two decades later, a few months after my arrival in the UK from Baghdad,

I visited Miss Strong for a weekend in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. She was over eighty by then but still sharp as a razor. She had her own suite in an old people's home, with her own furniture all around her. She was obviously well taken care of in every way but for me coming from the Middle East, where a large family lives together, sometimes with four generations under one roof, it was strange, and I felt sorry for her. Until then I really did not know anyone who lived alone and had no family at all. Miss Strong died soon after my visit. For some reason, my father felt closer to her than I did, I think he had adopted her as his surrogate mother, to me she was a stranger.

The question of just how much we inherit through our genes from our parents, grandparents and ancestors or how much of our own family or individual karma we bring along with us at our birth and how much our environment and the culture we are born into influence our character is still an open question in spite of all our science and technology. I was born a rebel and of course I was the odd one in our family. I was the first child and from the moment I was born, in accordance with Arab custom, everyone who knew my parents well, called them *Abu* and *Um* Margo. First names in the Arabic culture are reserved for people of the same age or older relatives and very intimate friends only. Two years later my sister Laura was born. My parents continued to be known to everyone outside the family as *Abu and Um* Margo, as I was the first-born. Things changed, however, when five years later, my brother George was born. If you are familiar with Arab customs you can now guess what happened. '*Mabrouk, mabrouk, Abu George.*' They congratulated my father on the birth of his son. '*Mabrouk Um George.*' Immediately, from the moment my brother George popped out, my parents ceased to be *Abu and Um Margo*. I was discarded, no longer recognized, I was now less important and moved down to second grade! Such is the custom still today. The boy always takes precedence over the girl no matter what age. My memories go back to when I was two years and to one episode even before that. But although I have no conscious recollections of my feelings at the time of George's birth, I am sure that, subconsciously, I felt deep hurt at being degraded in status within seconds of his birth. That was to be the first of many cruel blows that my little sensitive, feminine ego was to receive in the years that followed. I was five going on to six. The more blows my feminine ego was subjected to as I grew older, the more resentment I harboured, in our male dominated world, for being caste aside in favour of a male, for not being rewarded or appreciated,

rejected or discredited and all because I was female. I dreamt about going west one day where I imagined women to be free, emancipated, independent, respected and equal.

We were a God fearing family but we were not fanatically religious. We attended church sporadically, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Anglican, Assyrian, it did not make any difference. Church was church and attendance at Easter and Christmas was a must. I personally always enjoyed the Orthodox church of Damascus most of all, the service was in Aramaic and the church smelt strongly of frankincense and candles. I loved that. Many a time did I make the trip on foot through the narrow alleys of the old town of Damascus, with my grandmother. I skipped and half ran next to her holding her hand, as she'd explain, *'I must light a candle for St. George so that he sends us a boy.'* She prayed to St. George for my mother to have a boy and a solemn promise was made to call the baby George. Had I had even had an inkling what a baby brother would mean to my status in the family I surely would have objected and would have rather prayed for another sister. The reason why so many first-born sons of Arab Christian families, are named George in Syria and Lebanon, is due to the fact that mothers and grandmothers pray to St. George for a boy. The orthodox priests wear long black robes, black hard tall caps, have long hair tied at the back in a knot, a long beard and they chant and pray in Arabic or Aramaic very similar to Russian Orthodox churches. The churches were always packed solid for the Christmas midnight mass. People stood in the aisles and all the way behind near the main doors so that one could hardly come into the church once mass had begun.

I recall in particular Christmas mass in Baghdad. A crowd of young women who always came in late and stood together at the back in the aisles, as if ready to be the first to leave the church once mass was over. They looked different because of the way they dressed. Their clothes were ostentatious, they had lots of eye make up and bright red lipstick, some with curly red hair and others with blond or black long hair, long red fingernails and very high heeled shoes. People around us nudged each other with their elbows and I could hear them whispering. *'Look, look, here they come, the bad foreign girls. Look at the way they dress, shameless prostitutes.'* I personally couldn't get enough of them they were all very pretty I thought as I stared to get an eyeful. *'What's prostitutes, mama?'* I whispered looking up to my mother tugging at her skirt. *'Shush, be quiet and don't stare. They are just bad women.'* *'At least they remember Jesus at*

Christmas time. Another would whisper. *'Yeah, they come to cleanse their soul and ask God to forgive them their sins.'* Even at my young age I recognized envy in their voices. *'But why are they bad? What did they do, mama?'* I persisted I wanted to know. *'Turn around, look front and stop asking questions. You're too little to understand and watch your candle don't burn anyone.'* A gentle slap on my head usually accompanied this. I could see some of the men turning around curiously, trying to get a good look, and their wives pinching their arm or slapping their shoulder telling them to turn around and look in front. I figured prostitutes have something to do with men that wives and mothers did not approve of. I wondered what it was. But I forgot about it as soon as we left church, only to be reminded again at the Christmas midnight mass the following year. Some years later, I gathered that most of these women were Greeks, Egyptians, Armenians or East Europeans.

Although my father converted to Christianity and often read the Bible early mornings, at heart he always remained a Hindu. In the years that followed after he left India, he learned to embrace Christianity as well as have understanding for the Moslem and the Jewish religions without discarding his Bhagavad Gita. I was convinced of this because he worked with and had many Jewish friends and he also spent a lot of time with Sufis for whom he had a great deal of respect. He had many *Mullah* friends with whom he loved to philosophize about life. Sufis are a branch of the Islam, a spiritual and peace-loving sect. Sufism has survived over centuries despite persecution even by their fellow Muslims. My father loved to tell funny wise tales of *Mullah Nasruddin*, a legendary Sufi character famous for his satirical and philosophical tales, who lived during the thirteenth century. I must have heard each of his favourite tales a hundred times over. My mother usually gave us an exasperated look with pursed lips, whenever my father started one of his tales about *Nasruddin*, but we humoured him and we laughed each time, as if it were the first time we'd heard it, which of course pleased him no end.

It did not become clear to me until much later in my life that I was unappreciative of the fact that I grew up in a home where there was a very healthy open attitude towards religion and yet the presence of God was constant with us. This was a liberating attitude, which enriched our lives in every way, leaving no room for prejudice towards people of different beliefs or culture. Neither of my parents encouraged gossip. My father was too good-natured to listen or talk badly about anyone and my mother who didn't speak much

in the first place, frankly couldn't be bothered. We embraced people who my parents found to be kind, polite, refined, easy going and open minded no matter what their backgrounds were. There was always a healthy respect for the differences and customs of others. I can still hear my father's voice telling me again and again. *'There are two types of people in this world, Margo, the good and the bad. It doesn't matter what background, race or religion people have. Just keep away from the bad people.'* I did not appreciate my heritage and my parents until I was an adult living in the western world.

